Measuring Perceived Quality of Interpretive Services in the Park

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The purpose of this study is to apply the service quality model in the context of interpretive services in parks, and to evaluate the factors that impact a visitor’s expectation and perception of these services. This research provides useful feedback from park visitors to enable park managers and interpreters to improve the quality of future interpretive services. A survey was presented to visitors at the park in southwest Virginia, and responses were analyzed. The results of the study indicated that perceived quality in the reliability dimension points to the need for improvement in interpretive services. In addition, gender and income level affected visitors’ perceptions and expectations. Recommendations for the management of the park were produced from the analysis of the findings.

Key Words: Interpretive service, perceived quality, park agencies

People understand meaningful relationships between the natural environment and cultural inheritances through interpretation (Jubenville, 1976). The need for appreciation of cultural and natural resources is inevitable in the days of diminishing ecosystem. Therefore interpretation must be viewed as an essential part of park management, and the impact of interpretive programs on visitors should be considered as an important issue for the field of parks and recreation (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995).

However, the abstract nature of service quality – in this case, interpretation – makes it difficult to evaluate (Teas, 1993). For example, the interpreter’s contribution to the program is intangible and beyond the bounds of measurement practices (Dustin & McAvoy, 1985). Also, the quality of interactions between interpreters and park visitors is likely to vary among personnel from time to time. Finally, the interpretive program and its quality can be affected by the visitors’ actions and moods (Mackay & Crompton, 1988).

Two basic forms of interpretive services are provided to the public by parks–those involving non-personal services and those involving personal performance services (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). The former focus on non-personal interpretation via exhibits, signs, brochures, and self-guided trails and tours. The latter method concentrates on personal delivery of messages directly to the visitors. Park managers and interpreters have to deal with these two forms of interpretive services effectively and recognize that the success of the interpretive services depends on the degree of satisfaction experienced by the park visitors. However, it has been difficult to measure the effectiveness of interpretive services in the absence of proper approach. The proposed study, which deals with the perceived quality of interpretive services, will make a contribution to this area and can offer guidance for researchers interested in studying services in other parks and recreation facilities as well.
In view of the increasing importance of interpretive services in park management, and considering the lack of research on the quality of interpretive programs, this study proposes:

(1) to apply the service quality model in the context of interpretive services in parks,
(2) to evaluate the factors that effect visitors’ expectations and perceptions,
   1. hypothesize that visitors’ perceptions of Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Assurance of interpretive services met their expectations.
   2. hypothesize that visitors’ perceptions and their expectations were effected by gender, age, income, travel time, education level, planned/unplanned visit, and prior park experience.
(3) to provide useful feedback from park visitors to enable park managers and interpreters to improve the quality of future interpretive services.

Evaluation of Interpretive Services

Hood, Short, and Adams (1992) offered a major reason to evaluate interpretive services: “Research has shown that it is only when a garden or museum probes the motivations, opinions, values, interest, attitudes, social interaction behavior, expectations, and satisfactions of current and potential audiences that it learns why people do or do not go to the garden or museum, and what types of programs and experiences will attract those who do not attend.” The motivation to conduct evaluation is to survive because nothing can overcome the dissatisfaction of customers. If an interpretive program hopes to survive, it must produce a service that draws, pleases and affects people. The best advertisement for new visitors is the word-of-mouth recommendation of previous visitors, and to ensure this, park managers and interpreters should provide visitors better service. In this case, evaluation can help to design and adjust programs and exhibits to best serve a public. Evaluation helps focus interest on understanding visitors’ expectations and satisfactions. It also helps justify studying visitor experiences—what they do and what they wish they could do, what they learned and what they would like to know, how we did as interpreters and how they would like interpreters to do better.

There are four categories of whom or what that park managers or interpreters assess in an evaluation (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). The first is evaluating individual or group “performance” by interpreters so that they may find efficient ways to improve their delivery methods, messages, and interpretive approaches in future presentations. The most frequent assessments occur in the area of personal performance evaluation. The sources of evaluation include supervisors, peers or outside experts, self-evaluation, and audience responses.

The second assessment in an evaluation is evaluating overall productivity or the program mix and facilities, to determine whether park managers are spending money and effort efficiently. This evaluation is useful in presenting a case for funding a program. In budget decisions, benefits of the overall interpretive program often serve as one criterion. Total program analysis uses the number of visitors and the number and kinds of services offered (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995).

The third assessment is evaluating non-personal installations such as exhibits and trails to learn whether they have achieved their objectives and to modify them for greater effectiveness or timelessness. This assessment includes the cost effectiveness for program evaluation; one criterion is cost per visitor contact hour (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). This calculates the costs per visitor contact hour for all types of program.

The fourth one is evaluating visitors, their behavior and reactions, to determine whether park managers and interpreters have arranged things properly, written and designed exhibits well, and achieved their learning objectives.
Of these categories, evaluating the visitors’ reactions is the most direct way to measure the quality of the interpretive services because the purpose of the interpretation—people’s understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the natural and cultural environment—cannot be measured without comprehensive understanding of visitors’ behaviors and reactions. The visitors also provide the financial support for interpretation, either directly, through fees and donations, or indirectly through taxes. Their opinion should be part of any evaluation.

Using a questionnaire, a tool used to assess reactions of visitors to programs and facilities, provides quantitative information: importance-performance analysis. This approach evaluates consumer rankings of facilities and programs (Guadagnolo, 1985). After the modification of the questionnaire, which includes attributes that describe facilities and programs, visitors are asked to rate the importance and performance of each program. After that, the average perceived importance and performance are calculated. This importance-performance analysis could provide interpreters and managers with the visitors’ viewpoints on how to park visitors can be better served (Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). This approach shows that the importance of the performance and the actual perceived satisfaction of the performance could be different. It also emphasizes the important role of visitors’ satisfactions in evaluating interpretive services.

**Perceived Service Quality**

*Expectation and Satisfaction*

In the context of service quality, a significant concern is the evaluation of service perceptions against desires. Service quality is the difference between what is expected from each of the service dimensions and what a consumer perceives he/she receives from them. This type of discrepancy theory also has been used to define satisfaction. Highly satisfactory quality occurs when perceived performance exceeds expectations. Satisfactory quality results from a match between perceived performance and expectations. Unsatisfactory quality results when perceptions fall short of expectations.

However, there are two important differences between satisfaction and service quality (Hamilton & Crompton, 1991). First, service quality is conceptualized as a distinctively different construct from satisfaction, in that satisfaction relates to a specific transaction or experience, whereas service quality represents the summation of past transactions or experiences with a service. Thus, perceived service quality may be conceptualized as approximating the average satisfaction level of all previous individual experiences. The second difference is that the satisfaction literature has evaluated perceptions against expectations, whereas concern in service quality is with evaluating service perceptions against desires. Expectation in the satisfaction literature has generally been designed to reflect what an individual anticipates or predicts a service will deliver while desire is concerned with what an individual wants the service to deliver. Therefore, service quality is concerned with what consumers feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

While the constructs of satisfaction and perceived quality are strongly connected, it has been suggested that managers may be tempted to attain satisfactory quality ratings by lowering consumers’ expectations of what they could anticipate from a service. Although the quality of service delivered would be low, the evaluation would show consumers to be satisfied with it because their expectations likewise were low (Hamilton & Crompton, 1991).

In the context of recreation and parks, what constitutes quality is a highly personal matter. Desired quality is likely to be influenced by the accumulation of past experiences (Crompton, Mackay, & Fesenmaier, 1991). For example, it was found that a positive association
existed between previous experience with a campground and satisfaction with it (Mackay & Crompton, 1988). Participants may have a concept of ideal service quality that could be provided, but their previous experience with the current park or facilities and with other leisure suppliers of the service sets limits on the desired service quality that participants believe the managers could provide.

**Service Quality Model**

The conceptualization and measurement of service quality have been well described and researched by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985). They provide an explanation of the concept of service quality and identify the various “gaps” that affect service quality as perceived by consumers. Among them, the difference between customers’ expectations of service and their perceptions of the service is defined as “perceived service quality”.

In their following study (1988), they used a series of procedures, including individual interviews and focus groups, and collected quantitative data from more than 1,000 users of five different services. They reported that there were five dimensions of service quality, and developed a twenty-two-item scale to measure these five dimensions: Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. The Tangibles include the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel. Reliability is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness represents the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Assurance refers to the knowledge and courteousness of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Empathy indicates the caring and individualized attention provided to customers.

This service quality model (SERVQUAL) is operationalized as Q = P - E framework. That is, Perceived Quality (Q) increases as Perception of Service (P) increasingly exceeds Expectations of Service (E). In the service quality field, questions about the validity and reliability of the P - E gap framework have emerged. These are caused by ambiguous questions in the survey and its inflexible administration.

Teas (1993) examined the P - E service quality model and indicated a number of problems that create ambiguity concerning its interpretation. His study suggests that a considerable portion of the variance in the SERVQUAL expectations measures may be caused by respondents’ misinterpretations of the questions. He indicated that the word “should” may cause respondents to assign unrealistically high ratings to the E responses scales. Given this operational ambiguity associated with the expectations concept, his study introduced the revised expectation measure, which requests the respondent to focus on “excellent” quality. For example, “Excellent ___ have up-to-date equipment” rather than “They should have up-to-date equipment.” However, this revised operation of definition cannot be successful without considerable explanation about the questions. It is difficult to apply to park visitors because of its time-consuming nature.

Similarly, Carman (1995) argued that SERVQUAL has developed an instrument for measuring quality that should serve as a “basic skeleton.” The wording and subject of some individual items need to be customized to each service setting. His study emphasized that items on some dimensions should be expanded, if necessary for reliability, and that the scales should be refined before application.

**Application to the Parks and Recreation Context**

Since Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry have developed their instrument to evaluate service quality, many researchers in the parks and recreation field have adopted this conceptual framework. Mackay and Compton (1988) explored the usefulness of the approach to measuring
service quality in the context of recreation service delivery. They described how the dimensions adopted from SERVQUAL were adapted to the field of recreation. Their instrument consisted of twenty-five scale items including twelve of the twenty-two items that Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry included in their service quality instrument. The aspects of service quality on which agencies should concentrate were evaluated systematically through comparison of expectation and perceptions in four program areas. This approach generated an overall measurement of service quality in the form of an average score across all dimensions. This study also pointed out that a review of the individual questionnaire items that comprise a dimension would provide insight into which particular aspects of a dimension were superior or substandard and thereby indicate directions for improvement.

Similar research has been done by Wright, Duray, and Goodale (1992). They adapted SERVQUAL to assess users’ perceptions of service quality at eight county recreation centers. While SERVQUAL was designed to be applicable across a wide spectrum of services, they report that the original SERVQUAL is too generic to be able to measure service performance in individual recreation centers. Hence, this study describes the procedures for developing a customized service quality survey instrument based on SERVQUAL’s principles. They also showed that since quality is a function of ratings of both expectations and perceptions of performance, a low quality score could result from high expectations, low perceptions of performance, or a combination of both. In particular, they indicated that the data from a SERVQUAL-type assessment can be used by managers to identify areas for improvement, and the service quality scores of different types of users can also be compared for variations in perceived service quality. This is especially important, as separate service-delivery strategies may be necessary when user groups vary in their expectations and perceptions of performance. Understanding these differences may help focus service improvement efforts and refine marketing strategies for specific market segments. Therefore, demographic and park visitation information like age, gender, county residency, origin of the trip, etc., should be solicited.

More researchers have been concerned with whether or not SERVQUAL’s dimensions describe service quality in the context of parks, and if so, which dimensions are most important. Crompton, Mackay, and Fesenmaier (1991) adapted a conceptual framework for identifying dimensions of service quality. The cluster sample consisted of more than two hundred respondents drawn from four different types of recreation activities. Following SERVQUAL, service quality scores were generated by calculating the difference between the scores of mean performance and mean desire. Their factor analysis suggested that respondents perceived four dimensions of service quality: Assurance, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Tangibles. Only eleven of the twenty-two items that constituted the SERVQUAL instrument were found to be efficacious in the context of public recreation services. The authors insisted, “these results are based on a delta value of 1.0 which suggested that factor 5 (empathy) was not a meaningful dimension” (p.21). Ultimately, therefore, only four of five dimensions were used in this study.

Methods

Instrument Development

A survey instrument was developed based upon the conceptualization, with modifications, of four of five dimensions of service quality as reported by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988): Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Assurance. 12 items out of the 22 items, which they included in the service quality instrument, were used in the instrument for this study.
A fifth dimension, Empathy was excluded. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), empathy is defined as individualized attention given to visitors. However, interpreters hardly take care of individuals’ needs during the interpretive programs. Further, empathy has not been seen to significantly affect service quality in public recreation (Crompton, Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1991). Therefore, empathy was not used as a variable in this study.

Each of the twelve items appeared twice. In the first set of questions, respondents were asked for their expectations regarding each item and had to circle the appropriate number. In the second set of questions, which were administered on a second survey, respondents were directed to indicate their perceptions against each item. The wording of the items was changed appropriately to measure expectation and perception. For example, “The interpreters should be polite” (desired quality) changed to “The interpreters were polite” (perceived performance).

The scale response format used in this study for expectation and perception is asymmetrical, utilizing five positive points. The number of items, length, and complexity of the initial survey instrument had to be tempered by the respondents’ patience for answering questions. Early forms of the survey were presented to the Director of Virginia’s Explore Park and to some visitors, and the instrument was modified based upon their suggestions and/or reactions. For example, the number of items was reduced to twelve from an initial fourteen, and the details of items were modified to fit the context of interpretation in the park.

Preceding the twelve items on the expectations survey, questions were designed to gather information about demographics, such as gender, age, income, travel time, and educational level; whether the visit was planned or unplanned; and whether the respondent had made any prior visits to the park. The objective of these questions was to discover whether these variables have any influence on visitors’ expectations and perceptions. Whether the visit was planned or unplanned is important because the intention to visit the park may affect visitors’ expectations and perceptions. Since expected quality is likely to be influenced by past experiences (Crompton, Mackay, & Fesenmaier, 1991), visitors’ past experience of the park also could have a significant effect on their expectations and perceptions.

Sample

The survey was conducted at the only exit adjacent to the parking lot from Virginia’s Explore Park. Questionnaires were distributed to visitors after they had experienced the interpretive service. A pre-post test format was not used for this survey because of concern for visitors’ convenience. The purpose and nature of the study were explained to the visitors by the researcher. The visitors were informed that participation in the study was restricted to those aged 18 years and above and was optional. The subjects indicated their consent by accepting the questionnaire.

A sample of 203 respondents was drawn from the park. Surveying was completed over the course of four weeks, including weekends and weekdays. Sample selection bias might be a problem due to some visitors’ displayed disinterest in the survey. Because of this nonrandom sampling, all visitors did not have the same likelihood of being surveyed.

Results

Perceived Quality

According to the theory presented, the perceived quality is perception minus expectation. This was denoted by the equation: \( Q = P - E \). The T-test was used to test the null hypothesis that the means for the two independent groups are equal. Therefore, this equation was used to examine whether the difference between perception and expectation of Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Assurance are equal to zero, with statistical significance. The sign of the
mean is used to determine whether perceptions exceeded or fell short of expectations when the null hypothesis was rejected.

The survey results were evaluated to measure the overall quality of interpretive services in Virginia’s Explore Park. The data in Table 1 show the results of perceived quality with additional information on the four dimensions.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results of Perceived Quality from Four Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Tangible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Assurance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at .05
**significant at .01

It is hypothesized that visitor’s perceptions of the Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, and Assurance of the interpretive service would meet their expectations. According to the data, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected for Tangibles and Assurance because the calculated p-value is more than the predetermined p-value at 5%. It means that visitors’ perceptions met their expectations for the Tangibles and Assurance dimensions of interpretative services in Virginia’s Explore Park.

On the other hand, the result suggests that the null hypothesis is rejected for the Reliability and Responsiveness. It indicates that visitors’ perceptions did not match their expectations for the Reliability and Responsiveness dimensions. The negative sign of the mean difference of quality in Reliability dimension suggests that visitors’ expectations were higher than their perceptions. It shows that the Reliability dimension was not up to visitors’ expectations, which can be attributed to the fact that information given to the visitors was not the same as advertised, or the mission of the park was not fully realized by the visitors. The positive sign of the mean difference of Responsiveness suggests that visitors’ perceptions were higher than what they expected from the interpretive services. It suggests that visitors were not expecting a high service quality in this dimension of the interpretive programs.

Relationship between Perceived Quality and Other Variables

The difference between perceptions and expectations was analyzed according to subjects’ gender, age, income, travel time, education; whether the visit was planned or unplanned; and prior visits to the park. Overall quality was operationalized as summation of four dimensions. The General Linear Models (GLM) Procedure was utilized. The GLM was used because it allows for the comparison of means to determine whether they are significantly different from each other when the number of observations is different for each group. However, GLM does not indicate which means differ from each other. To overcome this situation, Duncan’s Multiple-Range Test was used for all mean variables. The Duncan Grouping allows for the identification of mean(s) different from each other.

The results show that the null hypothesis—means of total quality for gender is equal—cannot be rejected. Also, Duncan grouping suggests that total perceived quality of males and
females is equal (Table 2). Thus, there is no statistical difference in perceived quality because of gender.

Table 2

*Relationships between Perceived Quality in Interpretation and Predicted Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Duncan Grouping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-.045</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-.063</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $25,000</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-.119</td>
<td>4.08*</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000-$50,000</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $50,000</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing through</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day visit</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-.029</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned visit</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned visit</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>-.051</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Park Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No experience</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at .05

However, perceptions and expectations for males and females differ significantly (Table 3). Duncan grouping also shows that there are differences of perceptions and expectations associated with gender. The mean values suggest that females’ perceptions and expectations of interpretive services are higher than males’. Although males’ perceptions of service delivered were low, the evaluation would show total perceived quality reported by males to be equal to that of females because their expectations were also low. On the other hand, even though females’ perceptions were high, the total perceived quality is equal to males because their expectations were also high. The gap between perceptions and expectations of both female and male were the same regardless of how they actually perceived the interpretive services.
Table 3
Mean Difference between Gender to Perception and Expectation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F value</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.97</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>4.68</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at .05

The data in Table 2 indicate that the null hypothesis—means of total quality for all age groups are equal—cannot be rejected. The perceptions and expectations of the four age groups were similar; consequently, perceived quality was similar regardless of age.

The data about perceived quality as associated with income indicate that the null hypothesis—the means of total quality for all income groups are equal—is rejected for three income groups. Therefore, visitors’ perceptions and expectations differed in three income groups. Duncan grouping also shows that significant differences exist between the income groups of less than $25,000 and more than $50,000. Yet the perceived quality of income groups of less than $25,000 and $25,000 - $50,000 are equal. Further, there is no difference in perceived quality among visitors in the $25,000 - $50,000 income group as opposed to those in the income group over $50,000. However, the negative sign of the average mean indicates that visitors in the income group of less than $25,000 have higher expectations than their perceptions. It is interesting to notice that in the income group between $25,000 and $50,000, visitor’s expectations were equally matched by their perception. But the positive sign of the average mean suggests that the income group of more than $50,000 has higher perceptions than expectations. These results can be explained by visitors’ perceptions that arise from differences in income. The more income the more satisfied visitors are. This phenomenon may be due to the effect of perceived value for money. If a family earns less than $25,000, one can argue that spending $6.00 (entrance fee to Virginia’s Explore Park) per individual may be expensive. Therefore, their expectations will increase. If a family earns more than $25,000, spending $6.00 per individual may seem to be reasonable or inexpensive. Therefore, their expectations could be met more easily.

The data in Table 2 indicate that the null hypothesis—the means of total quality for all travel times are equal—cannot be rejected. Similarly, the null hypothesis—the means of total quality for all educational level are equal—cannot be rejected. Therefore, educational level does not seem to significantly influence expectations and perceptions. Further, there are no statistical differences between perceived qualities among visitor who had prior plans to visit the park versus visitors who did not. Whether they planned the visit or not, visitors’ expectations about interpretation were similar, and perceptions also did not differ. Finally, there were no significant differences between the perceived quality among first-time visitors and returning visitors. The perceptions of first-time visitors and returning visitors also did not differ. Since the expectation literature indicated that expected quality is likely to be influenced by past experience (Crompton, Mackay, & Fesenmaier, 1991), the finding on the relationship between expectations and past experience was an interesting one. Results prove that, for interpretive services, previous reports may not always be true.
Conclusion

Interpretation is the point at which an exchange between the park management and the public takes place. Without interpretation to bring managers and the people together, there is little chance of integration of services and full achievement of the function of the park. Interpreters and park managers evaluate interpretation to identify and retain what works best for the visitors as well as to attend to what needs improvement. Evaluation measures strengths as well as weaknesses.

In view of the importance of interpretation in park management, this study provides a guide for pursuing the evaluation of interpretive services through the service quality model that is driven by the comparison of expectations and perceptions. Furthermore, this study examines the factors that impact a visitor’s expectations and perceptions. This attempt at using the service quality model to study interpretive services has not been done before and contributes to the literature of the park and recreation.

A review of the individual questionnaire items that comprise a dimension would provide insight into directions for improvement. The results indicate that most quality dimensions (Tangible, Responsiveness, Assurance) are satisfactory in Virginia’s Explore Park and one needs improvement (Reliability). Moreover, gender and income level affect visitors’ expectations and perceptions. From these findings, recommendations that would help improve the interpretive services in Virginia’s Explore Park have been generated.

This study suggests that perceived quality could be improved through the identification of suitable dimensions and a continuing process of evaluation and modification. The perceived quality measurement can address visitors’ attitudes and demands, thereby maximizing their understanding and appreciation about cultural and natural resources. Park managers and interpreters can also demonstrate the value of their work to visitors; its effectiveness revealed in a systematic, convincing perceived quality measurement. Finally, by using this type of objective measurement, they can ascertain not only what is important to their visitors, but also where improvements are needed for interpretive services.

A limitation of the study reported here is that it did not include many items that allowed visitors’ demands and attitudes to be specified. Future evaluation studies for interpretation using service quality are likely to be most beneficial if they include more specific modification for each dimension along with open-ended questions.

References


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