Chapter 5

Research Processes for Evaluating Quality Experiences: Reflections from the ‘Experiences’ Field(s)

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Researching Experiences: Why Research the Quality of Experiences?

The beginning of the 21st century has been a time of ever-increasing consumption and (re)production of experiences across global landscapes, which cross temporal, spatial, cultural, geopolitical, economic and virtual boundaries. The world is filled with consumers, and with providers, only too eager to assure their needs. Within recreation, hospitality, entertainment, events, sports and travel sectors (collectively called tourism and leisure industries in this book), consumptive and (re)productive processes are manifest and manifold. Relatedly, in this environment, consumption and (re)production are constantly niche-ing, tailoring, reinventing and innovating in order to establish difference, uniqueness and distinction. Value-adding strategies are continuously being developed, with both value for money criteria and high-end market positionings being emphasised. Experience efficiencies and cost-cutting measures are given strategic importance. The latter are even more so being adopted, at the time of writing this chapter, in the wake of the economic crisis of October 2008 and its flow-on consequences. All of the aforementioned measures represent efforts by tourism and leisure providers to attract consumers to their experience-oriented products/services and to maintain and increase market share.

To do this may be more complicated than this initial overview may suggest. In the current situation, the tourism and leisure industries must take into account repercussions from a wide range of events. Some of these events are predictable, some less so – with the latter becoming more predominant. In planning, delivering and evaluating experiences, tourism and leisure industries need to take into account local, glocal, national and global environments. Such environments include, for example, substantive global conflicts, increasing occurrences of natural and human-induced disasters, localised social, cultural, political and
economic unrest, growing divides between ‘have’ and ‘have nots’, safety and security issues, climate change imperatives, sustainability issues, increasing and decreasing mobility and migratory practices, intergenerational diversity, intra-, inter- and cross-cultural diversity, changes in generating markets and increasing connectivity. All these factors have contributed to the expansion of a ‘knowledge economy’, and the growth of emotion-based economies (Gobe et al., 2001) and experience economies (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999).

Given the preceding, a number of questions are germane for tourism and leisure industries. How can experience providers remain competitive? How can companies continue to hold their edge? How can companies ‘weather’ crises and still remain in the market? What are the implications and consequences of answers to these questions for long-term sustainability and corporate (social) responsibility? The underlying premise in this chapter is that research and ‘quality’ are key mechanisms to enable providers to gain and hold their competitive edges as well as for consumers to experience extraordinary experiences. Moreover, it is in the notion of ‘quality’ that providers, companies and consumers can distinguish experiences from each other. Albeit in the current global climate, those experiences which are deemed quality and sustainable will be the ones that will maintain market share. Purchasers of experiences (Dolnicar, 2004; Higham, 2007; Higham & Carr, 2002; Kim et al., 2006; Zografos & Allcroft, 2007) and providers of experiences (Pohle & Hitlner, 2008) are recognising a need for greening experience delivery as well as social responsibility and corporate social responsibility. By corporate social responsibility, I am referring to ‘a collection of policies and practices linked to relationships with key stakeholders, values compliance with legal requirements, and respect for people, communities and the environment’ (World Bank, 2005).

Given the preceding, the overall aims of this chapter are to:

1. address the question – why research quality of experiences?
2. reflect on past and current practices used to research experiences and quality;
3. present a case study, which developed processes to evaluate the nature of quality of tourism experiences; and
4. proffer a quality tourism and leisure experiences research agenda.

The first aim has been addressed in the opening to this chapter. Before progressing to the remaining aims, a point of nomenclature needs to be made. The title of this chapter used the term ‘field(s)’. The term was deliberately chosen to represent both the fields of study, which include recreation, leisure, hospitality, entertainment, events, sport, travel and tourism as well as the research fields/settings in which quality experiences research has been and continues to be conducted.

Researching Experiences and Quality: Reflections on Past and Current Practices

The majority of studies undertaken of experiences and quality have utilised quantitative perspectives and have been informed by post/positivist paradigms, especially critical realism or pragmatism. Such investigations draw on extant theories to build knowledge regarding, in this instance, experiences and quality. A number of writers have commented on the need for holistic and qualitative-based research informed by constructivism and interpretivism, as a means to study tourism and leisure industries experiences and the quality of those experiences, in order to move beyond limited dimensional studies.

Others have specifically commented on the need for experience research to consider the multidimensional (Andereck et al., 2006; Jennings, 1999; Jennings & Weiler, 2006; Lee et al., 1994; Patterson & Pegg, 2009; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Yolo, 2009) and the multiphase nature of experiences (Borrie & Riggenbuck, 2001; Clavson, 1963; Craig-Smith & French, 1994; Jennings, 1997; Kilian, 1992; Ooi, 2005). Still others highlight the dynamic nature of experiences (Hull et al., 1992; Jonas, 2007). Such dynamism, according to Niesan and Shelby (1977) and reported by Jonas, is a consequence of the resultant mix arising from the coalescing of experience settings, the protracted nature of experiences often over several days as well as the unpredictable nature of the interaction between the providers and the participants themselves. How then to study such dynamism? Again, qualitative studies are preferred as they enable researchers to achieve holistic and insider (emic) perspectives as well as ‘capture’ the multidimensional, multiphase and dynamic nature of experiences.

With regard to quality, much research is linked to service quality, and in particular, is based on Parasuraman et al.’s (1985, 1988) SERVQUAL measuring instrument. The model was developed through qualitative processes associated with executive (indepth) interviews and focus groups. SERVQUAL itself is based on questionnaire research design processes. In 1991, Parasuraman et al. refined SERVQUAL, and in their concluding statements they commented that ‘SERVQUAL can fruitfully be supplemented with additional qualitative or quantitative research to uncover the causes underlying the key problem areas or gaps identified by a SERVQUAL study’ (1991: 445). Here, Parasuraman and colleagues are inherently acknowledging that qualitative perspectives will enable researchers to move towards more holistic understandings of quality as opposed to fragmented, incomplete perspectives using more quantitative perspectives. Albeit Parasuraman et al. (1991) acknowledged that qualitative research might complement SERVQUAL findings; Jennings and Weiler (2006) still critique SERVQUAL and related tools for their
objective rather than subjective research designs. Despite being popular as a tool, SERVQUAL has not been without other critics; for example, see Cronin and Taylor (1992). Yüksel and Yüksel (2001) have also critiqued the related service quality expectancy–disconfirmation paradigm with particular regard to experiential travel and tourism services. The edited work by Jennings and Nickerson (2006) provides alternate examples for studying ‘quality’ using qualitative and quantitative perspectives as well as mixed methods approaches. Additionally and similarly to ‘experiences’, a qualitative research design is advocated as being more suited to capture the multidimensional and complex nature of ‘quality’ (Jennings, 2006; Nickerson, 2006).

Researching Experiences and Quality: Interpreting Their Meanings

In experience-related literature, the framings of experiences have been described as organisational/business-based, individualistic, psychological and social in nature (Jennings et al., 2009: 300). Organisational-based framings focus on ‘marketing, value and delivery’; individualistic framings relate to ‘personal, affective, embodied… and memory’; psychological framings were associated with ‘feelings, memory, intellect and behaviour’; social framings were noted as connected with ‘lifestyle, and social context[s]’ (Jennings et al., 2009). Elsewhere, Ritchie and Hudson (2009) reviewed tourist experience literature and identified six broad categories or ‘streams’. Ritchie and Hudson’s (2009: 111–112) streams were framed as following, literature, which sought to (1) define the ‘essence’ of experiences; (2) ‘understand…and experience-seeking behaviour’; (3) explicate ‘methodologies used in…experience research’; (4) ‘explore and understand’ different experience types; (5) assist with ‘managerial issues’; and (6) distinguish ‘an evolutionary trail of experience thinking’. Volo (2009: 113–115) categorises experience literature into three broad areas: ‘definitions’; ‘complexity/nature’; and ‘measurement’.

Just as there is diversity in interpreting experiences, various authors in the extant western literature have noted the difficulty in ‘measuring’ quality because of its nebulous, subjective and complex nature. Over time, quality has been interpreted as value for money, expectations being satisfied or exceeded, match between expectations and experience delivery (Jennings et al., 2009). Additionally, related synonyms have been used to imply notions of ‘quality’. These include, for example, the terms: ‘extraordinary’ (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 1999; Jonas, 2007; Price et al., 1995) and ‘optimal’ (Beck, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Ito-Aholata, 1980) albeit that these terms assume that quality is related to intrinsically motivating experiences. Ritchie and Hudson (2009: 119) have also noted the use of ‘extraordinary’ in relation to experiences as well as the use of ‘memorable’. Noteworthy here is the use of qualifiers to the term ‘experience’. Such qualifiers serve to distinguish the experience beyond the ‘ordinary’ and enable the provider and experience-seeker (person engaged in the experience) to acknowledge and communicate the experience’s distinction from other experiences. Similarly, the term ‘quality’ is applied to indicate distinction.

Researching Experiences and Quality: Western-Centric Framings

Embedded in each of the various framings and interpretations of experiences and quality, is a worldview founded on western and developed world individualistic societies’ perspectives. What of collectivist value-based societies and cultures, such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, India? Do they desire individualised tailored tourism and leisure experiences? Do we as western researchers know? Dorfman (1998: 56) noted that ‘[t]he majority of the world’s population is collectivist, and the [sic] roughly 70% often do not agree with Western views’. Similarly, Urry (1990, 2002) has commented, meanings differ between societies and cultures as well across time.

In response to cultural value issues associated with SERVQUAL, a number of writers have questioned the assumption that SERVQUAL dimensions are homogenous across cultures (Furrer et al., 2000; Raipoot, 2004; Winstead, 1997). For example, Raipoot (2004: 198) developed PAKSERV: ‘a service encounter quality measurement, suited for use in a non-Western, Asian culture’. Raipoot developed PAKSERV by drawing on the works of Hofstede (1980, 1984) as well as Hofstede and Bond (1988) and Schwartz’s (1992) work on personal value measures. Raipoot used a mixed methods approach including focus groups and mail out questionnaires in the process of modifying SERVQUAL into PAKSERV to determine the nature of the quality of experiences. More broadly, within related marketing literature, a number of other critiques have been made regarding the ‘measurement’ of ‘quality’ across cultures (Crofts & Erdmann, 2000; de Mooij, 1998; Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Dorfman & Howell, 1988).

Despite recognition of a lack of universality of concepts, and acknowledgment that ‘although people are not the same, we tend to perceive them to be the same…This leads to cultural blindness: both perceptual and conceptual blindness’ (de Mooij, 1998: 44). Due to this ‘perceptual and conceptual blindness’, we need to continually ask questions, such as is the use of the terms, ‘quality’ and ‘experiences’, part of standard vocabularies of global languages? Do the terms have established sociocultural and taken-for-granted meanings in different cultures? For example, in South Korea, the term ‘leisure’ does not have a direct
equivalent or a socio-cultural construct. As a result of globalisation, a new word, ‘le-jour’ was coined to accommodate the western developed world introduced notion of leisure and sport (Lee, 2001).

While as researchers, we may use strategies, such as translation and back translation processes in cross-cultural research, de Mooij (1998: 55) emphasises that although terms can be translated and back translated – ‘the values included in the words can not be translated, and linguistic equivalence is thus not easily attained’. Earlier, social psychologists, Frijda and Jahoda (1966), also cautioned that cultural complexities make interpretations of research findings tenuous due to the diversity of alternate interpretations that may be generated, resulting in questionable findings. The same caution is worthy of attention in contemporary times within tourism and leisure experience industries research and quality research. Bearing these comments in mind, given the ‘homogenization of international markets and growing similarities in the tastes and habits of international consumers’ (Mattila, 1999: 250), understanding the role of culture with regard to ‘experiences’ and ‘quality’ will provide ‘competitive advantages’ for experience providers. Subsequently, constructs need ‘testing’ in ‘non-European countries’ (Steenkamp et al., 1999: 66). Overall, more research is required in these areas, particularly, intra-cultural, inter-cultural, cross-cultural and trans-national research. There is also a complementary need for collective, inclusive, multidisciplinary, multigenerational, multiresearcher agendas.

Researching Experiences and Quality: Changing Market Contexts

Within developed western world markets, rather than mass-delivered products and services, people are now experiencing individualised and tailored experiences (Gilmore & Pine, 2000; Jennings, 2001). In the 1990s, Lipscombe (1996: 40) forecast that future travel and tourism consumers will demonstrate ‘sophistication’ (Weller & Hall, 1992), they will be choice-wise and lifestyle diverse (Martin & Mason, 1987) novel experience-focused and co-decision makers (Fay et al., 1987), as well as individualised and intent on personal development. The same remains true of western, developed travellers and tourists in the early stages of the 21st century. Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009: 312) report that ‘today we see [tourists and travellers] want context related, authentic experiences[as]…seek a balance between control by the experience stage and self determined activity with its spontaneity, freedom and self expression’ as well as ‘self development’. Lipscombe (1996: 40) also cautioned that travel and tourism providers would need to be responsive and shift ‘from…old products [disconnected], single activity, seasonal,…, mass markets, and traditional destinations, towards new products (multiple activity, all seasons, integrated experiences), special markets, [as well as] new, emerging destinations (Oelrichs, 1994)’. More recently, Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009: 313) argue that ‘similar tourist product portfolios will not easily distinguish one destination from another’. One of the challenges for providers and destinations has been to avoid ‘serial reproduction of culture’ (Richards & Wilson, 2006) and experiences! Similarly, like Fay et al. (1987), Poon (1993) reiterated that the ‘new tourist’ also seeks to be ‘in charge’. Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009: 316) refer to this as co-creation and suggest this is linked to travellers and tourists’ quests for ‘quality of life’ [and quality of experiences]. Their suggestion supports Lipscombe’s earlier recommendation to change from mass to customer direct marketing of their tourism and leisure experiences.

The global market place, however, is changing. The burgeoning markets of numerous ‘non-traditional’ leisure and tourism-related nations, such as India and China, Russia and former Eastern block nations, are placing pressure on providers to supply these enormous markets despite global economic crises. In the process of supporting these rapidly increasing markets, as already noted, there are challenges to western-based notions of what is a tourism/leisure experience and what is a quality experience.

Researching Experiences and Quality: Sustainability, (Corporate) (Social) Responsibility and Business Ethics

At the outset of the 21st century, there are a number of issues that, although they have long been issues, are only now gaining greater currency in the discourses of tourism and leisure industries providers, organisations and related businesses. Indeed, greater numbers of stakeholders from both the demand and supply side of tourism and leisure industries’ economics are engaging in such discourses. These discourses are associated with sustainability, (corporate) (social) responsibility and business ethics aligned with related issues of peak oil, climate change, water and energy resources, as well as livelihoods including quality of life. The commercial tourism and leisure industries literature and media are punctuated with examples of experiences not being sustainable, corporately (socially) responsible or ethical. For example, Klein (2002) and the general media highlight a number of these practices with regard to the cruise ship industry.

Sustainability, travel/leisure experiences and quality are inter-related. Elsewhere, I have noted that, in practice, quality and sustainability are not mutually inclusive terms (Jennings, 2006). In particular, stakeholders need to reflect on whether the provision of quality tourism experiences compromises ‘development that meets the needs of the present without
compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987); for the provision of quality tourism experiences is not always complementary to sustainable tourism experiences. 'Sustainability, (corporate) (social) responsibility, quality [and the nature of experiences] are [continuously being] constructed and reconstructed, interpreted and reinterpreted; therefore community and stakeholder involvement is vital; and... ethical standards of practice and codes of conduct are necessary' (Jennings, 2007a: 243). Reflective processes regarding quality, experiences, sustainability, (corporate) (social) responsibility and ethical practice should then be a continuous socio-cultural, economic, environmental and political negotiation.

The provision of quality experiences needs to be considered within a global context in an ever-changing world. For as noted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development – the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, 'progress in implementing sustainable development has been extremely disappointing... with poverty deepening and environmental degradation worsening' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002). In particular, climate change, peak oil, environmental degradation, and poverty continue to be challenges to offering 'quality tourism experiences' in a sustainable manner.

Consideration of quality tourism experiences within sustainable tourism principles is a responsible and necessary choice for sustaining market share and development (Jennings, 2007a, 2007b), especially bearing in mind the challenges of 21st century globally connected markets. Unless tourism and leisure industries' oriented research engages in successive cycles of monitoring and evaluating quality experiences delivery, sustainability of those experiences will be placed in jeopardy. The inextricable inter-relationship between sustainability and quality cannot be ignored. While the provision of 'quality' and simultaneously 'sustainable' tourism experiences may provide competitive edges, this needs to be informed by using knowledge-based platforms (Jafari, 1990) and ethics-based platforms (Macbeth, 2005). To reiterate, the provision of quality experiences needs to be considered within a holistic framework which includes and engages tourists, providers, governments, communities and the environment bearing in mind local and global contexts.

Researching Experiences and Quality: Reflections and a Way Forward

The preceding sections have presented a number of problematics associated with researching experiences and researching quality. These are summarised below:

- Predication towards post/positivist, quantitative and western-centric research processes.
- Western-centric framings of experiences and quality.
- Predication towards developed world perspectives.
- The multidimensional, multiphase components of experiences and the nebulous, multidimensional and complex nature of quality.
- Diverse interpretations of experiences and quality.
- Need for more qualitatively framed perspectives to understand the nature of experiences and quality, especially holistically framed.
- Increasing markets of one within western-oriented cultures as opposed to collectivist-based cultures and their differing expectations of experience and quality and whether there are language and value equivalents for each of the terms.
- Experience and quality research may not be mutually supportive of sustainability, corporate (social) responsibility and business ethics agendas.

The next section overviews an example of praxis which aims to address a number of the problematics noted above.

Researching Quality Experiences: A Case Study From Tourism: Processes to Evaluate Quality Tourism Experiences

There is a burgeoning literature associated with understanding quality tourism experiences (Jennings et al., 2009). In this section, one praxis example is provided to complement those presented elsewhere in this book. This example aims to demonstrate ways to gain insights towards understanding 'quality tourism experiences' and how to evaluate tourism delivery of experiences. The case study draws on the work of Jennings et al. (2007). This research team worked towards developing a quality tourism experience evaluation tool. The study focused on one segment of the tourism industry: adventure travel and, in particular, the youth adventure travel market. The research processes were designed to achieve holistic, indepth understandings of quality tourism experiences from multiple perspectives drawn from the two primary stakeholders: adventure youth travelers and adventure tourism providers. In that study, the researchers identified the following as key elements of a quality tourism experience: combining experiences, experience delivery, personal connectivity, social connectivity and interconnectivity of the entire adventure tourism experience. Table 5.1 provides interpretations of those terms and related research to monitor and evaluate the elements.
Table 5.1 Elements which filter the quality of youth adventure tourism experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Related research for monitoring and evaluation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combining experiences</td>
<td>Clustering of experiences to generate multiple connected experiences, assist accessibility, enable choice and balance between adventure, fun, challenge, relaxation and socialising opportunities</td>
<td>Action research (see Reason &amp; Bradbury, 2006); benchmarking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience delivery</td>
<td>Delivering an experience instead of goods, products and services although the delivery may package the latter within the overall context of experiences</td>
<td>Reflexive journals, quasi-focus groups, i.e. conversation-based breakfast/lunch/evening-meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal connectivity</td>
<td>Authentic individualised person to person interactions - connections between travellers and tour providers</td>
<td>Self-reports, peer reviews, line manager assessment, experience-er feedback, action research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connectivity</td>
<td>Social interactions between a traveller and others, for example, various other travellers, residents, experience providers</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-connectivity of the entire adventure tourism experience</td>
<td>Experiences in different phases of adventure travel experiences impact on each other and are inter-related</td>
<td>Action research, reflexive journals, quasi-focus groups i.e. conversation-based breakfast/lunch/evening-meals, self-reports, peer reviews, line manager assessment, experience-er feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Jennings et al. (2007)

Researching Quality Experiences: Management Implications and Quality Agenda

To conclude this chapter, this section reflexively considers the preceding discourse and highlights the ramifications for management experiences. As noted at the start of this chapter, management needs to reconnect with the experience of tourism. In undertaking this task, it is necessary to re-examine the relationship between tourists' experiences and the tourism industry. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process. The tourism industry needs to be able to recognize the importance of tourists' experiences and to understand the role of tourists in the tourism process.
Figure 8: Root concepts and higher order concepts associated with quality adventure tourism experiences (Source: Sayage et al., 2007)
Research Processes for Evaluating Quality Experiences


References


Landscapes. As an agenda, it is founded on the premise that research and ‘quality’ are key mechanisms to enable providers to gain and hold their competitive edges as well as for experience-ers to ‘experience’ quality experiences.


