

# REPEAT VISITORS OF A TOURIST DESTINATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Customer retention is widely acknowledged being a favourable strategy, however, it has received little attention in the tourism literature (Reid, and Reid, 1993; Oppermann, 1999). Only recently a number of studies have studied the impact of previous destination experience and destination choice (Gyte and Phelps, 1989; Oppermann, 1997; Kozak, 2001). Most of these stress the differences between first time and repeat visitors. Despite the efforts, it remains unclear why people undertake repeat visits and what kind characteristics hold repeat visitors and whether they represent a homogeneous group or not (Oppermann, 2000). Therefore, this research aims to identify the reasons for repeating a destination as well as the sociodemographic and psychographic profile of the repeat visitor to a summer destination. Secondly, it aims to investigate whether this repeat visitor attaches emotionally to the community, as a consequence of his regular visits, and then becomes more conscious about the natural and human factors in the place frequently visited. Focus groups will be conducted with repeat visitors and their insights used to develop a questionnaire that will be piloted and later, distributed at the tourist destination.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the tourism industry and the subsequent interest to investigate its implications has dramatically increased in the last years. Research covers aspects that include competitive advantages of the different destinations; the flow of tourists around the world as well as different tourism impacts (economic, social and ecological impacts) and destination image (Ahmed, 1991), among others. Recently the emphasis has been placed on ecotourism and sustainability (Butler, 2000). For example, some studies have concentrated on strategies related to sustainable development (Clarke, 1997); others have emphasised the importance of community involvement in decision-making (Puczko and Ratz, 2000).

Despite the increased number of studies interested in tourism, only very recently a number of studies have been forwarded on the importance of repeat visitors to the same destination (Oppermann, 1999). Some studies on repeat visitation have focused on tourists' satisfaction in different destinations (Kozak, 2000, 2001); others have identified tourists' perception of the environment after years of visiting the same destination (Dymond, 1997; Pollard and Dominguez, 1993; Ryan, C., 1995; Puczko and Ratz, 2000). However, the literature shows lack of research relating to repeat visitors and their perception about environmental changes in the destination frequently visited.

Therefore, the objective of this study is three fold: (1) to determine if there is a distinctive profile that differentiate repeat from non-repeat vacationers in relation to variables such as demographic and psychographic characteristics, as well as among the repeat group; (2) to identify possible reasons for returning to a familiar destination; (3) to identify whether the repeat visitor feels emotionally attached

to the community frequently visited and becomes more conscious about the natural and human factors in the place frequently visited

The methodology proposed will include collecting qualitative data from focus groups composed by participants who are identified as repeat visitors. Gaining insights about the participants' personal life situation as repeat visitors will serve to incorporate significant information in the study of this phenomenon to be used in the construction of the questionnaire, which will be piloted and later, distributed at the tourist destination. At the same time, focus groups provide an invaluable opportunity to know how people think about environmental issues regarding natural and human factors in the place frequently visited.

As this research is still at a preliminary stage, this paper will focus on some aspects of the literature review regarding repeat visitation and sustainability concerns. The methodology about focus groups will be also presented.

## **2. THE REPEAT VISITATION PHENOMENON**

Despite the increased number of studies only very recently a number of studies have been forwarded on the importance of repeat visitors to the same destination (Oppermann, 1999). At the international level most countries keep record of the number of tourists that arrive every year, as well as their citizens' departures and arrivals, through custom controls at airports and harbours. The data collected generate extensive statistics reports, which can be used to analyse the tourism industry. Despite the amount of data generated by statistics, there is a lack of information about who are repeat visitors among the number of tourists visiting a specific destination.

Competition in the tourism industry is intense. Different strategies have been developed in the tourism market in order to increase the market share. Research has shown that it would be extremely convenient for any given destination to develop customer retention and collect information about regular customers (Giltenton and Crompton, 1984). Although customer retention is widely acknowledged being a favourable strategy, it has received little attention in the tourism literature (Reid, and Reid, 1993; Oppermann, 1999).

Among the aspects analysed about the repeat phenomenon, research shows that some visitors tend to repeat a destination when they feel satisfied with the particular attributes during their first visit (Kozak, 2000, 2001). Although satisfaction with a particular destination appears to be a necessary condition for explaining repeat visitations, it is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon since many respondents reported satisfactory experiences and yet did not return to the same destination. It might also happen that satisfied tourists might not return to the same destination because they prefer to discover other places in their next holiday (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984). On the other hand, less satisfied tourists might return to the same destination and eventually become repeat visitors. This procedure may be used as a strategy to avoid a new decision process for a further destination and reduce the implicit risks of facing another disappointed experience in the future (Oppermann, 1999, 2000).

Although research is not conclusive about the repeat visitation phenomenon, all of them agree that the first direct contact with the destination, the actual experience 'on site', has direct implications for the future choice process (Opperman, 2000). Some studies point out that a second visit highly increases the possibility of a further visit in the future to the same destination (Juaneda, 1996). At the theoretical level, most models on tourism destination choice include a reference to the importance of previous experience on the destination choice process (Ryan, 1995; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Woodside and Lysonsky, 1989; Gitelson and Crompton, 1984). Empirical work conducted by a number of authors suggested that for any given vacation potential tourists are likely to consider no more than an average

of four destinations in their late consideration set. This seems to be the result of the degree of familiarity with the destination and consequently the tourist quickly select. Some models (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989) included previous destination experience in the traveller's variables that influence destination awareness as well as traveller destination preferences.

Only recently have a number of studies been published that have studied the impact of previous destination experience and destination choice (Mazursky, 1989; Gyte and Phelps, 1989). Most of these stress the differences between first time and repeat visitors. While it is widely recognised that a person's previous encounter or experience with destinations is an integral component of that person's decision process, this has not been sufficiently translated into empirical work (Oppermann, 1999). Despite the efforts, it remains unclear why people undertake repeat visits and what kind characteristics hold repeat visitors and whether they represent a homogeneous group or not (Oppermann, 2000).

## **2.1 First time visitors and repeat visitors**

A number of empirical studies have examined first time and repeat visitation (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984; Juaneda, 1996). These studies aimed to establish whether there was an association between previous visits and the intention of choosing the same destination in the future. Results confirmed that repeat tourists are expected to be more likely than first-timers to choose the same destination in their future holiday. It appears that the second visit is a high predictor of a future one.

Some other aspects, which differentiate first-timers and repeat visitors, have been identified in the literature such as the reasons for selecting a particular destination as well as the kind of benefits sought in the trip. Benefits items include psychological outcomes such as a desire for variety, relaxation, and well-planned trip as well as experience benefits such as shopping, nightlife, and sports (Milman and Pizam, 1995). Understanding benefits sought in a consumptive situation provides insight into the consumer's value system as well as illuminating casual factors behind behaviour.

The literature about both groups shows that first time visitors are less satisfied than repeat visitors (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984; Kozak, 2000); tend to try another place in their next holiday because they are seeking variety and new cultural experiences (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984); show a different expenditure pattern, being more active and therefore, spending more than their repeat counterpart (Oppermann, 1997); tend to be younger (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984); visit much more locations and attractions (Opperman, 1996); are willing to pay to go to the destination for the first time (Moutinho, and Trimble, 1991)

On the other hand, repeat visitors are more likely than first time visitors to return to the same destination in the future (Kozak, 2001). This was explained as a reaction to the number of previous visits to the same destination, which is a determinant of the likelihood to revisit the same place in the future. Repeat visitors are seeking relaxation and tend to be older (Gitelson and Crompton, 1984); tend to repeat closer destinations (Moutinho and Trimble, 1991). This last paper finds differences between the first-time visitors and the repeat in their willingness to 'pay' to travel. This is a criterion for segmenting consumers according to repeat buying. Therefore, it appears that repeat visitation will depend on the distance to travel.

As stated above, the literature has already identified some variables that differentiate between first time and repeat visitors, however, further research is still needed to corroborate these findings and expand the knowledge about the repeat phenomenon in tourism (Oppermann, 1999).

## **2.2. Mallorca: a repeated destination**

Although some stagnation in the number of visitors to Spain has been recently identified, early studies, which were based on WTO reports - 1986, Spain recorder 29.9 million international arrivals,

accounting for some 9% of all such arrivals worldwide. Mallorca receives a substantial proportion of these arrivals; in 1986 Mallorca's 3.9 million international tourist arrivals accounted for 13% of the total for Spain. Tourism to Spain is growing rapidly, and tourism to Mallorca is also growing: tourist arrivals increased by 33% from 1981 to 1986 (WTO, 1986).

Previous studies on repeat visitation have chosen Mallorca, Spain, as an adequate example of a destination with a high number of repeat visitations. Gyte and Phelps (1989) reported a total of 55% of repeat visitors, and a slightly lower percentage of first-time visitors, 45 %. In their study, two different resort areas were selected to give an overview of the patterns for the island as a whole, as well as allowing investigation of possible variations due to resort type. However, results showed no difference in the trends based on the differentiation of resort area.

Kozak (2000, 2001, 2002) found that approximately 71% of tourists had previously visited Mallorca at least one. Surprisingly nearly 28% of the sample population had visited Mallorca four times or more. This seems to suggest that the number of previous visits to the same destination is a determinant of the likelihood of repeat visitation, which means that the more visits the more intention to revisit (Kozak (2000). The presence of these visitors seems not to be restricted to a specific sector. It was found that nearly 70% had not been to the same destination in the island. This suggests that some people prefer visiting different destinations for each visit to Mallorca. The popularity of the region and its consequent inclusion as a destination for repeat visitation studies make Mallorca an adequate destination to conduct our study.

### **3. SUSTAINABILITY**

The environment, whether it is natural or manmade, is the most fundamental ingredient of the tourism product. As soon as tourism activities take place necessary modifications of the natural environment started and new facilities are built or transformed to welcome tourists. Consequently, tourism has an immediate impact –negative and positive- on the environment as well as in the economic and social level. It is widely acknowledge that tourism can potentially affect virtually all aspects of the environment, and that the impacts may be profound (Simpson and Wall, 2000).

Inappropriate tourism development results in increasing stress on destinations and in detrimental effects to the destinations' physical, economic and sociocultural characteristics. At the environmental level, for instance, it is possible, with correct planning, to manage tourism development in order to mitigate the negative impacts while encouraging the positive impacts (Cooper *et al.*, 1996). As the tourist industry relies on high-quality environments, it would be in the industry's own best long-term interests to control its growth to avoid these impacts (Simpson and Wall, 2000).

Sustainable tourism is considered as a goal that all tourism must achieve in order to prevent further damage to nature (Butler, 1991). To date environmental preservation and improvement motive are at the forefront of many development decisions, and such considerations are treated with much greater respect than they were during the first half of the century. Empirical studies on the area of sustainability have significantly increased in the last decade. Some of these studies on tourism' negative impacts have resulted in calls for a sustainable way of tourism development that maintains the environmental, social and economical well-being of natural, built and cultural resources in perpetuity (Simpson and Wall, 2000).

#### **3.1. Sustainability and tourists' perception**

Some researchers have tried to discover the perception of local and tourists about the impact of tourism development in different areas. In the particular case of repeat visitors, researchers want to find out whether these witnesses -regular visitors- have perceived the progressive deterioration of the environment or not.

Ryan (1995) conducted a study about visitors to Mallorca to identify the role of past experience in determining holiday choice. The study included a sample of 252 retired people who answered a questionnaire and then 59 off-peak older tourists in Magalluf who were interviewed during their holiday in Mallorca. Among the latter group, a subsample, which represents 10 % of the total, reported that they had at least undertaken one visit per year over the past five years. Consequently, they had developed a strong sense of identification with the island and what it had to offer. For this group, there was a good level of knowledge about the island's geography and the changes that were taking place. Conversations with this group show what kind of changes they perceived comparing with the last visits. However, when asking for more precise information, respondents were more concerned about the increase number of changes in the activities in the resort. According to them, they have turned to be more Spanish orientated to satisfy the new visitors: Spanish pensioners.

In relation to environmental changes, although they had noticed the changes in the pedestrian areas and the general upgrading of the streets, it seems that the environmental changes (e.g., reduction of green areas, pollution, water supply) do not represent a main concern for this group of tourists. Only some expressed their concern about the high use of fertilisers in the nearby farms, damage of the cliff side after the construction of harbours for luxury yachts

According to the researcher, it is suggested that these older holidaymakers have a different perspective on environmental issues. They have been exposed during their lives to many changes, a continuous process of development at home as well as in the different destination they had visited. They have witnessed many changes, positive and negative, in different areas as well as in tourist destinations and they only wonder 'why this environmental degradation has become a national and global concern now' (Ryan, 1995, p. 213).

Pollard and Rodríguez (1993) conducted a study in Torremolinos, Spain to identify the consequences of unplanned tourist development in the area. The survey included environmental factors, general social milieu as well as the built and natural environments. A sample of 200 subjects (local and foreigners), mostly first-time visitors (51%), was asked about their perception of environmental issues. Respondents reported negative elements such as overcrowding, noise, drunkenness, as well as the building noise, dust, and general spoliation of the natural environment.

Puczko and Ratz (2000) conducted another study comparing local and tourist's perception of the environment. The study shows the relevance of Lake Balaton for Hungary, which is one of the largest bodies of fresh water in Europe, and it is an important attraction for Hungary which is a country with no access to the sea. Tourism in the area had already started in the 1840s and has always been highly seasonal (6-8 weeks in the summer, during July and August). Tourists were attracted by the scenery and the medical value of spa in the area. Later the road network was improved and new marines and accommodations facilities were constructed all around the lake.

In relation to the perception of both groups, local and tourists, 60% of domestic tourist blamed foreigners for traffic problems and believe that State companies should share responsibility in protecting the lake. However, both groups seem to have a general good opinion of the region and do not report high damage, although the researchers presented a quite negative picture of the development of the lake as a tourist resort.

The studies previously reported were all conducted on mass-tourist destinations, during the summer period. Researchers conducted those studies in order to identify, in the first place, whether people were aware of the deterioration caused to nature in a mass-tourism development, and secondly, the possible differences in perception among groups (local and foreign visitors). As stated before, respondents' perception is not concluded and therefore further research is required.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

This study will use different techniques to collect data. The first approach involved the use of focus group with participants who had travelled to the same destination more than once. Secondly, the construction of a questionnaire to collect sociodemographic variables, following those variables previously used in the literature. The review of the literature and the data collected in the focus group sessions will provide relevant information to determine the adequate variables to identify the reasons for travelling to the same destination as well as the necessary information about sustainable issues.

### **4.1. Focus group: General characteristics**

Focus groups have been used to collect qualitative data from a focused discussion. As the information is obtained by the discussion among participants, a precise definition of the kind of participants required is essential because they must be similar to each other in a way that is important to the researcher to get the needed information. Usually focus group researchers employ 'qualitative sampling' rather than random sample (Krueger, and Casey, 2000). That means that the sampling has been selected based on the particular research questions which they are addressing. Statistical 'representativeness' is not the aim of most FG research. It is also important to include groups from the two extreme positions.

As a general recommendation, the literature suggest some guidelines when conducting a focus group:

- (a) use homogeneous strangers as participants
- (b) rely on a relatively structured interview with high moderator involvement
- (c) have 6 to 10 participants per group
- (d) have a total of three to five focus groups per project.

### **4.2. Advantages**

Focus group interviewing is a qualitative approach to gathering information that is both inductive and naturalistic. Focus groups have been found useful prior to, during and after programs, events, or experiences. They have been helpful in assessing needs, generating information for constructing questionnaires, developing plans, recruiting new clientele, finding out how customers make decisions to use or not to use a product or service. Focus groups are particularly suited to the study of attitudes and experiences around specific topics (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

### **4.3 Analysis**

The focus group interviews should be tape recorded and then transcribed. The analysis of the data obtained could follow two different approaches: the unit of analysis is the group or the group individual. The literature suggests that both have to be considered in order to have a balance that acknowledges the interplay between these two levels of analysis (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

The three most common ways of coding FG transcripts are to note:

- (a) all mentions of a given code by each of the participants.
- (b) whether each individual participant mentioned the given code.
- (c) whether each group's discussion contained a given code.

### **4.4 The study**

As stated before, the objective of the study is to identify the profile of repeat visitors, the reasons for repeating a destination and their perception of sustainability. In order to gain as much insight about the

phenomenon as possible, a broad definition of repeat visitation was used. Based on previous studies (Gitelson and Crompton 1984), repeat visitation was defined as a 'domestic or abroad trip to a destination which previously had been visited for a holiday'. It was decided that a more rigorous definition might exclude dimensions of repeat visitation behaviour which may be of interest and useful to future research efforts.

Some terms in the definition, however, required further explanation. First of all the term destination means here any site visited in a country, excluding places which are not the primary destination (e.g., restaurants, or friends or family's houses). The second term refers to the time elapsed between the first and the next trip to the same destination. No time limit was given to participants in relation to the moment in time when these visits took place, giving them the chance to recall as many experiences as possible. The last term, holiday, includes any moment in the year when participants travel, from short breaks to long summer holidays.

The criteria for selecting participants will be based on their previous experience of visiting a place more than once in the past. These subjects will be considered as candidates to participate in this study. Therefore, our subjects will be selected from those who had travelled domestically or abroad to the same destination more than once, and can recall reasons for returning to the same destination and are willing to share their experience in a focus group.

Following the suggestions of the literature on focus groups, when conducted before the survey, focus groups can be used to facilitate questionnaire design, from the formulation of the whole question categories to fine-tuning wording on particular questions.

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