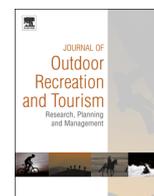




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Testing a mediation model of customer service and satisfaction in outdoor recreation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a model of customer service and satisfaction in the outdoor recreation experience. More specifically, it focuses on the question of whether domain-level satisfaction mediates the relationships between specific customer service attributes and the overall evaluation of an experience. Data were collected through a nationwide assessment of customer service at US Army Corps of Engineers (COE) lakes. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at 10 COE lakes located throughout the United States ($n=2933$ completed interviews). The survey instrument measured three levels of visitor satisfaction (19 individual attributes, four domains, and overall satisfaction). Study results supported the hypothesized model by confirming the relationships between individual customer service attributes, satisfaction within customer service dimensions (or domains) and overall satisfaction. The influence of some items, however, overlapped across multiple dimensions. The relevant items accounted for between 29% and 41% of the variance associated with satisfaction within the customer service domains. In turn, satisfaction within the domains explained 15% of the variance in overall satisfaction.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Visitor satisfaction is one of the fundamental concepts in outdoor recreation. This research investigated the relationship between subjective evaluations of overall client satisfaction with several of its components. Results suggest the following insights for managing outdoor recreation areas to improve visitor satisfaction:

- Findings underscore the importance of maintaining and improving the esthetics of recreation areas. Feelings about the appearance of the area were the strongest predictor of satisfaction with facilities, and influenced satisfaction in the other domains as well.
- Current and accurate information was found to be the most important determinant of satisfaction with information services, highlighting the need for recreation managers to continually review and update information provided to the public.
- Surveys of customer satisfaction in outdoor recreation areas should not only consider tangible indicators of facilities, services, and information, but also intangible aspects of the outdoor recreation experience. Factors such as the opportunity to recreate without crowding affected visitors' feelings of satisfaction with facilities and services as well as their satisfaction with their overall outdoor recreation experience.

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1. Introduction

Recreation quality has been one of the primary goals of recreation resource managers for more than four decades. In one of the earliest relevant publications, Wagar (1966) posed the

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question “What is quality in outdoor recreation?” He stated that recreation quality is a concept based on subjective criteria, depending upon the satisfaction of needs which are mostly learned and therefore extremely varied. Wagar went on to explain that quality is a highly personal matter that means different things to different people. Because various kinds of people come to recreation areas looking for diverse experiences, Wagar recommended a range of opportunities be provided to best match the desires of individuals with the opportunities available. This idea was later translated into practice in the form of the Recreation

Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) by the U.S. Forest Service and other natural resource management agencies (Brown, Driver, & McConnell, 1978; Driver & Brown, 1978; Driver, Brown, Stankey, & Gregoire, 1987).

More and Buhoff (1979) noted that satisfaction was a widely used measure of recreation quality. Visitor satisfaction in outdoor recreation has remained an important area of scientific inquiry, as exemplified by several previous review articles and books on the topic (Jaten & Driver, 1997; Manning, 2011; Oliver, 1997; Probst & Lime, 1982; Williams, 1989). Data on user satisfaction can inform various management and planning procedures, from establishing management objectives to implementing maintenance standards. For example, LaPage and Bevins (1981) conducted a four-year study of camper satisfaction measuring 14 elements of the camping experience. A report card method was used to assess the 14 elements. They found that changes from year to year correlated directly with changes in management practices. Likewise, a longitudinal study by Vaske, Donnelly, and Williamson (1991) found that the use of a report card survey could provide state park managers with a description of what is occurring in parks and identify changes needed in a particular park setting.

1.1. Conceptual foundations of satisfaction and customer service

Although satisfaction has frequently been identified as the principle product of the recreation experience and as the major goal of recreation resource management, satisfaction can be defined in many different ways (Manning, 2011). An early (and subsequently often used) conceptualization of recreation satisfaction defines satisfaction as the degree of congruence between aspirations and the perceived reality of experiences (Bultena & Klessig, 1969). Outside the recreation context, Oliver (1997) defined satisfaction as a consumer's fulfillment response, or the judgment that a product or service provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment. In both the outdoor recreation and consumer behavior literature, satisfaction has been most commonly understood on the basis of expectancy disconfirmation theories (Oliver, 1980; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988; Schreyer & Roggenbuck, 1978).

People engage in outdoor recreation expecting to achieve certain outcomes, and subsequently evaluate their recreation experience by assessing how well their expectations or desires were met (Peterson, 1974; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Outdoor recreationists are expected to be satisfied when their expectations are met. Disconfirmation between what one receives and what he or she expected or wanted to receive in an experience can cause reduced satisfaction, but may also be accepted, allowing visitors to remain satisfied. Previous studies have suggested various reasons for consistently high reports of satisfaction in outdoor recreation, include use of coping mechanisms such as rationalization, product shift, or displacement (Hall & Shelby, 2000; Shindler & Shelby, 1995).

Studies based on the disconfirmation model of customer service/satisfaction have addressed various issues associated with the approach, including what attributes should be included, how they should be measured, and if it is necessary to measure both expectations/desires and performance/satisfaction with various attributes. With respect to the latter question, evidence is growing that service quality and satisfaction can be assessed without directly measuring the disconfirmation between expectations/desires and performance in a given situation (Absher, 1998; Burns, Graefe, & Absher, 2003; Brunke & Hunt, 2007; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Absher (1998) concluded that "the simplified performance-measures-only model seems capable of providing important answers about visitors' desired conditions and the extent to which they are actually experienced" (p. 41). The more relevant question at this point seems to be, is

there a better way, consistent with expectancy/discrepancy-based theories, to assess the process through which visitors assess their satisfaction.

Although many studies have examined the concepts of satisfaction and service quality, little agreement has been reached on whether customer satisfaction is a function of the degree of service quality provided, or whether satisfaction is a precursor to service quality assessments (Crompton & Love, 1995). Some authors have suggested that there is no distinction between satisfaction and service quality (Iacobucci, Ostrom, & Grayson, 1995; LeBlanc, 1992). The prevailing view within the recreation and consumer behavior literature, though, suggests that satisfaction and service quality are related, but distinct concepts, the relationship between which remains unclear (Absher, 1998; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Crompton & MacKay, 1989; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Hamilton, Crompton, & More, 1991; MacKay & Crompton, 1990; Wright, Duray, & Goodale, 1992).

1.2. Dimensions of satisfaction/customer service

In their quest to provide an overall satisfactory experience for their users, recreation providers have turned to measuring and improving service quality. The original SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985), developed in the consumer behavior field, suggested that the attributes of customer service could be grouped into 10 categories or dimensions as follows: access, communication, competence, courtesy, credibility, reliability, responsiveness, security, tangibles, and understanding the customer. These 10 dimensions were later condensed into five domains of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

Crompton and MacKay (1989) examined these same five dimensions of customer satisfaction in a recreation setting. Subsequently, Crompton, MacKay, and Fesenmaier (1991) found that only four of the five attributes originally suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) (assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and tangibles) were applicable in a recreation context. In a study of service quality in recreation centers, Wright et al. (1992) used a battery of items without categorizing the items under any set of domains. Several authors (Carman, 1990; Hamilton et al., 1991; MacKay & Crompton, 1988, 1990) have noted that the SERVQUAL approach needs to be adapted to meet the needs of a particular service or context.

Howat, Absher, Crilley, and Milne (1996) measured customer service quality in sport and leisure centers using four domains (facilities sufficiency, facilities operations, services, and information). Their approach deviated from the work of Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) and subsequent authors by focusing on more applied indicators. Their four domains represent elements of recreation areas that can be manipulated by management to provide a quality recreation experience. Absher (1998) subsequently studied these same managerially relevant domains in the context of national forest recreation.

Satisfaction is influenced by more than just customer service, though. Connelly (1987) conducted a mail survey of 800 campers to determine factors directly related to camper satisfaction at two campgrounds. These factors were evaluated by using measures of each factor's ability to influence satisfaction. At both campgrounds, solitude/rejuvenation was the most important factor related to camper satisfaction.

The relationship between recreation satisfaction and crowding has received much research attention within the context of carrying capacity research. Many studies have documented weak relationships between satisfaction and crowding (Graefe, Vaske, & Kuss, 1984), causing some to debate the usefulness of measuring satisfaction (Stewart & Cole, 2001; Manning, 2003). However, Manning (2011) suggested that the absence of a stronger relationship may be due to mediating variables, given the multitude of variables that

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