

EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONS, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND FUTURE BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS IN AGROTOURISM

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Marketers have been working tirelessly to determine the factors that lead to customer satisfaction presuming that customer satisfaction automatically leads to repeated customers. Service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and repeat business are issues well recognized and investigated by researchers. Recent theory however suggests that service quality alone doesn't necessarily encourage customers to repeat their choices, but rather, "complete" customer satisfaction does. Thus, the main research question addressed in this paper is how to complete the relationship between "complete" customer satisfaction and repeat business. The customer's emotions have been proved to be a key determinant to turn a satisfied customer into a repeated one. The research was conducted in 2009, addressed to customers of agrotourism businesses on Lesbos Island and Florina – Greece.

Keywords: *Customer satisfaction, tourism services, agrotourism, emotions, overall satisfaction, expectations, repeated customers.*

INTRODUCTION

The technological advances took away from urban citizens the contact with nature thus creating the need for action and activities - either



authentic or as an illusion - in the landscape (Iakovidou, 2000). On the other hand, rural areas suffer from urbanization, isolation, restructuring of the agricultural sector and out-migration of higher educated youth (Hannigan, 1994). The “panacea” proposed for rural areas, has been agrotourism contributing to the economic viability and social regeneration of isolated areas and small islands (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Spilanis, 2000), while offering the customers the opportunity to link with the natural landscape and local population (Iakovidou, 2000).

A further customers’ demand is to have their needs met when selecting a destination. A great amount of research has been carried out on a global level aiming to investigate the causes of customer satisfaction. Meanings such as expectation, disconfirmation, intention, perceived price and repeated customers are among the issues investigated (Normann, 1984). Companies spend huge amounts of money to maintain their customers’ loyalty. It is estimated that customer satisfaction leads to consumer loyalty and encourages the repetition of visits, (Parasuraman, et. al., 1985, 1988) while on the other hand low quality service discourages return customers. Thus, it is generally accepted that when a company provides services of high quality it can anticipate satisfied customers and repeated guests (Tu, 2004).

Recent theory however suggests that service quality alone doesn’t necessarily encourage customers to repeat their choices, but rather, “complete” customer satisfaction does (Jones & Sasser, 1995). The missing keys to achieving “complete” customer satisfaction and consequently repeat business are the emotions and the overall experience and the way customers value these two factors when selecting a destination is the main issue the present paper deals with.

AGROTOURISM

Scholars and developers acknowledge that the economic development and the continuing expansion caused major (mostly negative) environmental, economic and sociocultural changes among farmers and their communities. Once modern agriculture was adopted, a massive rural outmigration took place which intensified in the 1960s and the 1970s (Anthopoulou, 2008). Soon, the negative impacts of modern agriculture and the effects on social and physical environments became a widespread concern. The realization of the environmental effects was the ideological underpinning of the concept of sustainable development (Paniagua, 2002).

Generally conceptualizing the sustainable development, it refers to those social and ecological conditions necessary to support human life at a certain level of well being through future generations. The core idea of sustainable development is that current economic, political and social policies should not damage prospects for maintaining or improving living standards in the future (Boo, 1990).

Given the numerous assessments of the negative consequences of the mass tourism on local systems, scientists supported the idea of a “new tourism” that lies within the natural and cultural “capacity” of the destination area. Thus, “new tourism” has been presented as a “sustainable” alternative to mass tourism. For many, sustainable tourism development holds great potential to revitalize rural areas (Tsartas, 2001).

Throughout Europe, tourism has been widely promoted as the lever to face the social and economic challenges isolated areas confront with, primarily those associated with the decline of traditional agrarian industries (Sharpley, 2002). Rural areas have been projected in the debate on tourism and sustainable development for two main reasons: first, because rurality embodies all those qualities that are missing from the urban and modern society, the urban citizen’s need to reunite with nature and rural culture (Butler et al., 1988, Logothetis, 1988). The second relates to the numerous empirical attempts in many Western countries to enjoy sustainable development as a starting point for rural policies. (Butler et al., 1998, Anthopoulou, 1998).

Gorton et al., (1998) highlighted that most tourism initiatives in rural areas initiate from urban citizens who usually invest the money they get from selling a house to a tourism business in the countryside where the investment cost is usually low. Just 6-18% of these tourism activities start from farmers who usually in crisis periods choose rather to decrease their costs from differentiating their product (Jenkins et al., 1998). However, Sharpley (2002) questioned the panacea character given to agrotourism being a “magic wand that will speed up economic progress” (Hoggart et al., 1995).

The new roles that agriculture is challenged to confront with are the protection of environment, natural life, conservation of cultural heritage and familiarity with local culture (Tsartas, 2001, Anthopoulou, 2008). Increasing interest in tourism activities developed in rural areas led within the last decade to increasing researches whereas public agencies encourage the establishment of small medium enterprises by rural population so as to keep residents in rural areas and increase employment and social welfare. (Fleischer & Felsenstein 2000). However, these small

scale, highly seasonal agrotourism enterprises face many challenges among which the inability of local communities to combine the agricultural values with the guest – service values (Fleisher and Pizam, 1997) as well as the fact that the quality of products and services don't match customers' expectations and demands (Sharpley, 2002). Researchers have proven that tourists to rural areas look for rest and new experiences (Iakovidou 2000; Sigala, 2003; Albacete-Saez et al., 2007) while simply providing accommodation facilities is not sufficient to attract visitors (Sharpley, 2002) but rather active holidays with educational and natural activities (Spilanis, 2000). Agrotourists are motivated by the formula of 3Fs (initials of the Greek words for Nature – Friendship – Hospitality) rather than 3Ss formula (Sea – Sun – Sand) (Iakovidou, 1995).

SERVICE QUALITY

Efforts made by tourism enterprises to maximize individual spend and provide products and experiences that could serve as motives to tourists to stay longer and return on repeat visits (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). When tourists receive excellent quality, their loyalty is empowered and this is a relationship verified by researchers. Loyalty to a rural destination can be directly linked to the services provided to tourists, which allow them to enjoy the participation in natural environment or tasks, custom and local way of living (Boo, 1990, Wight, 1994).

On the other hand, accommodation is extremely important to the experience. Sharpley (2004) concludes that solely the accommodation is not enough to attract tourists but most agrotourism enterprises think that they lack the necessary know how or skills to provide quality services. Furthermore, Kozak (2001) proves the strong connection between tourist's total satisfaction and his intention to visit again the same destination or others in the area.

Some researchers argue that improving the service of the qualities provided cannot achieve the desired customer loyalty. On the contrary, the "complete" customer satisfaction is the one to lead to repeated guests. Loyalty is more qualitative and subjective. Thus, a business can provide satisfaction without achieving loyal guests but cannot accomplish the opposite relationship (Stewart, 1995).

Questions that emerge from literature such as:

"If they are so satisfied, why are they leaving?" (Kirkby and Nelson, 2003)

“Satisfaction without engagement? Worthless. Satisfaction with engagement? Priceless”

“If you don’t make an emotional connection with customers, then satisfaction is worthless” (McEwen, 2003) need to be answered.

Crompton & Love (1995) defined customer satisfaction as a psychological outcome that originates from tourists’ participation to leisure or tourism activities. Zeithaml et al., (1996) highlighted that customer satisfaction is strongly connected to service quality starting with the expectations customers have when they make their choices.

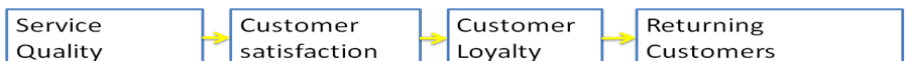
The four elements that constitute satisfaction and loyalty are:

- Brand: the enterprise image, values
- Quality: the perceived quality/professionalism of the enterprise, its service and products
- Interrelationship: the degree to which customer needs are met
- Performance: service delivery, product reliability and response times (Tu, 2004)

Customer satisfaction as a method to pertain customers is declining especially to businesses where services are greatly involved (Tu, 2004).

Possible factors behind falling satisfaction include:

- Customers become more demanding and their expectations increase.
- Enterprises don’t use their brand names even when they have one.
- Customers lack of emotional bonding with the brand.
- Customers feel “hunted” as their personal data are used to be bombed with sales.
- Lower service quality due to automation and reduced cost (Kirkby et al., 2003)
- The widely accepted theory indicates that good service quality leads to customer satisfaction, customer satisfaction leads to customer loyalty and loyalty leads to returning customers:



More recent researches reveal that this figure is no longer accurate enough to describe the actual consumer behavior. (McEwen, 2003)

There is usually a gap between what customer expects and what actually receives. A common mistake is the assumption that if a company

provides the same standards in quality then the perceived quality service will be achieved (Tu, 2004). For example, two restaurant clients receive the same services, the same lunch at the same time and place by the same waiter but they don't have the same levels of satisfaction since their individual expectations and emotions influence the ultimate perceived quality. Even the same customer can have different level of satisfaction by the same service in two different time occasions. (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Christou, 2003a)

The most common mistakes businesses make when studying customer experience are:

- They only consider the rational part of an experience when a large proportion concerns feelings / emotions
- They neglect the fact that the experience includes all five senses (ie. A very nice room that smells really bad)
- They confuse planning a product or a service with planning the experience
- They underestimate the value of the experience when they seek the customer's future behavior (Jones, 1995)
- They don't examine the attitude of local people. Tourism industry depends heavily on the local community and attitude is an important factor that contributes to customer satisfaction and repeated visitations (Sheldon & Abenoja, 2001, Swarbrooke, 1993)

It is evident that further research needs to be carried out regarding customer's behavior, prior, during and after the experience so as to effectively manage total experience (Kirkby et al., 2003). Literature also highlights the importance of customer's emotions in customer satisfaction. Customers can be classified into emotionally satisfied and rationally satisfied. Both types of customers are extremely satisfied with the products or services a company provides but the distinctive element between the two categories is the emotional connection of customers. While emotionally satisfied customers have a strong emotional attachment to the company, rationally satisfied customers, in contrast, lack the above mentioned attachment. Furthermore, emotionally satisfied customers tend to spend more money on the company, become repeated consumers of the same brand while rationally satisfied customers, on the other hand, and behave in a similar manner to a dissatisfied customer. "*Customers want more than transactions - they want relationships*" (Fleming, 2007).

“Without a strong emotional bond, satisfaction is meaningless” (McEwen, 2003). Most people seem to have the sense that affect (moods, feelings, emotion) can influence their decisions and thought process, at least under certain circumstances. However, it is usually assumed that such influence is irregular or unusual; that only strong and infrequent feelings would have such effects and that most often only negative feelings such as anger, sadness or fear would have an impact on thinking processes. Furthermore, most people assume that when affect plays a role in their decision process, such influences are disruptive and tend to make their decisions “irrational” and less appropriate than otherwise (Adayal, 2003; Christou, 2003b).

Emotions are divided into positive and negative ones (Tu, 2004). People tend to consider negative emotions to be the ones that influence the thinking process without realizing that positive emotions have a possible impact on thought processes. Negative emotions derive from three sources: the consumer himself (shame, guilt), others’ behavior (anger, hate) and situational causes (fear, sadness) (Oliver, 1993). Customers who experience negative emotions attributed to other agencies such as staff, have lower levels of satisfaction than those whose negative emotions attribute to the customer himself or to situations (Sigala, 2003; Tu, 2004). Positive emotions, on the other hand, don’t have the same effect as negative ones. If emotions like happiness, interest, enthusiasm etc. remain unchanged throughout the service provision, the customer is more likely to positively evaluate the experience regardless the emotions’ source of origin (Pham, 1996)

Customers tend to evaluate a service positively when they are happy and negatively when they are sad regardless of whether the specific information about the service is favorable or unfavorable (Adayal, 2001)

METHODOLOGY & FINDINGS

A survey took place in summer 2009. The tool used was a structured questionnaire addressed to customers of agrotourism businesses on Lesbos Island and Florina, Greece. Lesbos island is well known for the development of agrotourism since the first Women Agrotourism Cooperative was established on the island in 1983 while the island has the biggest percentage of agrotourism accommodation facilities in Greece. Florina on the other hand won the EDEN prize from the European Union. EDEN prize aims to awards the places with high levels of quality tourism

and Florina was among the 10 best destinations for agrotourism in Europe.

Respondents were asked to respond to a questionnaire divided into four parts dealing with demographic data, emotions, expectations and satisfaction. A total number of 330 questionnaires were collected. Out of 330 respondents 158 were men (48%) and 172 were women (52%). The age range was from below 20 years of age up to over 60 years of age. Approximately 63% of the respondents were between 36 to 45 years of age (Figure 1) while the biggest percentage earned monthly (individual or family income) between 2501 and 4000 Euro (Figure 2).

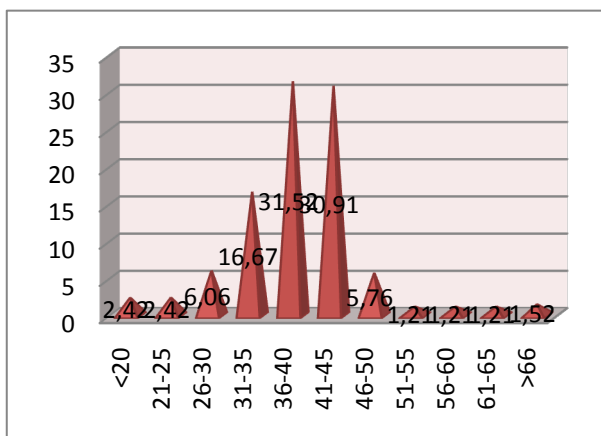


Figure 1. Age distribution

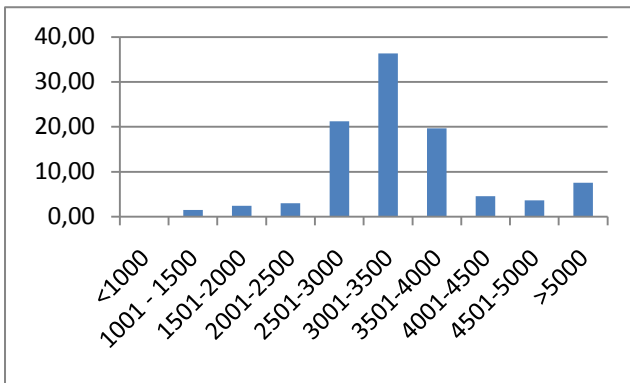


Figure 2. Individual or family monthly income

The majority of the tourists were foreigners (61%) mostly coming from France, Switzerland and Belgium (Figure 3).

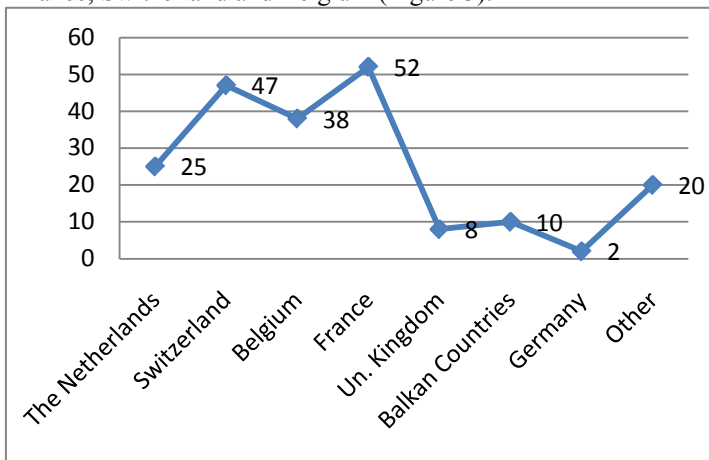


Figure 3. Nationality

Most of the tourists (197 out of 330) responded that they visit an agrotourism facility once a year and they do so keeping in mind the principles of agrotourism which they believe in (Figure 4).

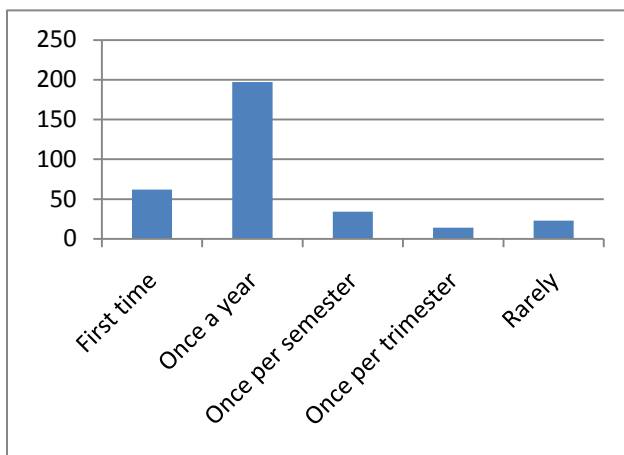


Figure 4. Frequency of visits

The emotions were divided into Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) ones. The PA emotions were Enthusiastic, Happy, Interested, Active, Alert, and Attentive, while the NA emotions were Afraid, Distressed, Lonely, Upset, Sad, Nervous, Cheerful, Irritable from PANAS scales (Watson et al., 1988) and we asked the participants to identify the emotions they felt prior, during and after their visit (Figure 5). As it appears from the figure, tourists experienced many positive emotions prior to their visit, which increased during their stay and decreased after they left the premises. According to tourism psychology, this result was expected since tourists experience a kind of depression once they leave a tourist destination since they feel obliged to return to their routine and everyday life (Lytras, 1993).

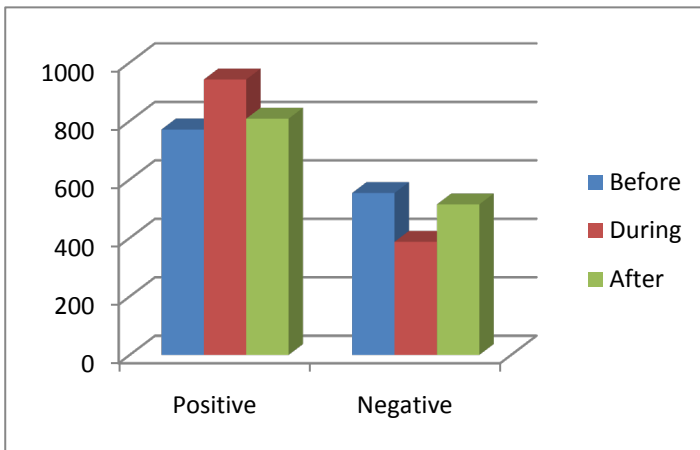


Figure 5. Emotions, before, during and after the visit

When asked about the level of their satisfaction from the accommodation, the majority of the respondents were satisfied (fully satisfied and somehow satisfied) (Figure 6), whereas when the activities were concerned the results were completely opposite since 48% were dissatisfied or fully dissatisfied from the provided activities (Figure 7).

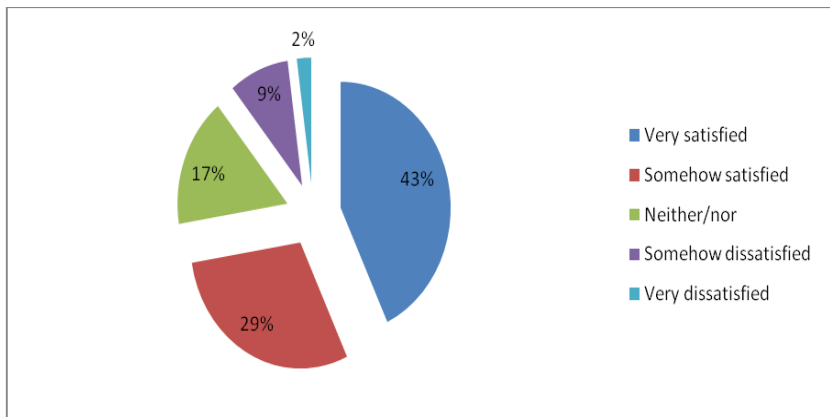


Figure 6. Satisfaction from the accommodation

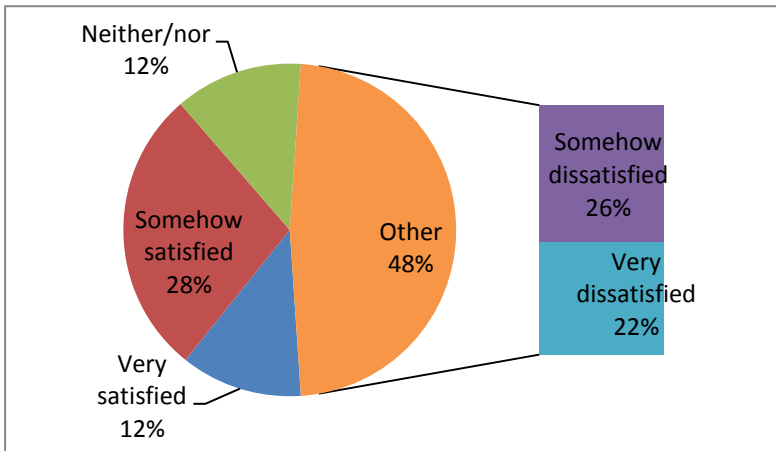


Figure 7. Satisfaction from the activities (total experience)

Trying to define whether the total experience influenced somehow their satisfaction from the accommodation, 77% of the respondents were either positively or negatively affected (Figure 8).

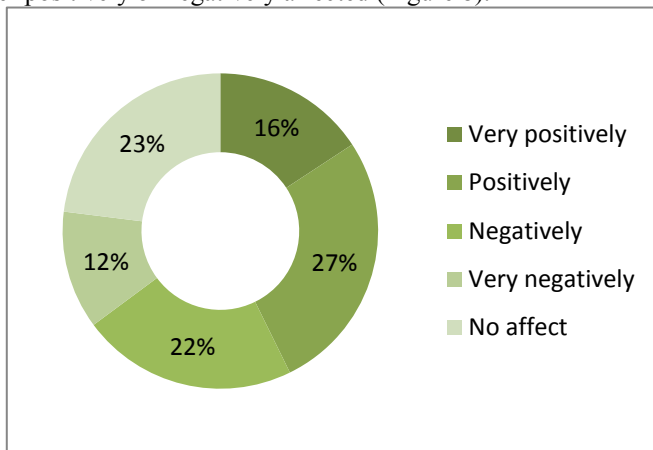


Figure 8. Total Experience and Satisfaction

Finally, when asked whether they would repeat the visit to the accommodation, the majority of the tourists responded positively (Figure 9).

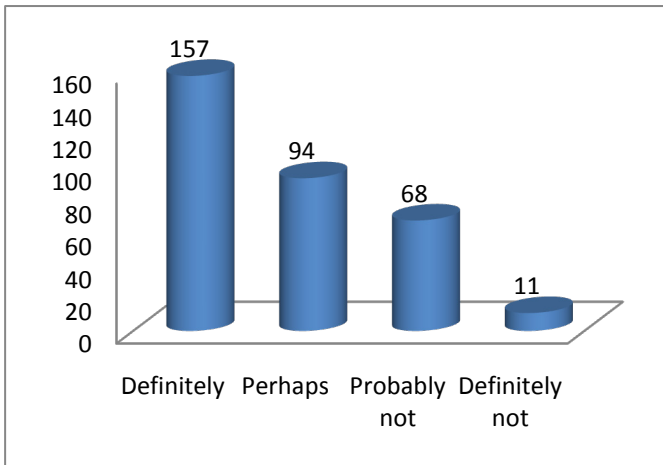


Figure 9. Would you repeat the visit?

CONCLUSIONS

Agrotourism is a field that provides farmers with supplement income. In addition to that, rural areas experience development and stability when agrotourism businesses are established. However, as any other tourism activity, agrotourism needs satisfied customers in order to achieve desired outcomes.

Literature reveals that customer satisfaction is an aspect than does not guarantee returning customers. The issues previously examined to achieve customer satisfaction lack the importance and contribution of emotions when formulating the entire image. Emotionally satisfied customers tend to return to the company and spend more money on the product or service provided. Emotions directly influence the formation of satisfaction and mediate the effects of perceived service quality on customer satisfaction. Emotions affect our experience and judgment. When a customer experiences positive emotions (for any reason), he is more likely to perceive everything better, whereas when a customer experiences negative emotions, he perceives everything to be less favorable or likable

(Russell, 1980). Thus, further research needs to be carried out so as to examine the effect of emotions in combination with expectations in creating “complete” customer satisfaction and subsequently returning customers.

On the other hand, experience is very important. People live for experiences. A good experience helps a customer feel positive. Agrotourists seek relaxation and experiences that might include participation in activities in nature, rural activities etc. A good experience helps determine a customer’s satisfaction and gives a customer the desire to repeat it again.

Emotions and expectations before the experience interrelate and affect the emotions during the encounter as well as the perceived quality both from the participation in activities in nature as well as from the provided accommodation. Finally, they all influence the emotions after the experience which leads to “complete” customer satisfaction which leads to the repetition of visit.

Having confirmed the relationships, there might be a pattern to accomplish returning customers and increase consumers’ loyalty to agrotourism business, thus establishing agrotourism as an unbreakable “ring” in tourism industry.

LIMITATIONS

The research was conducted in two agrotourism businesses, one on an island with long history in the field of agrotourism and a mountainous one awarded for being among the top agrotourism destinations in Europe. The research’s results cannot be generalized until further research is conducted in other areas and other lodgings so as to be able to come to broader conclusions regarding the relationship among emotions, satisfaction, total experience and repetition of visits.

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