

A STUDY OF THE EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF BHUTANESE TOUR OPERATORS REGARDING TO THE SERVICE QUALITY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF BHUTANESE TOUR OPERATORS

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Abstract

This research aims to study the expectations and perceptions of the members of the Association of the Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO) with regard to service quality, focusing on five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It analyzes the impact of various demographics factors on the expectations and perceptions of tour operators with regard to ABTO service quality. Data was collected from 218 member tour operators using the convenience sampling method. The results show differences in the tour operators' expectations and perceptions in regard to ABTO service quality when segmented into the five dimensions. Expectations were much higher in all cases and perceptions performed much lower than expectations, leading to a negative disconfirmation in regard to the service quality delivered by ABTO.

Keywords: Service quality, Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators, Bhutanese tour operators, SERVQUAL

1. Introduction

Economies around the world keep evolving, with all sectors, whether agriculture, industry and services, being affected. As countries develop and people enjoy higher disposable income, consumption starts soaring. So does the demand for and expectations of services. Service providers are expected to deliver high quality, turning service quality into one of the key ingredients for surviving competition.

One such economy rapidly changing is that Bhutan. With the country still at a developmental stage, tourism plays a big role in earning valuable direct foreign currencies. As is well known and often commented upon, the country's development paradigm revolves around the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as opposed to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as is the case with any other economy. What this means is that the development of the country is based on the well-being of its citizens with all policies deep-rooted in the GNH philosophy. GNH policies develop around four pillars, namely, equitable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation and good governance (Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2013).

Obviously, tourism development in

Bhutan is rooted in this GNH philosophy. As a rapidly growing sector, tourism has been identified by the Royal government of Bhutan as a developmental tool for the country. The attraction of Bhutan is due in no small part to the fact that until the late 1960s, the country had been in a state of self-imposed isolation, perceived as the only way to secure its sovereignty. Since Bhutan did not join the band wagon of globalization, it instead developed a unique culture, identity, and development paradigm. With the advancement of domestic economic activities and the opening up to the internet, and television in the late 1990s, Bhutan has now more or less joined the rest of the world and is now enjoying a thriving economy, with tourism an important factor in the country's emerging prosperity. Simply put, tourism has become a tool for Bhutan to spread its unique culture and identity as well as a developmental tool and a source of employment.

One organization established to further this end is the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO), specifically set up with the mandate to assist and represent tour operators. This mandate requires among others a solid understanding of the expectations and perceptions of tour operators, which would in turn facilitate the recommendation and implementation of measures designed to offer a yet better service quality.

ABTO is the focus of this research. Specifically, this study considers the expectations and perceptions of tour operators (ABTO members) with regard to ABTO

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