

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME? THE RESULTS OF AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE OWNERS/MANAGERS UNDERSTANDING OF THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND ITS REALTIONSHIP TO THE MANAGEMENT OF VISITOR ATTRACTIONS IN WALES (UK)

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Abstract

This paper examines issues to do with the academic discussion of visitor experience and presents some key of the findings from a review of visitor attractions in Wales (UK). The Welsh review was carried out using historical data from Government agencies, local tourism associations and independent sources, together with an on line survey of attractions and interviews with individual attraction owners/managers. Significant omissions in previous analysis of this field were highlighted, with a gap between some attraction operator's understanding of visitor experience and the reality expressed by visitors. This gap is an important element in the management understanding of the relationships between quality, value, experience and satisfaction of visitors, which may combine to form the attraction 'experiencescape'.

1.Introduction: quality and experiece issues in attractions

The work of Pine and Gilmore (1999) set the stage for the understanding of the crucial role that can be played by experiences in terms of customer value and experiential tourism. An experience is created when 'a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event' (Pine and Gilmore 1999, p. 11). They described four key aspects of experience depending on the business offering and involvement of the customer: entertainment; esthetic; education and escapism. At the centre of the destination's (or attraction's) development of these four aspects should be the essentially positive nature of the experience, leading to a memorable experience (Oh et al, 2007). Special events and other activities at attractions have a key role to play in developing this core benefit, as well as a useful source of secondary income, hence the drive by so many attractions in recent years to become venues for activities and special events.

Psychological aspects of the tourism experience were dealt with by Ooi (2005), who mentioned the challenges facing attraction operators and destinations in trying to package experiences, since they are such subjective things, and the same elements of a product can be experienced by different people in different ways. Experiences are socio-cultural, multifaceted and existential, and the packaging of experiences has in the past been weak. Andersson (2007) proposed that the tourist experience occurs at the point where tourist production and tourist consumption meet. Furthermore, the use of labels to influence the experience, and how this relates to appraisal theory are based on the notion that experiences are basically subjective: 'they can be shaped by three things – what occurred, the meaning that the service provider applies to what occurred, and the interpretation that the consumer gives to what occurred, both during and after the experience' (Ritchie et al 2011 p 424). They go on to say that the focus of many organisations is on the facts of the experience rather than on the way that tourists try to understand and relate to their experiences and interpretation of the facts.

Models such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al 1988) can perhaps help close the gap between understanding customer expectations and the service experience at visitor attractions. Developed in the early-mid 1980s, the SERVQUAL model of service quality was based on interviews in four service sectors of credit cards; retail banking; securities brokerage and maintenance and repair of products. The variations between expected and perceived performance and quality of service were investigated, and it was suggested that the model could be used to assess trends in service quality in each dimension: tangibility; reliability; responsiveness; assurance; and empathy. Having been widely adopted initially, there have been criticisms of the model especially in the tourism context (Frochot and Batat 2013), yet despite this, there have been a variety of spin-offs of this service quality model applied within tourism.

Misioura (2006) described the development of HISTOQUAL, which was applied to historic houses and included such things as how potential visitors are made aware of the attraction, and how their expectations of the various facilities such as catering and retail are dealt with on site. These factors were also included in the VAQAS – visitor attraction quality assurance scheme, developed in Scotland and England in the late 1990s, and VAQAS Cymru (Cymru is the Welsh language name for Wales) which concentrates on benchmarking quality issues at visitor attractions of all types. The following table is a summary of the key points of each of these schemes:

	SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al 1998)	HISTOQUAL (Misioura 2006)	VAQAS
Tangibles	The physical facilities	Catering, retail	Condition of buildings and visitor facilities – catering retail, toilets. Promotional

			literature, website.
Reliability	How well the org. delivers the promises made in the name of customer quality	Does the attraction meet customer expectations ?	Information for visitors, interpretation
Responsiveness	How far the organisation is prepared to go to meet the needs of its customers	What are the future plans of the organisation in response to visitor feedback?	Dealing with visitor enquiries, telephone calls
Assurance	The level of knowledge acquired by staff (through training) which Benefits customers	Quality of service	Efficiency and effectiveness of staff
Empathy	Level of care and individual attention offered to customers	Skill and expertise of staff and volunteers dealing with visitors	Levels of customer care

Table 1: A comparison of the key elements of SERVQUAL, HISTOQUAL and VAQAS

The significant difference in the above models is that whilst the first two use groupings of questions put to visitors/consumers to get quantitative responses, the VAQAS scheme uses a scoresheet completed by trained assessors to arrive at a quality score for each attraction.

A further model, ATTRACTQUAL for attractions was based on the SERVQUAL principles, and proposed by Lynch (2008). It was however, based on a relatively small sample of responses (133) from visitors to 4 man-made attractions in Victoria, Australia and Lynch acknowledged the shortcomings in data collection and suggested further research on a wider scale. A limitation of these models relates to cultural issues, and Morgan et al (2010) highlighted the Western viewpoint of the frameworks as opposed to the collectivist. PAKSERV was suggested by Raajpoot (2004) as a more suitable alternative for Asian cultures, by using additional focus groups to further investigate the nature of the quality of experiences of visitors from Eastern cultures. There were also queries raised about the applicability of such models within the Chinese tourism sector.

2.The 'experiencescape'

The experience of tourists, particularly when examining destinations, is therefore a complicated intertwining of emotions, memories and experiences associated with a location (Noy 2007). The attractions themselves create the essential parts of the experience by the way that they combine the presentation of place and culture (O'Dell 2005). Yet the experience itself is significant for the individual and reflects psychological factors such as self-realisation and identity, as well as other issues of

novelty/familiarity and authenticity (Li 2000; Selstad 2007). When discussing the promotion and development of experiences, Mossberg (2007) suggests that Bitner's (1992) 'servicescape' should therefore be replaced by O'Dell's (2005) 'experiencescape'.

Chui et al (2010) emphasise the servicescape aspects of the experiencescape

Factor	Tourist Experiences Categories	Number of Items	Experiencescape Theme
1	Hedonistic Self-Expression	4	Personality-centric
2	Touristic Activities	5	Activity-centric
3	Landscape Tour	3	Site-centric
4	Nature Adventure	3	Environment-centric

Table 2: Categories of tourist experience Taman Negara. Chui et al (2010) p 30

In examining research on tourist experience, Morgan et al (2010) drew on the work of Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987) on leisure and tourist experience, to highlight four perspectives:

The definitional approach	The identification of elements of the tourist experience
The post-hoc satisfaction approach	Focus on psychological outcomes and motivations
The immediate approach	The nature of on-site, real-time experiences
Business or attraction management approach	Focus on consumer theory and product offering

Table 3: Four perspectives of tourist experience (Morgan et al 2010)

This fourth perspective outlined above placed greater emphasis on techniques of management and the operation of sites rather than the significance for individual visitors, but still concerned itself with the overall experience. The importance of these concepts is that tourists are increasingly seeking authentic and unique experiences (Yeoman et al 2007, McIntosh 2004), yet are also making decisions on their own interpretation and acceptance of authenticity and how it relates to the experiencescape.

Sharpley and Stone (2011) continued the theme of investigating the tourist experience, and developed the element of time, as well as referring to the co-creation of experience.

The concept of co-creation of the experience was mentioned by Binkhorst (2009) as a direction that could be explored by some destination and attraction managers. It had links to areas of marketing such as relationship building and loyalty. The idea that an experience can be co-created by the supplier and visitor perhaps reflects a more managerial approach (Scott et al 2010).

3. Conclusion: The attractions experience in Wales

In order to investigate the managerial understanding of visitor experience, a detailed on-line questionnaire was sent to 415 visitor attractions in Wales in 2014. The aim of this was to provide a 'snapshot' of the business and marketing-related factors behind the development and management of these attractions at that time. 82 attraction operators in Wales responded, and one of the key findings was that 47% of those who replied said that there was sometimes a gap between the experience they were offering and the reasons given by visitors for going to the attraction. This highlighted the need for further work in this area, and to develop tools to establish and evaluate how individual attractions can adopt appropriate management practices for enhancing visitor experience.

If these initial results were representative, then it appears that the attractions sector has perhaps still not fully engaged with modern experiential marketing concepts in order to create additional value for visitors in the experience economy.

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