Services research in tourism: advocating the integration of the supplier side

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Abstract
Service quality and design researchers in tourism have long been directed by demand-driven paradigms and consumer-centred rationales. Ontologies and epistemologies are largely output orientated and customer centred, that is, performance of services, number of satisfied customers, loyal repeat visitors, overnight stays, financial performance and others. We argue that a need exists to reduce this imbalance. This conceptual article reviews the relevant literature before developing five fundamental premises regarding the enabler-oriented view of the tourism industry. Future research should conduct empirical studies to validate and/or modify the premises presented in this conceptual article.

Introduction

Tourism is a service-intensive industry that depends on the quality of customers' service experiences and their consequent assessments of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Thus, the management of services is of crucial importance to the tourism industry; indeed, service management is becoming increasingly important through the global growth of the service sector. This so-called 'tertiarisation' (Montresor and Marzetti, 2011) is a result of changing consumption patterns among tourists (Urry, 1994) and the continuing development of holistic tourism products and packages (Sanchez et al., 2006). In response to these developments, the tourism industry and many other service sectors have utilised various enhancement programs to improve their operations and performance in an attempt to remain competitive. These programs have been discussed with regard to customer service (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2001) and service offerings (Henkoff, 1994), benefits of satisfaction and loyalty (Heskett et al.,

1997), service operations management (Johnston, 1999), organizational service orientation and performance (Lynn et al., 2000; Lytle and Timmerman, 2006), customer retention and market share (Rust et al., 1996) and customer expectations (Schneider and Bowen, 1995).

An abundance of studies demand more services research to expand the knowledge on customer management (Leibold et al., 2002; Keaveney, 1995; Ngai, 2005; Petrick, 2002). Certain studies advocate the need for more demand-driven research that includes "strategic vision, customer knowledge/needs, and the role of technology" (Gamble and Blackwell, 2001: 83), the implementation of enhancement programs such as customer relationship management strategies (Goldsmith and Tsiotsou, 2012; Murdy and Pike,

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Table 1. Operationalisation of outcome and enabler measures for service.

Indicators for outcome orientation	Indicators for enabler orientation
• overnight stays	• leadership and leadership skills
• value added figures	• organizational policies and strategies
• customer satisfaction, loyalty	• resources
• behavioural intentions, repeat visitation	• empathy of the employees
• booking and buying figures	• motivation of the employees
• financial performance figures	• employee satisfaction
• impact studies and performance measurement	• decision-making processes
• marketing controlling figures	• problem-solving processes
• tourist flows and mobility	• organizational and job commitment
	• internal and external knowledge

Source: Fernández and Bedia, 2006: 771; Parasuraman et al., 1988: 20; Tribe and Snaith, 1998: 26.

Table 2. Outcome orientation in academic tourism papers between 1998 and 2007.

Outcome orientation of papers (cross-tab)			
	outcome orientation	enabler orientation	overall
year 1998	78	32	110
1999	82	35	117
2000	112	18	130
2001	115	18	133
2002	129	4	133
2003	120	17	137
2004	142	11	153
2005	150	21	171
2006	177	28	205
2007	163	37	200
overall	1,268	221	1,489

Source: own illustration.

n = 1,489 full papers (no book reviews, case studies, comments, research notes, opinion pieces) top 3 tourism journals: Annals of Tourism Research (ATR), Journal of Travel Research (JTR), Tourism Management (TM).

2012; Özgener and İraz, 2006; Siu et al., 2013; Stockdale, 2007; Vogt, 2011) and additional approaches that investigate methods for improving customer value measures (Chen and Chen, 2010; Gallarza et al., 2012; Sanchez et al., 2006). A field that has emerged to help understand customers' views better is 'service design' (Trischler and Zehrer, 2012; Zehrer, 2009).

However, studies that demand a more in-depth understanding of how those outputs have been generated, processed and implemented are not included, despite the fact that any success of any service provider is ultimately determined by the potential quality of a tourism company. Hence, the evaluation and measurement of quality and design of services remain largely outcome oriented and, thus, mono-dimensional and not

holistic. Therefore, we argue that enablers must also be evaluated and assessed because these factors influence the quality outcome of a service.

Following the introduction, we provide evidence for our argument that tourism research strongly focuses on demand-driven research paradigms. The article then reviews the relevant services research literature regarding the concepts of (i) services, (ii) service quality and (iii) service design. The article then offers a series of fundamental premises regarding the most important enabler-driven issues of service quality and service design for tourism companies. Finally, the article discusses the limitations of the study and future research possibilities and concludes with a summary of the major findings.

Outcome orientation in tourism research

A content analysis of the three highest ranked tourism journals—*Annals of Tourism Research, Journal of Travel Research* and *Tourism Management* —over 10 years showed that the majority of the published articles (85.2%) rely on the output of services (see Table 2). These three journals were selected because they are prominent and influential publication outlets in the field of tourism, with a number of studies over the last 22 years consistently ranking them as the top three most influential journals (Chang and McAleer, 2012; McKercher et al., 2006; Pechlaner et al., 2004; Ryan, 2005; Sheldon, 1990; Zehrer, 2007a, 2007b). All three journals received the highest ranking possible across different rating systems, indicating that they represent '... the best or leading journal[s] in its field [and] publish outstanding, original and rigorous research that will shape the field' (Harzing, 2012: 7). Table 1

shows the criteria used to operationalise the outcome orientation as the overall result of a service.

Table 2 shows the results of the quantitative content analysis. The analysis of 1489 journal articles reveals that the large majority deals with outcome-oriented measures. Researchers are putting far more effort into understanding demand-driven constructs of service quality in tourism than in investigating the enabling factors. The data analysis confirms that tourism research is largely output oriented (see Table 2). However, with the assessment of the output measures (e.g. number of satisfied customers, loyal repeat visitors, overnight stays and financial performance), the question on enablers and potential arises. Those enablers and potential actually lead to the results that output-oriented studies measure. The potential orientation, speaking of structures, potentials and processes of services criteria are only peripherally addressed. However, the processes of the value chain, organizational culture, leadership styles, employee engagement and commitment, corporate policy, strategies and use of resources, among others, require further consideration because these factors help overcome the costs of non-quality (Clark et al., 2009; Gimenez-Espin et al., 2013; Muskat et al., 2013; Romeiß-Stracke, 1995; Snyder et al., 2010; Stauss, 1998; Yee et al., 2013).

In service-intense industries, assessment of the enablers of services is necessary to foresee unplanned results. Therefore, the systematic identification and implementation of enablers and potentials are considered crucial with respect to quality assurance in a service company, such as a tourism business.

Therefore, the aim of this study is threefold:

- firstly, to demonstrate that an imbalance of tourism studies with underlying demand-driven paradigms exists;
- secondly, to develop the argument for the necessity of developing more research that supports the enabler side of services and
- thirdly, to establish a link between consumers and enablers of service quality and design for the tourism context, advocating an integrative, systemic view of service in tourism.

The findings of this article will assist tourism companies in dealing with challenges to their operating efficiency and profitability. The article is conceptual in nature. This subjectivist epistemology suits and benefits research purposes that suggest new ways of thinking and discuss 'big, holistic questions that are not amendable to empirical analysis' (Xin et al., 2013: 73). We take a hermeneutic approach which is defined as 'the study of the locus and principles of interpretation' (Ferguson, 1986: 4) and was understood as the task of 'hearing' what an ancient text has to say. Meanwhile, the term has seen a shift from 'explaining' to 'understanding' (Baumann, 2010; Seebohm, 2007).

Services research in tourism

Services

A service is a complex phenomenon. A review of the academic literature shows that no agreement exists on definitions of the term 'service'. In the area of marketing research, services are defined in very different ways, that is, constitutive characteristics are attributed to single service dimensions (Bruhn, 2003; Guthoff, 1995; Lovelock, 1983; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al., 1985). Services are immaterial goods characterised by the fact that production and consumption coincide; they are primarily intangible, making it impossible to stock services in the same way one would store goods (Canton, 1989; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Groenroos, 1984; Hill, 1977; Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988; Rushton and Carson, 1985).

Tourism products (Smith, 1994) and tourism services (Kandampully, 2000) are often pictured as 'bundles' of single service components. This bundle consists of the following four features: supporting facility, facilitating good, explicit service and implicit service (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 2001). 'The package is divided into two main categories: the main service or core service and auxiliary services or extras, which are sometimes referred to as peripherals or peripheral services, sometimes also as facilitator services' (Groenroos, 2001: 164). (. . .) 'Customers do not look for goods or services per se; they look for solutions that serve their own value-generating process' (Groenroos, 2001: 3–4).

For example, Bruhn (1995, 2003) distinguished four definitions of services: (1) activity-based definition: This approach classifies each human activity as a service, yet as a broad scope of action, the approach is only partially convincing because little room exists for service-specific characteristics (Meffert and Bruhn, 2003), (2) potential-oriented service definition: service potentials are supplied by the service

provider and comprise service willingness and service ability in the form of personal, objective or immaterial resources. Potential-oriented definitions are tied to the efficiency of human resources and technical equipment (e.g. machines). Therefore, services are first a productivity promise; they are immaterial and require customers' active participation (Hentschel, 1992; Kamiske and Brauer, 1993), (3) process-oriented service definition: services are viewed as a sequence of processes rather than one 'thing'; such definitions integrate the involvement of consumers and consider time and character of services (Groenroos, 1984; Hentschel, 1992) and (4) result-oriented service definition: services are interpreted as immaterial goods, which are the result of a service process (Bruhn, 2003).

Hentschel (1992) suggested a further model to describe the transaction process of services: the three definitions of services must be regarded in a phase model, as a simple flow process chart of service transaction (Whittle and Foster, 1991). The customer influences the development and results of the service development process as a more or less passive production.

This section explains the various definitions used to determine services. Predominantly, we found that researchers have been arguing from a marketing customer-driven perspective. The approach by Bruhn and Hentschel is one of the few to integrate a process view of services, which addresses contact points between organizations—the enablers—and consumers.

Service quality models

Numerous service quality models have been developed to describe the quality perception of services. The majority of these models have the goal of operationalising and measuring service quality and highlight the concept of potential and outcome service quality; the most important ones are as follows (Bruhn, 2003).

Donabedian (1980) was one of the first to reflect on service quality, to operationalise the term and to develop a widely acknowledged quality model. His model distinguishes three service attributes: (1) *structure* encompasses stable characteristics and refers to the abilities of service providers and employees to deliver the service (e.g. technical equipment and physical and organizational work environment), (2) *process* attributes comprise all activities taking place during service delivery and (3) *outcome* characteristics stand for the final result or performance

level. Donabedian principally assumed a certain linearity between the three components, yet refers to insufficient knowledge of the relationship between structural quality and process quality (Bezold, 1996; Donabedian, 1980; Haller, 1993; Meyer and Mattmueller, 1987). Although structural quality describes the service provider potential, process quality signifies the service delivery manner and finally meets the outcome quality, which will add value for customers.

Groenroos (1983) distinguishes between two dimensions—a technical and a functional dimension of services—and describes the functional component as the 'way' the service was delivered, whereas the technical dimension represents the outcome of the production process and is relevant to the customer's service evaluation. However, because the service is produced through interaction with the consumer, the technical quality dimension cannot count for the total quality perceived by the consumer. Obviously, the customer is also influenced by the manner in which technical quality is functionally transferred to them. Hence, the consumer is interested not only in what he or she receives as an outcome of the production process but also in the process itself. Whereas technical quality might be evaluated using objective criteria and reveals objective perceptions, the functional dimension is subject to the customer's personal judgment and unveils subjective perceptions. Obviously, the functional quality dimension cannot be evaluated as subjectively as the technical one. In fact, the functional dimension is perceived subjectively (Groenroos, 1983).

Meyer and Mattmueller's model (1987) is based on the main findings of Donabedian and Groenroos. In addition to the basic differentiation in 'what' and 'how', Meyer and Mattmueller (1987) based their model on the assumption that service quality is characterised and shaped by four service-specific marketing dimensions or sub-qualities: quality potential of service provider, quality potential of customers, process quality and output quality. Any of these four sub-qualities offers its own possibilities to heighten the consumer's quality perceptions of what is perceived and how it is perceived according to the technical and functional quality dimensions described by Groenroos. This service quality model represents a further development of previous quality models in a way that the influence of the external factor is strongly included. *Potential quality* is determined by the available capability of internal subjects (service

providers and employees) and the supplying internal objects (e.g. technical equipment). The potential quality as perceived by customers reflects their basic attitudes in terms of psychical, intellectual or emotional participation in the service delivery process and has positive, negative or neutral effects and pre-determines quality. The process quality may be viewed as the result of numerous interactions between the service provider and customer and influences overall quality. This process is similar to Groenroos' partial qualities and orientates on what the customer gets (tech quality) and how the service is delivered (touch quality). The outcome quality is composed of 2 quality areas: timely fixed 'procedural outcome quality' in accordance with Donabedian and 'inferential quality', which has the character of continuous quality as described by Meyer and Mattmueller (1987).

The application of quality management research specifically to the service sector commenced in the 1980s and developed in two separate schools: the Scandinavian school with Groenroos and Gummesson and the North American School led by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry. Both sets of researchers come from a marketing background. All models have in common that service quality is assessed according to differing partial qualities or quality phases/stages, and they all are based on the potential process and outcome phase of services.

Service design

Service design considers services as products that need to be systematically developed with a clear focus on customer value. More precisely, Gummesson (1994) described service design as the hands-on activities that describe and detail a service, the service system and the service delivery process.

Service design tools offer an alternative to the conventional approach to analysing and evaluating service experiences. Apart from the centrality of user-centred design and co-creation in service design thinking (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2010), service design provides profound insights into how customers experience the service and visualises the processes that may be effective for handling the complexity and variety of service experiences (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010).

Research on service design has evolved over the years from being design centred to being user centred (Holmlid, 2005, 2009; Mager, 2009; Sanders and Stappers, 2008); thus, it is applicable

within tourism. Zehrer (2009) discussed service design with a focus on Small and Medium-sized Entreprises (SMEs) in tourism with a demand perspective. Kansa and Wilde (2008) analysed the characteristics of information and service design by exploring tourists' needs and motivations. Service design in tourism was also explored with regard to destination management, again with a customer focus (Frischhut et al., 2012; Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009).

Even if Mager previously defined service design as '. . . the functionality and form of services from the perspective of clients' (Mager, 2008: 355), the topic recently evolved into a holistic approach aimed at designing services from both the user perspective and the provider perspective (Mager and Sung, 2011). Recent research in service design and tourism acknowledged the lack of the supply side (Dalton et al., 2009; Lally and Fynes, 2006) with missing factors such as 'management strategic directions' and 'employees viewpoints' (Trischler and Zehrer, 2012: 67). The current article now aims to move forward in this direction. Although service design to date has only been explored with the customer-oriented perspective in mind (Maffei et al., 2005; Teixeira et al., 2012; Williams and Buswell, 2003; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010), we assume that it has the potential to be discussed from the supply and enabler side as well, opening up an area with a potential research perspective for applying service design with a holistic approach both within and outside tourism research.

Fundamental premises and discussion

On the basis of the findings of the literature review, this conceptual article puts forward a series of fundamental premises regarding the management of service quality and service design for companies engaged in tourism.

Knowledge/epistemologies of tourism services

The previous discussion shows that service quality has a long tradition as a component of services research in tourism. Whereas service quality has established models, service design is a rather newly emerging area. Both areas are largely output oriented and most research relates and refers to marketing research areas. Hence, note that in both areas of services research in

tourism, ontologies and epistemologies remain largely marketing and consumer driven (Chen and Chen, 2010; Gallarza et al., 2012; Murdy and Pike, 2012; Özgener and İraz, 2006; Sanchez et al., 2006; Siu et al., 2013, Stockdale, 2007; Vogt, 2011).

Additionally, in the emerging tourism services area of service design, the central question for researchers has been to date understanding customers' views on service design (Trischler and Zehrer, 2012; Zehrer, 2009), service quality and their satisfaction (Bitner et al., 1990; Laws, 1998; Parasuraman et al., 1985), and components of customers' experience are considered the outcome of a successfully managed service delivery system (Laws, 1986; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982). Assertions about reality are based on customer views and needs; origins of knowledge about tourism services stem predominantly from tourist-centred, demand-related sources.

However, to more comprehensively understand tourism services, we propose:

> P1 A tourism researcher should consider multiple epistemologies and engage equally in customer- and enabler-related and generated knowledge.

Integration of enabling factors in service quality models and service design

The literature review discussed three seminal models that conceptualise service quality. We showed that the potential orientation of services, which comprises structures, potentials, processes of services, the value chain, leadership styles, corporate policy, strategies, the use of resources and others, was theoretically considered in various models, as follows.

1. Donabedian's model includes the three components—structure, process and outcome. Donabedian principally assumed certain linearity among the three components, yet referred to insufficient knowledge on the relationship between structural quality and process quality (Bezold, 1996; Donabedian, 1980; Haller, 1993; Meyer and Mattmueller, 1987).
2. Groenroos (1983) distinguished between a technical and functional dimension of services, thus differentiating between expected and perceived qualities.
3. The model by Meyer and Mattmueller (1987) is based on the main findings of Donabedian and Groenroos and

distinguishes among the sub-qualities: quality potential of service provider, quality potential of customers, process quality and output quality.

As shown, all models highlight the importance of considering and integrating enablers into achieving high service quality, leading to the second premise:

> P2 Service quality and service design largely depend on its enablers.

Service design research and the potential to develop an integrative model

Service design research is a relatively new area in tourism services research (see Section 2.3). Studies in tourism services research have been mostly practice related (Frischhut et al., 2012; Holmlid, 2005, 2009; Kansa and Wilde, 2008; Mager, 2009; Sanders and Stappers, 2008; Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009; Zehrer, 2009) and elaborated on applied themes around issues on how to best design services whilst integrating customer experiences (Maffei et al., 2005; Teixeira et al., 2012; Williams and Buswell, 2003; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010).

Although few theoretical models exist that conceptualise service design, the literature review showed that the area is emerging (Dalton et al., 2009; Lally and Fynes, 2006; Mager and Sung, 2011; Trischler and Zehrer, 2012). Therefore, models to conceptualise service design are anticipated to be developed in the near future.

For future research and anticipated emerging model development in tourism service design research, we propose:

> P3 Integration of both output and enabling factors and dimensions in forthcoming tourism service design models is required.

Systematic identification and implementation of enablers

When service quality largely depends on its enablers (see premise 1) and an increase in the potential orientation of service providers leads to higher output quality, obtaining additional knowledge on service enablers is necessary. Following the potential-oriented service definition according to Bruhn (2003, 1995), service potential is supplied by the service provider and comprises service willingness and service ability in

the form of personal, objective or immaterial resources (Hentschel, 1992; Kamiske and Brauer, 1993). To assess and value potentials and enablers, service companies must systematically identify them and measure their quality, leading to the fourth premise:

> P4 Enablers and potentials of services must be systematically identified and measured.

Employee qualification and tourism services research (service quality and service design)

Employee qualification is an enabler of service quality and service design. Changing circumstances and developments related to tourism consistently lead to new challenges for the higher education system (Ottewill et al., 2005; Tribe, 2005; Woodley and Brennan, 2000).

To meet the demands of the tourism industry on both a personal and a job/career level, people need competencies that enable them to manage the changing circumstances of the business world (Bagshaw, 1996). These new circumstances have led to discussions focusing on integrated approaches to tourism education including contemporary, content-specific disciplines and a list of skills and competencies termed employability, soft skills, personal skills, generic skills, attributes or capabilities (Atkins, 1999; Hager and Holland, 2006; Holmes, 2001). If competencies are classified, the literature distinguishes among several types of and approaches to competencies, which are summarised as follows (Kauffeld et al., 2002; Kolb, 2002; Sonntag and Schmidt-Rathjens, 2004):

- *Professional competencies* comprise skills, abilities and knowledge necessary to meet the challenges and tasks of one's profession;
- *Methodological competencies* are universal problem-solving and decision-making competencies that may be applied in one's job and in one's personal surroundings;
- *Social competencies* are abilities that enable to act in social surroundings and includes cooperating with other people, interacting with them and building effective relationships; and
- *Leadership competencies* are abilities that display inspiration for a shared vision to enable others to act or to encourage them.

Our last fundamental premise is as follows:

> P5 Employees in tourism must be qualified with regard to professional, methodological, social and leadership competencies.

Limitations and further research

The present article has certainly acknowledged limitations that need to be taken into account when considering the results of the study and its contributions.

The most significant limitation is that this article is purely conceptual and developed fundamental premises regarding service quality and its enablers in tourism. Conceptual articles are subjectivist and not based on empirical data; therefore, they are uncertain (Xin et al., 2013). Hence, this article did not intend to present an objective truth.

To further investigate why tourism services' research is dominated by customer- and output-oriented studies, we recommend future empirical studies of a qualitative and quantitative nature. Such studies are required to interpret, validate and/or modify the premises developed in this exploratory theoretical article. Such studies need not be restricted to the tourism industry. The fundamental characteristics of services—whether a tourism service or a non-tourism service—are such that the premises developed in this article might well be applicable to a service quality in a variety of service industries (such as banking or financial services).

Conclusions and implications

The purpose of this article has been to shed light on a notable epistemological issue in tourism services research: the imbalance of tourism studies with demand-driven, customer-centred research paradigms. We have developed the argument to necessitate additional research that presents knowledge stemming and arguing from a supplier and enabler perspective. We propose the integration of service enablers into future research and highlight the need for more integrative, systematic research of services in tourism.

The literature review showed that definitions of the term service are largely founded in marketing and are primarily and exclusively customer driven. Rarely do any models include the organizational perspective—the enabler side. However, we have also demonstrated that services rely on the enabler side that create and enable those services. Established models of service quality (Donabedian, 1980; Groenroos, 1983; Meyer and

Mattmueller, 1987) aimed to operate and measure process outputs. Additionally, service design research, an emerging services research topic in tourism, predominantly has focused to date on outputs and customer experiences rather than discussing or integrating the enabler's perspective.

This discussion and the findings are summarised into the following five fundamental premises.

> P1 Tourism researcher should consider multiple epistemologies and engage equally on customer- and enabler-related and generated knowledge.
> P2 Service quality and service design largely depend on its enablers.
> P3 Integration of both output and enabling factors and dimensions in forthcoming tourism service design models is required.
> P4 Enablers and potentials of services must be systematically identified and measured.
> P5 Employees in tourism must be qualified with regard to professional, methodological, social and leadership competencies.

We contend that including the enabler perspective into future research in tourism service is necessary to reduce the imbalance and expand knowledge on the supply side. We claim that a need exists to involve tourism operators in this thinking, particularly with regard to the definition and improvement of service-delivery processes. Thus, a service orientation as an organisational predisposition that encourages a distinctive approach to all aspects of the consumer market (Zehrer, 2009) forms the basis for achieving continuing service quality standards in service businesses. If tourism operators are to improve customer experiences and enhance satisfaction for their guests, first enablers of service quality must be improved and further developed.

A prerequisite for achieving the formerly defined aim is a certain level of qualification and competencies on the suppliers' side. Thus, we encourage further research in the field of higher education and ask for revised training programs to be introduced by future decision makers (Hofstetter, 2004), since there seems to be a gap between what higher education institutions offer as management and entrepreneurship level tourism education and the requirements as expressed by the customers. We claim that the identification and implementation of service potentials literally asks for highly developed skills of the future tourism workforce.

This study is one of the few to have conceptually addressed the relevance of an enabler-oriented perspective in the quality and design of services. We encourage researchers to investigate on the issues raised and to confirm the fundamental premises made.

Funding

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