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A conceptualization of the relationships between service quality and visitor satisfaction, and their links to destination selection

SHU TIAN-COLE a & JOHN CROMPTION b

a Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, 105 A.B.N.R., University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, 65211, USA

b Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, 77843-2261, USA

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A conceptualization of the relationships between service quality and visitor satisfaction, and their links to destination selection

SHU TIAN-COLE1 and JOHN L. CROMPTION2

1Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, 105 A.B.N.R., University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA; 2Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843–2261, USA

Six different conceptualizations of the relationship between visitor satisfaction and service quality have been suggested in the literature. A model is developed which integrates and reconciles these differences. Its central components are recognition of the distinction between quality of performance and quality of experience, and those between individual transactions and global or overall satisfaction and quality. At the transaction level, satisfaction is the affective psychological response to a destination, while service quality is cognitive belief about the destination’s features or attributes. Both overall service quality and overall satisfaction are attitudes with cognitive and affective components.

Introduction

Tourism managers strive to improve service quality and levels of visitor satisfaction in the belief that this will create loyal visitors who are pleased they selected a destination, who will return to it, and who will recommend it to others. In recent years, substantial effort has been invested in research relating to service quality and satisfaction in the recreation and tourism fields (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Childress and Crompton, 1997, Crompton and Love, 1995; Crompton and MacKay, 1989; Crompton, et al., 1991; Filatrust and Ritchie, 1988; Hamilton et al., 1991; LeBlanc, 1992; MacKay and Crompton, 1988, 1990; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1995), and in the services marketing and consumer behaviour fields (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Bloemer and Ruyter, 1995; Bolton and Drew, 1991a, b, 1992; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Dabholkar, 1993, 1995; Oliver, 1993a, b, 1997; Patterson and Johnson, 1993; Reidenbach and Sandifer-Smallwood, 1990; Rust and Oliver, 1994).

Despite this substantial volume of work, no consensus has emerged on the nature of the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. The purpose of this paper is to construct a model which (i) reflects empirical findings reported in the extensive literature on the relationship between visitor satisfaction and service quality; (ii) reconciles some of the competing views within this literature; and (iii) explains how both concepts influence future destination choices.
Evolution of the two constructs

The word ‘satisfaction’ is derived from the Latin words *satis* (enough), and *facere* (to do or make) (Oliver, 1993a; Rust and Oliver, 1994). Oliver (1993a, p. 72) states: ‘These terms illustrate the point that satisfaction implies a filling or fulfillment’. This notion of fulfillment has been conceptualized and defined in a variety of ways. Two have emerged in the tourism and recreation fields and both have a long history of acceptance (Mannell and Kleiber, 1997).

One approach is a need-based definition in which satisfaction is seen to be closely related to motivation, so satisfaction results from corresponding needs or motives being met. Need satisfaction has been conceptualized as the fulfillment of drives, motives, or needs. An early example of this conceptualization is Stankey’s (1972, p. 93) suggestion that quality of a wilderness recreation experience ‘can be judged only by examining the extent to which the motivations and objectives of the visitor . . . are fulfilled’.

The alternative approach is unrelated to needs or motives and is termed appraisal satisfaction. It refers to a form of assessment or evaluation of the extent to which an individual’s perceived reality meets with his or her current expectations (Bultena and Klessig, 1969; LaPage, 1983). This approach appears to have been first proposed by Bultena and Klessig, (1969, p. 349): ‘satisfaction is a function of the degree of congruency between aspirations and the perceived reality of experiences’. LaPage (1983, p. 39) endorsed it and held that ‘a high-quality outdoor recreation experience is one which meets or exceeds the visitor’s expectations’. This alternative has emerged as the dominant conceptualization of satisfaction in the tourism and recreation fields (Williams, 1988).

The appraisal approach is formally defined by the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980) which is derived from two processes: development of expectations of service outcomes, and the disconfirmation judgment that results from visitors’ comparing the outcome against these expectations. When the actual performance matches initial expectations, confirmation results. When the actual performance exceeds or falls short of expectations, then positive or negative disconfirmation occurs. Positive disconfirmation leads to satisfaction, while negative disconfirmation leads to dissatisfaction.

The need-based definition describes satisfaction as a static state of fulfillment of needs, while the appraisal approach attempts to understand satisfaction as a process. Satisfaction is perceived to be related to psychological outcomes. Mannell and Kleiber (1997, p. 185) noted that ‘psychological outcomes and benefits’ have been used by researchers to describe the social psychological process that satisfaction represents. In Brown’s (1988, p. 412) conceptualization of satisfaction, he argued that tourism or recreation ‘is a type of human experience based on intrinsically rewarding voluntary engagements during nonobligated time’, and went on to conclude ‘recreation experiences then are the realization of intrinsic outcomes from engaging in recreation activities’. Thus, visitor satisfaction is determined by the extent to which desired outcomes or benefits are realized.

Following this conceptualization, Crompton and Love (1995) defined satisfaction as visitors’ quality of experience, which is the psychological outcome
resulting from their participation in tourism activities. Their approach was consistent with Bultena and Klessig’s (1969) definition of satisfaction in that it recognized the comparison process between the expected and perceived experiences derived from participation in tourist activities, but it also underscored that it was the psychological end state of this process which was important.

The conceptualization and operationalization of service quality has a more recent heritage than satisfaction. It was pioneered by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988), but it also stemmed from the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm with positive disconfirmation resulting in perceptions of high service quality and negative disconfirmation leading to perceptions of low service quality. Much of the work in the tourism and recreation fields derives from that of Parasuraman et al. Examples include MacKay and Crompton’s (1988) conceptual model of service quality, and the measuring instruments developed by Fick and Ritchie (1991); MacKay & Crompton (1990); Wright et al. (1992).

Service quality in a tourism context has been viewed mostly as the quality of opportunities available at a destination, and it is considered likely to be related to a tourist’s quality of experience (Crompton and Love, 1995). Quality of opportunities are the features or attributes of a service provided by management. Thus, satisfaction, defined as quality of experience, is the realization of desired outcomes or benefits, but the production of these benefits has to start with the availability of raw tourism resources (Brown, 1988). These raw tourism resources are the tourism opportunities provided by destinations and their quality will influence how much benefit and satisfaction tourists receive. Nature and managers produce places for tourism, and tourists produce use, experience, and derive benefits from their interaction with these places (Brown, 1988).

Since service quality and satisfaction share a common theoretical derivation, the conceptualizations of the two constructs overlap. This has resulted in some believing that service quality and satisfaction are the same construct and that differences between them are semantic rather than substantive. This view was articulated by LeBlanc (1992, p. 15) in his evaluation of service quality in travel agencies: ‘Even though both quality and satisfaction are in theory concerned with the difference between expectations and perceptions, at present no theoretical distinction seems to be made between the two concepts in the literature’.

The literature is replete with reports that use the two terms interchangeably as synonyms and do not recognize them as distinctively different constructs. In many cases, operationalizations of satisfaction have used service features or attributes, which are the basis for making quality judgements but are not appropriate for evaluating psychological outcomes. For example, Howat et al. (1996) evaluated visitor satisfaction by using indicators of customer service quality based on Parasuraman et al.’s five dimensions of service quality. Similarly, Ohio State Parks (1996) developed a questionnaire which was intended to investigate visitors’ levels of satisfaction at state parks. However, the items on the scale developed to measure satisfaction were in fact measuring quality of opportunity. The instrument’s 31 items related to the campgrounds, cabins, lodge, food service, picnic areas, trails, beach, marina, golf course, and the parks in general. Results of the questionnaire were used to provide guidance for improving their service. For instance, hours of restroom cleaning were changed, because the survey
indicated that the old cleaning time conflicted with camper use patterns. Obviously, this study measured quality of the park management’s performance, and provided a useful diagnosis of weaknesses in their service. However, based on the results of the survey, the report mistakenly concluded that the questionnaire provided ‘feedback on levels of customer satisfaction with their outdoor recreation experience in Ohio State Parks’ (p. 2). The frequency with which these faulty operationalizations appear in the literature suggest a need to clarify the distinctions between service quality and visitor satisfaction.

Alternative conceptualizations of the relationship between service quality and visitor satisfaction

Although there is broad consensus that service quality and visitor satisfaction are different constructs, there is little agreement on the nature of their relationship. Table 1 summarizes six alternative schools of thought on the nature of the relationship and each of these is briefly reviewed in the following sub-sections. A model proposed by the authors to reconcile many of these alternative conceptualizations is shown in Figure 1 and its construction is explained in the narrative that follows.

Service quality and visitor satisfaction have different reference standards

Parasuraman et al. (1988) differentiated service quality from satisfaction by arguing that although both constructs involved a comparison between expected and perceived service, the expectation standards in the two constructs differed. They insisted that the comparison standard in visitor satisfaction was the predicted service, i.e., expectation of what the service is likely to be, while the standard in service quality was the ideal or desire, i.e., what the service should be. Thus, visitors’ desired expectations and predicted expectations of a destination co-existed, but they were independent of each other.

This argument is appealing because a number of studies have reported that visitors may use different referents when forming expectations for the same service attribute (Miller, 1977). Tse and Wilton (1988) proposed and empirically supported the notion that a visitor may simultaneously use desired and predicted expectations when making quality and satisfaction judgments. Similarly, Oliver (1993a, p. 79) suggested: ‘In service situations where quality judgments enter, two expectation referents may be operating. Ideal or excellence-based expectations may be the reference for expectations of quality, while the more common predictive expectations may operate for direct influences on satisfaction’. This distinction is shown by flows 1 and 2 in Figure 1.

The role of disconfirmation differs in visitor satisfaction and service quality

After visitors interact with a destination, they have a perception of its performance. If the perceived performance (flow 3 in Figure 1) is different from what they have predicted (flow 4) then disconfirmation is likely to result. The difference between visitors’ predicted expectations (flow 4) and their perceptions of actual performance constitutes disconfirmation which in turn contributes to visitors’ levels of satisfaction (flow 5). Meanwhile, perceptions of performance
Table 1 A summary of alternative conceptualizations that have been proposed to differentiate visitor satisfaction and service quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SQ and VS have different reference standards</td>
<td>SQ is defined by desired expectation; VS is defined by predicted expectation</td>
<td>Parasuraman et al. (1988); Tse and Wilton (1988); Oliver (1993a, 1994, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconfirmation</td>
<td>Disconfirmation defines SQ; but it an independent psychological state that influences VS</td>
<td>Oliver (1977, 1980, 1981); Oliver and DeSarbo (1988); Tse and Wilton (1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VS is transaction-specific, SQ is an attitude</td>
<td>VS is an antecedent to SQ</td>
<td>Parasuraman et al. (1988); Bitner (1990); Bolton and Drew (1991a, b; 1992); Patterson and Johnson (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ is transaction-specific and VS is an attitude</td>
<td>SQ is an antecedent to VS</td>
<td>Cronin and Taylor (1992); Bloemer and Ruyter (1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both SQ and VS are transaction-specific and are at the transaction level</td>
<td>SQ is an antecedent to VS</td>
<td>Crompton and MacKay (1989); Crompton et al. (1991); Crompton and Love (1995); Otto and Ritchie (1995); Baker and Crompton (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both SQ and VS are global attitudes</td>
<td>VS is experience specific thus can contribute to SQ</td>
<td>Pizam et al. (1978); Geva and Goldman (1991); Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991); Boulding et al. (1993); Bitner and Hubbert (1994); Thach and Axinn (1994); Parasuraman et al. (1994)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: VS = visitor satisfaction; SQ = service quality.

(flow 6) and predicted expectations (flow 2) also directly contribute to visitors’ quality of experience. In satisfaction processes, disconfirmation is a subjective assessment that ‘reflects the degree of perceptual distortion inherent in consumers’ own judgments of perceived reality’ (Oliver and Bearden, 1985, p. 79). It is not the difference scores between expectations and perceived performance, but rather it is an independent psychological state (Oliver, 1977, 1980, 1981; Oliver and Bearden, 1985; Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988; Swan and Trawick, 1981; Tse and Wilton, 1988).

In contrast, when evaluating service quality, visitors compare their perceptions of actual performance (flow 7) with their notion of desirable performance, and the resulting discrepancy directly determines visitors’ perceptions of quality of performance of a destination. There has been no suggestion that there is an independent construct of disconfirmation that influences service quality judge-
Fig. 1. The relationships between service quality and visitor satisfaction
Service quality and visitor satisfaction

ments. Thus, service quality is the gap between expectations and performance, while satisfaction is a function of disconfirmation, which itself is a function of expectations and performance. Thus, in Figure 1, flows 4 and 5 show disconfirmation to be an intervening function between predicted expectations and quality of experience, whereas there is no such function between desired expectations and quality of performance.

Visitor satisfaction is transaction-specific while service quality is a global attitude

Parasuraman et al. (1988, pp. 15–16) argued that service quality is ‘related but not equivalent to satisfaction’ because ‘perceived service quality is a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service, whereas satisfaction is related to a specific transaction’. This distinction between service quality and visitor satisfaction proposed by Parasuraman and his colleagues was in part drawn from Oliver (1980, 1981) who proposed that satisfaction is different from an attitude, in that it is related to a specific transaction. Conceptualizing service quality as an attitude enables Parasuraman et al. (1988, p. 16) to conclude that ‘incidents of satisfaction over time result in perceptions of service quality’. This relationship is shown as flow 12 in Figure 1. In a similar vein, Bolton and Drew (1991a) viewed satisfaction as an antecedent to service quality, while Patterson and Johnson (1993, p. 92) stated that satisfaction is related to ‘a specific transaction or consumption experience’, and service quality ‘represents a more global judgement across multiple service encounters’.

Since satisfaction is viewed as being transaction-specific, advocates of this school of thinking have often studied it in the context of service encounters between visitors and destination employees (Bitner, 1990). Several studies have offered empirical evidence of the relationship between service encounter satisfaction and service quality. For example, Bolton and Drew (1992, p. 68) concluded: ‘this study provides empirical evidence that small business customers’ assessments of telephone service quality and value depend on their satisfaction with service encounters’.

Service quality is transaction specific and visitor satisfaction is a global attitude

In contrast to those who believe that service quality is a super-ordinate concept to satisfaction, others have offered evidence that service quality contributes to overall satisfaction. This relationship is shown as flow 13 in Figure 1. Cronin and Taylor (1992) tested this relationship across four industries and reported that service quality had a significant impact on user satisfaction in all four industry samples, while the causal path from satisfaction to quality was not significant. They concluded: ‘service quality is an antecedent to satisfaction’ (p. 65). Similarly, Bloemer and Ruyter (1995, p. 51) concluded: ‘From a theoretical perspective, the most important finding of our empirical study is that overall satisfaction should be treated as a super-ordinate construct to service quality. From this perspective, quality can be viewed as one of the factors that determines customer satisfaction’.
Both service quality and visitor satisfaction are transaction-specific

At the transaction level, visitor satisfaction has been viewed as a super-ordinate construct to service quality. This is shown by flow 8 in Figure 1. Oliver (1993a) argues that visitors are likely to use more dimensions to form satisfaction judgments than quality judgements. He maintains that ‘the dimensions underlying quality judgments are rather specific, whether they are cues or attributes. Satisfaction judgments, however, can result from any dimension, quality-related or not’ (p. 76). Quality is only one dimension that influences satisfaction judgments. Quality and satisfaction are correlated, but the correlation is unlikely to be one.

This line of argument can be illustrated by a tourism experience. The production of a tourism experience involves both tourists and resources (Brown, 1988). Management can only provide opportunities such as attraction sites, and tourists must avail themselves of the opportunities in order to obtain an experience. Since tourists’ participation is involved in delivering the service, it means that a tourism experience can be influenced, from both factors provided by suppliers and those brought to the site by tourists. Service quality attributes provided by tourism suppliers can be controlled by management, while factors brought to the site by tourists are outside a supplier’s control (Brown, 1988; Crompton and MacKay, 1989; Williams, 1988). Thus, in a tourism experience, service quality relates to quality of opportunities or performance of management, while satisfaction relates to the psychological outcome resulting from the experience, which is out of the direct control of management (MacKay and Crompton, 1988).

It has been noted that there are likely to be many cases when ‘a high satisfaction outcome may result even when perceived service quality is low because, for example, the social group interactions are sufficiently positive to offset the low-quality service’ (Crompton and MacKay, 1989, p. 368). The opposite can also occur when a low level of satisfaction results although perceived service quality is high. For example, visitors may recently have had a bad experience while traveling to the destination, such as receiving a traffic citation, so they are not in a good mood. Thus, the source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction may have nothing to do with the service itself or the tourist provider. Visitor satisfaction levels are determined by a more extensive array of inputs than only quality of performance by the tourism provider. Crompton et al. (1991, p. 2) observe:

Satisfaction involves a broader assessment of the consumer’s experiences. It is likely that level of service delivery will be highly correlated with amount of satisfaction, but there are other variables that may intervene. For example, the service provider may perform well but the consumer may perceive that it costs too much, or the social group with whom he or she is participating may be inadequate in some way, or the consumer may not be in a receptive mental state of mind or physical condition to derive a high level of satisfaction from the outcome, or the weather may be detrimental.

This conceptualization recognizes quality of opportunity or performance as an antecedent to quality of experience or visitor satisfaction. Quality of experience is a super-ordinate concept and quality of opportunity is only one of the factors that influence quality of experience. However, this relationship between quality of
Service quality and visitor satisfaction

opportunity and quality of experience is unlikely always to be linear (Crompton and Love, 1995). High quality does not necessarily lead to a high level of visitor satisfaction, because there are intervening variables that also influence satisfaction judgements. As a result, it is possible that tourists may experience a low level of satisfaction when high quality is perceived, and vice-versa.

Otto and Ritchie (1995, p. 45) also positioned the quality of experience construct as being super-ordinate to quality of opportunity. They viewed service quality as attribute-based. They stated that the service quality dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985): ‘represent abstractions of intrinsic and extrinsic service attributes, or cues, which in turn allows the attributes to be generalized across alternatives’. Therefore, the authors concluded that quality of opportunity is a cognitive evaluation. However, they viewed satisfaction as being an affective response to these cognitive evaluations. They argued that service encounters are experiential in nature and that during the process of this experience, ‘(service) performance is converted into a psychological reaction by the consumer’ (Oliver, 1989, pp. 1–2).

Others have pointed out that in addition to the cognitive/affective distinction between the two constructs, visitor satisfaction is super-ordinate to service quality because it has more antecedents (Oliver, 1993a). The major antecedents of service quality have been identified as personal and impersonal communications and previous experience with a service (Oliver, 1993a; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1993). These are shown as flow 9 in Figure 1. These antecedents will also have an impact upon satisfaction judgements since they influence visitors’ expectations. However, other antecedents are also likely to influence satisfaction, especially equity and attribution (flow 10 and 11 in Figure 1).

Ap (1992) explored the role of equity in the exchange process of residents’ perceptions of tourism impacts. His study postulated that ‘when exchange of resources between residents and tourists is high and balanced, or high for the host actor in an unbalanced relation, tourism impacts are viewed positively by residents. When exchange of resources is low in either the balanced or unbalanced exchange relations, the impacts are viewed negatively’ (p. 685). Similarly, during a transaction or an encounter between a visitor and a tourism organization, both parties bring different inputs with them. Visitors first compare their inputs to outcomes, and then compare the tourism provider’s inputs and outcomes. If visitors perceive that their outcome-to-input ratios are proportionate to those of the tourism providers, satisfaction results. As Oliver and DeSarbo (1988, p. 496) stated, visitors are ‘satisfied if the ratio of their outcomes to inputs is in some sense fair’.

In addition to equity, attribution has been found to have an effect on satisfaction judgements. According to Weiner’s (1980) attribution paradigm, visitors assess the success or failure of an outcome along three dimensions: first is locus of causality, i.e., whether the cause is internal (due to the visitor) or external (due to the tourism provider); second is stability, i.e., how frequently it happens; third is controllability, which refers to whether the visitor has control over the occurrence of the outcome.

Empirical evidence has shown that attribution has a significant effect on satisfaction judgements (Folkes, 1984; Weiner et al. 1979). For example, Folkes (1984, p. 402) found that all three types of attributions play a central role in
determining response to product failure: ‘Stability was correlated with expectancies and type of redress preferred, locus was correlated with deservingness of being charged and receiving an apology, and restaurant controllability was correlated with feelings of anger and desire to hurt the restaurant’s business’.

The multi antecedents to satisfaction indicate that satisfaction is a higher-level concept when both service quality and satisfaction are perceived as transaction-specific. The relationship between quality of performance (service quality at transaction level) and quality of experience (visitor satisfaction at the transaction level) was empirically tested by Baker and Crompton (1999) in a festival context. Their maximum likelihood equation estimations showed that performance quality had a significant direct effect on visitor satisfaction.

Both overall service quality and overall visitor satisfaction are global attitudes

Service quality can be conceptualized as an attitude if it is accepted that service quality is an assessment of the overall excellence and superiority of a tourism service over time (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Boulding et al. (1993, p. 11) hold that overall service quality represents visitors’ cumulative assessments of the service. They state: ‘We believe customers average/integrate past experience with the firm and their latest service encounters in making a cumulative assessment of the service quality level of the firm’. This view is reflected in flow 14 in Figure 1.

Similarly, tourists’ satisfaction is not limited to their satisfaction with specific encounters. Johnson et al. (1995, p. 699) explain that overall satisfaction ‘is not a transient perception of how happy a customer is with a product or service at any given point in time. It is a customer’s overall evaluation of his or her purchase and consumption experience to date’. Oliver (1981, p. 27) notes that satisfaction can be, ‘The summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer’s prior feelings about the consumption experience’. This relationship is shown in Figure 1 as flow 15.

In the recreation and tourism literature, satisfaction has been measured at various levels of specificity. Mannell’s (1989) review of previous research concluded that conceptualizations of satisfaction could be classified into two categories: facet satisfaction and global satisfaction. The former is concerned with particular facets or sub-domains of the tourism experience, while the latter is concerned with overall assessment of a tourism experience. To understand tourists’ satisfaction judgements, researchers have frequently focused on identifying the factors or facets that may contribute to tourists’ total satisfaction (Geva and Goldman, 1991; Pizam et al. 1978; Ross and Iso-Ahola, 1991; Thach and Axinn, 1994).

This multiple benefit approach to measuring satisfaction has dominated much of the thinking about tourism experiences (Williams, 1988). For example, Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) conducted a survey to assess sightseeing tourists’ satisfaction. At the end of a sightseeing tour, participants of the study were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with the tour, and with six experiential aspects of it: Knowledge, Escape, Tour Pace, Social Interaction, Social Security and Practical Aspects. The distinction between facet satisfaction and global satisfaction implies that satisfaction with particular psychological benefits derived from the experience will result in tourists’ overall satisfaction with the service.
Negative perceptions of individual attributes or negative affective reactions to a specific benefit do not necessarily mean that overall assessments of quality of performance or visitor satisfaction will be negative. Visitors can have perceptions of high overall quality or high levels of overall satisfaction, even though they think certain service attributes have low quality or they are not satisfied with particular aspects of the whole experience. Thus, Lue et al. (1996) in the context of multi-destination travel behavior, reported that destinations could offset negative attributes, if there were other attributes which visitors perceived to be positive. They concluded that in a tourism context, service attributes were compensatory and cumulative.

A differentiating feature between overall service quality and overall visitor satisfaction is that satisfaction is experience specific while service quality is not (Oliver 1993a, 1997). Since service quality is visitors’ perceptions of performance, they can have a general attitude toward the quality of a destination even if they have never been there. This can occur when visitors have knowledge about the destination through external communications such as advertising, world-of-mouth communication, and newspaper or magazine articles. For example, based on their knowledge about Disney World, potential visitors may have a general attitude toward the quality of the destination even though they have never visited it. However, potential visitors cannot express satisfaction with it, because this attitude can only be formed after visiting and experiencing the park at least once. Visitors’ levels of satisfaction can only be derived from first-hand experience.

Flow 16 in Figure 1 recognizes that since satisfaction pertains to previous experience with the service, an individual’s level of overall satisfaction can contribute to his/her attitude toward service quality. When individuals have never visited a destination before but they have knowledge about it, they may have an attitude toward the destination’s quality. However, their perceptions of its quality cannot contribute to their overall satisfaction level, because without previous experience there is no basis for concluding if they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the destination.

The influence of overall service quality and overall visitor satisfaction on destination selection

Attitude is defined as ‘a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor’ (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). In other words, attitude refers to the overall evaluation of an entity. Service quality and satisfaction at the global level are viewed as attitudes which are likely to have a strong impact on destination selection decisions. They are shown as flows 17 and 18 in Figure 1.

The dominant theoretical approach to explaining the potential causal role of attitudes to behavior is Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) theory of reasoned action. It assumes that people are rational; that they systematically use available information to make decisions; and that most human actions are under volitional control. Thus, a visitor’s intention to visit a destination is the immediate determinant of the actual behavior of visiting that destination (flow 19). This close relationship
has resulted in behavioral intentions often being used as a surrogate for final destination choice.

Many studies have investigated the relationship between overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions (flow 18 in Figure 1). However, the work reported by Dabholkar and Thorpe (1994) was unusual in that it examined the relationship of satisfaction to behavioral intentions at both the transactional and global levels. The study found a significant relationship between overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions, and also that overall satisfaction mediated the effect of transactional satisfaction on behavior intention.

Overall service quality has also been found to be predictive of behavioral intentions (flow 17 in Figure 1). For example, Zeithaml et al. (1996, p. 44) concluded: ‘The overall findings offer strong empirical support for the intuitive notion that improving service quality can increase favorable behavioral intentions and decrease unfavorable intentions’.

Once a visitor has been to a destination, or to a similar destination, an attitude is formed toward it. The attitude has the potential of influencing visitors’ future behaviour through influencing their intentions. The attitude not only has behavioural consequences such as revisiting the place in the future, it also contributes to the individual’s expectations on any future visit. This is reflected in the feedback loops shown as flows 20 in Figure 1.

When studying the satisfaction processes in a retail setting, Oliver (1981, p. 33) conceptualized that ‘one enters a retail outlet . . . with attitude-based expectation, in the case of prior patronage, or with expectation-based attitudes, in the case of a new shopping experience . . . (the individual’s) satisfaction causes a revised attitude toward the store, which carries to the next store-related situation’. This shows the dynamic nature of the satisfaction process, in which satisfaction with the service contributes to the attitude toward the service, which in turn influences the customer’s satisfaction level in future experiences through expectations. In this model, overall service quality and overall visitor satisfaction are both attitudes, so they are likely to have impacts on visitors’ future experience with the service through influencing their expectations for future visits.

Conclusion

Since the early landmark study on service quality by Parasuraman et al. (1985), efforts have been made to distinguish service quality from satisfaction, but there has been no consensus. Indeed, the literature is characterized by widely divergent and antithetical views of the relationship between the two constructs. The model developed here has attempted to embrace and reconcile the views that have emerged. Its central components are recognition of the distinctions between quality of performance and quality of experience, and those between individual encounters and global satisfaction and quality.

The flows in Figure 1 indicate that both overall service quality and overall satisfaction are attitudes with cognitive and affective components. At the transactional level, satisfaction is the psychological outcome or emotional response to a destination, and thus is affective in nature. Perceptions of service quality are derived from cognitive beliefs about the destination’s attributes. Both evaluative
quality of performance and affective quality of experience directly contribute to overall service quality and to overall visitor satisfaction. At the same time, evaluative quality of performance indirectly influences overall satisfaction through quality of experience, while affective quality of experience indirectly contributes to overall service quality through overall satisfaction.

At the global level, service quality and visitor satisfaction are recognized as being two different attitudes. Service quality is an overall evaluation of the destination, whereas satisfaction is concerned with overall evaluation of the visitation experience at the destination. The concepts of quality and performance and quality of experience are conceptualized as direct antecedents of the attitudes of overall service quality and satisfaction. The overall constructs reflect visitors’ cumulative perceptions of experiences with the destination. Thus, differences between service quality and visitor satisfaction exist at both the transaction and the global levels. At the transaction level, service quality is cognitive, while visitor satisfaction is affective. At the global level, service quality and visitor satisfaction are attitudes that have both cognitive and affective components.

The central constructs of this model proposed in this paper are quality of performance, quality of experience, overall service quality, overall satisfaction, and destination selection intention. These constructs and the interrelationships proposed among them in figure 1 have been operationalized and tested by the authors using structural equation modeling (Tian-Cole et al., 2002). Results of this empirical test of the model verified the existence of service quality and visitor satisfaction at both the transaction and global levels. At the transaction level, quality of performance contributed to quality of experience; while at the global level, overall satisfaction influenced overall service quality. Both overall service quality and overall visitor satisfaction were found to directly influence visitors’ future destination selection intentions, and were confirmed as being different constructs.

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