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Services for Culturally Diverse Customers in Parks and Recreation

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Research Reflections

Services for Culturally Diverse Customers in Parks and Recreation

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Changes in racial and ethnic composition due to the increasing diversity in the United States are confronting managers of parks and recreation areas. Since cultural values influence perceptions and behaviors, studying cultural values among different groups is important for understanding perceptions of service quality and parks and recreation behavior. The purpose of this essay is to advocate the exploration of the relationship of cultural values and perceptions of service quality in the context of parks and recreation research.

Keywords ethnicity, culture, values, diversity, customer services, parks and recreation

Customer service has emerged as an important issue in parks and recreation management because of the demand for responsiveness and high quality service from government agencies. As the U.S. population changes, parks and recreation managers must make necessary adjustments to visitor management. Currently little research exists on how culturally diverse parks and recreation visitors perceive service quality despite changing racial and ethnic profiles.

We acknowledge the current uses of census ethnic categories (e.g., white, Asian, African American) in the United States for studies of parks and recreation populations for political, economic and discrimination reasons. However, nominal ethnic groups are often not

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culturally homogeneous. Brubaker (2006) stated that ethnic groups are really folk categories, not scientific categories. Cultural values are one of the major components of ethnic groups. If the homogeneity assumption of values in ethnic groups does not hold empirically, then testing the relationships between ethnic groups and service quality is meaningless (Li et al., 2007a). We believe that determining whether or not groups that are categorized and labeled as ethnic share a subculture is necessary. For instance, the Asian group actually consists of several ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese) and difficulties emerge when “Asian values” are constructed by lumping all these groups together. Therefore, rather than focus on basic ethnic census groups, we are interested in the influence of specific cultural values on perceptions of service quality and variables such as satisfactions and behavioral intentions.

This essay was framed mainly from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and service marketing. We argue that leisure research needs a theoretical foundation regarding services for diverse customers in parks and recreation studies. Specifically, we explore the relationships between cultural values and perceptions of service quality, and we suggest future agendas for this line of research. We hope research findings will help parks and recreation practitioners and researchers understand how to manage visitors with different cultural backgrounds and provide quality services that enhance customer satisfaction.

Cultural Values in Parks and Recreation Research

Over the years, many authors have speculated about the fundamental characteristics of societies that represent distinct dimensions of culture. For example, Aberle et al. (1950) listed nine functional prerequisites of a society, including shared knowledge, beliefs and rules of logical thinking. Just as Aberle et al. emphasized this prerequisite, studies of cross-cultural patterns suggest that cultural values result in different perceptions and behaviors. Cultural values are what fundamentally differentiate ethnic and national groups in terms of consumer behaviors. Various popular instruments exist to measure cross-cultural values from different disciplines such as:

- Rokeach (1979) Value Survey (RVS) is a theoretical perspective on the nature of values in a cognitive framework acquired through a value-measurement instrument. Examples of RVS measures include a comfortable life, ambition and honesty. RVS has been widely used and accepted by psychologists, political scientists, economists and others interested in understanding human values.
- Kahle's List of Values (LOV; Kahle, Beatty, & Homer, 1986) is another measure of values that is parsimonious in its approach and easy to administer. LOV has been applied to cross-cultural consumer research such as prediction of fashion preferences, shopping and spending behaviors, and risky sports consumption. Examples of LOV measures include self-respect, sense of belonging and sense of accomplishment.
- Schwartz (1992) Value Survey (SVS) was one of the most popularly used tools for measuring values in the 1990s. The SVS was tested with more than 60,000 individuals in 64 nations. Examples of SVS measures include power, hedonism, conformity and security.
- World Values Survey (WVS; Inglehart, 1990) is a tool for understanding how social, political, economic and cultural attitudes differ from one society to another. Inglehart collected WVS data and provided information regarding changing beliefs and values. Examples of the WVS questions are perceptions of happiness and importance of leisure.
- Hofstede (2001) identified four dimensions of national cultural values from 88,000 returned surveys of IBM company employees. These four dimensions were power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Later, Hofstede, and Bond (1984) developed a fifth dimension, long-term orientation (i.e., Confucian dynamics). The five dimensions of national cultural values are now widely used among international management and marketing scholars.

These measurements of cultural values were established from disciplines outside parks and recreation studies. Yet some unique aspects in the context of parks and recreation exist. For example, hedonic participation, intrinsic motivation, or freedom of choice may differ from other nonrecreation contexts. The heterogeneous populations in parks and recreation result in different recreational behaviors that reflect dissimilar socio-demographic profiles and make generalizing the measures of cultural values developed from other fields difficult. For instance, when Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions of values were applied in a culturally diverse national forest recreation context, we found a three-dimensional model (hierarchical beliefs, uncertainty avoidance and femininity) rather than four-dimension (power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance; Li et al., 2007b).

We are not aware of any measures of values in parks and recreation studies that have been validated cross-culturally. Rather than borrow measures and theories from other disciplines, we argue that the establishment of a set of recreational values in parks and recreation research would be useful. We believe developing a more complete understanding of the structure of cultural values as they apply to parks and recreation will require additional research with multiple parks and recreation populations.

Service Quality Dimensions in Parks and Recreation Research

Two fast-growing themes in the field of service marketing have been service quality and retention. Service quality is an important issue in America's public and private service sectors because of its apparent relationship to the success of an organization. Stemming from the service marketing research, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) identified five dimensions of service quality collectively referred to as the SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. In the context of parks and recreation, MacKay and Crompton (1988) applied SERVQUAL to measure service quality in the commercial recreation sector. Later, Crompton, MacKay, and Fesenmaier (1991) adapted SERVQUAL to measure service quality in public recreation. Crompton et al. found four dimensions of SERVQUAL (assurance, reliability, responsiveness and tangibles) applicable to public recreation. The fifth factor (empathy) was not a meaningful dimension in their study.

Absher et al. (1996) studied service quality in public sports and leisure centers in Australia. They found service quality items spilt into four dimensions: general facility, core programs and services, secondary services and staff quality. In a different setting based on 22 items assessed from a priori focus groups that specifically addressed the U.S. National Forests, Absher (1998) identified four domains of service quality: facilities-sufficiency, facilities-operations, services and information. Burns, Graefe, and Absher (2003) also measured satisfaction using service quality dimensions at Army Corps of Engineers' lakes. They identified four service quality dimensions specific for outdoor recreationists that included facilities, services, information and management, which were relatively valid and reliable across different outdoor recreation settings. The service quality dimensions for outdoor recreation developed by Burns et al. (2003) differed from those applications of SERVQUAL and provided a useful alternative to measure service quality in parks and recreation.

Dimensions of service quality clearly vary depending on the specific research needs in different service settings. On the other hand, multiple service quality dimensions exist and must be customized to fit different contexts. The validity and reliability of service quality dimensions are of major concern since they represent the framework of services that help managers realize how their customers evaluate service quality. Although researchers have identified combinations of dimensions, no agreement exists on service quality in parks and recreation contexts.

Relationships Between Cultural Values and Service Quality

We contend values determine social behavior, and cultural values play a significant role in understanding and judging perceptions of service quality among social groups. We suggest that parks and recreation researchers adopt a behavioral perspective in the examination of relationships between cultural values and perceptions of service quality. We believe varying social natures or behavioral service encounters occur between visitors and service providers. The interactions of social groups affect perceptions of service quality. Perceived cultural similarity in values determines acceptance of services. Therefore, similarity in cultural values likely is positively related to mutual attraction, liking and familiarity, which leads to increased perceptions of service quality. Conversely, the dissimilarity in the cultural values distorts the meaning of people's intentions and behaviors, creates communication problems, inhibits social interactions and leads to decreasing perceptions of service quality (Reisinger & Turner, 1999). The positive social interactions between customers and service providers may even compensate for low quality of services.

We argue three main points around the relevance of considering cultural values in respect to service quality dimensions. First, we believe the relationships between different measures of cultural values and service quality need to be tested, especially when the assumption of homogeneous values within the cultural group empirically does not hold true. Rather than pointing to people or a group, we refer to the "items" and test the dimension to dimension relationships. For example, Hofstede's (2001) measure of culture values consists of 20 items, and Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL measure consists of 22 items. The items analysis between these two sets of measures (i.e., $20 \times 22 = 440$ relationships) is complicated and difficult to understand. On the other hand, the dimension framework gives skeletal structure to the cultural values and service quality measures and provides a straightforward and parsimonious approach to interpret complexity in a succinct manner.

Furrer, Liu, and Sudharshan (2000) tested a conceptual link between the five cultural values dimensions developed by Hofstede and Bond (1984) and the five service quality dimensions (SERVQUAL) developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The findings allowed them to establishing a Cultural Service Quality Index (CSQI) that evaluated the relative importance of each SERVQUAL dimension as a function of the five cultural values dimensions. Their results also provided implications to segment the multicultural markets.

We suggest research can be designed to explore Kahle et al.'s (1986) List of Values dimensions (respect, harmony, achievement and hedonism) compared to four recreation service quality dimensions (facility, service, information and management). Precedents exist for this analysis when the CSQI was established by analyzing the five central values dimensions by Hofstede and Bond (1984) and the five service quality dimensions of SERVQUAL. We argue positive correlation could exist between harmony and management dimensions. In other words, if people tend to agree to the harmony values dimension, they would likely agree to the management dimension. Due to the warm, friendly and cooperative nature of the harmony values dimension, people who are more harmony oriented may regard themselves as changeable while they keep a lower profile and are ready to "fit in." As a result, they may tend to enhance the positive social interactions between visitors and service providers that lead to perceived higher management dimensions. Similarly, if people tend to agree to the hedonic dimension, their core values tend to include excitement, fun and enjoyment and would tend to agree more with the service dimensions. On the other hand, we argue if people tend to agree to the achievement values dimension, they would also tend to value the aspects of uniqueness, self-expression and material well-being that would lead to perceived lower service dimensions.

Second, we also suggest that an examination of the causal relationships from cultural values dimensions to service quality dimensions is important. Because values are treated

as explanatory variables and values are reflected by how customers evaluate service quality, understanding the causal relationships could help translate abstract cultural values into meaningful actions and facilitate effective service delivery. Exploring the causal relationships between cultural values and service quality dimensions in specific cultural groups could provide greater insights in the management of the individual cultural group. For example, research could be designed to analyze the causal relationships between dimensions of cultural values and service quality within ethnic groups such as African-Americans, Hispanics or Asians, as well as within national groups such as Canadian, Japanese or Chinese. Findings from this line of research could provide useful implications tailored to specific cultural groups and help to customize the services for appropriate market segmentation strategies.

A third issue is the need to examine the relationships between the segmentation of cultural values and service quality. Within group variations in cultural values can be as great as differences between groups. One way to solve this problem is to employ cluster analysis to find interpretable values segments. Cluster analysis segments meaningful cultural groups with homogeneous values, especially when socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age) and cultural values dimensions are combined. This approach provides a scientific way to explore the relationships between cultural values and perceptions of service quality and allows marketers to develop niche parks and recreation products and promotional themes that fulfill the segment's values.

Cultural values are regarded as one of the most abstract types of social cognition. They are not easy to profile and are often indirect and hard to identify. When different cultures interact, socio-cultural agreements and norms may become ambiguous. Consequently, this ambiguity affects perceptions of service quality. We advocate research using multiple populations and contexts, as well as cross-sectional surveys and settings. A result will be integrative data that can offer additional evidence to cross-validate findings and generate knowledge about developing theory and model-testing in the field of parks and recreation.

We feel this line of research makes a case for focusing on the dynamics of interaction among various racial and ethnic groups in the United States. This research interest could increase the complexity of the measurement of cultural values cross-culturally as well as the effects on perceptions of service quality and the consequent variables (e.g., satisfaction, behavioral intentions). We recognize values are important for providing the best services to individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Additional investigations on this issue will help address the gap in the park and recreation literature as cross-cultural customer service moves forward.

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