

Societal Impact Highlights



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Research Group: Marketing

Case study: RURALQUAL and the overall experience

Summary

Sandra Loureiro and other colleagues, such as Francisco Miranda and Elisabeth Kastenholz have examined the perceived service quality in rural tourism context and the overall experience, as well as the emotional interrelationship between rural owners and customers that lead to intention to return and/or recommend to others. The research shows that a pleasant surprise together with a participative and immersive experience inside and outside the rural lodging enhance the attraction to the destination and the behavioral intentions. The work has influenced managers of rural lodgings and regions in Portugal and Spain.

Underpinning research

The underpinning research has been conducted over the last ten years.

Six research outputs that report the research are described below.

Sandra Loureiro and Francisco Javier Miranda from University of Extremadura-Spain (Loureiro and Miranda, 2008) developed a model to measure service quality in rural lodging: RURALQUAL. This tool may help owners to identify strong and weak aspects of the offer. The scale can be used to compare different rural lodgings in a regions and help in a benchmarking process. When employed in a regular basis, the resultant time series can be used to analyze the existence of trends and patterns. This work also confirms that lodging image in customer's mind enhance perceived quality, satisfaction, trust and intentions to re-visit and recommend. Image and service quality are shown as key factors to rural lodging managers in Portugal and Spain.

In a follow-up article Sandra Loureiro (2010) applies the concept of customer delight to the context of rural tourism. Delight is a function of its predicted constituents (surprise experience, arousal, disconfirmation, and positive affect) and predicts loyalty. The findings support the conceptualization of customer delight and customer satisfaction as distinct constructs. Yet, findings suggest that satisfaction is a more significant determinant of loyalty than delight.

Sandra Loureiro and Elisabeth Kastenholtz (2011) (the last one from University of Aveiro) introduced corporate reputation and the RURALQUAL in the customer delight model analyzed by Sandra Loureiro (2010). The results highlight that the lodging unit's reputation is a more significant determinant of loyalty than satisfaction or even delight. Therefore, rural tourism managers must pay serious attention to the reputation of their lodging units. They are well advised to carefully control the elements that contribute to this reputation, such as: advertising, information made available at tourism offices, on web sites, presented via public relations, advising travel agents and tour operators.

Sandra Loureiro (2012) summarized an overall picture of the foundations of tourism in rural areas, from the marketing point of view, in an international book chapter, entitled "Tourism in Rural Areas: Foundation, Quality and Experience". The chapter conceptualize and characterize rural tourism in two European Countries (Portugal and Spain), taking into account the principles of quality management and brand quality, as well as tourism experience. The chapter concludes with a proposal for an integrative model of antecedents and outcomes of rural tourism experience and quality. The main reason behind the choice of Portugal and Spain lies in the fact that they are pioneers, in particular Portugal, in implementing rural lodgings. Actually, the first Manor house or Housing Tourism was launched in 1979 in Covilhã. However, legalization of this type of accommodation only materialized in 1982.

In the sixth work Sandra Loureiro (2014) explores the effect of the experience economy on place attachment and behavioral intentions through emotions and memory. The findings demonstrated the role of pleasant arousal and memory as mediators between experience and behavioral intentions and between experience and place attachment. The rural experience does not only mean accommodation with high quality service, but also accompanying guests during active and passive participation in activities, showing the rural way of life and how a rural region is truly unique and different from other regions, other destinations.

References to the research

- Loureiro, S., & Miranda G., F.J. (2008). The importance of quality, satisfaction, trust, and image in relation to rural tourist loyalty. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 25(2), 117-136. DOI: 10.1080/10548400802402321
- Loureiro, S. (2010). Satisfying and delighting the rural tourists. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 27(4), 396-408. DOI: 10.1080/10548408.2010.481580
- Loureiro, S.M.C., & Kastenholz, E. (2011). Corporate reputation, satisfaction, delight, and loyalty towards rural lodging units in Portugal. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 30(3), 575–583. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2010.10.007
- Loureiro, S.M.C. (2012). Tourism in rural areas: foundation, quality, and experience, In Murat Kasimoglu (editor), *Visions for Global Tourism Industry - Creating and Sustaining Competitive Strategies*, chapter 21 (pp.441-460). InTech: Rijeka (ISBN ISBN 978-953-51-0520-6) <http://www.intechopen.com/articles/show/title/tourism-in-rural-areas-foundation-quality-and-experience>.
- Loureiro, S.M.C. (2014). The role of the rural tourism experience economy in place attachment and behavioral intentions. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 40(5 July), 1-9. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2014.02.010

Details of the impact

The RURALQUAL scale tool has been used as a seed in promoting the importance of service quality on satisfaction and behavioral intentions of customers in Portugal, but above all in Spain (Extremadura and Andalucía regions). The findings of the articles and the book chapter (see references section in full text report) have been communicated to rural lodgings through reports sent to rural lodging owners and in meetings organized in workshops at universities, particularly University of Extremadura and University of Aveiro.

The research contributes to the development of rural regions. Rural tourism is oftentimes viewed as a development tool of rural areas, which are economically and socially depressed. Therefore, research enhanced changes in the management of service quality and rural experience which allows improvement of service delivery. Moreover, the tool RURALQUAL provided by the research, evaluates the service quality perceived by customers.

RURALQUAL shows six main dimensions: Professionalism (refers to well-presented meals, clean and neat appearance of the employees, and the readiness to attend customers in a kind and

personalized way); Reservation (includes items reflecting aspects of reservation of the accommodation); Tangibility (groups items associated to cleanness, comfort and acclimatization of rooms, furniture, and other aspects related to the lodging's physical environment); Complementary Benefits (includes items referring to the decoration and easy parking and access to the lodging); Rural and Cultural Environment (gathers items reflecting the possibility of integrating into the rural way of life of the region, such as typical gastronomy, fairs, special festivities and other aspects of cultural and recreational interest); and Basic Benefits (refers to the natural beauty of the place, the calm setting, the typical architecture, and the employees being aware of their duties). Together with this tool, Juntas in Spain (local entities) developed a norm and legislation that owners of Casas Rurales could follow in order to achieve the symbol of quality: "Q de calidad de casas rurales". Therefore, owners of rural lodgings alone or in network may use the tool, once a year or more frequently, depending on which procedural principle responsible person considers relevant, and by surveying customers can understand aspects in which the service quality is weak and take actions to improve it. Thus, in an integrated way, several actors (Juntas, owners and customers) contribute to improving the service quality and the reputation of rural lodgings. From the point of view of customers, the tool is a comprehensive way to express their perceptions and desires and a way to benefit from a better service to be delivered in following visits.

Rural tourism is mainly located inland and characterized by small accommodation units scattered over one given area. Managers at this type of accommodation units should be more proactive in establishing contact with other owners and manage their resources and facilities not isolated but in cooperation with others, including providers of local rural activities and local entities, creating a network. The integration of accommodation units and rural activities in a network allow providing the staged experiences, which allows positive emotions and memories. However, this alone is not enough to make tourists consider a preference for one destination over others. The whole process of the tourist experience begins with the search for a destination, and so a region's integrated marketing communication should consider not only accommodation, but also the region's unique and differentiating characteristics.

Sources to corroborate the impact

Following links had been created to facilitate the local access to information

- Grupo Extremeño de marketing y calidad
<http://gge.unex.es/documentos/escala%20ruralqual.pdf>
- Andalucía es calidad:
<http://direccionalojamiento.wix.com/daturisticos#!ruralqual/c1coy>