

TITLE STILL HAPPY HERE? HOW CHINESE TOURISTS PERCEIVE THE SERVICE IN HONG KONG.

ABSTRACT

This study applied a triangulation of qualitative research methods, namely projective techniques, to gain a more specific understanding of the main reasons for dissatisfaction with Hong Kong service for mainland Chinese tourists. The presented study adds on results from the PolyU Tourism Satisfaction Index 2009 to 2015, where tourists from mainland China show very low satisfaction rates compared with all source markets to Hong Kong. Since the results of the TSI are of quantitative nature, the goal of this study is to gain a more specific understanding of the main reasons for dissatisfaction on a qualitative base. It is hoped that the findings of this research will assist both academics and practitioners in better understanding of the issues and needs of tourists from mainland China towards the Hong Kong tourism industry and to aid the industry as well as policy makers with insights for innovations, quality improvements and standardization.

Keywords: *Tourism satisfaction; China outbound tourism; service quality; projective techniques; Hong Kong*

INTRODUCTION

China outbound tourism has been dominating travel statistics during the last decade (Siu, Lee & Leung, 2013, UNWTO, 2016). With 40.7 million tourists a year, mainland China is also the largest source tourism market to Hong Kong, responsible for 73% of the total annual visitors (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2014). 2009, the Hong Kong Tourism Board decided evaluate together with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University six main tourism-related service sectors in Hong Kong, including attractions, hotels, immigration, restaurants, retail shops and transportation. The tourists surveyed are from the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Africa, Japan, Taiwan and Korea, as well as mainland China. The results are composing the PolyU Tourist Satisfaction Index (TSI) (Song, van der Veen, Li, & Chen, 2012). Tracking the results from 2009 to 2015, the tourists from mainland China show the lowest satisfaction from all source markets, except East Asia (PolyU TSI 2009-2015) Since the results of the TSI are of quantitative nature, the goal and research question of this study is to gain a more specific understanding of the main reasons for dissatisfaction with Hong Kong service for mainland Chinese tourists. The proposed research objectives are:

(1) To identify the main reasons for dissatisfaction with Hong Kong service for mainland Chinese tourists. (2) To understand the main reasons for dissatisfaction with Hong Kong service for mainland Chinese tourists, and (3) To understand the cultural and contextual reasons underlying these reasons for the dissatisfaction with Hong Kong service for mainland Chinese tourists.

LITERATURE

The concept of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction is based on the expectancy-disconfirmation framework, a widely accepted theory within customer behavior research (Williams & Naumann, 2011; Pizam & Milman, 1993). The construct of satisfaction/dissatisfaction can be seen as consumers' perception and evaluation of a discrepancy between expectation and performance of services and products before and/or after consumption (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000) and depends to a great extent on the value of the services and the price paid by consumers (De Ruyter, Wetzels, Lemmink, & Mattson, 1997). Pizam and Milman (1993) find satisfaction and dissatisfaction inseparable, while satisfaction is positive related, leading to a repurchase and dissatisfaction causes a negative attitude towards brands and products. Since the constructs of service quality and customer satisfaction are

related and conceptually similar, a growing number of studies understand service quality as one of the antecedents to customer satisfaction (Perrone & Wong, 2013).

From a consumption-oriented standpoint, mainland Chinese tourists perceive the quality of products in Hong Kong as better than at home, trusting Hong Kong's corporations, their reputation and brands (Choi, Liu, Pang, & Chow, 2008). Here, shopping is a main motive since Hong Kong carries a larger variety of brands and products with lower prices compared to mainland China (Wang & Qu, 2004). Food is important, too, thus, the reputation, quality and variety of restaurants and supermarkets in Hong Kong are seen as additional pull factors (Law, To & Goh, 2008). In addition, world-class attractions and events have turned Hong Kong into a very attractive destination to Chinese tourists (Law, To & Goh, 2008). From a local perspective, the ever growing "Chinese tourists' wave", however, has had a noticeable impact on several layers of Hong Kong society in terms of quality of life (Xiao, 2013). Since 2014 tensions between Hong Kong and mainland China are noticeable, which seems to keep affecting tourism, hospitality and the service sector in general.

METHODS

In order to answer the research questions, this study applied a triangulation of qualitative research methods, namely (1) projective techniques, (2) in-depth interviews and (3) a focus group with experts. Projective techniques are an elicitation tool which, through providing ambiguous stimuli to an individual, is able to uncover conscious and subconscious respondents' perceptions (Levin-Rozalis, 2006; Wassler & Hung, 2014). For this study, word associations and sentence completions were used to uncover the main issues for the lack of satisfaction in the specific tourist segments. A number of 102 questionnaires were deemed as appropriate (Prayag, 2007; Wassler & Hung, 2014). Respondents were purposely sampled based on the criteria to have stayed at least one night in Hong Kong. All questionnaires were collected from February to March 2016 at the Hong Kong Airport. Once the main issues were identified through a frequency count of these findings, tourist within the specific segments were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to understand the findings' value chain. Semi-structured interviews were thus formed around the identified issues, but also allow further issues to emerge (Whiting, 2008). A mix of purposive and convenience sampling was applied, purposive in terms of the tourists' nationality, and convenience sampling within these cluster criteria. This allowed for tolerance of all interviewees, as long as they fall in the predetermined category (Weiss, 1994). The number of 34 respondents was based on the saturation of information. Last, an expert panel focus group was held with eight mainland Chinese academics in order to uncover the cultural dimensions and connotations underlying the identified and vertically ranked issues for the tourist group. Focus groups provide insights into collective norms and assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and experts were being sampled based on their cultural knowledge of the specific markets under investigation. Through triangulation of these three qualitative research methods, a deep understanding of each individual source market perceptions' regarding the service quality in Hong Kong was gained. All of the qualitative data was coded using Nvivo software. Projective Techniques and Interviews with tourists were held in Mandarin and later translated into English. Finally, the three different data sets were combined in order to form a framework explaining Mainland Chinese' dissatisfaction with service in Hong Kong.

RESULTS

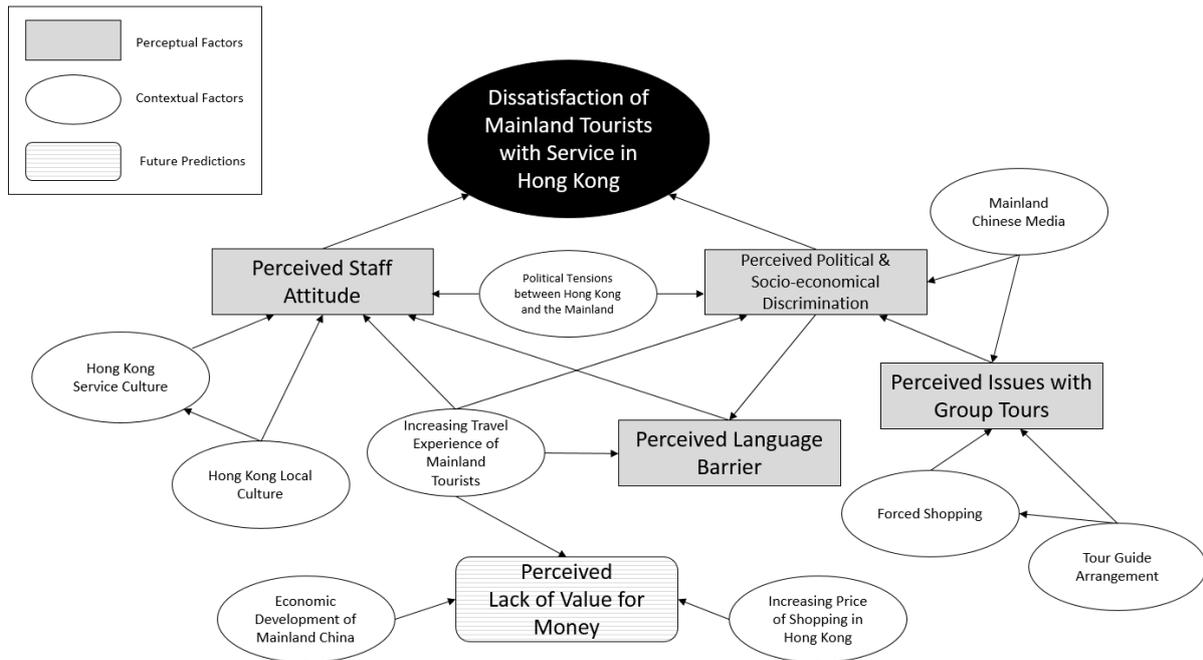
After checking for synonyms, the findings of the three applied projective techniques have resulted in the identification of several issues. The most mentioned was "attitude" (n=151), followed by "tour guide" (n=77), and "language" (n=47), as well as "anti-Chinese" (n=34) (see Table 1) In the second phase of research, these findings have been used to develop semi-structured interview questions for mainland Chinese tourists, in which they were asked on their agreement with the findings and further explanations of the identified key-issues and dissatisfiers. Subsequently, eight experts have been consulted for the same reasons and to offer predictions regarding the future of Chinese service perception in Hong Kong.

Analysis of the data has resulted in several contextual dimensions linking the four main identified issues of “perceived staff attitude”, “perceived political and socio-economic discrimination”, “perceived language barrier” and “perceived issues with group tours” (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Findings of Projective Techniques

Issues Question 1		
Attitude		45
Tour Guide		26
Anti-Chinese		23
Forced Shopping		16
Language		13
Efficiency		10
Unfriendly		9
Overcharge		9
Restaurant		7
Issues Question 2		
Attitude		55
Language		26
Tour Guide		25
Forced Shopping		12
Anti-Chinese		11
Efficiency		8
Fairness		7
Restaurant		7
Lacking Compared with Home Country		
Attitude		51
Tour Guide		26
Language		8
Efficiency		7
Others (mixed)		23

Figure 1: Framework explaining causes for dissatisfaction of mainland Chinese tourists with Hong Kong service



Accordingly, political and cultural reasons, increasing travel experience of mainland Chinese tourists and group tour arrangements in Hong Kong are among the main contextual factors influencing the identified causes for dissatisfaction. Experts furthermore predicted that mainland tourists are moving towards a perceived lack of value for money of tourism in Hong Kong, mainly due to the economic development of the mainland and increasing price of shopping in Hong Kong.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be concluded, that the key of the dissatisfiers has deep underlying political and cultural reasons, which surface in a business and service culture with attitude and language barrier. At a bottom line Hong Kong loses some kind of attractiveness in terms of perceived lack of value for money in the eyes of mainland Chinese tourists. Since the underlying political and cultural issues are not relevant for other source markets such as America, Europe, Africa or Middle East, the tourist satisfaction is deliberately higher (PolyU TSI 2009-2015). The implications for industry and politicians are calling for an improvement of the local service and tourism attitude through tourism education, internal destination marketing, resident integration and service innovations.

While the study is limited in terms of its relatively small sample size and exploratory nature, the suggestions for further research tends towards an empirical test of the framework with mainland Chinese tourists as well as further qualitative exploration in East Asian source markets with comparable low satisfaction rates.

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