

QUALITY TOURISM EXPERIENCES, TOURIST SATISFACTION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on how a destination can reconcile tourist satisfaction and the quality of tourist experience with the regional sustainable development. Based on a theoretical customer-oriented model, the study uses a multivariate analysis to operationalize the model and to identify various components of a destination's assessment. An empirical study conducted in a Portuguese inner region supports the model's forecasts. The main conclusion is that a holistic approach of a destination based on its own specificities will be able to contribute to the tourism sustainability as well as to the sustainable development of the tourists' host region.

Key Words: destination assessment, demand-oriented approach, quality tourism experiences, tourist satisfaction, sustainability, regional development

INTRODUCTION

As stated by WTO (2005) a quality tourism destination or product is one that addresses the full range of sustainability issues rather than simply concentrating on tourist satisfaction. Indeed tourists should be encouraged to think that a place that cares for the environment and of its workforce is more likely also to care for them. This statement of WTO raises a question. How does the perceived quality and satisfaction of a tourist experience may contribute to the sustainable destination development?

Sustainability seems to be the backbone which supports and allows the reconciliation of the different interests of tourism suppliers, tourists and local communities. It requires from them all, to take into account the economic, environmental and social aspects of products and production systems, and also the sustainable daily practices of each individual. These aspects appeal for multiple perspectives of analysis when evaluating the quality of a destination.

This paper reviews a theoretical customer-oriented model and uses a multivariate analysis to identify various components of a destination's assessment. An empirical study conducted in a Portuguese inner region supports the model's forecasts and concludes that with the valorisation of 'the resources' specificities and with an integrated supply of experiences, the destinations can satisfy the tourist needs and expectations without compromising (on the contrary, reinforcing) the sustainable development of the host region.

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Jennings (2006:10) states that "it can be convenient and valid to associate quality tourism experiences with the term sustainability", when assuming that quality and sustainability are synonymous, but "it is not always the case, as perceived high-quality experiences may in fact be unsustainable". The author (*op.cit*, 2006) raises the question whether quality tourism experiences and sustainability are, or are not, mutually inclusive and considers that the issue of sustainability requires some discussion. We subscribe this position but we consider that the issue of quality requires some discussion as well.

Quality, in its primary scope and essence, is strictly linked to business interests and is focused on the client satisfaction to reach competitiveness and enterprise success on the long run (Scafarto et al., 2006). A

broader perspective of quality embraces the entire value creation¹ system "in a responsible and wise sense of interpreting business interests, concentrated to many direct and non direct stakeholders satisfaction in which quality of products and services is required, along with quality levels of the organization providing them" (*op.cit.*, 2006: 6). This is aligned with the value constellation approach, in which the "relational effort of maximizing interlocutors' satisfaction is the key point in reaching high levels of value creation capacity" as stated by Scafarto et al. (2006: 6, quoting Normann and Ramirez, 1994). This raises the question: who are the "interlocutors" to be satisfied within a destination in order to reach high levels of value creation capacity?

As referred by Jennings (2006: 14) "quality tourism experiences are constructed as a result of interaction between tourists, host communities and their residents, tourism providers, government bodies, and environmental settings [...]". Nickerson (2006: 233) states that "how quality is attained depends on the traveler, the product and its presentation, the government, other related industry's stakeholders, environmental influences, and the local population". This means that all of these groups must be satisfied if the destination wants to reach high levels of value creation. Silva et al. (2001) admit that the performance of a destination reflects the complementary relationships which can be established between several public and private contributors, directly and indirectly connected with the tourism services' providers. Also Framke (2001) states that interaction, cooperation, networking and social practices are crucial activities to describe a destination, its content, its relations and its tourists. Nickerson (2006: 232) states that communities "are more prepared to provide an atmosphere for quality experiences for residents and tourists", when they work together for a common welfare.

Thus, the path seems to be the creation of strong networks of cooperation between public and private sectors, NGOs, various institutions, tourists and local communities in order to ensure the effective participation of all the stakeholders in the process. "Development co-operation can help tackle challenges such as global underestimation of the value of culture-and nature-based attractions; currency leakage that deprive local communities of tourism-generated income; a private industry preoccupied with short-term profits at the expense of long-term resource management; and a lack of experience and administrative/organizational structure" (Molstad et al., 1999:i). As Nickerson (2006: 233) avows the way the local government develops tourism and distributes the benefits to the residents, determines the type of interaction between residents and tourists: "If benefits are perceived to improve quality of life, the resident is more likely to assist in providing a quality tourism experience either through direct contact with the tourist or through support of government policy". This means that policies and actions must have a common goal: to strengthen the benefits and reduce the costs of tourism. To achieve these goals destinations must be developed in a sustainable manner while maintaining their unique features.

If it is true that the economic viability of tourism depends strongly on enhance of the quality maintenance of the local environment (WTO, 2005) it is also true that "if the tourism landscape is not maintained to the resident's desires, quality of life for the residents and a quality experience for the tourists will be diminished" (Nickerson, 2006: 234). Implicit on this statement are the principles of sustainable development guiding both residents and tourists. It must be present that a destination is more than a place visited and where one remains temporarily. It is a place where different communities live with different kinds of established networks, goals and needs which go beyond the one-dimensional and reducing perspective of satisfying primarily the needs of its tourists (as it is the case of several tourism enclaves).

ASSESSING THE QUALITY AND SATISFACTION OF TOURIST EXPERIENCE

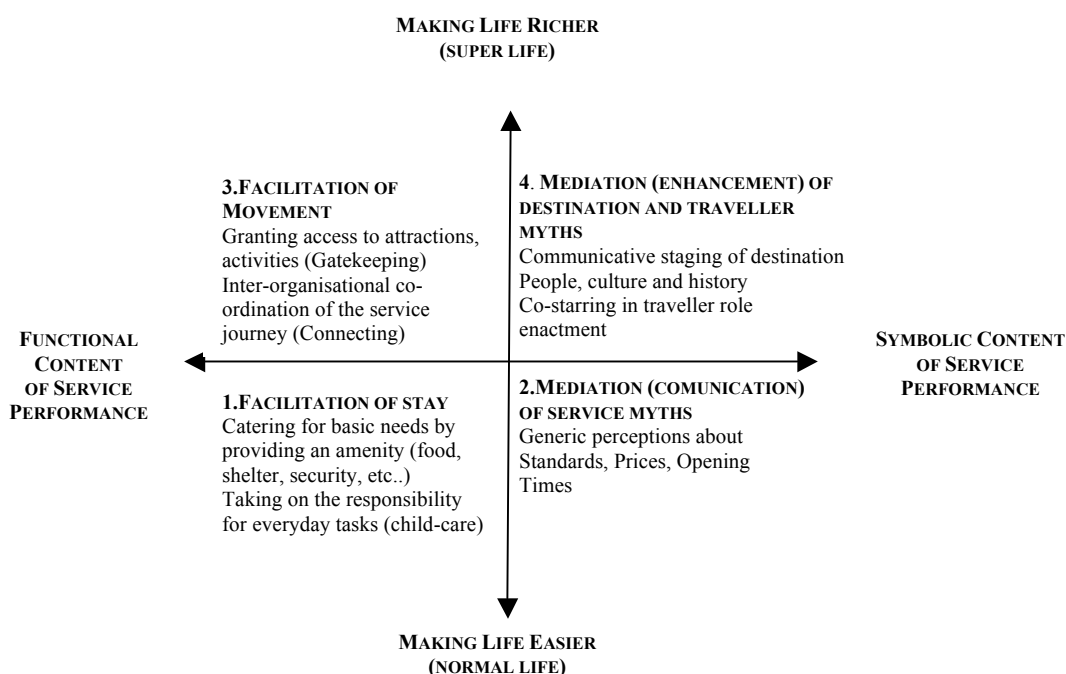
As Foster (n/d) notes, not all the responsibility for reaching high levels of satisfaction rest on the service delivered: "tourist create actively the tourist experience bringing to the process the history, perceptions, companions, skills, equipment, identities, hopes and dreams" (Foster, n/d,:6 apud Williams, 1988:432) . In fact "goods and services are no longer enough' and [...] producers must differentiate their products by transforming them into 'experiences' which engage the consumer" (Richards and Wilson, 2006: 1210). Furthermore Pine and Gilmore (1999: 11-12) argue that "experiences are memorable", on account the rich sensations created within

¹ Enterprise value creation is composed by an economic dimension (revenues aligned with firms growing perspectives, satisfying adequately internal and external financial supporters) and an ethic and social dimension (related to firms' ability to reach and maintain trust and consensus by important stakeholders). (Scafarto *et al.*, 2006: 5)

individuals. Following the same reasoning Wikström (2000) states that consumption experience provides stimulation and palpable personal satisfaction, since personal interests will be develop during most leisure activities.

This is the reason why Gyimóthy (2000) defends that a destination must be focused on the quality of the whole tourist experience and not only on the usual accommodation and restaurant's services supplied in the destination. These multiple roles are a major challenge in providing tourism goods and services. Tourist suppliers have to cope with multiple requirements from different tourists and they are also evaluated accordingly to a number of expectations, which may vary from tourist to tourist. This means that "in order to cater adequately for tourist needs, service providers must identify and rank these aspects along the customer-defined scale" (Gyimóthy, 2000: 172). The following theoretical model of Gyimóthy (Fig.1) seeks to integrate the tourist individual experience and the perceived quality and satisfaction in the demand-oriented assessment of the offer, no matter if it is an individual supplier, an integrated offer or a destination as a whole.

Figure 1
A customer-oriented model of service provider assessment



Source: Gyimóthy, 2000: 173

This model allows a multidimensional evaluation of the role that the providers carry to the tourists' experience. There are several advantages of the model as it allows: i) the identification of the various dimensions through which the tourists assesses the offer; ii) the identification of how offer can transform the experience in an extra ordinary event; iii) overcoming the difficulty of recognizing exactly what the product or service means for tourists, and iv) the application either to a single supply of services, or to an integrated offer, or to a destination as a whole. For these reasons we adopted and **adapted** this theoretical model, applying it to a Portuguese destination, located in an inner region of the country, called Beira Interior. Through a multivariate statistical method (factorial analysis of principal components) it was possible to operationalize the model and to reach the main goal of this study.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

The Beira Interior region is located in the inner center of Portugal, bordering Spain. The geographical alignment was accounted for the choice of nine districts of this region located on three different morphological zones: a mountain area (districts of Seia, Gouveia and Manteigas); a valley (Belmonte, Covilhã and Fundão);

and a prairie (districts of Idanha-a-Nova, Castelo Branco and Vila Velha de Ródão). The choice of these districts took into consideration their potential as destination, the availability and richness of natural and cultural diversity and also the possibility of a complementary offer.

Main Goal and Methodological issues

The core purpose of the study is to identify the dimensions of the destination's assessment, highlighting the importance of tourism as a vehicle to strengthen regional differences, and thus contributing to the sustainability of the own destination.

After consulting relevant literature, it was decided to construct an intentional non-probabilistic sample, selected from a non-proportional quota, reason why it is required special care when extrapolating the results to the population under study. The size and construction of the sample allowed the application of statistical tests (the T-test for independent samples and the ANOVA) and multivariate analysis (Factorial Analysis). The data was collected through individual structured interviews.

As a large amount of variables was analyzed, at the different levels of the tourist offer (the functional and symbolic contents of accommodation, restaurants, transports, information system, tourist resources and attractions), it was gathered a large set of data. In the context of this paper solely the results of the application of the Factorial Analysis Method, namely the Principal Components Analyses, will be presented. The Factorial Analysis of Principal Components, as a statistical multivariate method, allows transforming an initial set of correlated variables into another set of not correlated variables, identified as principal components, which result from linear combinations of the initial set. For this purpose, and after testing the application conditions for the above-mentioned method, the criteria of Keiser was used to select the number of components to extract among the several variables that were found as motivating the tourists to come to the destination. The statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) was used to process the data, considering a level of significance of 5 % for all the statistical tests.

Main Findings

The introduction of the multivariate factorial analysis, namely of the method of Analysis of Principal Components, allowed us to identify the existence of two dimensions in the destination's choice criteria of the tourists, which correspond to the **functional** and **symbolic** contents referred by Gyimóthy in her model. After testing the conditions for the application² of the above-mentioned method, the Keiser criterion³ was used to select the number of components/dimensions to extract from the six variables that we found as common to any destination. Two components were identified, that jointly account for 57 % of the total variance (see table 1). The first component is undoubtedly the most important, representing around 35 % of the total variance.

Table 1
Total Explained Variance and Components (extracted through the criterion of Keiser)

Components	Initial own values	Relative Variance (%)	Relative Accumulated Variance (%)	Own values of extracted components	Relative Variance (%)	Relative Accumulated Variance (%)
1	2,071	34,520	34,520	2,071	34,520	34,520
2	1,355	22,584	57,105	1,355	22,584	57,105
3	0,801	13,349	70,454			
4	0,730	12,172	82,625			
5	0,608	10,132	92,758			
6	0,435	7,242	100,000			

² Kaiser-Meyer-Ollin = 0,615 (>0,5); the level of the significance associated to the test of Bertlett: P=0,000 (< 0,05) confirmed that the variables were correlated among them

³ Which requires that the components have own values ≥ 1 , representing the own values the quantity of variance contained or explained by each component

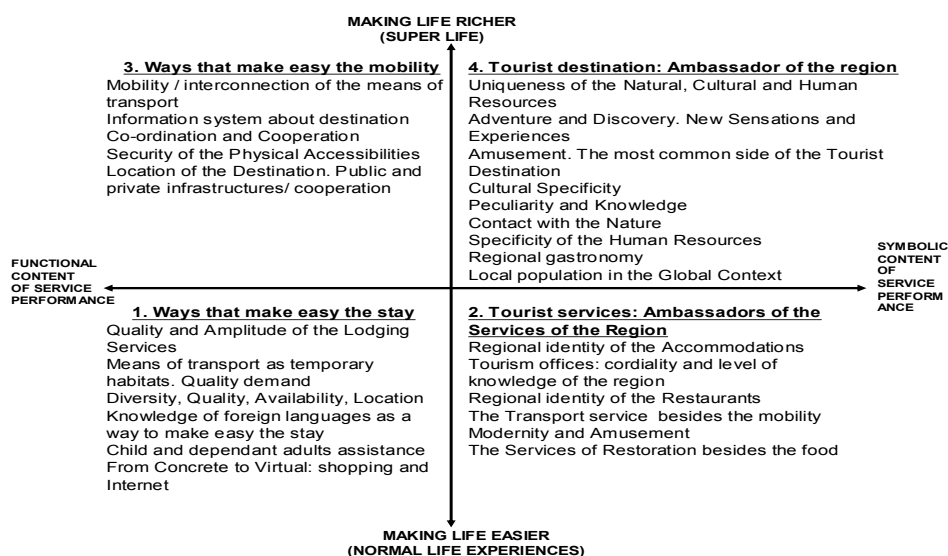
The next table (Table 2) presents the contributions (obtained after using the VARIMAX rotation method) of the variables for the retained components, representing such contributions the existent correlation between each original variable and each one of the factors, allowing interpreting its nature. The contribution was considered significant in statistical terms if the value was greater than or equal to 0.5, similar to other studies. Note that these **functional** and **symbolic** aspects of the destination are contained in the dimensions “facilitation of the stay”, “mediation of the services”, “facilitation of the movement” and “mediation of the destination”, from which, following Gyimóthy’s model, it is possible to assess the performance of a destination under the tourist point of view.

Table 2
The Functional and Symbolic Dimensions of a Destination

Functional Dimension	Contributions
Importance attributed to accommodation	0,832
Importance attributed to food/restaurants	0,791
Importance attributed to transports/accessibilities	0,600
Symbolical Dimension	Contributions
Importance attributed to the information system about destination	0,795
Importance attributed to the intensity/peculiarity of the tourist experience	0,760
Importance attributed to the tourist resources/attractions	0,630

Applying the same principal components method to a set of variables (classified as motivational variables), it was possible to identify the principal components of the four dimensions, as well as the contribution of each variable for each dimension and the nature of their relations. The factorial analysis method allowed detecting the principal components of the facilitator’ role of the tourist service providers, at the both levels of the movement and of the stay, as well as of their mediators’ role, both of the services and of the destination itself. As Gyimóthy suggests, both the roles of facilitators and of mediators attributed to the tourist suppliers by the tourists contribute to enrich the tourist experiences. This way it was possible to identify the most important dimensions and respective components for the tourists that visited the study area. Our study reached identical conclusions to that one of Gyimóthy’s respecting the importance attributed to the different dimensions through which the demand assesses a destination, as Figure 2 reflects.

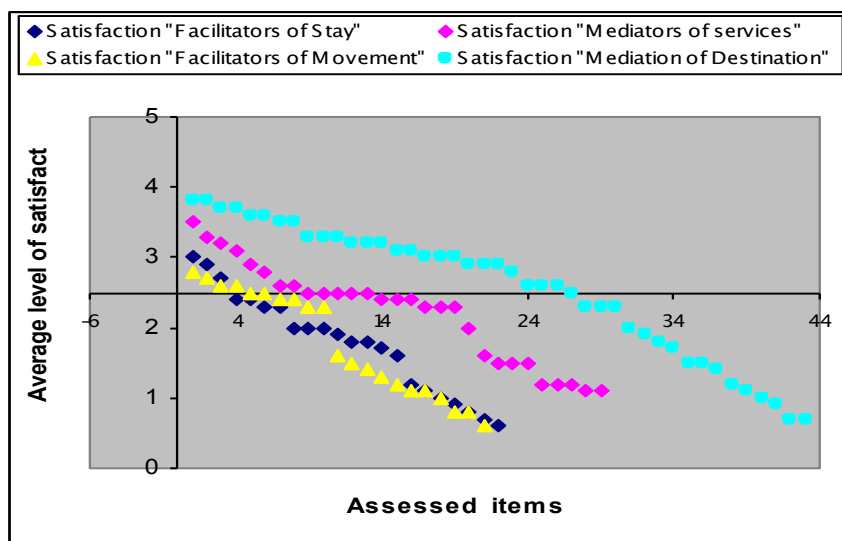
Figure 2
A demand oriented assessment of a Portuguese destination



Besides the importance attributed by the tourists to the several functional and symbolic contents of the service providers, it was considered important to analyze the corresponding levels of satisfaction, as a form of assessing the tourist offer of the study region, from the tourists point of view. Similar to the degrees of

importance, also the degrees of satisfaction were measured using a Likert scale⁴. After calculating the average level of satisfaction associated to each one of the variables and the different variables grouped in accordance with the four dimensions defined in the model of Gyimóthy, we concluded that it was essentially the **symbolic aspects** of mediation / ambassadors of the services and of the destination (hospitality, gastronomy, natural resources, culture, heritage, etc) that **satisfied the tourists most**, while the functional contents obtained a lower average level of satisfaction (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Evaluation of the region as a destination in terms of its tourist demand



If we assume that the symbolic contents are the ones that underlie the identity of the region, we can conclude that the more the region identity is reinforced, the more motivating is the difference and the more this identity works as key factor of tourism attractiveness. As stated by WTO (2005) a quality tourism destination or product is one that addresses the full range of sustainability issues rather than simply concentrating on tourist satisfaction. A destination pursuing the goal of the sustainability of the tourism and of the global process of development should take into account that the tourists not only assess the existing supply of services and attractions - how they are offered and who offers them - but also the experiences that the destination is able to provide. Involving the tourists on this kind of experiences can be not only a way of self-development for the creative tourism, but also a way to promote a “more direct interaction between tourists and the local population (...) turning the local into the essential source of expertise that the tourist is seeking, reversing the usual power relationships of the host–guest encounter” (Richard & Wilson, 2006: 1221). As Butler (2000: 56) states “Even where the sustainability is not an issue, development which is a part of a community is generally more successful than development which is apart from a community”.

CONCLUSIONS, POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

A destination may have two approaches. One centered on the tourists who enjoy the destination and the other focused on the local population who enjoys it while resident. In the case of the tourists, it is expected that the destination provides a set of better experiences and sensations different from the daily life; the residents expect that the experience of the daily life contributes to a better future. But in the current context of serious environmental and ecological imbalances, the future becomes risky for all. If the sustainable perspective of development is not internalized, shared and operationalized by the tourists and by the residents and, at the level of these ones, by the public power and by all the communities, institutions and organizations, public and private, then any one of the above mentioned approaches of the destination can be compromised. This perspective emphasizes the importance of the interconnection between the tourism and the regional development and the necessity of a destination to position itself in terms of an underpinned model of development and, consequently,

⁴ with graduations from 1 to 5; while “0” corresponded to “without opinion”, 1 and 5 ranged from “nothing satisfied” to “extremely satisfied”

in terms of the market as well. Butler (2000: 56) argues “While failure of a tourism enterprise at the global level through a lack of integration may be unfortunate, tourism development at a local level which is not suitably integrated with local activities and processes can be disastrous”.

The main conclusion is that adding value to the specificities of the resources and assuming an integrated experience offer, the destinations can satisfy the tourist needs and expectations without compromising (on the contrary, reinforcing) the needs of the local population. It is suggested the replication of this study on others destinations, being also interesting to compare the results between the hinterland and coastal areas traditionally demanded by tourists. It is also suggested the enlargement of the study, with the incorporation of various stakeholders, such as tour operators, local population and the public sector, focusing on the existing or potential networks of cooperation and complementarities.

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