

# The Quality of Service Experience: a contrast perceptions from Northern and Southern Mediterranean Tourists<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper compares the quality of service experience as reported by tourists in seven northern and southern Mediterranean cities. Otto and Ritchie's (1996) scale was included in a self-report study which provided data from 1362 tourists. Results show that tourists perceive northern Mediterranean destinations differently from destinations in the southern Mediterranean. Tourists report high tourist involvement in northern destinations, whereas, in the south, tourists' emphasize destinations' hedonic features. Tourists highlighted the importance of the dimension *peace of mind* in all destinations. Knowledge about dimensions of the quality of service experience may help tourism managers to improve services and innovate. These implications are also valuable for European policymakers.

**Keywords**—Tourism, Mediterranean Sea basin, quality, service experience, tourism management

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Research on the quality of service experience is rooted in Otto and Ritchie's (1996) work on "service experience". In tourism, authors have studied service experience by examining the variables "experience quality" (Chen and Chen, 2010), and "quality" (See Ying et al., 2012). Astrapellos et al. (2010) unified these concepts under the term "quality of service experience", which is the term this paper adopts.

The quality of service experience refers to psychological aspects of the service experience. In tourism, the quality of service experience relates to tourists' affective responses (Chen and Chen, 2010). It is a holistic, multi-dimensional measure that assesses personal reactions and feelings in response to a tourist service (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

Research on the quality of service experience is particularly important in tourism because of the complexity of tourism services. Tourists usually participate in numerous activities and interactions, causing them to feel, react and decide in different ways. Tourist trips are life experiences, highly memorable for travellers both during and after the service. In tourism, emotional reactions are particularly important because they influence tourists' evaluation of the service, and therefore their satisfaction (Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Chen and Chen, 2010). A better understanding of tourists' perceptions of experiences will improve performance in the tourism industry (Chen and Chen, 2010). Tourism providers can also innovate in response to tourists' perceptions and preferences. Despite its relevance, however, quality of service experience has been overlooked by the tourism industry (Astrapellos et al., 2010).

Apparently, the present study is the first analysis of quality of service experience in the Mediterranean. The present research thus contributes to the tourism literature on service experience. Using Otto and Ritchie's (1996) scale, we first analysed quality of service experience in seven Mediterranean tourist destinations. Results show that northern Mediterranean tourists emphasize different quality of service experience dimensions from tourists in the southern Mediterranean.

The second and third sections offer a review of the literature on quality of service experience in tourism. Section 4 describes the empirical method, and section 5 presents the results. Finally, section 6 discusses findings and offers conclusions, including managerial implications and research opportunities.

## **2. THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A TOURIST DESTINATION**

Tourist destinations are an amalgam of several components. Transport, hotels, restaurants and heritage sites form a holistic experience of an area, place or country (Murphy et al., 2000). Tourist destinations comprise tangible and intangible components (Hu and Ritchie 1993; Murphy et al., 2000; Hosany and Gilbert, 2010).

From a competitive perspective, tourist destinations are “geographic concentrations of interconnecting companies, specialized suppliers, service suppliers, firms in related industries and associated institutions in particular fields that compete but also cooperate” (Snepenger et al., 2007: 319). As such, a tourist destination consists of a cluster of elements, with complex relationships linking stakeholders (Fyall et al., 2006).

Social theorists have long hypothesized that people identify and affiliate themselves with places to give purpose to their lives (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Places gather meaning through the attitudes, values and beliefs people attach to them (Sack, 1992). Understanding destinations’ symbolic meanings is important because these meanings positively influence tourists’ perceptions and attitudes. When tourists visit a destination, they experience many phenomena, for example the local tourism industry, resident population and environment. The quality of the tourist experience refers to the final product that tourists feel and perceive in the destination.

International tourism is important to the Mediterranean economy because it generates employment, income and regional development (Dieke and Karamustafa, 2000; Karamustafa and Ulama, 2010). The Mediterranean basin includes the countries along its coast and islands, including countries from Europe, the Maghreb and the Middle East. The Mediterranean is the world’s most-visited tourist destination, thanks to its 30,000 kilometres of coastline (Almeida, 2008). The Mediterranean basin has two subzones: the northern arch (Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Albania, Cyprus, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Malta and Turkey) and the southern arch formed by countries of the Maghreb and the Middle East (Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, plus Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) (Colom and Saez, 1999).

Today, there are two diverse economic and cultural models in the Mediterranean. In the northern Mediterranean, countries are highly industrialized, democratic and predominantly Christian. In contrast, southern Mediterranean countries are Muslim, and have varying degrees of economic development. Despite these notable differences between the north and south, however, certain cultural factors are common to both zones. Gastronomy, social relationships and some cultural aspects are similar throughout the Mediterranean. Furthermore, in both the north and south, people value quality of life and religious faith more than reason and experience (Maestre, 2006).

Studies have established a link between cultural variables and perceived service. Donthu and Yoo (1998) studied the effect of consumers’ cultural orientation on their service quality expectations. Using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1991), they analysed the influence of culture on consumers’ service quality expectations. They found that consumers vary according to culture in both their overall service quality expectations, and their expectations towards each dimension of service quality. Mattila (1999) also examined the impact of culture, but rather on customer evaluations of complex services. She evaluated the trade-offs that Western and Asian customers were willing to make between personalized service and pleasant physical environment in luxury hotels. She found that Western customers were more likely to rely on tangible cues than their Asian counterparts were, and that the hedonic dimension of consumption was more important for Westerners than for Asians. Research suggests that culture’s role in shaping people’s attitudes and

preferences is pronounced in people-processing services that require a high degree of customer contact with service personnel and facilities (Lovelock and Yip, 1996).

### **3. TOURISTS' QUALITY OF SERVICE EXPERIENCE**

Tourism often elicits strong emotional and experiential reactions from consumers, even in functional industries such as air travel (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Because of growing competition, tourist marketers must understand destinations' symbolic value and experiential qualities (Gretzel et al., 2006). Successful tourism marketing strategies rest on an appreciation of the distinguishing characteristics of tourists' experiences (Perdue, 2002; Hosany and Gilbert, 2010).

Quality of service experience holistically and subjectively assesses personal experiences, reflecting tourists' affective responses to their desired social-psychological expectations. Although the quality of service experience relates to service quality and perceived value, it differs from service quality in several ways. Service quality is an objective measure of functional and technical aspects of a service. It usually refers to the service provider and service environment. But, service quality fails to capture affective factors, which can also help to explain the overall quality of the service experience (Fick and Ritchie, 1991). Unlike objective service quality, quality of service experience is subjective. Its evaluation is holistic/gestalt rather than attribute-based, and focuses on self-evaluation (internal) rather than service provider evaluation (external). In addition, the scope of quality of service experience is general rather than specific, its benefits to tourists are experiential/hedonic/symbolic rather than functional/utilitarian, and its psychological representation is affective rather than cognitive (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

Scholars have attempted several times to assess service experience in tourism. Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed the first quantitative scale, which consisted of four dimensions: hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition. According to Otto and Ritchie (1996), these four dimensions are common to different industries such as airlines, hotels, and tours and attractions. However, the importance of each dimension varies according to the industry under study: peace of mind is most important in airlines and hotels, whereas hedonics is especially relevant for tours and attractions (Otto and Ritchie, 1996).

This scale has been employed later by Astrapellos et al. (2010) to study the quality of service experience in outdoor activities in Greece. The scale was found to be perfectly consistent in this new context. Additionally, Astrapellos et al. (2010) reported some statistical differences according to the gender of the respondent: men show higher means in peace of mind and involvement while women score more in hedonics. There is also a significant difference regarding the age of the participant for the recognition factor: the older the respondent, the higher the mean of that factor.

Chen and Chen (2010) applied Otto and Ritchie's (1996) scale to heritage tourism in Taiwan, although they found only three dimensions: involvement, peace of mind and educational experience. Thus, they proposed modifying the scale for future research to better reflect its meaning in the heritage tourism context. They also studied the positive effects of experience quality on tourists' perceived value and satisfaction.

In a paper on theme parks, Kao et al. (2008) proposed four different dimensions: immersion (involvement of consumers which leads them to forget about time), surprise (freshness, specialty, distinctiveness), participation (interaction of the consumer with the service) and fun (happiness and enjoyment).

#### 4. METHOD AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

##### 4.1 Data collection and sample

To gather information about the quality of service experience, we used a questionnaire that included the scale by Otto and Ritchie (1996). Otto and Ritchie (2000) and Chen and Chen (2010) applied it to heritage tourism, whereas Astrapellos et al. (2010) applied it to outdoor tourism. Some classification questions collecting gender, country of origin and other demographical data were included. We pre-tested the questionnaire and revised items to ensure content validity. All items were measured by a 5-point Likert-type scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

We surveyed tourists in seven Mediterranean cities: Tafilah (Jordan), Tyre (Lebanon), Maamoura (Tunisia), Oristano (Italy), Latina (Italy), Sicily (Italy) and Cullera (Spain). The first three cities belong to the southern Mediterranean arch, and the remaining four to the northern arch. Respondents were tourists who had just finished their visit to a tourist site. The survey yielded 1362 valid responses (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of the sample**

| Universe               | Tourists at six cities in the Mediterranean Sea basin |                   |                       |   |                   |                   |                    |
|------------------------|---|-------------------|-----------------------|---|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| SAMPLE                 | Tafilah<br>(Jordan)                                   | Tyre<br>(Lebanon) | Maamoura<br>(Tunisia) | Oristano<br>(Italy)                     | Latina<br>(Italy) | Sicily<br>(Italy) | Cullera<br>(Spain) |
|                        | 155   | 202               | 200                   | 208                                     | 200               | 201               | 199                |
|                        | Total southern Mediterranean<br>n = 557               |                   |                       | Total northern Mediterranean<br>n = 808 |                   |                   |                    |
| Total sample           | 1362 tourists   |                   |                       |   |                   |                   |                    |
| Geographical scope     | Mediterranean Sea basin                               |                   |                       |   |                   |                   |                    |
| Data collection method | Self-report questionnaire                             |                   |                       |   |                   |                   |                    |
| Sampling procedure     | Non-probabilistic method: convenience sampling        |                   |                       |   |                   |                   |                    |

Table 2 shows the main features of the sample. The majority of respondents travelled for leisure purposes. Respondents with higher studies constituted 43.4% of the sample, and 45.7% spent less than four nights at their destination. The countries of origin with the highest frequencies were Italy and Spain, although the sample comprised tourists from more than 40 countries.

**Table 2. Characteristics of the sample**

|                              | <b>Characteristics</b>  | <b>%</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| <b>Gender</b>                | Male                    | 47.6     |
|                              | Female                  | 52.4     |
| <b>Age</b>                   | < 25 years old          | 20.5     |
|                              | 25–33 years old         | 23.1     |
|                              | 34–41 years old         | 12.1     |
|                              | > 42 years old          | 44.3     |
| <b>Education</b>             | Higher                  | 43.4     |
|                              | Average                 | 46.8     |
|                              | Basic                   | 9.8      |
| <b>Nights in destination</b> | 0–3 nights              | 45.7     |
|                              | 4–7 nights              | 41.6     |
|                              | > 7 nights              | 12.7     |
| <b>Reason for the visit</b>  | Leisure/holidays        | 68.8     |
|                              | Work/business           | 11       |
|                              | Visiting family/friends | 17.1     |
|                              | Other                   | 3.1      |
| <b>Country of origin</b>     | Italy                   | 38.6     |
|                              | Spain                   | 12.3     |
|                              | Lebanon                 | 10.9     |
|                              | Tunisia                 | 5.9      |
|                              | Jordan                  | 6        |
|                              | Others                  | 27.3     |

## **5. RESULTS**

### **Validity of the quality of service experience scale**

To validate the quality of service experience scale, we used exploratory factor analysis. We applied the principal component method with Varimax rotation. Previously, we used the KMO coefficient and Bartlett's test (see Table 3) to check data were adequate for this technique. Factor analysis identified four factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1, yielding an explained variance of 66.76%. These four factors resembled those reported in the literature; only two items loaded on an unexpected factor. We therefore adopted the names from the literature for these four factors: *hedonics*, *peace of mind*, *involvement* and *recognition*. *Hedonics* explained the highest percentage of variance, and accounted for the greatest individual variance. *Hedonics* captures tourists' perceptions of doing what they like, engaging in thrilling activities, living memorable experiences for themselves and to share with others, and having fun. *Peace of mind* relates to personal security, privacy and comfort. It was the second most important dimension in percentage of variance. *Involvement* refers to tourists' willingness to participate in the service, have some element of choice in activities, and maintain some control over the outcome. It also includes the desire to learn about activities. *Recognition* includes feeling important and being taken seriously by the service provider.

**Table 3. Rotated factor matrix**

| QUALITY OF SERVICE EXPERIENCE   | FACTOR LOADING                     |               |               |               |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|   | Hedonics                           | Peace of mind | Involvement   | Recognition   |
| On this trip, I am doing something I really like to do  | 0.502                              |               |               |               |
| I am doing something memorable that enriches my life  | 0.671                              |               |               |               |
| This experience is exciting   | 0.706                              |               |               |               |
| I am having a “once in a lifetime” experience, I feel much better about things and myself after this trip | 0.707                              |               |               |               |
| After travelling, I can share memories from my trip   | 0.619                              |               |               |               |
| I am being challenged in some way**   | 0.493                              |               |               |               |
| My imagination is being stirred   | 0.632                              |               |               |               |
| It feels like I am on an adventure  | 0.654                              |               |               |               |
| This travel experience provides me with fun   | 0.603                              |               |               |               |
| On this trip, I established friendships with one or more new people                                       | 0.568                              |               |               |               |
| This trip let me feel that I am doing something new and different   | 0.556                              |               |               |               |
| Visiting this city let me feel physically comfortable   |                                    | 0.676         |               |               |
| Visiting this city let me feel that my property is safe   |                                    | 0.794         |               |               |
| Visiting this city let me feel relaxed  |                                    | 0.765         |               |               |
| Visiting this city let me feel a sense of personal security   |                                    | 0.762         |               |               |
| Visiting this city let me feel that my privacy is assured*  |                                    | 0.577         |               |               |
| That I am involved in the process of this trip  |                                    |               | 0.695         |               |
| That there is an element of choice in the process   |                                    |               | 0.761         |               |
| That I have some control over the outcome   |                                    |               | 0.764         |               |
| That I am being educated and informed   |                                    |               | 0.697         |               |
| A sense of cooperation*   |                                    |               |               | 0.696         |
| That I am being taken seriously   |                                    |               |               | 0.760         |
| That I am important   |                                    |               |               | 0.793         |
| <b>% explained variance</b>   | <b>45.804</b>                      | <b>8.435</b>  | <b>6.908</b>  | <b>5.617</b>  |
| <b>% Accumulated explained variance</b>   |                                    | <b>54.239</b> | <b>61.148</b> | <b>66.765</b> |
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)  | 0.942                              |               |               |               |
| Bartlett’s sphericity test  | $\chi^2 = 19501.637$ ; Sig < 0.001 |               |               |               |

\*This item was expected to load on Factor 3.

Source: Authors’ own work

### Reliability of the quality of service experience scale

After validating the scale and its dimensions as per the literature, we calculated Cronbach’s alpha to assess the scale’s reliability. As Table 4 shows, all coefficients were over 0.86, thereby confirming reliability (Nunnally, 1970).

**Table 4. Quality of service experience scale reliability**

|                                     | Cronbach’s alpha |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| Quality of service experience scale | 0.85             |
| Factor 1: Hedonics                  | 0.91             |

|                                |             |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Factor 2: Peace of mind</b> | <b>0.87</b> |
| <b>Factor 3: Involvement</b>   | <b>0.86</b> |
| <b>Factor 4: Recognition</b>   | <b>0.87</b> |

Source: Authors' own work

## Descriptive analysis

We calculated the means of the quality of service experience dimensions to present descriptive statistics. As shown in Table 5, data for each destination was analysed.

**Table 5. Quality of service experience descriptive statistics by destination**

| Mean (st.dev.)       | Cullera<br>n = 199 | Oristano<br>n = 208 | Sicily<br>n = 201 | Latina<br>n = 200 | Tyre<br>n = 202 | Maamoura<br>n = 200 | Tafilah<br>n = 155 |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Hedonics</b>      | 3.51<br>(0.78)     | 3.48<br>(0.80)      | 3.50<br>(0.58)    | 2.88<br>(0.73)    | 3.31<br>(0.90)  | 3.41<br>(0.55)      | 3.98<br>(0.72)     |
| <b>Peace of mind</b> | 3.63<br>(0.80)     | 3.64<br>(0.87)      | 4.51<br>(0.54)    | 3.58<br>(0.88)    | 3.53<br>(1.06)  | 3.86<br>(0.79)      | 3.98<br>(0.85)     |
| <b>Involvement</b>   | 3.54<br>(0.84)     | 3.55<br>(0.79)      | 3.62<br>(0.64)    | 3.34<br>(0.72)    | 3.34<br>(1.01)  | 2.99<br>(0.59)      | 3.85<br>(0.88)     |
| <b>Recognition</b>   | 3.48<br>(0.88)     | 3.51<br>(0.87)      | 3.54<br>(0.79)    | 3.37<br>(0.80)    | 3.35<br>(1.30)  | 3.33<br>(1.16)      | 3.83<br>(1.03)     |
| <b>Total QSE</b>     | 3.53<br>(0.76)     | 3.52<br>(0.74)      | 3.71<br>(0.48)    | 3.17<br>(0.66)    | 3.36<br>(0.88)  | 3.37<br>(0.48)      | 3.93<br>(0.71)     |

Source: Authors' own work

QSE= Quality of service experience

The dimension with the highest score in all destinations was *peace of mind*, although there was a wide range between the average of 3.53 in Tyre and 4.51 in Sicily. *Hedonics* had the lowest score in four destinations: Oristano, Sicily, Latina and Tyre. Oristano, Sicily and Latina are northern Mediterranean cities. *Recognition* had the lowest score in Cullera, so tourists in Cullera felt they cooperated less in the activity as tourists in Talifah. *Involvement* had the lowest score in Maamoura, so tourists in Maamoura sensed a lack of control over the tourism service outcome and required more information. Regarding the overall quality of service experience, Tafilah had the highest average, and Latina the lowest. In summary, the average perception of quality of service experience in southern Mediterranean destinations (mean = 0.75) was higher than that in the north (mean = 0.70).

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper responds to Gnoth and Matteucci's (2014) call for phenomenological approaches to tourists' experiences to critically and productively develop the tourism industry. The Mediterranean welcomes huge numbers of tourists each year, which greatly affects surrounding countries. Planning and managing Mediterranean tourism is therefore important to minimize its negative effects and enhance its positive impacts. People from diverse social and cultural backgrounds converge on these destinations, exerting a significant positive influence on the local economy (Theobald, 2005).



Understanding how tourists' perceive experiences may boost tourist providers' performance and increase tourists' satisfaction. Nevertheless, the tourism industry has somewhat overlooked research on service experience (Astrapellos et al., 2010). Seemingly, no research has addressed quality of service experience in the Mediterranean.

This study contributes to the tourism literature in two ways. First, it validates Otto and Ritchie's (1996) scale to analyse quality of service experience in the Mediterranean. As in the original scale, this study offers a four-dimension quality of service experience scale to assess tourists' emotional experiences in seven Mediterranean destinations: Cullera, Oristano, Sicily, Latina, Tyre, Maamoura and Tafilah. Of the four dimensions—*hedonics*, *peace of mind*, *involvement* and *recognition*—*peace of mind* had the highest score in all seven locations. *Hedonics* had the lowest score in three out of four northern Mediterranean cities: Oristano, Sicily and Latina. In other words, scores for enjoyment (i.e., hedonics) were lower in these cities than scores for other dimensions of quality of service experience.

Second, this article compares southern and northern Mediterranean cities. Results show a higher overall quality of service experience reported by tourists in the southern Mediterranean, despite a lower score for southern destinations in *peace of mind* and *involvement*. Descriptive statistics show that *hedonics* was higher in southern destinations, whereas *involvement* scored higher in northern cities. Therefore, southern Mediterranean destinations thrilled tourists more than did destinations in the northern Mediterranean. In addition, tourists in northern cities felt they had more options, more control and sufficient information. Cultural and technological development differences between the northern and southern Mediterranean may have influenced these perceptions. Culture can help to explain many patterns in tourist preferences, perceptions and behaviours (Hofstede, 1991; Mattila et al., 1999; Reisinger and Turner, 2002). Respondents differed in their ratings of the importance of fun and excitement in the service experience. Furthermore, tourists to northern destinations reported greater feelings of involvement because intense participation by travellers is probably easier to manage with developed technical systems in the northern Mediterranean.

These findings have important managerial implications. A better understanding of the overall tourist experience can help companies to enhance their current services, and can inspire innovation. Tourist services should emphasize emotional elements of the overall experience. In other words, they should meet visitors' expectations with respect to the four dimensions of the quality of service experience: *hedonics*, *peace of mind*, *involvement* and *recognition*. Accordingly, many tourist organizations are increasingly inviting public participation in their policies and programs (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002). Successful tourist innovation must draw upon popular aspects of the dimensions of quality of service experience. Qualitative market research could accomplish this task.

According to previous research, quality of service experience may influence tourists' cognitive image of a destination (Kayat and Hai, 2014). Therefore, our results can help to design more effective positioning and communication strategies. Our analysis identifies areas for improvement in dimensions with low scores. For example, tourists indicated they felt somewhat neglected by service providers in Cullera, Sicily and Talifah, so these destinations should improve aspects concerning *recognition*. Oristano, Latina and Tyre must improve aspects to enhance *hedonics* because tourists did not feel these destinations

provided a memorable stay. Finally, Maamoura should improve aspects regarding *involvement*, namely more control over the trip, greater participation and more information for tourists.

Policymakers can also benefit from our findings. For instance, public institutions from southern Mediterranean countries can strengthen their position as tourist destinations by enhancing their already strong hedonic qualities. To improve their service, these countries should give their tourists greater peace of mind (i.e., personal security and comfort) and encourage their involvement (i.e., participation and control). Results show that the opposite applies to northern destinations. They should aim at raising the low hedonics scores reported by tourists, whilst continuing to offer tourists peace of mind and involvement.

The present paper has certain limitations that future research should seek to overcome. Although the sample was large, the study's scope was limited to seven Mediterranean tourist cities. Further research is therefore required to generalize findings to other Mediterranean destinations. Furthermore, although it offers insight into the structure of the service experience, the study is static and provides no dynamic information on the service encounter. The quality of service experience scale requires further research before it can be generalized and applied to other tourism services.

Opportunities for further research abound. It would be interesting to find out statistically significant differences between North and South Mediterranean destinations. Further, the measurement instrument used in the current study could be applied to other tourism services. As Chen and Chen (2010) suggested, additional research could study relationships between antecedents, consequences or moderator variables of quality of service experience, such as destination image, place attachment, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Scholars concur that culture can account for many differences in tourist perceptions and behaviours, which underscores the need for continued research in this area. Finally, longitudinal analysis could complement this descriptive study to assess how tourists' perceptions change over time.

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