

# **PRICE-QUALITY EVALUATION IN THE TRIANGULATION OF SATISFACTION, RECOMMENDATION, AND LOYALTY OF INTERNATIONAL TRAVELERS ARRIVING BY LAND TO BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO**

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In the field of management and marketing, the knowledge of visitor's satisfaction has become a strategic issue for the development of tourist activities at all levels. In this context, the variables that precede tourist's satisfaction, as well as the price-quality relationship and those deriving from it, such as recommendation and loyalty to the destination, have become subjects of study and implementation application to maximize repetitive consumption of touristic products.

There are papers oriented on explaining the importance of tourist satisfaction which coincide in highlighting the anticipatory impact in the recommendation of a destination and on strengthening of loyalty toward its consumption. Once these aspects are transferred to tourism management, the latter has been reflected in a steady reduction of cost associated to the attraction of new visitors, resulting in a profit increase of the company and/or destination.

On the antecedents of consumer's satisfaction, few studies have focused on the impact of perceived quality, reflected in the present study by price-quality, found a positive impact on satisfaction. Furthermore, it may be necessary to mention that these approximations focus mainly on price-quality as an antecedent for tourist satisfaction, although there is no conceptual impediment to address it in the context of a post-construct to the satisfaction of the visitor. In our context of study, regardless of the visitor's level of satisfaction to increase demand, if the assessment of the positive price paid during the stay is determinant, it would be giving way also to the possibility for a price revision in favor of the supply actors.

The exploration of the causal relationships between the tourist satisfaction assessment and price-quality is based on the development of two research designs (Model A and B) which differ only on the way the price-quality assessment is incorporated. Although these two research models seem to express similar situations, their logic for incorporating price-quality makes them different and susceptible to reflections with potentially uneven consequences.

In model A, the price-quality assessment acts as a construct inherent to tourist satisfaction with an impact on the visitors flow increment by recommendation and consumption loyalty. While in model B, tourist satisfaction is confirmed as an antecedent to price-quality assessment.

Under the framework of this paper, the conceptual approach of both research models focuses on the perspective of satisfaction emerging from the relationship between the paid costs and received benefits, a connection known for often leading to ambiguity in its comprehension.

To avoid confusion in the interpretation that sometimes arises from the duality of the relation between consumer's satisfaction and the components of perceived utility (perceived quality and consented sacrifice), the latter will take the expression of perceived quality in model A. In fact, previous studies found that the increase in the assessment of perceived quality translates to an increase of satisfaction from the consumer. The same misinterpretations are reflected in the duplicity of the quality assessment which covers conceptually the prices of internal referents conformed by stimuli and personal experiences, and the prices of external referents structured by variables from the sales context.

In this sense, the quality of a product and/or service can be approached from the perspective of its intrinsic attributes (inherent referents) and/or through their exogenous referents which express their contextual variables. Under this perspective, model A will be expressing the perceived quality encapsulated as a referent inherent to tourist satisfaction, while model B focuses its interest in the perceived quality as an exogenous referent, that is, a construct determined from the tourist satisfaction which in turn is defined by its predictive constructs in the research model.

Considering the multidimensional quality and structural complexity of the two research models posed in this work, it was appropriate to use the partial least squares technique (PLS). The analyzed data comes from the survey "Characterization of international visitors in the border cities of Baja California: Mexicali, Tecate and Tijuana" collected by the Tourism Observatory of Baja California (TOCB) during the months of July, August, and September, 2013 at the land border ports of entry. The survey was conducted through stratified sampling and multistage with proportional probabilities which allowed the completion of 2,704 questionnaires with a +/- 5 % theoretical margin of error for a 95 % confidence level, 1.5 % for the correction of design effect, and an estimated 15 % non-response rate.

The first results of the study showed that regardless of whether there is information in other contexts that confirms a positive relationship of the image of the destiny, its attractions, and tourist satisfaction, in this research that relationship seems neglected and without validity. The same happened with the particular services which are characteristic of an assessment of urban tourism, which do not seem to exhibit a significant impact on the positive perception of tourist satisfaction. These findings may be the result of a travel motivation not centered on the image, attractions of the destination and particular services, thus translating a set of causal relationships not necessarily feasible in all tourist environments.

In comparison with other contexts, the destinations in Baja California have been identified mainly by a degraded perception of public safety, and they have not yet managed to structure a brand image able to impact tourist satisfaction. In the same context, travel motivation based mainly on visiting family and/or friends which characterizes the crossings by land of international visitors at the Baja California border does not usually leave a mark on satisfaction when evaluating attractions and services which are of very low consumption in this segment.

However, in terms of accessibility to the destination and public services, which are important aspects in the evaluation of tourist satisfaction, the relationships between them become significant only when assessing price-quality and these relations are considered as a subsequent event to tourist satisfaction (model B). This may be the translation of visit expectations less sensitive to prices which tend to focus on the reasons, means and context of the trips. These latter aspects may already be incorporated to the impact of the travel experience in the tourist satisfaction, which is highly significant in both models, where a more relevant total effect is registered in the core of model B. From this perspective, the image of a particular, complex, and diverse tourist destination emerges seeming to respond to a model of tourist satisfaction centered on the specific interests of the visitor.

The above affirmation is also perceived in the variance explained by the construct of tourist satisfaction in research model B, which reflects a differential a 20 % lower in respect to the other model. However, under model A conditions, the total effect of price-quality in satisfaction is highly significant with a 0.4664 value, while in model B, the total effect of satisfaction on the price-quality is equally significant, since it exhibits a 0.6306 value. These results expressing two aspects seem at some point as antagonistic and must be considered concurrently to achieve a better understanding of the extent of the causal relationships involved. The first aspect finds its expression in model A, reflecting a greater explanatory power of the observed differences in the conformation of the tourist satisfaction construct. And the second that emerges from model B is the explanation of price-quality for satisfaction which is more relevant, although, it indicates a relevant reciprocity between satisfaction and price-quality.

Clarifying that in both cases the high levels of significance allow producing the same assertions. Perhaps, it is interesting to highlight the model A fits well in an exploratory purpose, and model B responds best to a predictive interest.

In the context of the two research models, the triangulation of satisfaction, recommendation, and loyalty to the destination is characterized by a highly significant causality that may be also observed in the respective connections to the price-quality construct. In this sense, although the findings of this study are consistent with the results of other studies, the overall effect of the disposition to recommend the destination in the loyalty seems more relevant in both models, followed by the effect of satisfaction on the recommendation which reaches its highest level in model B. Similarly, these causal relationships were highly significant in both models, although their overall effect is more relevant in visitor's loyalty and considerably more important in the model A, both for disposition to recommend the destination as to strengthen loyalty.

The reciprocity between price-quality and visitor's satisfaction seems to characterize this relationship in both models, and it opens the possibility for reflection and action considering a revision of the prices applied in the destination in favor of the supply. This becomes particularly interesting if you take into consideration the approach of an efficiency that has been a synonym of growth with distributive tension among the different social groups conforming the communities dedicated to tourism. In fact, aside an economic pragmatism which has accustomed us to a vision strongly centered on demand, the eventuality of stretching the prices is contemplated in a distributive approach which allows taking into consideration the demand, actors and structuring context of supply.