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In Search of the Sweet Spot

A Case Study of Tourist Satisfaction in 5 Arizona Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a test of the “sweet spot” theory that proposes an increase of tourist destination visitor satisfaction with participation in four realms of the tourism experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Factor/cluster analysis attempted to separate respondents based on factor scores of activities preferences. No significant clusters were found. Limited evidence demonstrated support for the theory in ANOVA and chi-square analyses. The paper includes recommendation for tourist destination planners and marketers and for future research.

Keywords: *experience economy, sweet spot theory, visitor satisfactory, four realms of tourism experience.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important goals of tourism planners, developers and marketers is that of achieving consumer satisfaction which has been evaluated in various theories and models. Some consumer satisfaction models are based on expectancy/disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980); others on equity (Oliver and Swan, 1989) or importance-performance (Martilla and James, 1977) while another examined perceived overall performance (Tse and Wilton, 1988). Research confirms that a satisfied customer is more likely to return, is willing to pay more and will recommend the destination to others (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Bigné, Sanchez & Sanz, 2005; Murray and Howat, 2002; Yoon and Uysal, 2005).

Pine and Gilmore (1999) proposed four types of experience that contribute to overall satisfaction of the tourist destination visitor. The experiences in this theory differ on active versus passive participation and absorption as opposed to immersion. According to the theory, the optimal experience effects are derived when a consumer participates in all four types of experience. Pine and Gilmore’s term for the ideal experience combination is the “sweet spot”. The theory is intuitively sound but has not been empirically tested. This research examines the question of whether satisfaction levels are higher for those who participate in all four types of experience than for those who do not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer satisfaction has been defined as the global evaluation that the consumer makes after a purchase (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994). It leads to an intention to buy again (Yi and La, 2003) and positive word of mouth (See the review by Soderlung, 1998). Consequently, considerable research has concentrated on defining and identifying factors that affect satisfaction. Studies of tourist satisfaction have been based largely in the disconfirmation

paradigm which has been criticized for not distinguishing between measuring tourist satisfaction and antecedent elements (Dmitrović, Knežević, Kolar, Brenčič, Ograjenš, Žabkar, 2009). Perhaps the best known satisfaction model in the hospitality and tourism field is that of SEVQUAL that measures the gap between expectations and perception (Parasuraman, Seithaml & Berry, 1995). Several studies confirm a positive relationship between quality and satisfaction (see Campo and Yagüe, 2009). A recently proposed model of tourist satisfaction includes four antecedent constructs to satisfaction – quality, value, costs and risks, and image with two outcome constructs – complaint behavior and loyalty (Dmitrovic et al., 2009). To date, no research has examined the relationship between type of experience and satisfaction. Yet, planners, developers and marketers of tourism destinations need information about the affect of participation in types of experience on consumers' global evaluations for strategic development and marketing.

Experiences are made up of behavior, perception, cognition and emotions that are either expressed or implied (Oh, Fiore, Jeung, 2007). They are created through a process of learning and enjoying an activity (Stramboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Each person creates his/her own experience based on backgrounds, values, attitudes and beliefs brought to the situation (Knutson, et al, 2006). A number of theories attempt to explain various dimensions of experiences.

Schmitt (1999 in Tsaur et al, 2006) proposed five components of experiences: SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT, RELATE, four of which appear to be similar to Pine and Gilmore's four realms of tourism experiences. Another researcher identified four core elements of experiences: emotional impression, informational effects or learning, practiced capacity building and transformational impacts (Aho, 2001). A later study differentiated experiences as real, fun and indulgent (Hayes and MacLeod 2007).

Pine and Gilmore (1999) conceptualized four realms of tourism experiences with fluid boundaries describing them based on their position on a vertical pole where one end point was active participation and the other was passive participation and on a horizontal pole with absorption on one end and immersion on the other (see Oh, et al. (2007) for a diagram and further details). Experiences were classified into four realms: *education, esthetics, escapism and entertainment*. Educational experiences were those that fell into the active absorption quadrant. In this type of experience participants actively absorb the experiences as a mental state. For example, visiting art galleries or wineries are placed in the education quadrant because visitors learn about wine and increase their ability to make effective choices. On the other hand passive absorption experiences are those that appeal to the senses. They are labeled esthetic experiences because even though the mind is immersed in the environment it is not affected or altered as it is in an educational experience. Walking along a creek bed or visiting a historical site can be classified as esthetic experiences because the visitors are passively appreciating and are not becoming actively involved. Escapism experiences involve active participation and immersion to the point where the tourist actually has an effect on the performance or phenomenon. Playing golf and camping are activities in which the efforts of the visitor affect the outcome of the experience. The final realm involves passive absorption experiences where the participant does not affect the occurrence or environment and appreciates or absorbs activities and/or performances such as in attending a concert (Oh, et al, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Two recent studies provide empirical evidence of the validity of the four realms of tourist experiences. Oh, et al. (2007) examined the reactions of customers of a bed and breakfast experience and concluded that the four realms of experiences offered "a conceptual fit and a practical measurement framework for the study of tourist experiences" (p.127). Jurowski's (2009) factor

analysis demonstrated that underlying commonalities in a list of tourist activities can be classified as escapism, education, esthetic and entertainment.

METHOD

The research was conducted in a popular destination region comprised of several communities where visitors can participate in historical, cultural, natural, adventure, and even mystical experiences. A two-page survey was designed to obtain information on visitors' activities in the county, reasons for visiting, communities visited, and expenditures. Surveys were collected according to a seasonally adjusted stratified sample based on community attractions. Visitors completed the survey handed to them by lodging or attraction staff and returned it to the provider. The distribution schedule was randomized to ensure that surveys were circulated on both weekdays and weekends and that no two communities were surveyed at the same time to reduce the possibility of surveying the same visitor twice. Each community was provided a fixed number of surveys to be dispersed according to a predetermined survey schedule. A total of 1284 surveys were collected for the year, for a response rate of 26.8 percent.

Several steps were taken to test the theory that respondents who participated in all four realms of tourism experience are more satisfied than those who do not. First, a factor-cluster analysis was performed in an attempt to identify underlying commonalities among preferences for 20 tourist activities and group respondents based in the factor scores. Second, two new variables were created: one identified respondents who participated in activities included in each of the factor groupings and the other specified the number of factor groupings in which each respondent participated. In the third step, mean satisfaction scores were computed for participants in activities in the factor groupings and for those who participated in each number of groupings. Next, satisfaction scores were categorized to contend with skewness (Neter, Wasserman & Kutner, 1985). Finally, cross tabulations with chi-square tests for significance levels were used to analyze differences in satisfaction of participants versus non-participants.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the factor analysis with associated statistics. Four factor groupings resulted from the factor analysis each of which can be intuitively related to one of the four realms of experience proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999). The *Aesthetics* grouping included hiking or walking trails, cultural and historic sites, national and state parks, US Forest Service lands, bird watching and observing wildlife. These activities can be classified as passive immersion because visitors enjoy being in the destination environment but do not affect or alter the nature of this environment. They are passively appreciating the way the destination appeals to their senses. A second factor was titled *Escapist* for its close relationship to the "Escapist" experience realm with greater immersion and participation. The *Escapist* factor included the following activities: fishing, rock climbing, back road tours, mountain biking, recreation vehicle stays, camping and playing golf. The third factor grouping titled *Education* included visiting art galleries and wineries, shopping, resort or spa experiences and spiritual metaphysical vortexes. These activities require active absorption because of the interaction of the mind and/or body with the environment and were therefore classified as *educational* experiences. The final factor incorporated only two of the activities – attending special events and a ride on the scenic train or a railway tour. The entertainment value of these two activities makes a case for attributing them to the *Entertainment* realm of passive absorption in which the consumer passively observes the activities and/or performance of others.

Table 1
Principal Component Factor Analysis of Preference for Activities

Activities	Component			
	Escapist	Esthetics	Education	Entertainment
Fishing area rivers or creeks	.775			
Hiking or walking trails		.780		
Visiting cultural/historic sites		.645		
Visiting national and state parks		.798		
Visiting US Forest Service lands		.806		
Visiting Art Galleries			.680	
Rock climbing	.793			
Back Road tours (Jeep OHV etc)	.572			
Bird watching/observing wildlife		.642		
Spiritual Metaphysical Vortexes			.517	
Visiting area creeks or rivers		.542		
Mountain Biking	.833			
Recreation Vehicle (RV) stay	.703			
Camping - Backpacking	.776			
Playing golf	.705			
Visiting wineries or wine tasting			.449	
Shopping			.737	
Resort or Spa experience			.749	
Scenic train or Railway tour				.775
Special event				.819

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

The results of the hierarchical factor/cluster analysis with squared Euclidean distance resulted in two clusters. However, 95% of the participants fell into one cluster. Little could be gained by analyzing differences between the two clusters. Consequently, four new variables were created to identify respondents who had participated in activities in each of the four realms of tourism experiences and another to measure the number of realms in which respondents participated. There appears to be no relationship between the number of realms participated in and satisfaction levels. The satisfaction level of those who participated in one realm was 8.77 and those who participated in two realms was 8.47, three realms scored satisfaction as 8.83, and four as 8.91. Most interestingly, the highest satisfaction score was recorded by those who participated in all four realms. However, ANOVA revealed no significant differences at the .05 level. Table 2 provides details of the comparison of mean scores on satisfaction based on the number of realms in which respondents participated.

Table 2
Mean Scores on Satisfaction Based on Participation in the Number of Realms

Number of realms	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1	8.77	185	1.25
2	8.47	45	1.16
3	8.83	132	1.23
4	8.91	230	1.24

ANOVA: F =1.715, Sig =.163, Eta squared = .009

Analysis of the frequency of the satisfaction scores revealed high skewness with an overall mean score of 8.85 on a scale of 1-10 where 10 was the highest. Table 3 displays the mean scores based on participation in each of the four realms. There is little difference in the satisfaction scores (8.84-8.91) of those who participated in one realm versus another.

Table 3
Mean Scores on Satisfaction Based on Participation in a Specified Realm

Realm	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Escapist	8.85	307	1.29
Esthetics	8.84	525	1.22
Education	8.91	456	1.23
Entertainment	8.91	230	1.24

Table 4

Cross tabulations of Participation in Escapist Activities and Satisfaction Levels

Escapist Activities	Satisfaction level 1	Satisfaction level 2	Satisfaction level 3	Satisfaction level 4
Participated	11.1%	26.1%	20.5%	42.3%
Did not participate	20.1%	24.2%	21.7%	34.0%

Person Chi-Square Asymp. Sig (two-tailed) : .002

More than 80% (82.3%) of the respondents indicated a satisfaction level of 8 or above. To reduce the effect of the skewness of the data, satisfaction scores were classified into four

categories (7 and below (17.7%), 8 (24.7%), 9 (21.4%), & 10(36.2%) (See Danaher & Mattsson, 1994; Neter, Wasserman & Kutner,1985). The satisfaction categories of those who participated in activities according to experience realms were compared those who did not using cross tabulations with chi-square statistics. Tables 4-7 delineate statistics that compare satisfaction levels of those who participated in each realm of experiences with those who did not. Pearson Chi-Square significance levels indicate highly significant (>.01) differences in satisfaction levels between the participants and the nonparticipants. Those who participated in all four reams of tourism showed the greatest percentage (53.8%) of respondents that denoted the highest satisfaction level (10 out of 10). Table 8 displays the satisfaction levels of those who participated in all four experience realms.

Table 5

Cross tabulations of Participation in Esthetics Activities and Satisfaction Levels

Esthetics Activities	Satisfaction level 1	Satisfaction level 2	Satisfaction level 3	Satisfaction level 4
Participated	11.2%	25.7%	23.6%	39.4%
Did not participate	23.2%	23.9%	19.4%	33.5%

Person Chi-Square Asymp. Sig (two-tailed) : .000

Table 6

Cross tabulations of Participation in Education Activities and Satisfaction Levels

Education Activities	Satisfaction level 1	Satisfaction level 2	Satisfaction level 3	Satisfaction level 4
Participated	10.3%	24.6%	22.8%	42.3%
Did not participate	22.6%	24.8%	20.4%	32.2%

Person Chi-Square Asymp. Sig(two-tailed) : .000

Table 7

Cross tabulations of Participation in Entertainment Activities and Satisfaction Levels

Entertainment Activities	Satisfaction level 1	Satisfaction level 2	Satisfaction level 3	Satisfaction level 4
Participated	10.4%	26.1%	19.5%	43.9%
Did not participate	19.5%	24.4%	21.8%	34.3%

Person Chi-Square Asymp. Sig (two-tailed): .003

Table 8

Cross tabulations of Participation in Four Experience Realms and Satisfaction Levels

4 Realms of Activities	Satisfaction level 1	Satisfaction level 2	Satisfaction level 3	Satisfaction level 4
Participated	8.5%	23.6%	14.2%	53.8%
Did not participate	18.6%	24.8%	22.1%	34.4%

Person Chi-Square Asymp. Sig(two-tailed) : .000

DISCUSSION

The importance of achieving customer satisfaction cannot be understated. A destination's ability to attract new and repeat visitors depends upon the quality of consumer experiences because consumers are motivated to purchase products and services by the expectation of a pleasurable and memorable experience (Tsaour, Chiu, & Wang, 2006). Even though tourists create their own unique experiences, it is the responsibility of the destination and the industry within that destination to provide the input for those experiences (Anderson, 2007). The creation of a desirable experiential environment is critical to achieving a competitive advantage (Tsaour et al., 2006). Furthermore, in this age of technological advances that enable customized experiences, consumers are willing to pay a premium for quality memorable experiences that transform them. Consequently, an understanding of the nature of tourism experiences is critical to the financial success tourist destinations. Effective marketing requires a diagnosis of offerings and an analysis of consumer choices (Oh, et al, 2007).

Tourism experiences are created through a process of learning and enjoying activities (Stramboulis & Skayannis, 2002). A greater understanding of the relationship between participation in activities and satisfaction is useful for planners and marketers of tourism destinations. The research presented here explored the possibility of confirming the existence of the "sweet spot" where satisfaction levels are highest when tourists participate in all four realms of tourism experiences. Based on the analysis of this data set, the sweet spot theory cannot be confirmed. This may be attributable to the satisfaction measure which asked only the extent to

which the visitor was satisfied with his/her visit. Visitors on vacation are highly likely to be satisfied and even with a 10 point scale it is difficult to differentiate levels of satisfaction. Methods that ask respondents to compare satisfaction levels for different experiences may prove more fruitful in evaluating the “sweet spot” theory.

While the results are far from confirmatory, some minor evidence emerged to suggest that consumers who participate in experiences in all four realms may have higher levels of satisfaction. Therefore, destination managers and marketers may consider creating packages that encourage participation in all four realms of tourism experience. Lodging establishments may be able to attract more repeat visitors with the same strategy.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the study suggests that Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) theory of the sweet spot in the four realms of tourism experiences may have validity, it does not provide conclusive evidence. More evidence is required before the sweet spot theory can be validated. Furthermore, the study is limited by a lack of inclusion of other antecedents to satisfaction. For example, the Yoon and Uysal (2005) model proposes that motivation and satisfaction affect destination loyalty and the Dmitrović, et al. (2009) model includes four antecedents to satisfaction. Future research might examine the relationship between satisfaction and participation in the realms of tourism experience with the inclusion of other antecedents to determine the extent of the effect participation in various combinations of realms of experience have on perceived overall performance.

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