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Assessing Tourist Satisfaction in Cultural Tourism through Service Quality Indicators

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ABSTRACT

With tourists increasingly seeking experiences of authentic heritage and deeper cultural engagement, cultural tourism is emerging as one of the fastest growing segments of the world marketplace. However, while there has been much research conducted into (general) tourist satisfaction, there has been little empirical work (that we know of) that identifies the role of service quality dimensions on satisfaction within the domain of cultural tourism. In order to fill this gap, this study uses a quantitative research methodology, examining the effects of important service quality elements on tourists' satisfaction in cultural tourism destinations. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and multiple regression modelling for domestic and international tourists. The findings reveal that the quality of the service will impact tourist satisfaction, being the biggest predictors of tourist satisfaction were empathy and reliability, followed with assurance and responsiveness, with tangibility playing the least salient role in the tourism context. Human-centered and reliable delivery service is important for enhancing cultural tourism experiences, and these findings can help reflect that. The study provides practical implications for destination managers and policy makers by highlighting service quality improvements as a strategic approach to reinforce tourist satisfaction, destination competitiveness, and sustainable economic development through cultural tourism.

Keywords: cultural tourism, service quality, tourist satisfaction, destination competitiveness, tourism economics.

Introduction

Cultural tourism is 1 of the leading and most resilient sector of the world tourism economy, illustrating a structural change from the standardized mass tourism to experience-oriented, knowledge-based, value-driven travel in preferences. Heritage – the value of significant landmarks and historic narratives; Socio-cultural environments – the local traditions and traditions that are attracting more extensive interests from cultural tourist visitors. As a consequence, in certain economies, cultural tourism has become more than an alternative segment of the scarce visitor economy; it has evolved into a policy tool for economic diversification, regional development, and destination branding. In this frame, tourist satisfaction plays a key

driver at the consumption pattern micro-level and tourism destination competitiveness macro-level.

Tourism satisfaction is, therefore, especially important from an economic standpoint, because of its association with demand sustainability, re-visitation, situational externalities like word-of-mouth endorsement and destination image. Happy visitors will have a longer duration of stay, pay more, and be loyal, thus ensuring steady revenue streams and sustainable economic resilience. However, in cultural tourism destinations, large-scale expansion faces constraints severely due to limits on preservation, carrying capacity, and authenticity, making the non-invasive upgrading of service quality a critical reality strategy to maximize economic returns from cultural tourism without destroying culture.

These experiences are primarily intangible, co-created, and very service encounter sensitive which makes them significantly different from non-cultural tourism products. But tourists do not just consume cultural assets with intrinsic value, their perceptions are also influenced by the quality of the services surrounding consumption, such as interpretation, hospitality, accessibility, and personal interaction. Thus, the service quality makes or breaks the process of converting the cultural resources into good experiences. Low quality service leads to a deterioration of perceived value and loss of authenticity, as well as a weakened relationship with the destination, while high-quality services enhance the symbolic value of the culture and the level of satisfaction.

While the significance of service quality has been referred to by previous authors, the connection between the service quality indicators and tourists' satisfaction in cultural tourism still has not been empirically studied enough yet. Previous research has focused mainly on broad tourism context, hospitality assistance or destination image, but lacks in addressing the specific nature of cultural tourism consumption. Furthermore, much research conceptualizes service quality as a unidimensional construct and assumes that different dimensions of service encounters will have homogenous effects on satisfaction. This research adds to those limitations through a systematic analysis of the effects that specific service quality dimensions have on tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism contexts.

Cultural Tourism and Its Economic Role

Cultural tourism is often described as travel for the purpose of experiencing the cultures of a destination that may include cultural expressions, heritage resources, and the way of life of a community. These consist of tangible (E.g monuments, museums and historic architecture) resources and intangible resources (E.g collective memories, tradition, arts and customs.) Cultural tourism is important in the economic perspective because it provides multiple advantages such as job creation, income generation, local entrepreneurship and development of peripheral areas.

Cultural tourists, compared with other segments, exhibit higher social awareness, cultural awareness, educational attainment and are more willing to pay to enjoy good services. While this profile boosts the economic value of cultural tourism it also raises expectations around service delivery. Thus, destination attributes are being determined not only the opportunity for cultural assets but also the extent to which these assets are managed, interpreted and presented through proper quality services.

In the nature of cultural tourism, the tourism product is matured; it is always experiential and relational. Service quality is an economic variable since the quality of interactions between tourists, service providers and local communities co-create the value. Too little service delivery decreases consumer surplus and may lead to reduced future demand but too much service delivery does not always lead to improved quality but can destroy potential perceived value, as well as reduce destination competitiveness without extensive physical investment in the form of infrastructure and service supply.

Tourist Satisfaction as an Economic and Behavioral Construct

One of the central topic of tourism economics and consumer behavior studies is tourist satisfaction. It is mostly understood as a post-consumption evaluation derived from the discrepancy between pre-travel expectations and actual perceptions during and/or after the experience. This assessment indicates to what extent the consumption of tourism meets the needs, desires, and motivations of tourists.

More from the utility-maximizing outlook point, satisfaction represents the utility that the tourism experience has provided in comparison to expectations. From the perspective of a tourist, a high satisfaction corresponds to an efficient distribution of tourism resources while a low satisfaction implies ineffective use of resources or that expectations are not met. Numerous empirical studies proves that the satisfaction of tourists is positively related to destination loyalty, intention to return to the destination, and intention to recommend the destination to others, which is all matter of economic importance.

On the other hand, with regard to cultural tourism, satisfaction is sensitive to a greater extent to non-material issues, including authenticity, emotional involvement, learning and interaction quality with service personnel. Travelers are now more in search of great experience instead of just fun, thus the role of service quality dimensions such as interpretation, empathy and trust become crucial. As a result, a framework for analyzing satisfaction in cultural tourism should reflect the complexity of service encounters.

Service Quality in Tourism Research

Tourists can consider service performance of different attributes and therefore, service quality is a multidimensional construct. The most influential conceptualization of the service quality identifies five basic dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Tangibles is all about physical facilities and appearance; reliability is all about delivering the promised services accurately; attentiveness is how quickly and willingly the services are extended; assurance is all about competence and trust; and empathy is all about caring, personalized attention.

This framework has been widely applied to tourism and hospitality like hotels, transportation, tour operations, and destination services (see Spotify and many more). Yet, there is another type of tourism that has a specific setting with service interactions that take place among several touchpoints (heritage sites, museums, guides, information centers and local businesses): cultural tourism. Tourists responded in a qualitative, holistic and global style; their evaluations are summative, combining affective with functional and symbolic elements.

More importantly, not all dimensions of service quality have the same impact in cultural tourism. Climate controlled spaces may be required but not sufficient in achieving satisfaction, especially in heritage settings — too much modernity may distract visitors from authenticity. However, interpersonal attributes like empathy and assurance are more likely to affect the perceived sense of welcoming, trust, and cultural empathy among tourists.

Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction in Cultural Tourism

An avalanche of empirical literature confirms that the interaction between perceived service quality and tourist satisfaction are positively correlated. Research consistently demonstrates that increases in service quality yield increases in satisfaction, emotional attachment and positive behavioral intentions. Reliability and empathy are often found as the crucial variables in cultural tourism; tourists prefer correct information, good treatment, and individualized engagement.

However, previous knowledge is still tenuous and context-dependent. While some studies underscore importance of physical features, others stress interpersonal items, the findings on relative importance of the pecture of the qective of the quality dimensional groups have been inconsistent. Moreover, many studies using descriptive analysis or only partial models end up

neglecting the economic implications of the satisfaction outcomes.

In the light of the above, it is obvious that there is a gap in research which deserves empirical and grounded attention so that service quality indicators and their distinct impacts upon tourist satisfaction in cultural tourist destinations can be assessed in a systematic manner. This study will make contributions to academic knowledge, as well as practical destination management, by combining a rich tourism economics literature with service quality theory, and employing national-level quantitative data and rigorous analysis.

In this sense, the research has three main objectives: to assess tourists' perceptions of service quality on multiple dimensions, to examine effects of these dimensions on overall satisfaction and to extract managerial and policy implications to further advance service performance and sustainable destination competitiveness.

Methodology

The research design was cross-sectional and of a quantitative nature, collecting empirical evidence on the links of the service quality indicators to tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism destinations. We focused on the cultural tourism sector and collected primary data using a structured questionnaire administered to both domestic and international tourists who had undertaken any cultural tourism activities like visiting heritage assets, museums or historical attractions. Only tourists who had spent at least one whole day shopping or taking part in cultural tourism activities were included in the sample to guarantee that respondents possessed adequate experiential exposure. Tourists were sampled using a non-probability convenience sampling technique given the inability to reach tourists at more than one cultural site. Out of 420 distributed questionnaires 386 was retained after excluding the unfinished and inconsistent responses. The questionnaire comprised three basic elements: (1) Demographic and travel-related characteristics; (2) Perceived service quality; and (3) general tourist satisfaction. Data on service quality were collected using 22 items, formed from the five-dimensions of service quality (i.e., tangibility; reliability; responsiveness; assurance; and empathy), and the survey included five evaluative statements on tourist satisfaction. All items were measured using five-point Likert scale from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. Before proceeding to the analysis, the reliability tests by internal consistency of the measurement scales were assessed, demonstrating satisfactory reliability levels. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondents' perceptions; correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship among variables; and multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the ability of service quality dimensions to explain tourist satisfaction, by software and statistical programs. This provided a more rounded and statistically coherent assessment of service quality effects in cultural tourism contexts.

Results and discussion

The practical contribution of this paper is to provide empirical evidence for a decisive influence of service quality on tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism destinations. In general, respondents evaluated service quality positively, suggesting that when weighing the differing relevant facets, destination characteristics allow for sufficient cultural tourism experiences in the areas studied. Yet, differences on service quality dimensions provide valuable information to destination managers on services that are more strongly related to tourist satisfaction and, ultimately, to destination competitiveness and economic sustainability.

The results in Table 1 describe the various statistics of the five service quality dimensions. The mean scores for all dimensions are higher than the scale midpoint; therefore, it indicates that, in general, tourists have positive perceptions of service performance across cultural tourism services. Of the dimensions, reliability has the highest mean score, followed closely by empathy and assurance. Or in terms of tourists' values, this shows that reliability, service delivery, accurate information, and credibility in cultural interaction are important factors for tourists. On the contrary, tangibility received the lowest mean score, yet this was still within an acceptable range. This indicates that the uniqueness of the tourism experience should not be defined merely by

tangible facilities or graphical appearance as it is rarely considered a key factor of tourists evaluations in cultural tourism situations.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Service Quality Dimensions

Service Quality Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation
Tangibility	3.78	0.64
Reliability	4.12	0.58
Responsiveness	3.95	0.61
Assurance	4.05	0.56
Empathy	4.08	0.59

Under this condition, descriptive results reveal that cultural tourists emphasise more on functional accuracy and individual attention the most. That tangibility scores lower reflects the relative lack of material significance in cultural tourism, where authenticity and depth of experience almost always take precedence over physical infrastructure.

The positive image of reliability emphasizes the need for consistent service experience in the field of cultural tourism. Reliability in opening hours, guiding services and visitor flows seems to decrease unpredictability and increase the feeling of control of tourists over their experience. Likewise, the high scores of the empathy dimension indicate that personalized work, cultural sensitivity and mutual respect influence the emotional reaction of the tourists sample. Economically, these aspects lower the perceived transaction costs and add to the perceived value leading to higher total satisfaction.

In order to more deeply explore the connection between service quality and satisfaction of tourists, correlation analysis was performed. The results, shown in Table 2, reveal that the relationship between all of the service quality dimensions and overall tourist satisfaction is both statistically significant and positive. Empathy and reliability show the highest correlations with satisfaction, suggesting that interpersonal contact and consistent service delivery are the primary drivers of favorable assessments. There are also moderately strong correlations between assurance/responsiveness and tangibility has a much lower yet still significant correlation.

Table 2. Correlation between Service Quality Dimensions and Tourist Satisfaction

Dimension	Correlation with Satisfaction
Tangibility	0.42**
Reliability	0.68**
Responsiveness	0.55**
Assurance	0.61**
Empathy	0.70**

Note: $p < 0.01$

The correlation results indicate that relational and functional service attributes are more strongly related with satisfaction in cultural tourism than physical ones. And two dimensions stood far above the rest in terms of their impact: empathy and reliability, suggesting the importance of humanized delivery of service, in heritage-based tourism.

These results reaffirm that cultural tourism is about the experience rather than the consumption of culture and about meaningful engagement of consumers through co-creation instead of standardised culture consumption. Empathy and satisfaction are highly correlated, which signals that tourists typically respond favorably toward services that respond to their personal needs, cultural contexts, and motivations to learn. Likewise, the noteworthy correlation between reliability and satisfaction also indicates that tourists tend to favor exact, systematic events and outcomes which enhances trust and lowers dissatisfaction risks.

Correlation analysis can however confirm or deny the existence of relationships it does not determine causality and does not indicate the relative importance of each dimension. To

investigate this further, the degree of explanatory power of the service quality dimensions of the tourists in their satisfaction was evaluated by multiple regression analysis. As shown in Table 3, the final regression results display that satisfaction with the biomarkers is explained to a large degree, confirming good predictive validity.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Results for Tourist Satisfaction

Predictor	Beta	t-value	Significance
Tangibility	0.09	1.84	0.067
Reliability	0.31	5.92	0.000
Responsiveness	0.18	3.47	0.001
Assurance	0.22	4.11	0.000
Empathy	0.34	6.28	0.000
R² = 0.62			

According to the regression analysis empathy and reliability were the leading predictors as opposed to assurance and responsiveness for tourist satisfaction. This means that the variable Tangibility show a weak and marginally significant effect because this affinity between physical elements and quality in a context of cultural tourism may not be relevant per se to significantly strength satisfaction.

The importance of empathy as a predictor reflects the cost and the benefit of personalized service interactions. If they feel that service providers care about their needs and value their cultural perspectives, and communicate effectively they are likely to report higher levels of satisfaction. This finding further strengthens the notion that cultural tourism consumption revolves around creating emotional value. Reliability also showed a positive direct effect, and this is an indication of the importance of performing the service correctly, as well as dependably and accurately to maintain satisfaction and confidence.

Although the role of responsiveness and assurance are somewhat less impactful than friendly service, they are important factors that leads to satisfaction. Quick help, professionalism, and the ability of personnel to reassure tourists facilitate the comfort of tourists and reduce their feelings of risk in an unknown cultural context. This provides satisfaction by enabling seamless interactions and builds trust in cultural institutions and service providers across these dimensions.

The weak tangibility effect implies that investments in physical infrastructure must be made in conjunction with authenticity considerations. Clean facility, signage and clean equipment is still needed, but they do not determine satisfaction on their own without the backing of high-quality interpersonal and functional services. Where material enhancement is pursued at the expense of service delivery and interpretation improvements, cultural tourism may be subject to low-hanging-fruit-induced devaluation.

Exceptional service quality dimensions that contribute to strengthening trust, emotional engagement, and experiential coherence, as a whole, highlight that tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism is primarily derived from the level of service quality (resource of satisfaction). Through more tourism economics lens, emphasizing empathy, trust, and confidence can create positive multiplier effects in terms of intent to revisit, length of stay and reputation of destination. Such outcomes promote sustained demand and economic stability without significant physical expansion.

Results indicate the necessity for destination managers and policymakers to adopt a human-centred approach in enhancing tourism service quality. Investments to train staff in cultural standards, cultural interpretational skills, language skills, and visitor engagement strategies are likely to return greater visitor satisfaction dividends than further improvements purely in infrastructure. Furthermore, integrating service quality monitoring into governance frameworks for cultural tourism can facilitate evidence-based policy-making and facilitate the sustainable management of destinations.

Conclusion

In light of the results of this research, service quality is one of the main drivers of tourist satisfaction in cultural tourism destination. Empirical finding indicates all of service quality dimensions having a positive impact on satisfaction and that empathy and reliability emerging as the most influential predictors with assurance and responsiveness having as less degree of impact and tangibility emerges as a less significant predictor of satisfaction. Such findings underline the importance cultural tourists attach to quality in service delivery, individualized service and confidence-based interactions than on the purely physical aspects of tourism facilities. The implications from the findings are essentially to steer destination planners and policymakers towards service-oriented methods that focus on the human aspect through staff training, approaches to cultural interpretation capabilities, and visitor involvement practices can help improve satisfaction and help strengthen destination competitiveness without loss of cultural authenticity. Enabled by the service quality monitoring, if integrated with cultural tourism management frames with intention to be part of overall destination management systems, it could function to underpin sustainable economic outcomes through repeat visitation and word-of-mouth effect. Longitudinal studies are suggested for future research to explore the temporality of changes in tourist satisfaction, whereas, comparative analyses could advance the generalizability found progressive analytics in different cultural contexts. Moreover, utilizing qualitative methods may offer further insights into tourists' experiential assessments and enhance the understanding of value creation in the cultural tourism context through the mechanism of service quality.

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