

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN FESTIVAL QUALITY EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the role of visitors' relationships with service providers, other customers and their companion(s) in festival experience, suggesting the integrated festival quality model which combines relational constructs with the current five-dimension functional quality model. Like other forms of services, festival is a social activity. Festival encounters involve a series of social relationships in the presence of multiple service providers and other visitors who share the servicescape with and other customers on service experience has been substantially examined. Additionally, festival visitors usually visit festivals with a group of some size. As the indigenous presence of social groups involving families and friends in the leisure and tourism activity has been recognized, attending festivals is also a leisure activity that is most often shared with companion visitors. In the festival literature, family togetherness or socialization has been identified as one of the most common sources of motivation for festival customers. Despite the importance of social groups in the festival encounter, there is little, if any, research that empirically examines the role of festival visitors' relationships with their companion visitors in festival quality and satisfaction research.

An onsite survey was conducted from Nonsan Strawberry Festival, which was held in April 13-15, 2012. A total of 215 completed responses were received. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using SPSS AMOS 20 was used to test the proposed model and hypothesized relationships among the constructs. All hypotheses examining a positive effect of visitors' relationship with service providers, other customers and companion(s) were supported by the data and the proposed model also had an acceptable fit to the data.

It appears that relational aspects have not been explored to any great extent in the festival quality literature and there are a number of questions that lend itself to the analytical framework in festival quality literature. By examining the importance of relational aspects of festival service experiences, this study suggests that festival operators need to keep in mind that considering how a festival visitor encounters social relationships with whom and how those influence his/her festival experience is important for successful marketing. Providing visitors with an opportunity for positive and supportive relationships with service providers, other customers, and their companion(s) using festival programs and services will help improve visitors' festival experience. As important as a festival visitor perceives the process and outcome of the social relationships at a festival, he/she will accordingly enjoy the festival experience. This is an important part of relational quality because social enjoyment has been identified as one of the major festival motivation. However, it should be noted that all social relationships make important, but complementary contributions to visitors' satisfaction judgment. In particular, in order to derive joint enjoyment between visitors and their companions, festival programs and services need to focus on shared activities of exchanges, considering that people usually visit festivals in a group of some size.

By incorporating multiple observable relationships associated with service quality specific to a festival setting, this study provides insight into festival service research applicable to many tourism services involving diverse social relationships. The findings indicate that there are various types of social relationship contributing to festival quality and all of those can similarly and differently influence festival service experience. Therefore, in addition to conventional functional quality elements, it is important for festival organizers to recognize the importance visitors' social relationships in offering satisfying festival experiences.

References available upon request.