TESTING THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF PRIOR DESTINATION KNOWLEDGE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESTINATION EXPERIENCES AND TOURIST SATISFACTION: AN IRANIAN CASE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the moderating effects of tourist prior knowledge on the relationship between destination experience and tourist satisfaction in the context of Iranian inbound tourism. PLS-SEM was applied to analyse the data and run the multi-group analysis to test the moderating effects of prior knowledge. Findings show an apparent moderating role played by prior knowledge on the formation of tourist satisfaction. The direct effects of destination experience components (e.g., attraction, infrastructure, restaurants and service performance) tourist satisfaction was considerably moderated by tourists' prior knowledge about the destination. However, the effects of these destination experience components on tourist satisfaction are moderated by tourists' prior knowledge of the destination. Both theoretical and marketing implications were discussed.

KEYWORDS: destination experience, tourism satisfaction, prior knowledge, PLS, Iran

INTRODUCTION

This study looks into the moderating role of prior knowledge on the relationships between different destination service and experience components and tourist satisfaction. We test the moderating effect of prior knowledge on the formation of tourist satisfaction applying partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) multi-group analysis on a sample composed of 266 international visitors to Iran.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourist satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction with a destination is determined by the experience a tourist obtained during the visitation. Hunt (1983) argued that satisfaction is the evolution of the experience rather than the pleasurableness of the experience. This may represent more of the cognitive perspective in conceptualising satisfaction. Indeed, with tourist experience in a destination, both personal intrinsic factors, such as states of mind and emotions and external factors such as that of the perceived quality of service may influence the formation of tourist satisfaction. Thus, Huang and Hsu (2009b) argued that an individual's overall satisfaction of a specific destination can be regarded as equivalent to a subjective evaluation of the travel experience in the destination. We adopt this definition in the current paper.

Destination experience and tourist satisfaction

In measuring tourist satisfaction with a destination, the attribute-based approach has been widely employed (Hsu, 2003; Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010; Kozak, 2003; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Pizam, Newman, & Reichel, 1978). In general, different studies generated different sets of destination attributes that affect tourist overall satisfaction with the destination (cf. Pizam et al., 1978; Kozak, 2003; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). This demonstrates the atheoretical nature of the attribute-based approach although it is useful to identify those more important destination attributes in destination marketing.

The increasing acknowledgement of experience and customer co-production in consumer research (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Ritchie, Tung,

& Ritchie, 2010; Yuan, & Wu, 2008) has made the attribute-based approach less suitable in studying tourist satisfaction with destination experience. Experience seems to involve more personal constructs such as emotions than destination physiques and servicescapes to affect customer satisfaction (Brunner-Sperdin, Peters, & Strobl, 2012; Coghlan & Pearce, 2010). Therefore, destination experience conceptualised as the major determinant of destination satisfaction should be evaluate beyond the traditional attributes set.

Tourism experience involves services provided by multiple service sectors. Most prominently, the accommodation, transportation, infrastructure, attractions, and other customer care services (e.g., immigration) constitute the major components of destination experiences (Pizam et al., 1978; Kozak, 2003; Hsu, Killion, Brown, Gross, & Huang, 2008; Song, Veen, Li, & Chen, 2012) and should not be overlooked in evaluating tourist satisfaction with a destination. Song et al. (2012) in their effort on constructing the Hong Kong Tourist Satisfaction Index, identified six key service sectors (i.e., hotels, restaurants, retail shops, attractions, transportation and immigration services) in the destination to compose the overall tourist satisfaction with the destination experience.

The moderating role of prior knowledge

Virtually little has been known on how tourists' prior knowledge about the destination functions in the formation of tourist satisfaction. Lehto, O'Leary, and Morrison (2004) claim that "surprisingly, not much is known about how increased experience and knowledge influence behaviour at a destination." (p. 802) Relevant empirical findings suggest it is unlikely that prior knowledge has a direct effect on tourist satisfaction with the destination (Huang & Hsu, 2009a; Mazursky, 1989). However, limited evidence suggests a moderation role of prior knowledge on the formation of tourist satisfaction might be the case. For instance, Maestro, Gallego, and Requejo (2007), in their study on rural tourism in Spain, identified that destination familiarity, somewhat a proxy construct to prior destination knowledge, moderated the relationship between rural tourists' attitudes toward rural tourism and their perceived quality. In the general consumer literature, Ellis and Ashbrook (1988) suggest that individuals with greater knowledge resist the interference of emotional states on their judgements more than those who possess less knowledge. In evaluating service satisfaction, Mattila (1998) found people with greater processing capability are less influenced by state of mind. However, despite these distant clues in the literature, we have not found any published studies examining the moderating role of prior knowledge on tourist satisfaction.

METHODS

Measurements

The research presented in this paper is part of a larger scale study investigating the various factors influencing foreign tourists' satisfaction of visiting Shiraz, one of the famous tourist destinations in Iran. Based on literature review (e.g., Alegre & Cladera, 2009; Bosque & Martin, 2008; Bowen & Clarke, 2002; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2009; Wang & Qu, 2006) and the nature of the destination, a questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire and the items were reviewed for appropriateness by 12 professors and managers well-known with the local tourism industry. During this stage some questions were removed, for example there was a question about the law against alcohol consumption. Although Shiraz is famous for its wines, the question was deemed problematic due to the general alcohol prohibition in Iran. The survey contains 42 questions, 13 for demographic details and travel characteristics and 29 questions to measure the latent variables and took about 10 minutes to complete.

For the purpose of this paper, we selected relevant items measuring those salient destination experiences, including experiences with *attraction*, *infrastructure*, *restaurants*, and *service personnel performance*. Specifically, attraction experiences were measured with 8 items covering the uniqueness of the attractions, the perceived level of harmony of the attractions with their surrounding environments, artefacts and handicrafts at the attractions, meals and museums at the attractions; experience with tourist infrastructure was measured by tourists' evaluations on public toilets, trash collecting facilities, accommodation and safety conditions. Experience with restaurants included the variety of food, availability of restaurants, taste of meals, price of restaurant, cleanliness of restaurant and restaurant service staff appearance. Experience with service personnel was measured by items evaluating the service behaviour of locals, tour guides, airplane crew, hotel staff and restaurant staff. Tourist satisfaction was measured with four items, including tourist expectation, the extent to which tourist expectation was met, tourists' willingness to revisit the destination and the overall satisfaction with the trip.

Tourist prior knowledge with the destination was measured with two questions: "*How much did you know about Shiraz and its attractions prior to your trip*?" and "*How much did you know about the customs and traditions in Iran prior to your trip*?". The scores of these two questions were averaged to identify a 'high' knowledge group and a 'low' knowledge group to test the moderating effects in the analysis.

Data collection

The survey was conducted at main hotels and attractions with foreign tourists in the city of Shiraz between February to September 2010. The questionnaire was distributed to tourists that nearly completed their trip and represents a convenience sample. Consent was obtained and the purpose of the survey and assistance was provided to the respondents that facilitated the data collection procedure. The manifest variables are anchored by levels of agreement and measured on a five-point Likert scale.

RESULTS

Description of the sample

In total, 266 questionnaires were collected but 66 cases were removed due to large number of missing values for the variables and the remaining 200 questionnaires were used for the predictiveanalysis stage. The remaining missing values for the individual cases were less than 10% and were imputed using the expectation-maximization estimation option. The tourism statistics of the Fars province indicate that 35,644 foreign tourists visited Shiraz in 2008. As there was no systemic statistical procedure in the tourism sector in Iran, we cannot get more information about these foreign tourists regarding their gender distribution, age, and education levels and so on. The majority of the respondents were from Europe (71.2%) and the mean age was 51. A significant proportion of the respondents were retired (44.6%) and had an above average income (53.6%). The majority of the respondents were experienced travellers (90.6%) but for many it was their first visit to Iran (86.1%). The key motivation for them to travel to Iran was to experience culture (86.9%), and to visit the historical sceneries and attractions (83.1%).

Descriptive and general PLS analyses

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for all the manifest variables. The results show that the respondents were pleased with their visit to the attractions such as Persepolis, The Garden of Eram, Vakil Mosque and Kareem Khan Castle. However, the respondents were less pleased with the cleanliness and availability of public restrooms with a combined score below average ($M = 2.66$). The

restaurants and general service performance of staff in various tourism sectors received above average evaluations with a grand mean score of 3.99. Likewise a grand mean score of 3.99 is received for overall tourist satisfaction, indicating that the respondent's expectations were met and that they are willing to visit Shiraz in the future. The majority of indicators are at the higher spectrum of the scale and the related standard deviations are below one. This illustrates that most of the respondents are fairly like-minded regarding their evaluations and that they are generally satisfied with their trip in Shiraz.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics (n = 200)

Factor/Item	Mean	SD
Attraction	**3.73**	
(20) I consider that the attractions and sceneries in Shiraz are unique	4.25	.84
(22a) The attractions are in harmony with its surrounding environment based on size	3.67	.77
(22b) The attractions are in harmony with the surrounding environment based on colours	3.70	.82
(22c) The attractions are in harmony with its surrounding environment based on materials	3.60	.88
(22d) The attractions are in harmony with its surrounding flora and fauna	3.70	.89
(23a) I am pleased with the artefacts and handicrafts at each attraction	3.64	.86
(23b) I am pleased with the meals at each attraction	3.58	.98
(23c) I am pleased with the related museums at each attraction	3.69	.82
Infrastructure	**3.29**	
(24a) I am pleased with the availability of the public toilets and restrooms	2.86	.97
(24b) I am pleased with the cleanliness of the public toilets and restrooms	2.46	1.03
(25) I am satisfied with the trash collecting facilities	3.24	.96
(41) I am pleased with my accommodation	3.93	.84
(42) I am pleased with the safety conditions in Shiraz	3.96	.96
Restaurants	**3.63**	
(36) The variety of the food in Iranian restaurants is good	3.45	1.10
(37) I am satisfied with the variety and availability of the restaurants in Shiraz	3.43	.90
(38) I am satisfied with the taste of the meals	3.69	.94
(39) I am pleased with the prices at the restaurants in Shiraz	3.60	.88
(40a) The cleanliness of the restaurants is good	3.77	.73
(40b) The neatness of the waiting staff is good	3.82	.78
Service Performance	**3.99**	
(18a) I am pleased with the service behaviour of the locals	4.37	.88
(18b) I am pleased with the service behaviour of the tour guides	4.31	1.00
(18c) I am pleased with the service behaviour of the airplane crew	3.63	.99
(18d) I am pleased with the service behaviour of the hotel staff	3.71	.95
(18e) I am pleased with the service behaviour of the restaurant staff	3.62	.90
(19) I feel comfortable with the service behaviour of the locals	4.30	.86
Satisfaction	**3.99**	
(43) I had high expectations for this trip	3.77	.92
(44) My expectations were met	4.13	.82
(45) I am willing to revisit Shiraz in the future	3.79	.98
(46) Overall, I am satisfied with my trip to Shiraz	4.26	.83

Note: Likert scale 1 (= disagree) – 5 (= agreement)

Further analysis is conducted using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The statistical software program SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle et al., 2005) was used to estimate the path models and generate the related diagnostics. The PLS-SEM method estimates the relationships

between the proposed latent variables in a path model. The estimation procedure uses a component-based approach that is comparable to principal components factor analysis (Compeau et al., 1999). The procedure focuses on estimating the structural path coefficients which is represented by the inner model. The outer model represents the measurement model and specifies the relationship between the latent variables and their indicators (Henseler et al., 2009). PLS-SEM does not rely on distributional assumptions (Fornell et al., 1996). Therefore, direct inference statistical tests of the model fit and the model parameters are not available, as a solution to this a global fit index and bootstrapping results with the *t*-values are provided (Chin, 2010).

Both the composite reliability and average variance extracted scores are provided in Table 2 as measures for internal consistency and convergent validity. The measurement items have significant factor loadings and the average factor loadings range from 0.62 for Infrastructure to 0.80 for Satisfaction. The majority of the loadings indicate that there was more shared variance between the construct and the measurement items than error variance (Hulland, 1999).The constructs indicate acceptable composite reliability scores ranging from 0.76 for Infrastructure to 0.90 for Service Performance and thereby satisfying the minimum threshold of 0.6 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988: 82).

Table 2 Model specifications and bootstrapping results (n = 200)

Factor/Item	Std. Factor Loading	t-values	Composite Reliability	Average variance extracted
Attraction	**0.68**		**0.87**	**0.47**
20	0.67	10.07		
22a	0.75	13.86		
22b	0.76	14.34		
22c	0.80	17.50		
22d	0.75	13.55		
23a	0.59	7.25		
23b	0.56	5.80		
23c	0.54	6.02		
Infrastructure	**0.62**		**0.76**	**0.40**
24a	0.45	2.40		
24b	0.51	3.16		
25	0.65	5.17		
41	0.75	11.00		
42	0.73	8.92		
Restaurants	**0.75**		**0.88**	**0.56**
36	0.66	8.59		
37	0.71	9.52		
38	0.82	21.17		
9	0.70	10.48		
40a	0.81	19.50		
40b	0.78	15.95		
Service Performance	**0.77**		**0.90**	**0.59**
18a	0.85	26.06		
18b	0.75	13.40		
18c	0.75	12.63		
18d	0.77	16.65		
18e	0.74	11.58		
19	0.74	12.92		
Satisfaction	**0.80**		**0.88**	**0.66**
43	0.58	5.04		
44	0.90	40.05		
45	0.79	13.86		
46	0.92	58.69		

The average variance extracted measures the amount of variance captured by the construct relative to the amount of variance attributable to measurement error and should equal or exceed 50% (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted for two of the latent variables – Attractions and Infrastructure – was slightly below the suggested minimum threshold. However, all of their factor loadings were significant; therefore they were retained in the original structure because of their importance for the analysis.

Test of moderating effect

The original factor structure was retained to provide as much information as possible for the predictive analysis stage. Service performance and tourist satisfaction usually correlate positively. However, a better understanding could be achieved if we can pinpoint to the circumstances under which this relationship is stronger or weaker. The variation of the relationship refers to the identification and quantification of moderating effects. Moderating effects are evoked by variables whose variation influences the strength or the direction of a relationship between an exogenous and an endogenous variable (Baron and Kenny, 1986: 1174). Moderating effect indicates that the slope of the independent variable is no longer constant, but depends linearly on the level of the moderator (Henseler & Fassott, 2010).

To test the moderating effect of prior destination knowledge on the formation of tourist satisfaction, we used a 'multi-sample' approach whereby the moderating variable is divided into two value categories. The group approach is similar to previous studies that use structural equation modelling to identify possible moderation effect (Homburg & Giering, 2001). Both items measuring the prior destination knowledge were used. A grand mean was calculated by averaging the means of the two items. The grand mean (2.84) was then applied to split the whole sample into two groups. Cases that have an averaged mean of 2.84 or higher were classified into the 'high' group and those with an averaged mean below 2.84 were grouped into the 'low' group. There was almost an even split with 108 respondents for the 'high' group and the 92 in the 'low' group. The conceptual model with the direct effects is estimated separately for both groups. Figure 1 is for the 'high' group and Figure 2 is for the 'low' group.

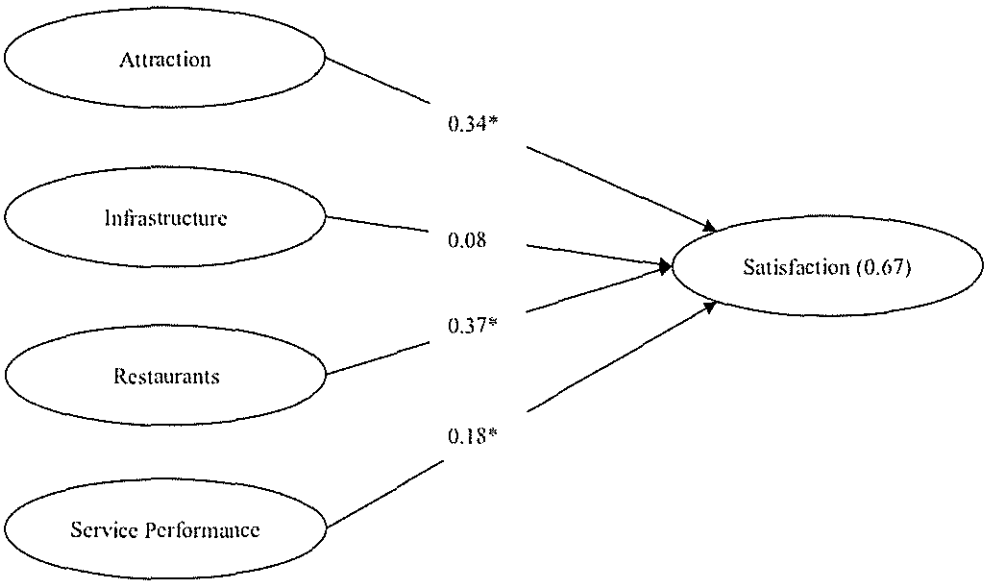

Figure 1 Path model with regression results 'high' group (n = 108)

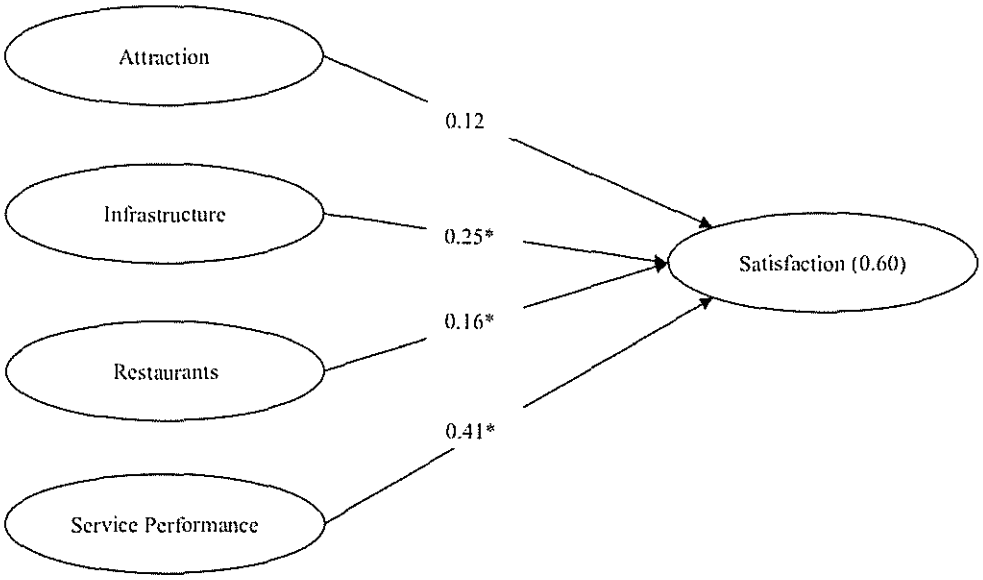

Figure 2 Path model with regression results 'low' group (n = 92)

All the structural relationships are in the proposed positive direction and the majority of the estimated path coefficients are significant. The positive direction of the parameters can be interpreted as a one-point increase in the service performance will increase tourist satisfaction by 0.41 points for the 'low' group (see the corresponding path coefficient in Figure 2). Accordingly, increased service performance means that tourists would be more satisfied with their overall experience. However, for the 'high' group the relationship between Infrastructure and Satisfaction is not significant. This suggests that tourists with a high level knowledge of the destination may have more realistic expectation about the infrastructure of the destination so that they won't have any perceptual gap with regard to destination infrastructure to affect their overall satisfaction. In contrast, for the 'low' group, the relationship between Attraction and Satisfaction is not significant. This suggests tourists who held less knowledge about the destination did not generate their satisfaction from their experience with attractions. Although this finding is a bit hard to interpret, it did indicate that prior knowledge of the destination played a differentiating role in generating tourist satisfaction among tourists. While attraction became non-significant in determining tourist satisfaction with the 'low' knowledge group, service performance gained more saliency in its effect (β=.41, $p<.05$) on satisfaction with this group than that (β=.41, $p<.05$) with the 'high knowledge' group.

The model explains a considerable amount of the variance in tourist satisfaction for both groups. The *R*-squares range from 0.67 for the 'high' group to 0.60 for the 'low' group. These values indicate that at least 60% of the variance in satisfaction can be explained by the four antecedent constructs. Tenenhaus et al. (2005) introduced a global fit measure for PLS-SEM that has been widely accepted (Guenzi et al., 2009; Wetzels, Odekerken-Schroder, and van Oppen, 2009) and it is defined as the geometric mean of the average communality and the average *R*-square, ranging between 0 and 1. Wetzels et al. (2009) specify .36 as the cut-off value for large effect size demonstrating good model performance The goodness-of-fit values ranged from 0.60 for the 'high' group and 0.57 for the 'low' group, both exceeding the cut-off value of 0.36, confirming that the models performed well across both groups.

Examining moderating effects are important because theoretical relationships may vary under different conditions and contexts (Chin et al., 2003). Table 3 compares the path coefficients and the differences between the groups. The interaction effects are apparent due to the differences in parameter estimates when the same model is applied to different but related sets of data (Rigdon et al., 1998: 1).The differences in the structural parameters between the different data groups can be interpreted as moderating effects (Henseler & Fassott, 2010).

Table 3 Path Coefficients Differences

To Satisfaction	High	Low	Difference
Attraction	0.34	0.12	+0.22
Infrastructure	0.08	0.25	-0.17
Restaurant	0.37	0.16	+0.21
Service Performance	0.18	0.41	-0.23

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the moderating effects of tourist prior knowledge on the relationship between destination experience and tourist satisfaction. The study was conducted in the context of Iranian tourism. Data were collected from a questionnaire survey from 266 foreign tourists to Shiraz, Iran. PLS-SEM was applied to analyse the data and run the multi-group analysis to test the moderating effects of prior knowledge. Findings show that destination experience components (e.g., attraction, infrastructure, restaurants and service performance) affected tourist satisfaction. However, the effects of these destination experience components on tourist satisfaction are moderated by tourists' prior knowledge of the destination. For tourists with less destination knowledge, experience with attraction did not seem to be a key determinant to tourist satisfaction, but destination services provided by various types of service personnel had a stronger effect. For tourists with more destination knowledge, experience with attractions significantly affected satisfaction while experience with tourist infrastructure did not turn to be a key determinant. Tourist experience with restaurants in the destination appeared to be significant to both groups, while the effect of restaurants with the high knowledge group is more salient. Service performance by destination contact service staff exerted a stronger effect on satisfaction of the low knowledge group than it did on satisfaction of the high knowledge group.

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