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Ye Zhang
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies Indiana University Bloomington

Yeon Woo Park
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies Indiana University Bloomington

Shu T. Cole
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies Indiana University Bloomington

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Ye Zhang
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies
Indiana University Bloomington

and

Yeon Woo Park
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies
Indiana University Bloomington

and

Shu T. Cole
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies
Indiana University Bloomington

ABSTRACT

This study identifies factors that affect tourism experience of people with mobility impairments, and examines how the interactions of factors formulate a positive/negative tourism experience. Both focus-group and personal interviews were conducted among twenty-three travelers with mobility impairments. Identified factors involve: physical environment (physical accessibility, convenience, security), human interaction environment (service capacity, service attitude, efficiency of services), individual characteristics (personality type, sensitivity to the environment) and situational factors. Among these factors, convenience, security, efficiency of services, personality type, sensitivity to the environment, as well as the situational factors were new content added to the existing conceptual framework. This study reveals that when physical factors fail, human interaction in most cases can compensate for it. Moreover, individual characteristics and situational factors affected participants’ engagement in physical and human interaction environment.

Keywords: tourism experience, service experience, people with mobility impairments.

INTRODUCTION

The segment of people with disabilities, estimated as 19 percent of the general population, has motivated tourism marketers to explore the needs and experiences of this promising market (Huh & Singh, 2007). Efforts to better understand and improve the travel experience for people with disabilities can help tourism businesses maintain this loyal tourist market as well as their support networks (Stumbo & Pegg, 2005). In addition, such efforts also prepare tourism businesses to improve travel experiences for the growing mature market.

The existing tourism literature primarily examined the constraints preventing people with disabilities from travelling (Packer, Mckercher, & Yau, 2007). Only a handful of studies investigated the on-site tourism experience, which is fundamental to the improvements of service provision for people with disabilities (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2011). However, none of them have investigated the factors that impact their tourism experiences. Such information would provide important insights to management regarding how to produce optimal tourism
experiences with limited resources. Therefore, this study identifies factors that affect tourism experience of people with mobility impairments, and examines how the interactions of factors formulate a positive/negative tourism experience.

**FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURISM EXPERIENCE**

Walls, et al. (2011) offered a conceptual framework which provides a comprehensive understanding of consumer experience in the tourism context. The framework identifies a number of factors that impact tourism experience. They are: 1) Physical environment, which are related to physical facilities and surroundings; 2) Human interaction environment, which are primarily interactions between tourists and service providers; 3) Individual characteristics, which involve personality type and sensitivity to the environment, influence how tourists perceive the staged services; 4) Situational factors are the characteristics that influence the nature of the trip, such as the purpose of a trip and travel companions.

To date, studies on this topic have only explored the influential factors in a single sector of the tourism industry, such as hotels, or airline service. In addition, the influential factors studied were mainly on accessibility issues (Darcy, 2009; Poria, et al., 2011). Thus, it is necessary for this study to examine all influential factors proposed by Walls, et al. (2011) across different sectors of the tourism industry.

**METHODS**

A qualitative approach was adopted in the study due to the complex nature of the topic and the lack of existing research on this subject. Both focus-group and personal interviews were conducted among travelers with mobility impairments. The sample was composed of six attendants of the 2011 Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality world congress, as well as fifteen residents of Bloomington, IN. Among the twenty-three participants, twelve were female. Thirteen used wheelchair only, whereas four used wheelchair/walker, and four used walker only.

Major interview questions include: 1) description of a satisfactory or dissatisfactory experience with a hotel, restaurant, transportation services, and a tourist attraction; 2) explanation of their expectations of these services. Corresponding to the exploratory nature of the study, data was analyzed with thematic analysis by which the researchers recognized the emergent categories and themes (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The typology by Walls, et al. (2011) was adopted as the basis for data coding. Several factors were coded into each of the four types.

**RESULTS**

**Physical environment**

*Physical Accessibility* as a fundamental factor influencing tourism experience was most frequently mentioned by all the participants. Many tourism services are indicated as “partially accessible”, either because some facilities or areas do not comply all the ADA standards, or the services are designed to be “ADA accessible” but not functional due to inappropriate usage or being occupied by people with no impairments. Accessible services beyond meeting ADA standards are expected for satisfactory experiences.
Convenience - Half of the participants complained about the extra trouble they undertook to utilize accessible services. For example, some negative experiences are about moving toward the restroom in a crowded restaurant from a table far away. Such inconvenience means more than extra effort – they are humiliated and “feel more handicapped”, as one participant stated.

Security on one hand refers to the safety participants feel about the setting, such as whether the hotel entrance is close to the room they are staying. On the other hand, it represents the secure feeling derived from the participants’ confidence in tourism services. Such confidence is normally obtained from consistently reliable service performance of providers, although participants feel their confidence level is relative low with current tourism services in general.

Human interaction environment

Service Knowledge and Capability - A large number of participants attribute their positive tourism experiences to employees who are familiar with how to serve this group of people. For instance, these employees know what questions to ask and how to ask, what the policies related to serving people with disabilities are, and how to meet their needs. Meanwhile, negative experiences are often related to unreliable information about accessible facilities provided by the employees who misunderstand the concept of accessibility.

Service Attitude of employees towards people with a disability is highlighted the most by participants. While they understand that not all tourism services can be accessible to them at all times, participants do expect the employees to be willing to solve problem with them, and be treated as tourists without a disability, and be compensated when the service fail to fulfill their promises. As one participant claimed, “I wasn’t looking to be given a free week…I was looking for ‘how can we solve this situation and have a conversation about minimizing that sort of thing happening in the future’”. Apologetic attitude can be more impressive than material compensation. Several participants reported how it hurt their self-esteem when employees were ignorant of their independence and insistent of help even in the absence of need, or talking to their companions rather than themselves.

Efficiency of Services is necessary for a positive tourism experience given the physical limitations of people with mobility impairments and possible secondary illness they may have. However, more than half of the participants reported that some services such as airline boarding or car rentals are often complicated and take far longer than expected to wait. In addition, they frequently mentioned the extra trouble it took them to transfer from one service to another (e.g., from hotel to airport, or from check-in to boarding).

Individual characteristics

Personality Type is a factor that influences the participants’ willingness to recognize elements of physical or human interaction environment. Participants with a positive personality mostly mention positive environment elements. They set a lower expectation level regarding service provision, thus they have a wider zone of tolerance for service than other participants. They can more easily achieve a satisfactory tourism experience. In contrast, participants with more negative personality often express relatively higher expectations and generally tend to have a more negative experience.
Sensitivity to the Environment refers to the sensitivity of participants to the details in the physical or human interaction environment. For participants who are more sensitive to service details, desirable service features could easily bring them a satisfactory experience. For instance, one participant referred to a happy experience at a motel she stayed, because the bathtub had “two handrails with one going vertical and one at a slant…[it] felt just right”. However, their attention to the failure in service details can also easily ruin their tourism experiences. For instance, one participant was sensitive to being called as “handicapped” and his entire travel experience was ruined because of it.

Situational factors

Situational factors can affect the level of dependency of participants on travel services, which in turn, impact their overall travel experiences. Oftentimes, travelers with mobility impairments rely heavily on services provided. However, their level of reliance on services differs by purpose of trip, travel companions, etc. For participants who are more adventurous and intentionally travel to less accessible areas, they rely on tourism services less and thus the failure of services is not devastating for their overall tourism experience. In contrast, if they go on a cruise, services are decisive because they usually expect to rely on services onboard. In addition, their travel companions determine the degree to which a participant may need service. One participant explained that after her husband passed away, she relied more on tourism services than before, and the failure in services had a more negative impact on her experiences.

DISCUSSIONS

Different factors influencing the tourism experience of people with mobility impairments were identified in this study. In particular, convenience, security, efficiency of services, personality type, sensitivity to the environment, and the situational factors were newly-identified factors.

In general, when the physical factors fail, human interaction factors in most cases can compensate for it. Thus, human interaction factors should be primarily managed by service providers to assure the delivery of positive tourism experiences. Moreover, individual characteristics and situational factors affected participants’ engagement in physical and human interaction environment. Therefore, understanding these individual- and trip-specific factors can help tourism businesses provide customized services and accordingly satisfactory experiences for people with mobility impairments. The study is exploratory in nature and additional empirical investigations are needed to confirm the proposed factors.

REFERENCES


