

## Perceptions of tourism products

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of the tourism product has been rooted in the minds of industry professionals as the industry has rapidly developed. Yet research into the tourism product and its constitution has not been a particular focus. Smith (1994) was one of the first, and remains one of the few, researchers to have decomposed the tourism product into basic elements. His five elements formed a single core and a series of four encapsulating shells. The study reported here first clarified the definition of tourism product and employed Smith's framework to analyze various tourism products in different tourism sectors. A student sample was used in a survey to rate the importance of five elements of tourism products. The results showed that the five elements were prevalent but that they differed in their importance for tourists across a variety of tourism products. Tangible physical plant was considered to be the most important component of nearly all tourism products. Finally, a new model of the tourism product is proposed here, and managerial priorities when creating sustained and satisfying tourist experiences are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourists are confronted with a wide range of tourism products in the destinations that they visit. For providers of tourism and hospitality services, the key question is: what makes a memorable and successful experience for tourists? What about general expectations versus niche tourism? Tourism industry professionals consistently reiterate the importance of innovative and diverse products that provide memorable experiences for a diverse clientele. Surprisingly few academic researchers have conceptualized tourism products to guide real life practice. Smith (1994) was one of the few researchers in recent decades to emphasize multiple components, and broke down the tourism product into five elements: physical plant, service, hospitality, freedom of choice, and involvement. To elicit a tourism product model, he first summarized previous marketing and supply-side perspectives. In his literature review, Smith discussed the work of Medlik and Middleton (1973), who presented a “components model” that was developed to take a holistic view of tourism products. Smith extended this line of thinking and established his model at both the “specific” and “total” levels (Middleton, 1989). In the model, a series of concentric circles suggest that the physical plant should be

placed at the core, with the other elements in a series of encapsulating shells. The elements are ranked from the core to the shells, according to the magnitude of management control and consumer participation, considered from the management and customer viewpoints, respectively. However, a question arises in relation to the model's adaptability to distinct tourism products, and to the different perspectives of tourists. Smith concluded his conceptual study by indicating the complex structure of the tourism product, but failed to examine that structure. Hence, the present study considers tourists' observations and perceptions of various tourism products by employing Smith's tourism product framework. This is a significant objective given the dearth of research aiming to broaden our understanding of the tourism product concept by testing extant models.

### 2. Literature review

In any industry, a product is developed to meet the needs of potential customers. The development of the tourism industry has triggered the development of tourism products. In the relevant literature, there is no consensus definition of a tourism product, but there is a common understanding that such a product must appeal to travelers seeking either business or leisure activities. In the recently published *Tourism Product and Services* (Sharma, 2007), Bill Hardman Sr. – former president of the Southeast Tourism Society – noted that a “tourism product is whatever is put into the promotion. ... it could be a whole community or an individual facility, such as a park (a site) or a hotel (a property)” (p. 23). The book also included definitions of tourism products relying on theories, such

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as economic theories from the supply-side perspective. Smith, in his paper, criticized that both marketing and supply-side tended to miss the essence of the tourism product concept and failed to generate a generic tourism product model. Therefore, he proposed the conceptual framework to “acknowledge the role of human experience in the tourism product, [as well as] identify which elements can be empirically measured for an estimate of the economic magnitude of the industry” (p. 586). However, this study defines a tourism product from the marketing perspective, as whatever aims to cater to tourism needs and is promoted in the marketplace. For tourists, the product is a complete experience that fulfills multiple tourism needs, and provides corresponding benefits. Given this definition, the study serves to build upon the understanding of tourism products by focusing on demand rather than supply. From a marketing perspective, tourism product developers and marketers should be cognizant of what is normally included in a tourism product – both tangible and intangible elements. In line with Smith’s five element tourism product theory, the physical plant and freedom of choice are tangible elements, and the other elements are intangible. Moreover, each tourism sector can be considered as a tourism product, attracting tourists by focusing on a particular business/leisure purpose. For example, a theme park is developed to entertain tourists by establishing and injecting themed backgrounds and objects. Hotels are constructed to meet travelers’ needs for lodging at the destinations they visit. A cruise aims to satisfy a variety of needs, such as exercise, voyaging, entertainment and leisure, and family togetherness. A wildlife refuge protects wild animals and welcomes leisure tours. A retail outlet focuses on tourists’ inclination to shop. These tourism products in distinct sectors differ in their development strategies and focus on the tangible and intangible elements involved.

### 3. Research methodology

A sample of undergraduate students promised to be useful in understanding various tourism products with the assistance of Smith’s (1994) five element model. One hundred and nineteen students were approached for this study; they were all aged 18 or over, and had all registered for a compulsory subject required by a school of hotel and tourism management at a Hong Kong university. A student sample was considered appropriate because the students had been tourists themselves and, through their university studies, had acquired professional knowledge of tourism management and relevant marketing theories. A list of 15 tourism products was given for the subsequent data collection and data analysis using Ninemeier and Perdue’s (2005) book on hospitality operations. Those students who had consumed all of the tourism products listed were invited to participate in the subsequent structural survey, which involved rating the importance of five elements of tourism products on the basis of travel experiences and professional knowledge of tourism (“1” denoted that the element was “the most important” and “5” denoted that it was “the least important”). A total of 79 students were eligible and willing to participate in the study. The sample was primarily female (67.2%) and over two thirds of the students were either juniors or seniors. They voluntarily verbalized some of their tourism product consumption perceptions, mainly related to Hong Kong and Macao, two cities abundant in many types of tourism products. The students mainly offered Hong Kong Disneyland, the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, Star Cruises, the Hong Kong Wetland Park, and the Venetian Macao as examples of tourism products in distinct tourism sectors.

Before the data collection, the author specified a definition of each of the tourism product elements using factual examples in line with Smith’s study. Problems of conceptual understanding for

students always point to an inability to distinguish between elements of service and hospitality. The author thus used Hemmington’s (2007) argument in an attempt to identify the constructs (cf. Table 1) in class. The hospitality industry can provide extraordinary surprises and tends to create memorable experiences, allowing tourists to differentiate, evaluate, and rank service offerings. Essentially, service aims to satisfy tourists’ functional needs, while hospitality aims to meet tourists’ experiential value-added needs. The author acted as a moderator throughout the data collection process.

### 4. Findings and discussions

The five tourism product elements were evaluated in disparate tourism sectors, and the results show that physical plant has a mean score of 2.2118 while the other elements are all above 3, ranging from 3.0380 to 3.3021. This finding suggests that the students perceived the physical plant to be the core of tourism products, paralleling Smith’s notion. The other four elements were seen as having roughly equal levels of importance in contributing to tourism products.

Distinct emphasis was placed on the five elements of the selected 15 tourism products (cf. Table 2). The physical plant was rated as the most important component for the majority of products and involvement as the least important for producing positive travel experiences. Notably, physical plant played an overwhelming role (87.3%) in the success of heritage attractions, possibly due to the priceless collections affiliated with the destinations under consideration. Conversely, involvement seemed to be a pivotal constituent for tourists consuming festival products, for which physical plant was less important. This interesting phenomenon might have arisen because festivals are celebrations that attract groups of tourists who are intent on experiencing certain cultural or historical events (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Getz, 2008). Cole and Illum (2006) found that those attending festivals judged their experience on performance quality and overall satisfaction; the temporary nature of festivals perhaps explains why physical site and infrastructure are not as important to the overall experience.

Other findings included that the student tourists did not consider service to be of particular significance when attending theme parks. In addition, the hospitality element was rated at the lowest level of importance for those tourism products that included museums, casinos, and areas of natural beauty and wildlife refuges. It has been widely acknowledged that since an experience economy emerged (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), increasing numbers of tourism service marketers have become aware of the importance of orchestrating extraordinary hospitality experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Shaw & Ivins, 2002; Schmitt, 2003),

**Table 1**  
Differences between service and hospitality.

| Dimensions                          | Service                          | Hospitality              |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Who is it for?                      | Customers                        | Guests                   |
| Who manages it?                     | Manager                          | Host                     |
| How is it managed?                  | Manufacturing<br>commoditization | Theatre                  |
| What is the economic function?      | Delivery                         | Staging                  |
| What is the economic relationship?  | Parsimony                        | Generosity               |
| Who delivers it?                    | Staff                            | Cast                     |
| What is the delivery goal?          | Customer service                 | Performance              |
| What is the timing?                 | Delivered on demand              | Lots of little surprises |
| What are the needs?                 | Functional                       | Experiential             |
| Who leads?                          | Customers led                    | Host led                 |
| What is the nature of the offering? | Intangible                       | Memorable                |
| What are the factors of demand?     | Benefits                         | Sensations               |
| What are the security concerns?     | Of goods and processes           | Of strangers             |

Source: Hemmington, 2007.

**Table 2**  
The perceived importance of tourism products' elements (N = 79).

|                         | Physical plants    | Service            | Hospitality        | Freedom of choice  | Involvement        |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Theme parks</b>      | 64.6% <sup>a</sup> | 35.4% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .024               | .091 <sup>c</sup>  | .005               | .135 <sup>c</sup>  |
| <b>Resorts</b>          | 49.4% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 53.2% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .008               | .000               | .001               | .000               |
| <b>Airlines</b>         | 44.3% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 69.6% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .002               | .014               | .023               | .000               |
| <b>Festivals</b>        | 53.2% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 74.7% <sup>a</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .011               | .001               | .007               |
| <b>Museums</b>          | 74.7% <sup>a</sup> |                    | 44.3% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Craft shops</b>      | 41.8% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 46.8% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .001               | .000               |
| <b>Convention C.</b>    | 63.3% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 46.8% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .002               | .049               | .000               |
| <b>Cruise</b>           | 62.0% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 40.5% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .009               | .003               | .040               | .000               |
| <b>Hotels</b>           | 45.6% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    |                    | 65.8% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Restaurants</b>      |                    |                    |                    | 32.9% <sup>a</sup> | 62.0% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .483 <sup>c</sup>  | .000               | .091 <sup>c</sup>  | .001               | .000               |
| <b>Casinos</b>          | 34.2% <sup>a</sup> |                    | 43.0% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .006               | .000               | .000               | .002               | .046               |
| <b>Retail shops</b>     |                    |                    |                    | 46.8% <sup>a</sup> | 50.6% <sup>b</sup> |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .078 <sup>c</sup>  | .000               | .091 <sup>c</sup>  | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Natural beauties</b> | 73.4% <sup>a</sup> |                    | 40.5% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Heritage sties</b>   | 87.3% <sup>a</sup> |                    |                    | 20.3% <sup>b</sup> |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Wildlife refuges</b> | 65.8% <sup>a</sup> |                    | 49.4% <sup>b</sup> |                    |                    |
| Asymp. Sig.             | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               | .000               |
| <b>Average (Mean)</b>   | 2.2118             | 3.1511             | 3.3274             | 3.3038             | 3.3021             |

<sup>a</sup> The highest per cent of respondents perceived the element as the most important.  
<sup>b</sup> The highest per cent of respondents perceived the element as the least important.  
<sup>c</sup> Chi-square value is non-significant at .05 level.

which result in positive memories for tourists. A stage-based experiential approach has been conducted by many tourism industry professionals in developing and promoting their products. Nevertheless, this dramatic representation happens to be less true in the aforementioned four tourism products. Museums, which have been suggested to be principal attractions for urban tourism (Jansen-Verbeke & van Rekom, 1996), are professionally developed for the storage and display of cultural collections, and as a stage for education. While museum service exists in the form of activities such as lectures, guided tours, and workshops, hospitality is rarely desired to stimulate interest; service experiences are more influenced by a visitor's state of mind (Chan, 2009). In most casino settings, customers gamble and require merely functional service from dealers and waiters or waitresses (Kim, Prideaux, & Kim, 2002). In general, mass visitors to areas of natural beauty and wildlife reserves have no need for service and hospitality, but are motivated by the tangible physical plant, including the scenery and the animals (73.4% and 65.8% respectively). This finding is in line with those of wilderness leisure experience studies, which have concluded that the environment and visitors' own state of mind create satisfaction for them (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001).

Finally, freedom of choice, which refers to having a range of options available to tourists (Smith, 1994), is held to be the most significant factor for restaurants and retail shops. Tourists do care whether these tourism products provide a wide range of choices that they can include in their consideration sets. Given their unique nature, restaurants and retail shops lacking in multiple choices may give insufficient freedom to tourists, thereby resulting in dissatisfying experiences.

Table 2 also indicates that some of the tourism product elements were not equally ranked in terms of importance. The physical plants of restaurants (.483) and retail shops (.078), the hospitality of theme parks (.091), restaurants (.091), and retail shops (.091), and the involvement of theme parks (.135) all showed non-significant Chi-square values. The student respondents rated these elements as ranging from the most important to the least important in particular tourism products. These results demonstrate that tourists should be treated as individuals to satisfy their particular expectations. A possible, but less likely, alternative explanation is that the tourism product elements were not well understood and differentiated by the students.

This study used Smith's five element model to examine tourist perceptions of tourism products. Five elements were prevalent and yet differed in their importance for tourists among a variety of tourism products. The tangible physical plant was considered to be the most important component of nearly all tourism products.

**5. Concluding remark: a new model of tourism product**

To conclude, an adequate conceptualization of the tourism product would be a model with physical plant at the centre, and with the four other competing but complementary elements in a peripheral circle. The outer four elements facilitate the processes of tourism production and consumption. (cf. Fig. 1). There is thus a pressing need to consider freedom of choice and involvement as inputs in conjunction with service and hospitality to add value to the physical plant in the creation of tourism experiences. The other four elements play supporting roles. The core physical plant only determines partial customer satisfaction when the minimum tangible needs are fulfilled, and the support elements produce satisfaction with experiences that target higher self-induced needs (Balmer & Baum, 1993; Chan & Baum, 2007). This explanation echoes the essence of the two-factor theory as proposed by Herberg (1959). A tourism product comes into existence when the five elements are correctly and successfully integrated to catch the attention of tourists and further satisfy their multiple needs, as identified in the conceptual model. Those needs involve both tourist-related and tourism product elements.

It is equally important to note that all five elements, especially the support elements, differ in terms of their importance across tourism products. Moreover, for some elements of particular tourism products, the student respondents regarded their importance differently and could not reach agreement. The four support

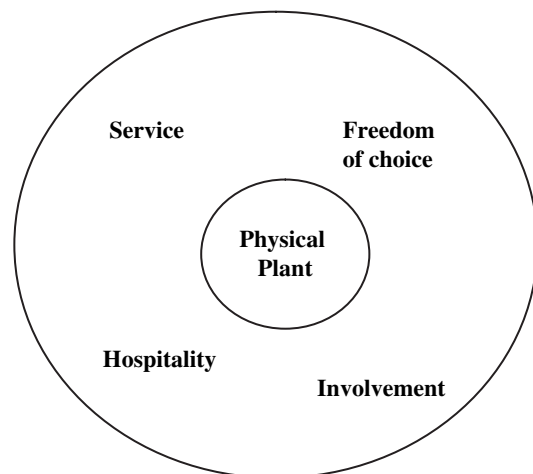


Fig. 1. Tourism product model.

elements equate to the intangible elements found in the literature, except the freedom of choice element, which is tangible and could be evaluated before the actual tourism experience (Nelson, 1970).

This multi-faceted model of tourism product development has immediate practical implications because it suggests that managers need to take a holistic view and include both core and support elements of successful tourism products in today's experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Managers relying solely on the provision of an adequate physical plant will miss many opportunities to market – and profit from – enhanced support elements. A more useful approach would be to integrate the tourism product elements in a systematical order. In many hotels, for example, hoteliers should design rooms, facilities, and the service environment to assure basic guest satisfaction as a first priority, and train and educate frontline staff to provide efficient and responsive services, thus incorporating other elements. Many researchers have realized the importance of service quality and hospitality in hotel selection and performance (Barsky & Labagh, 1992; Callan & Kyndt, 2001; Choi & Chu, 2001; Gilbert & Morris, 1995; Saleh & Ryan, 1992; to cite just a few). In addition, the body of research on value-added hotel service experience, in which guests are more involved, is growing (McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Oh, Fiore, & Jeung, 2007). Industry professionals should understand the true value of each experience-based support element when developing tourism products, ensuring that physical plant remains the core element.

However, of particular importance in tourism product development is an understanding that involvement rather than the physical plant is the core element for festivals. In addition, there is a need to highlight the importance of freedom of choice for tourists in relation to restaurants and retail shops, taking into account the differences between individuals in perceiving physical plant and hospitality. The physical plants of theme parks are also important, in that they attract visitors. While practitioners in theme parks are thus eager to take advantage of the charm of physical settings and the associated theatrical support elements to maximize their business success in today's experience economy (Kao, Huang, & Wu, 2008), the divergence between the perceived importance of the hospitality and involvement elements needs further clarification. Subsequently, despite the applicability of the newly developed model to most tourism products, attention needs to be paid to the nature of particular products and the fact that the requirements of groups of customers vary. The model can thus be used to guide practice and ensure competitiveness.

Finally, physical plant and freedom of choice, which are both tangible, should be described in a more thoughtful way in tourism product promotion brochures and other advertising materials to help tourists form basic expectations of them. Onsite service providers should create memorable experiences for tourists to influence their future tourist behavior.

## 6. Limitation and further research

Notwithstanding its significant findings, this study is limited by the small sample obtained for analysis, and also by the fact that students do not represent a complete cross section of the population. Furthermore, the students may have not had enough experience as tourists to draw sufficiently considered conclusions about tourism product consumption. Nonetheless, further research among industry professionals and other stakeholders should yield additional useful data. Although limited in scope, the findings of this study do provide a point of departure for understanding dissimilar tourism products from a multi-faceted perspective.

It could also be interesting to examine the discrepancies between tourism products within a given tourism sector. For example, a comparison of the distribution of the five elements in luxury hotels, mid-price hotels, and economy hotels could be an interesting research topic. Further research that builds upon and clarifies the concept would have value for both academics and marketers.

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