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**The quality of service experience in outdoor activities programs**  
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### **The quality of service experience in outdoor activities programs**

#### **Abstract**

In our days the outdoor activities of recreation are new and continuously increasing tendency that has usually entered in the industry of tourism and called Alternative forms of tourism. The aim of this study was to examine the experience of service of individuals after their attendance in various programs of outdoor activities and recreation that offer various private companies of recreation. Another stream of research from the general marketing field has shown that subjective, affective and experiential factors comprise a substantial portion of consumer satisfaction with services. In the research participated 273 men and women of age of 20 – 50 years, which participated in various outdoor activities in Greece that were organised by two private companies of recreation. The results of this research should extend itself in future in a bigger number of companies of recreation so as to become the desirable generalisations but also be used in the frames of processes of marketing.

Keywords: experience quality, satisfaction, outdoor activities, private companies

## **The quality of service experience in outdoor activities programs**

### **Introduction**

In the last decade there has been an increase in the number of private outdoor recreation companies and outdoor activities. In Greece, the interest in the programs of outdoor recreational activities began in the late of 80's. This resulted in several key events such as: a) the development of rural seed market in Greece and especially after 1980, b) the existence of special equipment and sporting equipment for use in outdoor recreational activities in the Greek retail market c) the rise of living, economic status of the Greeks and the general level of life quality for them. Even some patient efforts of the Greek National Tourism Organization (EOT) to reduce the mass tourism and move towards a new tourism development model, which are alternative forms of tourism.

The development of positive attitudes towards participation in outdoor recreational activities and particularly to adopt a lifestyle closer to nature and open environment, it seems to be one of the future goals of recreation and tourism. The individual's participation in outdoor programs and leisure activities is located in the fact that there is not a specific frequency or even participation repetition.

Albeit tourism is essentially a service industry and the importance of service quality has been highlighted, another important facet, service experience, has been relatively neglected in the tourism industry which is considerably associated with experiential components. Service experience is the subjective personal reactions and feelings that experienced by consumers when they consume a service, and thus has important influence on service consumer evaluation and satisfaction (Otto & Ritchie, 2000). Hence, a better understanding of experiential phenomena in tourism service is particularly important.

In one context, the experience has been used as a vehicle to describe the *meaning* of various leisure and tourism activities and events, also called definitional research (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987). Such research refers to the phenomenology, dimensionality and characteristics of leisure pursuits (Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentimihalyi, 1986), the risk represented by various activities (Cheron & Ritchie, 1982) and the symbolic or cognitive representation of travel (Nash & Smith, 1991).

Among other constructs, perceived quality, perceived value and satisfaction have been suggested to be three important antecedents affecting performance of tourism

services and/or activities and visitors' reactions to them (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Petrick and Backman, 2002; Petrick, 2004).

As viewing tourism as a service industry, the evaluation of service quality and the more functional and technical aspects of service delivery by using traditional measures of service quality such as the SERVQUAL instrument based on a disconfirmation theory (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1994) and SERVFERF instrument based on performance-only evaluation (Cronin and Taylor, 1992) have been widely applied to evaluating services in the tourism industry. Compared to service quality, for experience quality, the measurement is subjective rather than objective, the evaluative tends to be holistic/ gestalt rather than attribute-based, the focus of evaluation is self (internal) rather than company/service provider/service environment (external), the scope is more general than specific, the nature of benefit is experiential/hedonic/symbolic rather than function/ utilitarian, and the psychological representation is affective rather than cognitive/attitudinal etc.

Otto & Ritchie (2000) develop a scale of experience quality in tourism industry context with four factors: hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition using consumer survey data obtained from three tourism service sector including hotels, airlines, tours and attractions. The factor of hedonics is associated with the need to do what they love or like, to have their imaginations stirred and to be thrilled by the service activities. The factor peace of mind is focused on the need for both physical and psychological safety and comfort. The factor of involvement refers to having more to do with the process of service delivery than with outcome, the desire to have choice and control in service offering and the demand of being educated, informed and imbued with a sense of mutual cooperation. Finally, the factor of recognition is linked to feeling important and confident in being taken seriously. Notably, the significant differences in both the nature and degree of the service experience are found evident across service sectors.

Oliver (1997) suggests that service quality judgments are more specific while customer satisfaction judgments are more holistic. In addition, service quality is related to cognitive judgments and customer satisfaction is related to affective judgments. To imply holistic evaluation after a purchase, the concept of overall satisfaction is made to distinguish from satisfaction with individual attributes (Bitner and Hubert, 1994; Fornell, 1992)

Past research studies have suggested that perceptions of service quality affect feelings of satisfaction, which then affect loyalty and post-behaviors (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Fornell, 1992; Oliver, 1980; Choi and Chu 2001; Petrick and Backman, 2002; Tam 2000).

The purpose of this study was to examine the individuals' service experience, who participate in different programs of outdoor activities and recreation that some private recreation companies offer in Greece. Furthermore, this study tries to define new concepts for more development of leisure sports and outdoor activities.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

273 customers of two (2) private companies offering outdoor recreational activities and sports agreed to participate in the study. Most visitors who participated in the research filled the questionnaire after participating in some of the programs offered. The sample consisted of 143 women and 129 men aged from 18 to 50 years old. The sample majority (77,3%) was ranged from 20 to 40 years old. Moreover, for the most respondents (37%) it was the first time of participating in recreational programs. (37%).

### **Questionnaire**

The Otto and Ritchie (1995) questionnaire for the evaluation of Service Quality was selected. It is consisted of 15 items that were designed to measure four dimensions of service quality offered in outdoor recreation activities: hedonics (6 items), piece of mind (3 items), involvement (2 items) and recognition (4 items) and four independent items: share my experience with others later, have control over the outcome, cooperation and importance. All answers could be given in a five Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree).

### **Process**

The questionnaires were distributed to two different regions in Greece: Evinos river near Nafpactos city and Nestos river near Xanthi. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants that had participated in outdoor activities programs. Selected one from north and one from southern Greece for better reliability of the sample and because the two companies offers a variety of activities (rafting, hiking, rapel, walking, canoe – kayak, horse riding, mountain bike, archery, shooting). The researchers informed all participants that the questionnaires were to be filled in voluntary and that

research data were strictly personal. It is assumed that the responders understood the questions and responded honestly.

### Results

In all, four factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to one emerged from the data set, as given in *Table 1*. Scale reliability was calculated at 0.819 (table 2).

**Table 1.** Factor loading matrix.

	FACTORS			
	Hedonics	Piece of mind	Involvement	Recognition
Doing something I really like to do	.571			
Doing something thrilling	.703			
Having a “once in a lifetime” experience	.793			
My imagination is being stirred	.798			
On an adventure	.689			
Having fun	.507			
My property is safe		.694		
Relaxed		.797		
Personal security		.780		
Involved in the process			.650	
Element of choice in the process			.755	
Taken seriously				.521
Revisiting				.711
Overall satisfaction from the activities				.772
Doing same activities in the same company				.711

**Table 2.** Scale reliability.

Factor	Cronbach’s alpha
Scale	0.677
Factor 1: Hedonics	0.712
Factor 2: Peace of mind	0.735
Factor 3: Involvement	0.522
Factor 4: Recognition	0.899

Also, we used Analysis of Variance with one factor (One Way Anova) to determine any statistically significant differences in gender and age (table 3 and 4). Different aged

individuals were chosen to show their behavioral intentions according to their age, after their participation in different activities.

**Table 3.** Analysis of Variance (One Way Anova) by gender.

	Gender	N	Mean	Df	F	Sig.
Hedonics	Male	112	4,06	1	7,74**	.006
	Female	135	4,26	245		
	Total	247	4,17	246		
Peace of mind	Male	118	4,04	1	5,10*	.025
	Female	135	3,81	251		
	Total	253	3,92	252		
Involvement	Male	125	4,48	1	5,81*	.017
	Female	141	4,31	264		
	Total	266	4,39	265		
Recognition	Male	123	4,13	1	0,15	.698
	Female	135	4,16	256		
	Total	258	4,15	257		
Share my experience with others later	Male	129	4,47	1	3,41	.066
	Female	143	4,61	270		
	Total	272	4,54	271		
Have control over the outcome	Male	123	4,27	1	6,09*	.014
	Female	138	4,04	259		
	Total	261	4,15	260		
Cooperation	Male	123	4,00	1	2,52	.113
	Female	138	4,17	259		
	Total	261	4,09	260		
Important	Male	115	3,64	1	5,73*	.017
	Female	138	3,93	251		
	Total	253	3,80	252		

\*The total number of participants is different, because some of them didn't response.

**Table 4.** Analysis of Variance (One Way Anova) by age.

	Age	N	Mean	df	F	Sig.
Hedonics	Until 20	39	4,16		0,40	.753
	20 – 30	153	4,15	3		
	30 – 40	43	4,25	243		
	40 – 50	12	4,24	246		
	Total	247	4,17			
Peace of mind	Until 20	39	3,84		2,26	.082
	20 – 30	151	3,85	3		
	30 – 40	44	4,15	249		
	40 – 50	19	4,14	252		
	Total	253	3,92			
Involvement	Until 20	40	4,30	3	2,61	.052

	20 – 30	159	4,35	262		
	30 – 40	46	4,48	265		
	40 – 50	21	4,67			
	Total	266	4,39			
	Until 20	39	3,97			
Recognition	20 – 30	158	4,08	3	7,01***	.000
	30 – 40	43	4,42	254		
	40 – 50	18	4,47	257		
	Total	258	4,15			
	Until 20	40	4,55			
Share my experience with others later	20 – 30	164	4,49	3	1,06	.367
	30 – 40	47	4,68	268		
	40 – 50	21	4,57	271		
	Total	272	4,54			
	Until 20	40	4,15			
Have control over the outcome	20 – 30	157	4,12	3	0,90	.440
	30 – 40	45	4,11	257		
	40 – 50	19	4,42	260		
	Total	261	4,14			
	Until 20	40	4,27			
Cooperation	20 – 30	155	4,14	3	2,48	.061
	30 – 40	45	3,80	257		
	40 – 50	21	4,00	260		
	Total	261	4,09			
	Until 20	40	3,90			
Important	20 – 30	153	3,81	3	0,48	.693
	30 – 40	46	3,74	249		
	40 – 50	14	3,57	252		
	Total	253	3,80			
	Until 20	40	3,90			

\*The total number of participants is different, because some of them didn't response.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis showed that participants in outdoor recreational activities were mostly women, in contrast to other research that men were more (Whisman & Hollenhorst, 1998), the vast majority, 60.1% were between age 20 to 30. The majority of people surveyed (37%), participated for the first time in a program of outdoor activities offered by a private entertainment company which means that more and more people decide to participate in some outdoor activities.

Regarding gender, no statistically significant differences were found between men and women for the hedonic factor, the factor of peace of mind, the involvement factor, in the activity's control variable and the variable on the feeling confidence (significance).



Finally, in terms of age significant differences were found between the ages of the participants only for the recognition factor.

The concept of quality service and service experience for participating in outdoor recreational activities includes four factors: hedonics, peace of mind, involvement and recognition that are perfectly consistent with the work of Otto and Ritchie (1996). These factors are found in the literature, followed by the perception that the concept of quality service experience is multidimensional and depend on the place which was under investigation.

Participants in recreation programs believe that the service they receive from the activities and services from entertainment companies are quite high. That is one reason to engage and push companies in more efficient use of all opportunities.

Depending on the form, outdoor recreation activities take place in an organized or independent manner in racing or non-racing format. Divided into informal (walk, free play) or specific (skiing, paragliding). Also, we can rank them according to the place where they take place: mountain, forest, air and water (lakes, rivers, sea). Mountains and the woods are used more because they offer greater diversity of recreational activities all the year. Under these new conditions, new special forms of tourism models developed in Greece.

Similarly, research into the service experience should be as real and as recent as possible; that is, interviews should be done as close to consumption of an actual (as opposed to theoretical or scenario based) service as possible, so that the evaluation remains fresh in consumers' minds and so that experiential benefits are not 'forgotten' or replaced with more cognitively accessible functional benefits. Finally, while this research has enhanced our understanding of the structure of the service experience, it is static in nature and does not lend insights into the dynamics of the service encounter. For example, the research does not indicate how consumers might trade off or weight their evaluations of different aspects of the service experience in reaching overall satisfaction.

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