

Persian translation of this paper entitled:

کیفیت خدمات و رضایت مشتریان در بخش گردشگری: تلفیقی از مطالعات فارسی زبان

is also published in this issue of journal.

Investigating Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in the Tourism Sector: An Integration of Persian-Language Studies

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Received; 2018/12/17

revise; 2018/12/24

accepted; 2018/12/31

available online; 2019/03/13

Abstract

Several studies have examined the quality of tourism services and its effects on customer satisfaction - an issue closely related to the culture and sociology of Iranian civilization. All the efforts of tourism firms are centered around getting customer satisfaction to ensure their business environment. Hence, the collection and compilation of the results of Persian-language studies is considered as a theoretical and practical need. The current study was conducted to integrate Persian-language scientific studies regarding the quality of tourism services and customer satisfaction. The study aimed at investigating the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction. This qualitative study was a meta-synthesis research, which emphasized on the conducted studies. Thus, according to the selected keywords, 20 valid studies were collected from Scientific Information Databases (Jihad-e Daneshgahi). The results showed that many factors indirectly affect service quality and customer satisfaction, which is less dealt with. Public infrastructure, laws and regulations, mental and promotional elements have been considered some of these factors. The methodology of the collected studies was mostly quantitative or integrated. However, it seems that emphasizing on qualitative studies is required for the better understanding and description of the relationship between these concepts. Not much innovation and creativity in this area has been because of excessive emphasis on the evaluation of the non-native service quality. It seems that future studies can plan and state problems in this regard.

Keywords

Service quality, Customer satisfaction, Quality of tourist services, Integrated method.

Introduction

In the recent decades, as an emerging industry with

a great potential, tourism industry has been welcomed by the people of the world,

which has had significant advances. Moreover, it has had undeniable economic, social and cultural effects. Service quality's delivery is one of the main elements playing a key role in the global competitive market. Since tourism is a kind of service and the tourists as consumers of these services cannot examine and pre-experience the product, the criteria for measuring service quality are complex and difficult. The cultural and historical context of Iran, hospitality and attention to strangers are inherent characteristic of this cultural area. Hence, it is expected that the existing studies in this area have different results and themes from that of non-Iranian studies. Where the attention to the guest and respecting him is a value, the means of creating the quality of services would be from heart and inner rather than a compulsory one. Although quantitative studies have been conducted through a contextual regard with the aim of discovering the reality of the formation of service quality from inside the Iranian culture, integrated studies are a good onset for understanding and developing awareness of this issue. This study seek to integrate and combine the findings on the quality of services in the tourism sector to provide a comprehensive and complete view: a comprehensive view of the topic that is disconnected, very subjective and at the same time dependent on the moment of service experience.

Nevertheless, the experience of tourists from services is complex yet multi-dimensional. The service quality can be considered the same as matching the experience with what promised that the customers judge after the first encounter with the service (Uzunboylu, 2016: 45). The moment of the first contact and the continuous experiences of tourists by the human resources of the tourism sector, have the greatest subjective effects on the customer satisfaction. This means that the physical and tangible nature of the journey is perceived by the mentality created before the journey, beyond what was expected. Human resources and tourism

infrastructure have hidden aspects and angles developed and improved by management, social and educational processes. Using these processes, the chances of having better service quality will be created. In a complex and simultaneously systematic discipline, the tourist experience is shaped through the interaction between the tourist, the host society, the service centers, and the moments devoted to travel. As a black box, the tourist has complexity and ambiguity more than all other traveling components. As one of the most important criteria for measuring the success of service quality, this is where the tourist experience is seen more profound and unpredictable. Hence, the present study has been conducted in a cultural and emotional context where some people interacted with each other as tourists and the service providers, and the vital elements and infrastructures were the cornerstones of the formation of experience. The research question is that how is the relationship between the services quality and customer satisfaction in the existing Persian-language studies, and what can be explained by combining these studies. Thus, as a research field, the culture of Iranian society may be considered or ignored because the underlying variables are always present, but due to regularity and repetition, they are not recognized as an incentive, unless they create a distinction and a competitive advantage. Thus, theoretical basics, methodology, results, and, ultimately, conclusions will be presented in the following parts.

Research question

What topics can be examined through integration of the existing findings related to service quality and customer satisfaction in tourism sector?

Methodology

The paper had a meta-synthesis framework. This research has examined the results of more than 20 research projects, which has been applied in terms of

purpose. It has tried to identify the factors affecting the quality of services and the satisfaction of tourists in recent years, which was descriptive-explanatory in terms of nature and method. Meta-synthesis is a method where an innovative, coordinated, and different interpretation of the qualitative results of the papers is obtained. This method tries to integrate the findings and the components of a particular field and extract qualitative and profound findings. In this approach, it is tried to obtain an integration of the results and a criteria for the evaluation and categorization of research elements. Therefore, library studies and the compilation of existing studies, filtering and interpretation of classified data from the studies would make it possible to obtain knowledge of the research in this area. Therefore, repetitive cases along with less repeated ones make it possible to introduce and deliver the findings. The population of the study included all studies allocated to the keywords of service quality, customer satisfaction and quality of tourism services. Firstly, 45 papers were identified as scientific-research and scientific-promotional studies. After reviewing and eliminating non-applied ones, 23 papers were selected. The deletions were due to the remoteness of the research subject to tourism or the unrelated studied variables. In other words, non-comprehensive studies were removed from the study. The main emphasis is on the documentation addressing the link between service quality and customer satisfaction in tourism sector.

Theoretical basics

• The quality of tourism services

Nowadays, tourism is considered as a significant income-creating economic activity. Overall, services are a set of activities done to satisfy certain individuals. Services have several types. Some of the services create indirect and telephone contacts with the customer (such as travel agencies) and some

services have direct relation to the customer (such as residential and restaurant sectors or services assuming a combination of the two). Some features like uncontrollability, constant changeability, mortality and, finally, inseparability of services have caused the service quality management to be a complex and competitive problem for the firms of this industry (Amin Bidokhty & Rohipour, 2013: 170). Tourist services have discrete or continuous components due to the diversity of components. The tourism product has three levels including the main product, tangible product and additional product. The main product is the very service provided, such as transportation. The tangible product includes the special features and benefits provided by the transportation system such as different seats of the airplane that the convenient ones can be booked at an additional cost. The additional product includes features not related to the main product like transportation, but may affect the customer's decision such as serving drinks and caviar during the flight. Here, the quality concept is one of the most important factors of competition in tourism industry (Mostofi Almamaleki & Farmani, 2009). Strengthening the infrastructure of e-tourism, clarification of the authorities of the inter-sectoral areas of tourism, and more robust implementation of well-designed rules and regulations in this regard, the balanced development of tourism destinations and considering local communities can provide a base for the qualitative development of tourists' experiences (Rezvani, Sabaghpour Azarian & Shafia, 2017: 54; Ehsani et al., 2010: 7-9). Despite its frequency, quality does not have a same and precise concept and includes several definitions, such as doing the right thing besides meeting the needs and expectations of customers (Lamie, 1999). Matching characteristics and features of services with the expectations and requests of individuals (Gorgi, 2008) are among the

definitions. According to modern managerial views, quality is absolutely and directly defined according to the needs and expectations of customers, which is contrary to the traditional views, considering the service features as quality (Hosseini & Sazvar, 2011: 124). One of the most important issues is dealing with the concept of quality and its effective role. The existing presumption is that enhancing the level of quality increases the costs, whereas raising the level of service quality would increase the profitability of the tourism industry (Gorgi, 2008). One of the most important goals of tourism companies is the satisfaction of the customers. As the capital, it provides the possibility of survival and competitiveness of each sector of the industry. Satisfying today's customers is a bit difficult than the past due to the competition of tourism companies (Mirabi & Zadourian, 2010). Even some studies have shown that cultural elements and individual characteristics (Zhu, Freeman & Cavusgil, 2018), emotional states, and mental conditions of the recipient of the services (Oriade & Schofield, 2019) are involved in the formation of customer satisfaction. This means that successful patterns depend on the investigated samples and conditions before being developed and disseminated to other topics. Thus, studying in a cultural sphere or a particular civilization would yield results not necessarily and directly applicable elsewhere.

Some companies have tried to provide tourists with excitement by providing services beyond their expectations. This policy has caused the perceived quality of tourists to be more than expected and needed, so maximizing their satisfaction. Nevertheless, given the differences in the needs and desires of tourists, tourism steps on the border of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the customers since managing customer satisfaction is difficult (Mostofi al-Mamaleki, Farmani, 2009 ; Hosseini et al., 2010). Some of the firms that have become brands on their

own market, have considered internal branding practices. This means that instead of promising empty and fictitious promises, they have considered the construct of behaviors and the commitments from the inside out; i.e. the focus from within the organization to outside and the realization of what should be done (Shafia, 2016: 17). In this process, it is assumed that tourist satisfaction depends on reaching organizational citizenship behavior. This behavior voluntarily emerges from the staff who do not expect to receive any rewards or money in return (Shafia, 2017). Creating a sense of security, confidence, altruism, social customs, and chivalry are of the characteristics resulting from branding employees that are transmitted to tourists, which would create a sense of empathy and pleasure in the tourists (Nejat et al., 2009: 75).

Whatever it is, service quality is a very dynamic subject in need of review, and no fixed and repeatable pattern is recommended regarding this issue (Uzunboylu, 2016). Many studies have been conducted about the service quality and satisfaction, but a few have been focused on tourism. Today, there is a significant difference between the services tourists predict and what they get and feel in reality (Hosseini & Sazvar, 2011: 130-133). This means that creating a vacuum between imaginations and facts would lead to dissatisfaction. Hence, the role of the mental image of the tourists in the satisfaction and perception of the quality of services should not be ignored (Panahi et al., 2014: 109).

Findings

• Integrating the findings

The role of tourist's mental image is significant in satisfying the quality of services, which is important when being integrated with advertising. Tourism and marketing can have significant outcomes. Advertisement can take place through superficial but effective word of mouth methods and through

friends and acquaintances, or it can have a general and media aspect. The integration of the tourism industry and media advertising would accompany positive results as its subcategory (Kazemi et al., 2011). The collected studies have been examined in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this section was integrating all the results and outcomes. They described the quality of tourism services in Iran. Table 1 summarizes these results as separated for each study.

The table indicated that the existing studies have not examined the dimensions of the weakness and quality of services in the tourism sector coherently and comprehensively. In other words, some studies included only the drawbacks, and other have entailed only the strengths. Thus, the integration of existing results regarding the lack of convergence of collected data would be questionable. Nevertheless, it can be stated that the issue of the effect of friendly manner and hospitality of the host society has special considerations on customer satisfaction. Although this is one of the characteristics of the Iranian community, it has had different effects on the expectations of tourists when dealing with these behaviors. Hence, although one of the benefits of Iranian culture is associated to their hospitable behavior, tourists' awareness of it has an intermediary effect on its change to a competitive advantage. On the other hand, due to the price differences between Iran and other countries, the sense of reasonability of prices for foreign tourists has had an effective role in their satisfaction. In other words, the price condition can create a higher quality of traveling experience as an influential element in the mentality of tourists. However, the services provided in the safety and security sector and the destructive effects of environmental, socioeconomic, and electronic tourism topics have failed to meet the expectations of tourists. Thus, the specialized and managerial aspects affecting the quality of services can be

considered.

The hospitality and friendly behavior of the Iranian people with travelers is a noteworthy point mentioned in the evaluations as a significant and valuable element - a topic originating from the family and living space of the Iranian community rather than the tourism education and business environment (Ziayi & Abbaspour, 2011). Therefore, the family as the primary educational and culture maker institution has an effective role in the nature of communication and tourism interactions. The evidences indicated that among tourism components, the element of electronic tourism had a general and fundamental defect due to the lack of infrastructure and proper management. Since a part of tourism expectation in the safety and comfort sector, is dependent on the awareness and access to information, this inadequacy can be effective on security and mental safety of tourists and the tourism of the entire country (Ehsani et al., 2010: 22).

Solving these problems needs its specific time and infrastructure, which is considered an achievable goal. Given the importance of the tourist's mental image of the tourism industry, good coherence of the components of tourism is needed together. Thus obtaining an appropriate and systematic combination of components when creating tourism experience in the development of service of this section is emphasized. According to studies, the important factor in tourism and the service quality includes paying attention to different age groups, as the demographic element of age strongly affects the expectation of the tourist and tourist's perception of the quality of services. Thus, in presenting various packages of tourism, diversity should be considered as suitable for all age groups - such as children, adolescents, elderly, and so on - to be fun, entertaining, and not boring (Ibid: 20).

According to Table 2, the elements present in SERVQUAL model are of utmost importance

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of tourism services quality, Source: Author.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Reference
Hospitality as a cultural and family element has affected the satisfaction of tourists regarding their travel experience.		Ziayi & Abbaspour, 2011
Regarding expectations: safety and comfort Regarding perceptions: knowledge, politeness, decency	Regarding the context of expectations: tangibles Regarding perceptions: safety, comfort Environmental, Social, and economic dimensions: having negative and bad effects on tourism, understanding the effect of environmental and socioeconomic effects on tourists	Feizi & Tatari, 2004 Seifaldini et al., 2009
Increasing customer satisfaction = increasing customer loyalty = awareness / increasing awareness and information = increasing cognitive loyalty = increasing the loyalty of customers = their positive feelings / increasing the quality of service delivery = increasing customer satisfaction		Allameh & Noktehdan, 2010
	The existence of a significant gap between the expectations and perceptions of foreign tourists regarding the quality of services, the failure to meet the expectations of the tourists	Hosseini & Sazvar, 2011
Enhancing the perceived quality as well as the image of destination, the impressive effect of the tourist's mental image on the quality of perceived intangible agents such as reassurance and so on.		Kazemi et al., 2011
The existence of a positive and significant relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and customer perception of service quality / between job satisfaction and employee trust and organizational citizenship behavior		Nejat et al., 2009
The lack of demographic characteristics' effect on marital status, educational level, gender and household income on customer expectations of service quality	The effect of demographic characteristics of age on customer expectations of service quality	Amin Bidokhti & Rouhipour, 2013

according to tourists, both Iranian and foreign. This model is a subset of the mental models that consider the perceptions and opinions of tourists. In other words, the tourists' expectations are adapted to the performance of the organization to assess the quality of the services. That is why SERVQUAL model and its variables are most widely used in measuring the quality of services because the expectations of tourists, except in a few cases, are quite consistent with the criteria of this model.

However, the point in Table 3 is the insignificance of the socio-economic characteristics of tourists, meaning that factors such as age, gender, income, and so on did not have a great effect on the expectations of tourists. The summary of these studies is as follows:

In domestic studies, it was found that different age groups had different perceptions of service quality.

For instance, the age group 56-65 years had more expectations in accountability. Another study showed that gender was not related to the expectations of people regarding the quality of services. Another study found that demographic characteristics of marital status, education, and household income had no effect on people's expectations of the quality of services (Amin Bidokhty, Rohipour, 2013: 160-180). However, in foreign studies, a study showed that age had no significant relationship with the expectations of people regarding the quality of services. In another study, gender showed a significant relationship with the expectations of people regarding the quality of service aspects. For instance, women's expectation in assurance was more than that of men. Finally, in another study, the demographic characteristics - marital status, education, and household income - had no effect the

Table 2. The mental elements of tourists, Source: Author.

The subjective elements effective in the variables	References
Expectations, perceptions	Ziayi & Abbaspour, 2011
Security	Hosseini, Sazvar, 2011
Expectations, perceptions	Karroubi & Yousefi, 2010
Reliability, accountability, guarantee, empathy	Feizi & Tatari, 2004
Customer trust, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, professionalism	Allameh & Noktehdan, 2010
The mental image of the tourist, reliability, assurance, empathy	Kazemi et al., 2011

Table 3. Socio-economic characteristics, Source: Author.

Socioeconomic characteristics effective in the variables	Reference
Age, gender, educational level, income, marital status	Seifaldini et al., 2009
Age, gender, marital status, education level, household income	Amin Bidokhty, Rouhipour, 2013

expectations of people regarding the service quality (Kniatt, 1995). Through comparing domestic and foreign studies, it was found that even tourists in different places had various ideas (Ibid). Overall, it can be claimed that socio-economic characteristics were insignificant (Ibid), (Table 4).

One of the most frequent variables in these studies has been attributed to the organizational citizenship behavior. Factors such as altruism, social customs, and chivalry are among these behaviors. Table 4 indicated the most frequent variables and most important factors associated to tourists. It showed that the subjective elements had more frequency compared to others. Moreover, those objective elements had high values for tourists, which were rooted in the ease of perception. Thus, to attract tourists, it is necessary to consider both objective and subjective factors. It is noteworthy that the emphasis on Cartesian view and the separation of concepts objectively or subjectively ignores objectively-minded and valuable concepts. It seems that new categories that encompass both sensation

and objective elements and objective and subjective effects to tourists would require more attention. Issues such as brand and the elements manifesting it, are objective-subjective factors having an important role in perceiving and understanding the neglected tourism experience.

The utilized research methodology

The research methods categorized in these studies indicate how the problem raised is examined in the study. This study showed that all the studies were applied and no fundamental studies have been done in this regard: 63% of the papers had used integrated method and 37% were quantitative, indicating low attention to qualitative and grounded methods. Moreover, 100% of the studies have used field method and 40% have benefited from library method besides field method. It should be added that 90% of the papers were descriptive and 10% were descriptive-analytic. Thus, it can be stressed that the concerns and the issues stated in existing studies, rather than having theoretical, fundamental

Table 4. Objective elements, Source: Author.

Objective elements effective in the variables	Reference
Information, health, facilities	Hosseini, Sazvar, 2011
Season	Seifaldini et al., 2009
Tangible environmental factors, accountability	Kazemi et al., 2011
Product, location, price, promotion, people, physical evidence, process	Ehsani et al., 2010
Product, price, distribution, promotion, physical features, operation management or process	Shariyati & Forouzan, 2010
Service delivery speed, employee appearance and coverage	Allameh & Noktehdan, 2010
Tangibility	Feizi & Tatari, 2004
Organizational citizenship behavior, friendship, social affiliation, chivalry	Nejat & et al., 2009
The employee behavior	Allameh & Noktehdan, 2010

and indigenous aspects, described and expressed the current state of the fields of studies by emphasizing the status quo. Table 5 shows the research instruments and methods based on Grounded Theory.

Conclusion

The present study has been conducted using meta-synthesis method. It tried to identify and examine the factors affecting the services quality in tourism, derived from the integration of scientific papers. The results showed that many of the less relevant components of tourism services affected the quality of services perceived by the customer. The elements

like driving laws in Iran, population density, as well as personal vehicles, poor transportation systems and, finally, the lack of tourism information bases have been widely affected by the tourism service quality.

The family affects hospitality and tourism as one of the most important bases of education and culture. In other words, the common cultural patterns in Iranian society and the emphasis on hospitality and attention to travelers have made families be the focal point for the proliferation and dissemination of effective values in providing service quality. Although complementary data showed that customer's expectations of tourism

Table 5. Grounded Theory, Source: Author.

Reference	Research orientation	Research method	Data collection method	Objectives	Data collection tools
Ziayi & Abbaspour	Applied	Integrated	Library and field	Descriptive-analytic	Questionnaire and documentation
Feizi & Tatari, 2004	Applied	Integrated	Library and field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire, interview, and documentation
Seifaldini et al., 2009	-	Integrated		Survey	Questionnaire, interview, and documentation
Allameh & Noktehdan, 2010	Applied	Quantitative	Field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire
Hosseini, Sazvar, 2011	Applied	Integrated	Field	Survey	Questionnaire
Kazemi et al., 2011	Applied	Integrated	Field	Descriptive-survey-analytical	Questionnaire
Nejat et al., 2009	Applied	Qualitative	Field	Descriptive	Questionnaire
Amin Bidokhti & Rouhipour, 2013	Applied	Integrated	Library and field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire, interview, and documentation
Ehsani et al., 2010	Applied	Integrated	Field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire
Shariyati & Forouzan, 2010	Applied	Quantitative	Field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire
Karroubi & Yousefi, 2010	Applied	Quantitative	Library and field	Descriptive-survey	Questionnaire and documentation

experience and their awareness of Iranian hospitality have taken this important issue out of the competitive advantage frame. In other words, the tourists know and expect to experience the hospitable behaviors described during their journey. Local tourists, as a part of this culture, either ignore this or do not react to it due to its commonness.

It is noteworthy that the transportation system is one of the most important systems creating quality services. Creating a good integration of different types of transportation and providing the right integration and variety to meet different needs of tourists would guarantee the quality of tourism services. One of the main reasons for the lack of having appropriate service qualities is the lack of adequate infrastructure. This issue depends on the integration of various sectors involved in the provision of tourism and public and governmental sectors. The creation of a ministry called the Ministry of Tourism may make it possible to establish such integrations. Although there would be discussions and challenges alongside the formation of this ministry, this is beyond the scope of this research. Ministries, such as road services, water and sewage, education, municipality and the like, which have an impact on tourism services, must be integrated across specific spheres of tourism. Therefore, according to the suggestions of reviewed studies, the creation of a chain of inter-sectorial communication is necessary to create the needed empathy.

Another main point is that Iran's tourism system requires paying attention to the capacity of tourism destinations and the management of the so-called destinations. Excessive reception of tourists in the destinations lacking capacity would cause both host dissatisfaction and poor quality results. Destruction of the destinations can have social, economic, and environmental consequences that cannot be easily corrected.

Besides all the stated points above, the tourism

industry of Iran is on the path of development and possesses with social potentials like the hospitality factor. Emphasis on education as the main pillar affecting the tourism industry can lead to a better, more guaranteed, and more secure services. Education can create economic, social and environmental development in a context where the culture of hospitality prevails with no expectations and purity. Thus, education is significant and noteworthy as the main source of sustainable tourism development.

Conducting qualitative, integrated and synthetic studies to analyze the existing studies in theoretical literature, while helping the accumulation and coherence of existing knowledge, assists identifying theoretical and practical gaps. The study showed no specific emphasis on qualitative and underlying methods in terms of service quality and customer satisfaction. However, identifying and analyzing the aspects of service quality and its effects on customer satisfaction calls for question-based and underlying methods and tools. The tested and common western patterns and models are the most widely used ones in domestic studies, whereas practical literature in Iran's tourism services sector has its own needs and basics. It is suggested that new contextual studies should be conducted to show if the use and reuse of the models and tools for measuring the quality of services in the tourism sector is something appropriate or needs major revisions and changes.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Firouzi, Gh. (2019). Investigating Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in the Tourism Sector: An Integration of Persian-Language Studies . Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient,7 (23):35-46.

DOI: 10.22034/jaco.2020.83918

URL:http://www.jaco-sj.com/article_83918_en.html

