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**Analysing service quality for senior travellers: A
mixed research approach investigating the
perceptions of satisfaction in this growing
tourism market**

Thesis submitted by

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STATEMENT ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

I recognise James Cook University for providing a PhD Scholarship which provided financial support throughout my degree. I also recognise that the university provided grants to attend conferences that aided in the progress and completion of the PhD thesis.

I recognise the support received from the School of Business in the form of financial and physical resources provided during the course of the PhD thesis.

I recognise the contribution of my supervisor Professor Gianna Moscardo for her support and guidance during my PhD.

I recognise the support of the many employers who participated in my survey, their employees who also assisted in my research, and the many senior travellers who participated in the studies.

I recognise the JCU Ethics Committee for ensuring that all research conducted for this PhD thesis met ethical standards and received approval.

Alfons Kuilboer

Date

DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans (1999)*, the *Joint NHRMC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (1997)*, the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics, Standard Practices and Guidelines (2001)*, and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice (2001)*. The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (H 1849, H 2185).

Alfons Kuilboer

Date

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ABSTRACT

Australia, like most developed countries, has an ageing population resulting from people living longer and declining fertility and mortality rates. This trend is exemplified in the demographics of Australia's ageing population with predictions that by 2050 the number of people aged over 65 years will increase to 35.9 million (Swan, 2010) constituting approximately 25% of the population. The shift from a younger population to an older population will have an impact on the economy, health priorities, environment, urban planning, housing, transportation, recreation, employment, tourism and business service providers. Tourism researchers in Australia have of recent years been aware of the growing importance of senior travellers to the travel and tourism industry. While there have been many articles written about service quality and customer service in general, to date no studies have been identified exploring the perceptions of customer service from both a senior traveller and manager perspective for an ageing population within an Australian context.

The overall aim of this thesis was to identify service quality gaps from the perspective of both the customer and service provider using the SERVQUAL model. The thesis incorporated three components:

- Evaluating perceptions of customer service encounters by senior travellers
- Interviews with managers about their perceptions of customer service
- A Service provider survey questionnaire with employees and employer

The first study in this thesis had three broad aims. The first aim was to identify a broad range of respondent generated service incidents by senior travellers using the critical incident technique. The second aim was to evaluate the importance of respondent's perceptions of customer service. The third aim was to identify pertinent gaps between the service provider and customer and relate those gaps to the SERVQUAL model. The study (n=45) asked respondents to record details of their six best and six worst service encounters in a travel diary. Open-ended descriptive encounters (376) were then themed into the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model and the frequency of occurrence was compared across the different service locations identified. Both best and worst service incidents

confirmed the importance senior travellers place on staff attitudes which were reflected throughout the dimensions of Responsiveness and Assurance. During the coding process, several additional themes emerged from the critical incidents. Further analysis indicated that the theories of ageism (Palmore, 2003) were worthy of further research attention.

The results from the first study provided support for the further exploration of the perceptions of customer service and satisfaction from the perspective of service provider employers. A series of semi-structured interview questions were developed to analyse employers' (n=59) perspectives on Australia's ageing population and customer service. The aims were to identify employer's perspective on Australia's ageing population, perceived impacts of an ageing population on service providers, identify gaps in the downward flow of ageing population information to service providers, evaluate employer's views on good customer service, and explore employers' perceptions of senior travellers applying discourse analysis. The results suggested that employers did not have a detailed understanding of the concept of an ageing population but had a vague notion that a trend existed. More negative implications for business were recognised revealing several negative ageist stereotypes. Employers had limited awareness of government policies/strategies concerning population ageing. Their most important ingredient for good customer service was staff attitudes, but 64% would not change their customer service approach for senior customers. The application of discourse analysis identified several negative ageist stereotypes with reference to senior customers from the perspective of employers.

The third and final study used the results from study two to develop a more focussed and structured employee and employer self administered questionnaire. The aims of this study incorporated knowledge about the ageing population, perceptions of customer service to the senior market, identifying underlying perceptions of ageism and examining the differences of ageism perceptions according to demographic characteristics and customer service training. The results showed that both respondent groups recognised and

identified the importance of customer service, however minimal training was identified. In providing excellent customer service to senior customers, employees described staff attitudes and behaviour to be the most important. Yet in describing senior customers, one third of employees were negative in their responses which mostly reflected typical ageist stereotypes. Employers had slightly above average awareness than employees' concerning knowledge of Australia's ageing population but in both instances this information came from media programs and articles and not from credible government or industry sources.

Overall these studies have shown that there are gaps in service providers understanding of, and emphasis on, appropriate service provision to senior customers. Several contributing factors include: lack of customer service training with an emphasis on senior customers, limited knowledge and understanding of Australia's ageing population, and the influence and impact of negative ageist stereotypes. Application of the SERVQUAL model was considered to be a useful framework for identifying and measuring service quality gaps with the proposal of an additional gap identifying the need for external communications to managers to be added to the model.

Parts of this thesis have been published in refereed journals and proceedings.

References for these are:

Kuilboer, A. B. (2005). The use of travel diaries in evaluating the perceptions of customer service encounters by Australian senior travellers. *Fourth Asia Pacific Forum for Graduate Student Research in Tourism, Honolulu, University of Hawaii*

Kuilboer, A.B. (2010). Managers' perceptions of customer service for an ageing population. *The Business Review, Cambridge*, Vol.15, (2), 158-163.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADVENTUREQUAL	Outdoor Adventure Centres
ALGA	Australian Local Government Association
ANOVA	Analysis of Variation
CEM	Customer Experience Management
CIT	Critical Incident Technique
CPA Australia	Certified Practising Accountants Australia
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
D & S Model	Demand and Supply Model
DINESERV	Restaurant Service Quality
ECOSERV	Service Quality Expectations of Ecotourists
HISTOQUAL	Quality of Heritage Attractions
LibQUAL	Library Service Quality
LODGQUAL	Lodging Quality
LODGSERV	Hotel and Motel Services
NSAA	National Strategy for an Ageing Australia
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBS	Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
QLD	Queensland
RACQ	Royal Automobile Club Queensland
REQUAL	Quality of Recreational Services
RTO	Regional Tourism Organisation
RV	Recreation Vehicles
SA	South Australia
SERVQUAL	Service Quality
TAS	Tasmania

TEAMQUAL	Professional Team Sports
TQ	Tourism Queensland
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WOM	Word of Mouth
VIC	Victoria
VIC	Visitor Information Centre
WA	Western Australia
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council
Xers	Generation X – born between 1965 and 1979
Y's	Generation Y – born between 1980 and 1994