

# Doctoral dissertation summary: Influence of Selected Determinants on the Perception of Beaches as a Tourism Product

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## **INFLUENCE OF SELECTED DETERMINANTS ON THE PERCEPTION OF BEACHES AS A TOURISM PRODUCT**

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### **SUMMARY**

#### **Purpose**

Beaches are icons of summer tourism and a strong motivating factor for the arrival of tourists in the sun and sea tourism destinations. Spending time on the beach is one of the most popular forms of tourism leisure worldwide. Beaches serve both as recreational areas of coastal cities, and valuable ecosystems that provide natural and protective functions. The Croatian coast is relatively rich in this valuable tourism resource, but the management of beaches as a tourist product has not reached significant progress. This dissertation aims to contribute to the sustainable management of beaches as a tourism product and recognises the possibility of involving all stakeholders in this process by studying socio-demographic factors, preferences, satisfaction, and future behavioural intentions of beach visitors. This knowledge can make an important contribution to the beach management process because it can be used to make more informed management decisions. Which characteristics of a particular beach need to be improved, what facilities should be introduced or discontinued, beach managers can find out through social science research methods that can encourage participation of all stakeholders, increase visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness, and thus lay the groundwork for more sustainable development of beaches as tourism products.

The purpose of this doctoral dissertation is to develop a cognitive-affective-conative model of beach visitor satisfaction. This dissertation developed, validated, and tested an empirical model of beach visitor satisfaction by combining the sustainable development framework, international coastal zone management protocols, and national legislation with theories of satisfaction, quality, and consumer behaviour. The empirical model includes measures of beach visitor satisfaction levels with natural beach features, beach facilities, overall beach experience, emotional experience and their future behavioural intention.

## Methodology

The study follows a mixed method design, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method was used for the purpose of testing the links between model constructs. Kruskal Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used in analyses of socio-demographic variable influences of beach visitors. Data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire on three separate beach locations in the Primorsko – goranska county littoral during the summer of 2021, with the paper assisted personal interview (PAPI) technique. A 5-point Likert scale was used in attribute level satisfaction and importance performance measurements. Qualitative methods include investigation by an unstructured inquiry of importance, concerning beach attributes not mentioned in the structured part of the questionnaire, as an opening of an unstructured interview with the beach visitor. Findings of the qualitative analysis have shown that beach visitors also value cultural factors and place high importance on beach sediment quality.

## Findings

The findings of the descriptive statistical analyses concerning socio-demographic characteristics of beach visitors indicate that on average, women (59.4%) visit the beach more than men (40.6%). The most frequent age group of beach visitors is in between 45-54 years old (25.7%), followed by visitors in between 15-24 (21%) years old. Regarding education levels, on average most visitors have finished high school (54.6%) followed by visitors with university level education (43.5%). Foreign tourists make up most of beach visitors (60.2%) while domestic tourists are second most represented (20.7%), followed by local residents (17.2%) and season residents (1.9%). Concerning the habits of beach visitors, they are most likely to visit the beach as a family with children (31.3%), as a couple (26.8%) or with friends (26.3%). Beach visitors will most likely use a car to get to the beach (77.7%), go on foot (12.5%) or use public transport (8.8%). Concerning the time they spend on the beach, most visitors stay in between 3-5 hours long (39.5%), followed by stays in between 1-3 hours long (38.2%) and stays over 5 hours long (21.2%).

The descriptive statistical analyses of structural model independent variable constructs for the whole sample of all three beaches, indicates that regarding beach natural characteristics, beach visitors are most satisfied with beach scenery = 4.57, cleanliness of the sea = 4.47 and texture of beach sediment = 4.06. Beach visitors are somewhat satisfied with the opportunities to observe maritime species = 3.42. The least levels of beach visitor satisfaction are with available shade on the beaches = 2.82. Concerning beach visitor satisfaction with beach facilities, all average values of individual attributes are below 4, which indicates that beach visitors are on average more satisfied with the natural beach attributes than facilities available at the beaches. In the overall sample, beach visitors are satisfied the least with lifeguard and/or medical service = 2.90, accessibility to the beach and sea for persons with disabilities = 2.97, rental service of water sport and recreation equipment = 3.12, parking space availability = 3.12, shower availability = 3.13, toilet cleanliness = 3.15 and toilet availability = 3.24. Beach visitors are satisfied the most with bar and restaurant service on the beaches = 3.99, clearly

designated safe swimming areas in the sea = 3.88, litter bin availability = 3.88 and with areas for sport, recreation, and children play on the beaches = 3.81.

Concerning the descriptive analyses of beach visitor emotional experiences, measured on the Destination Emotion Scale (DES), on average beach visitors feel joy = 4.21 the most, followed by the emotion of love = 3.84 and positive surprise = 3.69. Beach visitor satisfaction with the overall experience at the beaches is on average relatively high = 4.29, as are the intention of revisit = 4.49, and the intention of recommending the beach = 4.35

The results of the bivariate statistical analysis show significant statistical differences in overall experience satisfaction regarding visitor type, while no differences were found by age or gender. Domestic tourists are least satisfied on average, while season residents are satisfied the most. The results partially support hypothesis H1. Significant statistical differences were found in the construct of intention of recommendation by gender and age. Women have a higher intention to recommend the beach than men. Age groups of 15-24 years of age tend to recommend the beach the least, while age groups of 45-54 and 55-64 have the highest levels of recommendation intention. These results partially support hypothesis H2, as no differences were found by beach visitor type. Women also have a higher intention of revisit the beach than men, while local residents and season residents have significantly higher intention of revisit than tourists, partially supporting hypothesis H3, as no differences by age were found.

Lastly, the results of multivariate statistical analysis show that satisfaction with natural beach characteristics affects satisfaction with the overall experience at the beach ( $\beta=0.529, p<.01$ ), intention to revisit ( $\beta=0.37, p<.01$ ) and intention to recommend ( $\beta=0.497, p<.01$ ). Thus, confirming hypothesis H4, H5 and H6. Satisfaction with beach facilities affects the overall experience satisfaction with the beach ( $\beta=0.189, p<.01$ ), the intention to revisit ( $\beta=0.146, p<.01$ ) and the intention to recommend the beach ( $\beta=0.106, p<.01$ ) confirming hypotheses H7, H8 and H9. Concerning the impact of beach visitor emotions on the overall beach experience, the results show that joy ( $\beta=0.437, p<.01$ ), love ( $\beta=0.203, p<.01$ ) and positive surprise ( $\beta=0.105, p<.05$ ) have a significant impact. Confirming in this way hypothesis H10. The impact of emotions on revisit intention is also statistically significant for joy ( $\beta=0.442, p<.01$ ) and love ( $\beta=0.266, p<.01$ ), while positive surprise is not related to revisit intention ( $\beta=0.061, p=0.271$ ). By this, hypothesis H11 is partially confirmed. Concerning the effect of emotions on recommendation intention, both joy ( $\beta=0.445, p<.01$ ) and love ( $\beta=0.27, p<.01$ ) affect recommendation intention, while the relationship with positive surprise is not statistically significant ( $\beta=0.047, p=0.333$ ). The results confirm partially hypothesis H12. Satisfaction with overall beach experience is significantly related to the intention of revisit ( $\beta=0.585, p<.01$ ) and with the intention of recommendation ( $\beta=0.597, p<.01$ ) confirming hypothesis H13 and H14 respectively. Mediation analysis results indicate that emotions partially mediate the relationship between satisfaction with natural beach characteristics and overall experience at the beach, while complete mediation of emotions is established between satisfaction with beach facilities and overall experience satisfaction. Finally, confirming hypothesis H15 and H16 respectively.

### **Originality of the research**

In an innovative approach, while responding to the calls of several authors from the literature of tourism and marketing for the creation of integrative models of satisfaction with both cognitive and affective components, the Destination Emotion Scale (DES) is used in the context of modelling overall beach visitors' satisfaction affective component. Furthermore, by assessing the importance of beach facilities at the natural beach, opposed to satisfaction with beach facilities on beaches in urban areas at the same time, an innovative integral assessment of wider coastal area beaches is enabled no matter the beach type. This is achieved by the combination of satisfaction and importance measurements of beach facilities in the overall beach sample. In this manner, the importance of facilities at the natural beach, becomes a control variable, and the results of independent variable attribute level statistical significance measurements may be interpreted as significant, controlling for the fact that beach visitors may have different priorities regarding facilities on the natural beach in a rural setting, than visitors of beaches in urban settings. This dissertation establishes the applicative, theoretical, and empirical validity of the observation of beaches as tourism products. Furthermore, it is demonstrated how this approach incorporates the principles of sustainable development while simultaneously being oriented towards some of the most important theoretical determinants of successful business operations – visitor satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. By assessing the reliability and validity of the empirical model and testing the proposed scientific hypotheses, new insights into the area of beach visitor satisfaction have been explored and revealed, these insights establish emotions as a reliable predictor of beach visitor satisfaction and future behavioural intentions and include different emotional experiences of visitors on a natural beach in a rural environment.

**Keywords:** beach visitors; satisfaction; emotions; behavioural intentions

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