Critical service features in group package tour: An exploratory research

Kuo-Ching Wang[a],*, An-Tien Hsieh[b], Tzung-Cheng Huan[c]

[a]*Department and Graduate School of Tourism Management, Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC*
[b]*College of Business, Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC*
[c]*Department and Graduate School of Tourism Management, Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC*

Abstract

In many countries, especially in Asia, the group package tour (GPT) is the mainstream mode of outbound travel. Nevertheless, surprisingly little effort has been devoted to improving our understanding of the grounded service features of the GPT. In order to fill this gap and thereby enhance the foundations of group travel theory, this study conducted exploratory research to identify the critical service features of the GPT. Sample data come from the customer lists offered by a large wholesale travel agency. Data were collected from both customers and employees using critical incident technique (CIT). After the data collection, a rigorous categorization exercise was conducted; 25 distinct grounded service features emerged from the data. At the end, the authors also discuss implications for future systematic investigation, model development, and make recommendations for tour operators. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Group or all-inclusive travel is likely to retain its popularity for many Asian groups for some time to come, especially for international trips (Fuller, 1994; Hooper, 1995). In many Asian countries, such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and China, etc., the group package tour (hereafter abbreviated GPT) is one of the main modes of outbound travel (Prideaux, 1998; Tourism Bureau, 1998; Wang & Sheldon, 1995; Nozawa, 1992). Surprisingly little research has been directed toward improving our understanding of the grounded service features of the GPT. In order to fill this gap and thereby extend the theory of group travel, this study conducted qualitative research to identify and explored the critical service features of the GPT.

When the restriction on overseas travel by the residents of Taiwan was lifted, the number of people going abroad increased rapidly from 321,446 in 1979 to 6,161,932 in 1997. The annual survey reports on Republic

of China outbound travelers have consistently showed in recent years that sightseeing is the purpose most frequently mentioned by outbound travelers; accounting for, in 1997, 61.9 per cent of the total. Among these sightseers, 73.5 per cent participated in some form of GPT, defined broadly to include the incentive and semi-group package tour formats (Tourism Bureau, 1998). This report also revealed that the median length of stay overseas for GPT was 6.1 nights, and average expenditure by GPT travelers was NT$ 42,012, or about US$ 1241 (including package fees, shopping fees, extra fees for food and drink, and all other fees).

Outbound travel can be essentially classified into two types: the GPT and the foreign independent tour (hereafter abbreviated FIT). There are two main differences between GPT and FIT. First, the "buying process" is different. In the GPT buying process, the customer might buy the GPT product through third parties such as friends, relatives, parents, companies, schools, churches, or through retail travel agencies. On the contrary, FIT customers usually contact the travel agencies personally in order to get travel information and counseling (Persia & Gitelson, 1993; Kent, Meyer & Reddam, 1987; Bitner & Booms, 1981). Second, the

*Corresponding author. Tel.: + 886-2-2765-5413.
E-mail address: wangkc@tpts5.seed.net.tw (K.-C. Wang)

GPT customer relationship is mediated almost entirely through a single "contact employee". That is, in the GPT, the travel agency would assign a tour guide to escort the tour. In some countries or cities such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Paris, Vienna, and London, etc., local guides are also provided, but this is not necessary for FITs.

As indicated in previous research (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1995; Goldsmith, Flynn & Bonn, 1994; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985, p. 45), service industries are highly dependent on contact employees who exert a strong influence on the service quality as perceived by the consumers. Moreover, Quiroga (1990) and Schmidt (1979) clearly pointed out that the function of the tour guide within the group is considered to be indispensable by the tourists themselves, and the quality of the tour guide can be a crucial variable; his or her presentation can make or break a tour. Holloway's one day coach-tours study (1981), Schmidt's research on guided tours (1979) and Cohen (1985) and Schuchat (1983), all indicated that the tour guide's various important roles and responsibilities include: provision of security and protection, information, promotion of group interaction, surrogate parent, pathfinder and mentor, leader and mediator, and entertainer.

It is very likely that a GPT customer's main contact with the sponsoring agency will be through the tour guide. Often, the tour guide will be the exclusive point of contact. If so, then clearly the tour guide's behaviors will be the predominant factor influencing the customer's perception of travel service quality. But so far, the exact grounded service features of the tour guide in the Asian GPT remain unknown.

In the literature to date, few studies have focused on the travel service quality exclusively from the GPT viewpoint, as distinct from that of the FIT. LeBlanc (1992) conducted a study in Canada using 277 sample customers provided by two mid-sized travel agencies. The results showed that the customer evaluates travel service from six dimensions; corporate image, competitiveness, courtesy, responsiveness, accessibility, and competence. LeBlanc's study, however, has limitations in the context of the issues being explored here. First, the fact that GPT customers often interact with the tour-sponsoring travel agency through an intermediary renders some of LeBlanc's service features (for example; the greeting received by the customer upon entering the office) inappropriate for measuring the customer's perception of GPT service quality. Second, where LeBlanc did include such variables as "courtesy" to rate the conduct of the contact employee(s), the result of his regression analysis shows that for the sample used, this was not a very important consideration. We expect that in the GPT context, interaction with the tour guide will become much more important; both because group tourists are much more dependent on their guides, and be-

cause the relationship must last for the duration of the trip.

Another travel-service-related study was that conducted by Persia and Gitelson (1993). Based on 65 features which originated from a literature review, they convened two panels; one consisting of travel managers and the other of commercial and leisure travelers. In the end, they identified 29 service features. Again though, it is evident that such features as "agency has brochures," "has airport pick-up," "agency delivers tickets", are of much greater importance to the individual traveler than to the group tourist.

In conclusion, since the previous research take only the perspective of the FIT, they do not account for the grounded service features specific to the GPT. Thus, there still exist ambiguities about the nature of the GPT's service features. Accordingly, the major goal of this study is to explore a grounded model as a foundation for future systematic investigation. Such a model will also help tour operators achieve a better understanding of the critical service features in GPT.

In this study we will mainly focus on tour guide, because he or she is the predominant influence on GPT quality. In view of the fact that people tend to make internal attributions for positive outcomes but external attributions for negative outcomes (Folkes, 1988; Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994), data were collected from both customers' and employees' perspectives in order to garner a more comprehensive perception.

2. Method and procedure

The first step in determining the importance of service features was to develop a list of features reflecting the functions and services of travel agencies (Persia & Gitelson, 1993). We began by collecting information about actual critical incidents which led to satisfaction or dissatisfaction on the part of GPT participants. There are two main reasons for incorporating dis/satisfaction concepts into the data collection process. First, as Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) indicated, satisfaction is the central concept in attempts to understand tourism behavior, which in turn is expected to produce personal satisfaction. Duke and Persia (1996a) also suggested that satisfaction can significantly indicate good or bad features that deserve attention in tours. Second, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, (1988, p. 16), argued that the key objective for agencies should be to guarantee satisfaction over repeated service encounters; satisfaction over time generates the perception of service quality.

After the critical incidents were collected, the incidents were categorized to reveal patterns (service features). With a grounded theory development approach, patterns must be allowed to emerge from the data, in contrast to the hypothetical-deductive approach (Keaveney, 1995).

2.1. Critical incident technique (CIT)

CIT has been applied successfully in fields as diverse as marketing, human resource management, and customer behavior. As noted by Keaveney (1995), CIT is applicable both to the resolution of practical management problems and to the development of new theory. Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990, 1994) also indicated that when the purpose of a study was to appreciate blurred real-world phenomena, the employment of CIT would be most suitable. Since the primary purpose of this study is to explore the important but still unclear service features of GPT, CIT was employed to choose what should be brought in and what should be excluded. The reliability and validity of this technique has also been demonstrated in such studies as Andersson and Nilsson (1964), Ronan and Latham (1974), and White and Locke (1981). For reliability, this study used both interjudge and intrajudge designs during the process of categorization (Weber, 1985; Bitner et al., 1990, 1994; Keaveney, 1995).

2.2. Sample selection

The selection of sample subjects comes mainly from the customer lists offered by a wholesale travel agency based in Taipei, Taiwan. The agency has four branches located throughout northern, central, and southern Taiwan, offering all forms of business and leisure travel services. The total number of employees is 165. In order to confine the study to customers with fresh recollections

of their tour guides and thus avoid the time delay effect (Heneman & Wexley, 1983), the travel agency was then invited to provide the customer lists for its GPTs within the past six months.

Due to the fact that the traveling duration of a GPT is normally long and covers diverse dimensions, we thought it necessary to divide the GPT into discrete sectors, such as the hotel, restaurant, and coach, etc. There are two advantages to this approach. First, it can help the implementation of data collection. Precise definition of incident sectors is conducive to eliciting the customers' recollections. Second, dividing the GPT into sectors can prevent some sectors from being overlooked.

To divide the GPT into sectors, we employed the focus group method (Krueger, 1994). Participants included the chairman, the heads of the marketing, sales, package tour departments, and three senior international tour guides. The group was chaired by a host researcher (who himself had working experience in a wholesale travel agency). The average working experience of the participants in the travel industry was 13 y. In the beginning, a number of issues were raised by the host researcher including: past experiences of tour guides, the relative importance of different sectors of the GPT itinerary as recognized by the participants, spots that are more likely to cause disagreement or conflict during the tour, and so on. After thorough discussion, and with the aid of answers to open-ended questionnaires and recording equipment, the opinions were integrated and summarized. The GPT itinerary was then divided into nine sectors; pre-tour briefing, airport/plane, hotel, restaurant, coach, scenic-spot, shopping, optional tour, and others, as shown in Fig. 1.
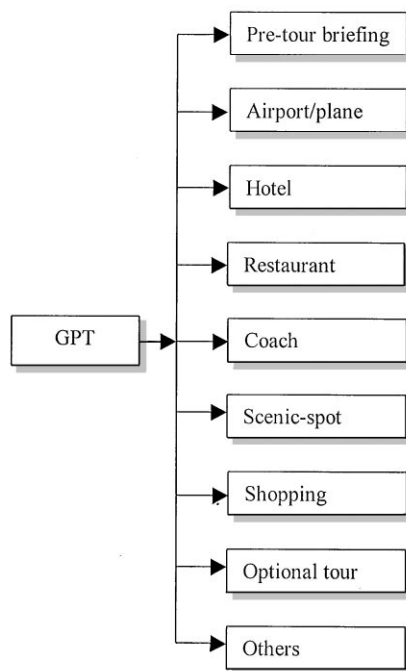
2.3. Questionnaire development

Two types of questionnaire were developed; the customer interview questionnaire and the employee questionnaire. The customer interview questionnaire was designed to be answered purely on the basis of personal experience, making it easy for most people to answer. Respondents were asked the following questions (taking the hotel sector as an illustration):

1. Of the group package tours you have taken part in, in the sector of *hotel*, can you tell me if there was any service of the tour guide which made you feel dis/satisfied?
2. Can you tell me what the tour guide said or did?
3. In the sector of *hotel*, if you ever take part in group package tour again, on the basis of your previous experiences what service would you expect the tour guide to provide?

To the employee questionnaire, Flanagan (1954, p. 343) once revealed that if the respondents are motivated to read the instructions carefully and answer

Fig. 1. The sectors of GPT.

conscientiously, questionnaires seem to give results which are not essentially different from those obtained by the interview method. Furthermore, in this case because the employees were familiar with the nature of their work, the questions were designed to be open-ended and self-reported. Based upon their personal experience, employees were asked the following questions (taking the hotel sector as an illustration):

1. In your experience of group package tour guiding, can you tell me, in the sector of *hotel*, if there was any incident which occurred with respect to your service, that led to the customer feeling dis/satisfied?
2. How did you deal with the incident?
3. Should an incident of similar nature occur again in the sector of *hotel*, as a group package tour guide, how would you handle it so as to satisfy the customer?

2.4. Data collection procedures

Data collection involved two separate stages, one for the customers, and one for the employees. In the first stage, six interviewers collected data from customers via telephone interviews. The advantage of this method is that the interviewers can provide the necessary explanation and question elucidation where needed, so that the interviewees will not be confused in their responses. Furthermore, this study used recording equipment to thoroughly preserve the answers of the interviewees, which proved useful during the subsequent categorization process.

The six interviewers were all undergraduate students who have taken courses in business management and travel management; they have also conducted a case study project focused on a wholesale travel agency. The six interviewers were divided into three groups; each team made up of one male and one female. Before telephone interviews were initiated, they received extensive training and written instructions so as to guarantee the smooth flow and consistent quality of the interviews. Written instructions were designed and provided based on the suggestions made by Morse and Field (1995).

In the second stage, written questionnaires were distributed to most of the employees of the travel agency. Before the employees were asked to fill them out, the researchers provided a public explanation of the contents of the questionnaire and the manner in which it was to be completed. Each of the questionnaires was supplemented with written instructions and illustrations. Furthermore, in order to motivate respondents to do a conscientious job, the questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter from the Chairman of the company strongly encouraging participation in the study.

Before large-scale data collection took place, this study used a small-scale sample to conduct a pre-test in order to uncover any potential problems. The characteristics of

the 15 respondents who participated in the pre-test were as follows: there were eight males, seven females; 36 per cent of respondents were college or university graduates; 36 per cent were between 31 and 35 y of age; 24 per cent of interviewees worked in the business community; most of them had traveled abroad two or three times.

3. Data quality

3.1. Quality of the critical incidents

For the customer interviews a total of 912 calls were made, 302 calls produced useable interview data. On average each interview took 32 min to complete. In these 302 successful interviews with the customers, 853 critical incidents were collected as a whole, but some of them were of doubtful relevance to the domain of the study. In view of this fact, this study has employed and adapted four principles put forward by Bitner et al. (1994) in order to process and screen the incidents. Under these principles; an incident was required to: (1) involve the conduct of the tour guide; (2) evince dis/satisfaction from the customer's point of view; (3) constitute a discrete episode; and (4) contain sufficient detail to be visualized by the interviewer. Accordingly, there were 42 incidents that could not satisfy one or more of the principles in the 853 incidents. After they were removed, a total of 811 incidents remained for study. Of these, 421 incidents generated expressions of customer dissatisfaction, while 390 incidents produced expressions of satisfaction.

In regard to employee questionnaires, all employees responded except those who were currently escorting GPTs overseas and those who were currently on vacation. Questionnaires sent out totaled 120, 112 were returned, of which 84 were useable. In these questionnaires, 352 incidents were observed, and 21 of them were removed as they fell short of the requirements based on the principles mentioned above. Of the remaining 331 incidents, 189 demonstrated satisfaction while 142 demonstrated dissatisfaction.

3.2. Characteristics of the sample

Fifty-nine percent of the customers sampled were female and forty-one percent were male. Twenty-six percent of interviewees were 31–35 y old, while 25 per cent were in the age group of 36–40. The mean frequency of participation in overseas GPTs was 2.3 times, of which about 1.2 trips had been sponsored by the subject travel agency.

Of the 84 employees sampled, 47 per cent were female and 53 per cent male; 41 per cent were aged 26–30, while 23 per cent were aged 21–25. The respondents had worked in the travel industry for an average of 4.6 y, of which their current job accounted for 2.5 y, and

during their current job they had led an average of 4.3 GPTs.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Unit of analysis

As indicated by Holsti (1968) and Kassarjian (1977), the first step in data analysis is to determine the appropriate unit of analysis. In this study the basic units of analysis were the critical features which emerged from the critical incidents. For instance, in the sector related to airport/plane; some interviewees responded that since the boarding passes for group seating are printed out in alphabetical order, couples and friends are often unable to sit next to each other. Customers often complained that the tour guide failed to address this problem in advance. The result was chaos as all of the group members were changing seats after boarding. Thus, there is a certain amount of dissatisfaction toward the service of the tour guide because some people could not sit with their family or friends. Critical incidents of the kind would be coded as "seating arrangement". Another example is in the hotel sector; some interviewees miss the chance to enjoy certain leisure facilities of the hotel because the tour guide does not brief them on the hotel facilities in advance; some interviewees are alarmed when involved in an accident where there is a fire at the hotel because the tour guide has not explained the emergency facilities of the hotel beforehand. Critical incidents of that kind would be coded as "facilities".

Two judges conducted the coding task of the unit of analysis, and the disagreements were further discussed with the researchers. In the end, a total of 1204 critical features emerged from the customers' 811 critical incidents, while 662 critical features emerged from the employees' 331 critical incidents.

4.2. Sub-sectors development and reliability

Once the basic unit of analysis was established, this study then categorized the critical features. First, two judges (A and B) categorized all of the 1204 critical features collected from the customers. In an iterative process conducted by judges A and B, each of the critical features was read out, classified, re-read, and re-classified. Twenty-five sub-sectors emerged within the nine primary sectors, and each of these sub-sectors was named. After the completion of the categorization process, the study then tested the reliability of the categorization process, and the pattern which emerged, by conducting interjudge and intrajudge reliability testing. According to Bitner et al. (1990, 1994), Keaveney (1995), and Ronan and Latham (1974), if the interjudge and intrajudge levels of

agreement reach 0.80, the categorization process can be regraded as reliable.

This study introduced judges C and D in order to conduct interjudge reliability testing. A time-lag of two weeks was employed for the intrajudge reliability testing, as suggested by Davis and Cosenza (1993). Judges C and D categorized all of the 1204 critical features into the nine sectors and were encouraged to create new sub-sectors if appropriate. The results of interjudge reliability were 0.85 for judge C and 0.86 for judge D. No new sub-sectors emerged. The results of intrajudge reliability were as 0.86 for judge A and 0.89 for judge B.

4.3. Sub-sectors confirmation

The study employed the 331 critical incidents from the 84 employee questionnaires as its confirmation sample, even though it was pointed out by Flanagan (1954, p. 343) that the sample size would be sufficiently large if no new category (sub-sector) emerges when an additional 100 incidents are added. This study required, for reliability, that judges A and B must be able to categorize all of the 331 critical incidents without adding any new sub-sectors. The intrajudge reliability was 0.89 for judge A, and 0.90 for judge B. Judges C and D also conducted interjudge reliability testing; the results were 0.86 and 0.88 respectively.

Table 1 shows the resulting categorization of critical features. The results show that the three main sectors were shopping (414), optional tour (343), and airport/plane (272), followed by scenic-spot (202), hotel (201), coach (186), others (91), restaurant (88), and the least-mentioned venue was the pre-tour briefing sector (69). The importance ordering of sectors was quite consistent regardless of whether the customers' or employees' questionnaires were used. However, in terms of the dis/satisfaction critical features, customers and employees held dissimilar views. In the customer sample, features of dissatisfaction outnumbered features of satisfaction by 773 to 431; conversely, the employees sampled mentioned fewer features of dissatisfaction than of satisfaction, by a margin of 285 to 377.

5. Results: the hierarchical structure

After the sub-sector development process, a complete structure was proposed. As shown in Fig. 2, the hierarchical structure included nine sectors and 25 emergent sub-sectors. Some detailed discussion of the most noteworthy findings is appropriate:

5.1. Pre-tour briefing

This sector represents 3.7 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are: (1) briefing references to

Table 1
Categorization of critical features in GPT

GPT sectors	Categorization sample (Customer)			Categorization sample (Employee)			Total sample		N and % critical features
	N of critical features (satisfied)	N of critical features (dissatisfied)	N of critical features	N of critical features (satisfied)	N of critical features (dissatisfied)	N of critical features	N of critical features (satisfied)	N of critical features (dissatisfied)	
1. Pre-tour briefing	20	31	51	10	8	18	30	39	69/3.7
2. Airport/plane	60	92	152	68	52	120	128	144	272/14.6
3. Hotel	49	82	131	40	30	70	89	112	201/10.8
4. Restaurant	30	32	62	14	12	26	44	44	88/4.7
5. Coach	51	74	125	35	26	61	86	100	186/10.0
6. Scenic-spot	50	63	113	55	34	89	105	97	202/10.8
7. Shopping	82	227	309	64	41	105	146	168	414/22.2
8. Optional tour	69	142	211	70	62	132	139	204	343/18.4
9. Others	20	30	50	21	20	41	41	50	91/4.9
Total Features	431	773	1204	377	285	662	808	1058	1866/100

optional tours; (2) briefing references to shopping; (3) briefing references to food and meals; and (4) provision of GPT information.

In the sub-sector related to "briefing references to optional tours", the primary source of customer dis/satisfaction lies in the tour guide's need to explain fully the optional tours during the briefing; for instance, "in pre-tour briefing, the tour guide didn't say there was such an optional tour and it has come up all of a sudden", " … the tour guide didn't reveal the fees for the optional tours and we [group members] only learned about the steep price when the tour guide encouraged everyone to join". Clear and complete briefings evoked satisfaction ("the tour guide honestly explained optional tours and its fees while in the pre-tour briefing, and he even frankly indicated that due to the extra services he provides, he would draw certain percentage of the fees as commission from each participant").

In the sub-sector "briefing references to shopping", customer dis/satisfaction often hinged on whether the tour guide had made clear the frequency and content of shopping excursions included in the GPT; for example, "in the pre-tour briefing, the number of spots for shopping and the content of shopping were not mentioned; some group members started to argue with the tour guide during the itinerary as they thought the group shouldn't be brought to shopping destinations not mentioned in the pre-tour briefing".

In the sub-sector of "briefing references to food and meals", it was clear that the respondents held tour guide responsible for checking the food and meals to be served overseas and inquiring about any particular dietary habits of the customers in advance ("I am a vegetarian, and the tour guide didn't check this during the briefing, so I could eat nothing but fruit [on the plane]", "when I took kids to Japan for a pleasure trip, they were not used to Japanese breakfasts; then I learned from some other group members that it was best to bring some pulverized pork for kids as a breakfast dish, but the tour guide didn't say anything of the sort at the briefing").

In the sub-sector of "provision of GPT information", customers often expressed appreciation when the tour guide took the trouble to communicate practical information to tour members who had been unable to attend the briefing. On the other hand, they expressed frustration at being left uninformed ("I didn't bring a hair-dryer with me because I thought there must be one available at the hotel, but there simply wasn't", "I took the whole family to the west coast of the States for fun, but we didn't know that it would be so cold in San Francisco in the summer and we brought only short-sleeved clothing, thus our children got a cold", "when we joined the 17-day tour to Europe we were occupied and couldn't attend the briefing, but the tour guide called us personally and informed us of each and every item to be attended to; and we felt the guide was good").
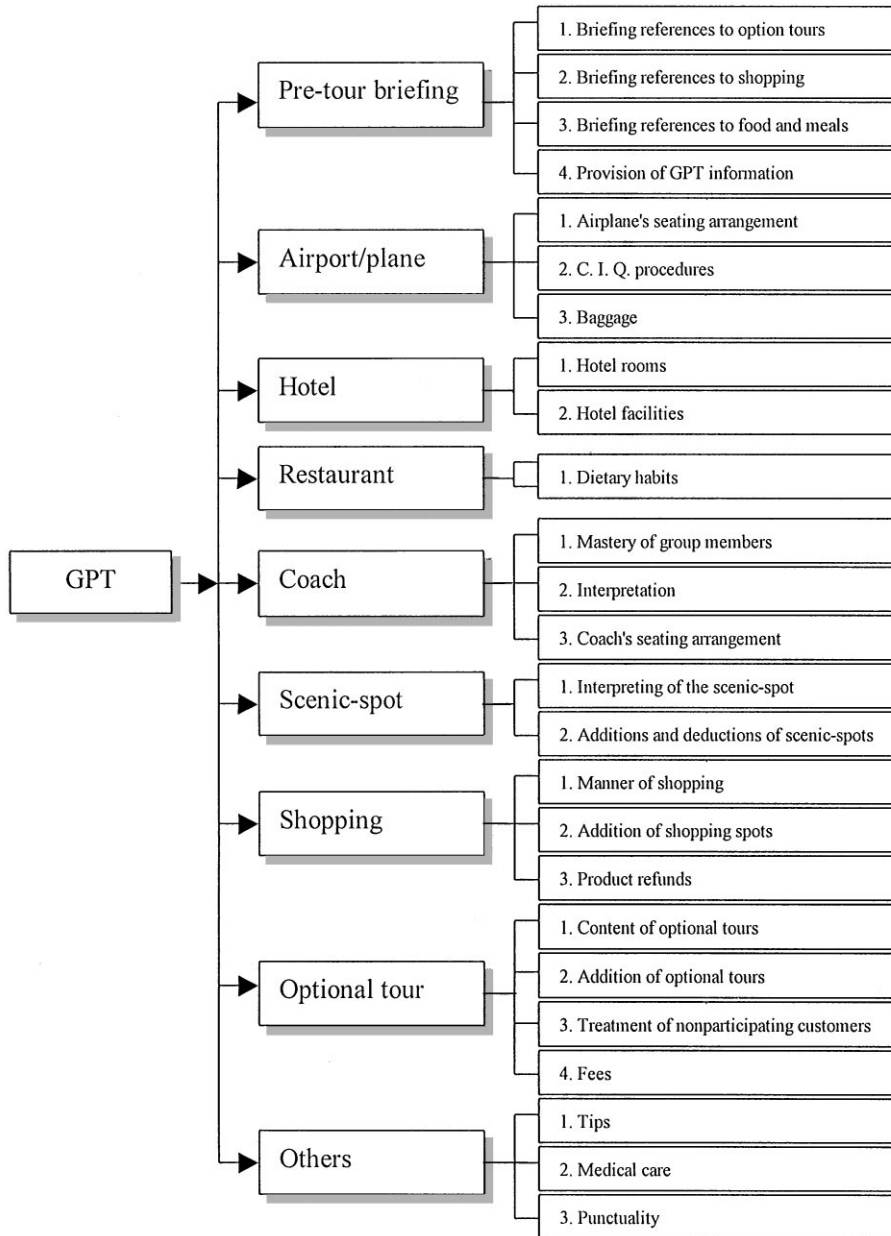
Fig. 2. The hierarchical framework of critical service features in GPT.

5.2. Airport/plane

The critical features in this sector represent 14.6 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are (1) airplane's seating arrangement; (2) CIQ (custom, immigration, and quarantine) procedures; and (3) baggage.

In the sub-sector of "airplane's seating arrangement", the chief concern was the difficulty of satisfying individual seating preferences and the desire of customers to sit with their preferred companions ("the tour guide did not arrange the plane seating in advance, and it was a mess after we boarded, also I could not sit next to my

mother", "at the airport, I suggested to the tour guide that we should re-arrange all of the group seating, but he wouldn't accept it, and it was a mess after we boarded", "on my latest tour to the States for pleasure, our tour guide was very detailed and experienced, he had already re-arranged all of the group seating beforehand and written it on the boarding pass, and he also inquired if anyone had any particular request, such as sitting next to the aisle or next to the window").

The sub-sector "CIQ procedures", mainly includes assistance getting through customs ("I couldn't speak either Japanese or English [GPT to Japan], and when there was trouble with my baggage at the customs inspection,

the tour guide was already out of the customs area"). It also includes the filling out of relevant customs forms ("there were many forms to fill in for entry and exit of a country, but the tour guide didn't help").

In the "baggage" sub-sector, other typical concerns emerged: ("the tour guide didn't tell us completely about the constraints placed on the baggage weight by the airline; as a result, my baggage was excess", "the tour guide asked the group members to help him bring some things back from Europe as his baggage was full").

5.3. Hotel

This sector represents 10.8 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are (1) hotel rooms; and (2) hotel facilities.

In the sub-sector of "hotel rooms", the primary factors leading to customer dis/satisfaction relate to whether the tour guide has made a clear and good arrangement of rooms or room facilities; for instance, "we went to Hawaii for our honeymoon, it was supposed to be a big bed [double] but there were only two small beds [twin]. Since we couldn't speak English it took us half an hour before the tour guide came to do something", "the tour guide went to each room to explain operation of its facilities and inquired if there was any problem".

The sub-sector of "hotel facilities" refers to the hotel facilities that are free to house guests, and the introduction to the fire and emergency facilities of the hotel ("when we were staying at the hotel [Penang, Malaysia], the hotel was broken into; we were lucky that our tour guide had reminded us to put our important belongings in the hotel safety-box, thus we were spared").

5.4. Restaurant

The critical features in this sector represent 4.7 per cent of all of the critical features. Its only sub-sector is "dietary habits".

Here we note that customer dis/satisfaction often hinged on whether the tour guide had made special arrangements for such customers as vegetarians, avoiders of specific meats such as beef, etc., for example, "I am a vegetarian; the tour guide forgot to inform the restaurant to make vegetarian meal arrangements for me", "in my pleasure trip to the States, the tour guide, after learning that all our six family members did not take beef, asked the restaurant to replace most of the beef with other kinds of meat".

5.5. Coach

This sector represents 10.0 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are (1) mastery of group members; (2) interpretation; and (3) coach's seating arrangement.

In the first sub-sector of "mastery of group members", the primary reasons leading to customer dis/satisfaction concerned the tour guide's alertness to the whereabouts of the group members ("when we were leaving Disneyland [Tokyo], the tour guide did not make a head-count and ordered the driver to move on, but it turned out that one member was left out").

The sub-sector of "interpretation" embraces the content and manner of interpretation ("on the way from LA [Los Angeles] to Las Vegas, the tour guide did not conduct any interpretation but only played some videos for us", "the tour guide did not interpret anything about the environment but keep promoting the content of shopping").

In the sub-sector of "coach's seating arrangement", issues of fairness often arose ("it was a trip to Australia/New Zealand, we were sitting at the back of the coach all the time and did not have a chance to sit at the front which has better view as well as being less susceptible to car-sickness, but the tour guide did not coordinate rotation seating for us", "for our pleasure trip to Europe in the summer, besides some fixed seating for elders at the front, the tour guide has arranged rotation seating for the group members every day as we had to sit for a long time; thus everyone shared the chance to sit at the back and front").

5.6. Scenic spot

The critical features in this sector amount to 10.8 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are (1) interpreting of the scenic-spot; and (2) additions and deductions of scenic-spots.

In the sub-sector of "interpreting of the scenic-spot", customers showed that they were mainly concerned with the manner and content of the guide's interpreting of the scenic-spot (" … trip to the Grand Canyon, while other Taiwanese tour guides conducted only photo-taking and free time for their group members, our tour guide, in every spot of viewing, interpreted the particulars of the scene in detail as well as the history of the Grand Canyon National Park, everyone felt much enriched", "in our pleasure trip to the States with kids in summer, the view was wonderful in Yosemite National Park, only the tour guide did not inform us very well, it was just a casual introduction and then free time for the group members; when I asked him if he knew who John Muir was, he didn't recognize the name").

In the sub-sector of "additions and deductions of scenic-spots", the main reasons leading to customer dis/satisfaction were that the tour guide did not obtain consent from the group members before he made changes involving the additions or deductions of the scenic-spots ("in Osaka, Japan, the tour guide did not obtain consent from us before he eliminated some destinations from the itinerary under the excuse to hurry for the flight").

5.7. Shopping

The critical features in this sector amount to 22.2 per cent of all the critical features, making it the largest sector. Its sub-sectors are (1) manner of shopping; (2) addition of shopping spots; and (3) product refunds.

In the sub-sector of "manner of shopping", the principal reasons leading to customer dis/satisfaction concerned forced shopping or the deliberate keeping of customers in the store for shopping ("in Hangzhou [China], the tour guide took the group to buy tea and tea-pots, and we stayed in the store for one and a half hours, and the tour guide wouldn't leave even though we had chosen not to buy", " …he [tour guide] threatened us that we had to buy something", "the tour guide indicated that the shopping destinations were pre-arranged by the travel agency so that we had to visit, but no one was forced to buy anything").

In the sub-sector of "addition of shopping spots", the primary reason for customer dis/satisfaction was the tour guide's addition of certain shopping destinations on his own initiative without obtaining the agreement of group members in advance; for instance, "[Thailand], the tour guide incorporated several shopping spots without the consent of the group, and we were on a spree of buying throughout the day", "on the way to the restaurant [Bali, Indonesia], the tour guide took us to buy silverware as he said the store was on the way, regardless of our willingness".

In the sub-sector of "product refunds", customers were mainly concerned about the unavailability of refunds: ("after we had bought some precious stones in the shopping store, the tour guide indicated us that there would not be refunding for those precious stones").

5.8. Optional tour

This sector represents 18.4 per cent of all of the critical features, making it the second largest of all the sectors. Its sub-sectors are (1) content of optional tours; (2) addition of optional tours; (3) treatment of nonparticipating customers; and (4) fees.

In the sub-sector of "content of optional tours", the incidents emphasize the need for the tour guide to make clear in advance the dangers of the optional tours and to call the tourists' attention to the necessary safety precautions: ("on an optional tour in Langkawi [Malaysia], the tour guide did not remind the participants to put on their life-jackets, one member of our group nearly drowned himself during the snorkeling diving").

In the sub-sector of "addition of optional tours", the primary concern was the need to obtain consent ("when in New Zealand, the tour guide put in the optional helicopter fight without the consent of the group").

With regard to the "treatment of nonparticipating customers", the main cause for complaint lay in the attitude of the tour guide toward nonparticipating customers, and whether there were any special activities arranged for them ("since we were afraid to take the small plane and we could not speak English, we could only stay in the hotel when the tour guide took most of the group members to Grand Canyon", "I get seasick easily; on the tour to the Philippines, the tour guide asked every customer to attend the optional bay cruise for the sake of safety").

In the sub-sector of "fees", the main reason for customer dis/satisfaction was typified by ("in the night entertainment show [Paris], we found the fee rather exorbitant, and inquired with the tour guide about it, but he simply remarked that the fee was determined by the travel agency. We felt that the tour guide cheated us").

5.9. Others

The critical features in this catch-all sector represented 4.9 per cent of all of the critical features. Its sub-sectors are (1) tips; (2) medical care; and (3) punctuality.

Concerning "tips", the manner of tip collection by the tour guide often provoked comment ("at the last day of the itinerary, the tour guide passed an envelope on the coach on the way from hotel to airport, and everyone could offer whatever they thought his performance deserved and it was not compulsory", "there was compulsory tip-collection as we joined a tour to mainland China, and even before the tour started the tour guide began to collect tip at the airport [Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport]", "for our tour to Europe, the tour guide clearly indicated that he took NT$ 100 per day from every person and child as well for the tip, but we thought that it took the performance to decide how much to give").

In the sub-sector of "medical care", customers showed that they attached importance to the tour guide's knowledge of basic medical care (" …one member felt uncomfortable, but the tour guide, not a physician himself, prescribed medication for him", "when my husband fell at the bathroom [hotel] and hurt himself, the tour guide knew quite well about the procedures for such an emergency"). In the sub-sector of "punctuality", customers showed dissatisfaction with delays caused by the tour guide's lateness, as for instance, "when everyone has arrived, the tour guide is nowhere to be found".

6. Discussion and conclusions

Articulation of a rigorous classification system provides the fundamental first step in developing a comprehensive theory (Keaveney, 1995). Through the CIT classification process, this study enables the researcher to explore the meaning behind such general concepts as inefficient, adequate, unprepared, and knowledgeable. It

thus offers insights into the actual tour guide's service features that are linked to those concepts in GPT. As a result, we proposed an exploratory and grounded model that implies certain extensions to GPT in group travel research. The model and its categories can be seen as exhaustive and reliable, for the following reasons:

First, the data were collected by six comprehensively trained interviewers in a carefully controlled interviewing process, which was structured according to written instructions. Second, the results exhibited high inter-judge and intrajudge reliability. Third, both customers' and service providers' viewpoints were considered. Fourth, less than 5 per cent of the features were sorted into the "others" sector, which implies that the division of sectors developed by the focus group was adequate and appropriate.

The proposition that the shopping, optional tour, and airport/plane sectors have most influence on customer dis/satisfaction is supported by the fact that together these three sectors accounted for a total of 55.2 per cent of the critical features. This implies a need to put more emphasis on these sectors. Particularly in the shopping sector, it strongly suggests the inadvisability of a commission-dictated shopping itinerary. Often a tour guide is induced to take the GPT to more shops or to shops where the guide receives a high commission. Frequently, the high commission entails poor product quality or unreasonably high prices, often leading to disputes about refunds.

One interesting finding, which emerged from the collected incidents, was that most dissatisfaction incidents occurred in Southeast Asian countries. This phenomenon may reflect the intense price competition faced by tour operators in this market. For example, it is very easy to see GPT advertisements in local newspapers, such as "7 days GPT to Thailand, primarily includes the two famous scenic-spots Bangkok and Phuket island, airfare, coach, food and accommodation, etc., the direct sale price is only NT\$ 8,800, or about US\$ 260". Since such GPTs are marketed on the basis of price rather than quality, it is not surprising that only those shops which can offer large commissions are considered.

In short, the research findings raise three implications for the tour operator. First, the tour operator should constrain the tour guide's behavior in the shopping sector more rigidly, explicitly specifying such considerations as; shopping time, location, frequency, and the refund process. Second, GPT brochures, advertising, and pre-tour briefing should clearly express the shopping time, location, frequency, and refund process and guarantee. Third, we suggest that the tour operator must look for equilibrium between the GPT price and the revenue from the shops' commissions. Hart (1988) indicated that the cost of customer dissatisfaction is enormous. If the tour operator still intends to cover the underestimated GPT cost through the shops' commissions, they should be aware that this may result in serious loss of customers and hence, of profit.

"Optional tour" is the second largest sector, comprising 18.4 per cent of all critical features. For the purposes of reducing the GPT selling price and providing flexible choices for GPT customers during the itinerary, the optional tour has become an essential part of most GPTs. Popular optional tours include one-day tours to the Grand Canyon, cable car and underwater world tours in Singapore, and night tours in Las Vegas. From the critical incidents reported it is obvious that some optional tours such as jet boat (Queenstown) and snorkeling diving (Bali and Langkawi island) entail risks. In order to reduce risk and prevent customer dissatisfaction, the tour guide should not only clearly understand the risk-related attributes of each optional tour, but also should advise the customer in advance of the attendant risks and the precautions they can take.

With regard to the addition and fees of the optional tour features, problems arise which are similar to the problems mentioned in relation to the shopping sector. In order to gain commissions, the tour guide sometimes adds extra optional or discretionary tours, for which they may charge prices that the customers regard as unreasonably high. Thus there is a direct pecuniary connection to the sub-sector "treatment of nonparticipating customers". Without a doubt, the number of customers who participate in the optional tour will significantly influence the tour guide's commission. Thus, the tour guide may intentionally or unintentionally neglect those customers who did not take part in an optional tour. Such neglect becomes a common source of customer dissatisfaction.

Airport/plane is the third largest sector, representing 14.6 per cent of critical features. The sub-sectors are: (1) airplane's seating arrangement; (2) CIQ procedures; and (3) baggage. Due to the variety of procedures for airports, airplanes, customs, immigrations, quarantines, transfer, baggage, and so on, most customers need careful guidance, and to some of them language (English) is a significant problem. If the tour guide is unknowledgeable or uncaring, dissatisfactions can easily result. Thus, we suggest that tour operators should specify the procedures involved in this sector clearly and completely. Carefully designed information booklets or brochures might also be helpful to both the customer and the tour guide.

The other six sectors (pre-tour briefing, hotel, restaurant, coach, scenic-spot, and others) accounted for 44.9 per cent of all the critical features. It is interesting to note some of the more interesting phenomena which emerged from the data. In the coach sector one emergent sub-sector, "coach's seating arrangement," is consistent with Quiroga's package tour study (1990) in which she indicated that seat-assignment is one of the most frequent sources of conflict, especially in large groups. In this study almost all the critical incidents related to coach's

seating arrangement occurred in the GPTs that contained long-distance coach itineraries, mainly in New Zealand, USA, and European countries. This implies that distance may be as much a determinant of conflict over the coach's seating arrangement as group size.

The pre-tour briefing sector represents only 3.7 per cent of the critical features. This low percentage is partly due to the fact that many customers did not attend the pre-tour briefing; for example, "We are too busy to attend the pre-tour briefing", "it seemed unnecessary to attend pre-tour briefing". Although the reported percentage is quite low, the sub-sectors such as: briefing references to optional tours, briefing references to shopping, and briefing references to food and meals, imply that problems related to the pre-tour briefing may serve as antecedents to critical features in other sectors. That in turn implies that an effective pre-tour briefing would probably reduce conflicts elsewhere. Practitioners should probably devote extra attention to the design of the pre-tour briefing, and take steps to insure that those who did not show up will obtain the complete information before GPT commences. However, the real causal relationship is still unknown and needs to be examined more closely in the future.

It is important to note that the critical incidents from the nine sectors are controllable from a service provider's point of view. The service features that emerged from the data also suggest areas in which tour operators might take action to prevent customer dissatisfaction. As Deming (1982) once recommended, a basic principle of quality management is that to improve quality, first it must be measured. Duke and Persia (1996b) concluded that concrete itinerary issues should be emphasized by the tour planner. Thus, we suggest that researchers and practitioners can incorporate these 25 sub-sectors as a basis for measuring and managing GPT service. Specifically, the fundamental problem in GPTs is similar to the inherent problems of service products, namely, the intangibility of what is being delivered and the variation among individual contact employees (Ryan & Cliff, 1997; Keegan, Moriarty & Duncan, 1995). Thus, tour operators can develop performance standards for tour guides by aligning them with the 25 tangible sub-sectors, for example:

1. In *hotel* sector, the tour guide must personally check each of the customers' rooms within 15 min after the group has checked-in. (*hotel rooms sub-sector*)
2. In *optional tour* sector, the tour guide must arrange some activities for those who do not intend to take part in the optional tour. (*treatment of nonparticipating customers sub-sector*)

One problem may still present itself even if it were possible to standardize service behaviors as suggested above. As Knisely (1979) revealed, people's day to day performance fluctuates up and down, the level of consist-

ency that you can count on and try to communicate to the consumer is not a certain thing. This situation is made more difficult by the fact that the tour guide's job performance is generally outside the observation and control domain of management.

Therefore, it needs to be clearly stated these 25 tangible sub-sectors are essential, but even more importantly is that they should be expected in advance. That is to say, before the GPT commences both the customer and the tour guide need to be clearly aware of what tangible services should be "received" and "provided" at a certain level in each sector. By educating or informing the customer's awareness and expectations in advance, the tour guide's job performance fluctuation would be reduced and the level of service would be more consistent.

One point to be emphasized here is that these 25 tangible sub-sectors would not constrain the tour guide's performance entirely. A complete catalogue of all possible services to be rendered by the tour guide under all possible circumstances would probably list hundreds of varieties. These proposed 25 features only disclose the basic and most important features as identified by customers and service providers. The tour guide still has room to exercise his own creativity and authority to lead the tour. In fact, because different GPTs might confront diverse countries, weather, traffic problems, etc., the tour operator should carefully adapt these proposed 25 features accordingly.

Furthermore, the tour operator can incorporate the concept of "customer appraisal," into the 25 sub-sectors presented in this study (Pollack & Pollack, 1996; Wang & Hsieh, 1998). The customer can be employed as a job performance rating source, using the 25 sub-sectors as performance criteria to appraise the tour guide's job performance. In this way, not only are the services guaranteed at a certain level, but also the gap between service quality specifications and actual service delivery (*GAP 3*, Parasuraman et al., 1985, p. 45) can be reduced.

The work of Bitner et al. (1990) focused on the service encounter and diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. Hotels, restaurants, and airlines were selected as representative of high-contact service industries. After a rigorous data collection and categorization process, the results revealed that three major groups and 12 categories emerged from the collected incidents. Bitner et al. (1990) have emphasized the broad relevance of their study and it may indeed be applicable to many other high-contact transaction-based service industries. We thought, however, that some critical attributes of the interaction between tour guide (contact employee) and customer in the GPT, such as the long duration and closeness of the personal relationship, the dominant role of the tour guide, and the fact that tour guide's performance is generally outside the observation and

control domain of management, etc., require the special treatment which we have tried to provide here. These phenomena combine to create a service environment which could not be fully explained by the simple direct transference of categorizations developed in Bitner et al. (1990).

Furthermore, some of the results of Bitner et al.'s research seemed to us too abstract or too general to be of specific use to GPT operators; for example, gestalt evaluation, response to unreasonably slow service, response to customer preferences, etc. From the tour operator perspective, Bitner et al.'s research was striking, but we believe that by adding extra detail in some areas and leaving other areas unexplored, the present study offers results and ideas which are well tailored to the direct needs of service quality management in this industry.

As Wang and Sheldon (1995) pointed out, China represents the largest population in the world and is currently experiencing stunning growth in outbound travel as travelers are now discovering the rest of the world. Taiwan and China are similar in race, culture, and language. We can infer from the evolution of the GPT here in Taiwan that, it is reasonable to believe China will become the largest outbound GPT export country in the world. Certainly, it is worthwhile for the destination countries to pay closer attention to it.

Using qualitative methods, we have introduced the first grounded service features model based directly on the GPT. Further evaluative research, including controlled manipulation of proposed causal variables, is needed to test actual cause and effect. Some ideas for future study are suggested by the limitations of the current research. First, only critical incidents related to the tour guide were considered in this study. Other agencies such as airlines, coach companies, etc., might also influence the service features in GPT. Future study could incorporate these elements for a more extensive investigation. Second, in the data collection procedure, we conducted a focus group to define basic sectors for the convenience of respondents and to prevent some sectors from being overlooked. The fact that fewer than 5 per cent of features were sorted into the "others" sector, implies that the use of the focus group was appropriate in this study. But it remains unknown how the study results would have been affected if a focus group had not been used in advance. This should be tested in the future. Third, in this study we did not distinguish the tour guide from the destination's local guide. Although the nature of their job performance is similar, further research is needed to identify possible differences which might still exist.

In conclusion, this present study proposes the first grounded model of critical service features specific to the GPT. In the future, further specification and testing of the model and more systematic investigation of other relevant variables are needed to increase our understanding of GPTs.

References

Andersson, B.-E., & Nilsson, S. G. (1964). Studies in the reliability and validity of the critical incident technique. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *48*(6), 398–403.

Bitner, M. J., & Booms, B. H. (1981). Deregulation and the future of the U.S. travel agent industry. *Journal of Travel Research*, *20*(2), 2–7.

Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreault, M. S. (1990). The service encounter: Diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, *54*(1), 149–155.

Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Mohr, L. A. (1994). Critical service encounters: The employee's viewpoint. *Journal of Marketing*, *58*(4), 95–106.

Cohen, E. (1985). The tourist guide: The origins, structure and dynamics of a role. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *12*(1), 5–29.

Davis, D., & Cosenza, R. M. (1993). *Business research for decision making*. California: Wadsworth.

Deming, W. E. (1982). *Quality, productivity, and competitive position*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Duke, C. R., & Persia, M. A. (1996a). Performance-importance analysis of escorted tour evaluations. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *5*(3), 207–223.

Duke, C. R., & Persia, M. A. (1996b). Consumer-defined dimensions for the escorted tour industry segment: Expectations, satisfactions, and importance. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *5*(1/2), 77–99.

Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, *51*(4), 327–358.

Folkes, V. S. (1988). Recent attribution research in consumer behavior: A review and new directions. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *14*(4), 548–565.

Fuller, G. (1994). *Travel agency management*. Ohio: South-Western.

Goldsmith, R. E., Flynn, L. R., & Bonn, M. (1994). An empirical study of heavy users of travel agencies. *Journal of Travel Research*, *33*(1), 38–43.

Hart, C. W. L. (1988). The power of unconditional service guarantees. *Harvard Business Review*, *66*(4), 54–62.

Heneman, R. L., & Wexley, K. N. (1983). The effects of time delay in rating and amount of information observed on performance rating accuracy. *Academy of Management Journal*, *26*(4), 677–686.

Holloway, J. C. (1981). The guided tour: A sociological approach. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *8*(3), 377–402.

Holsti, O. R. (1968). Content analysis. In G. Lindzey, & E. Aronson, *The handbook of social psychology: Research methods*, 2 (pp. 596–692). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Hooper, P. (1995). Evaluation strategies for packaging travel. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *4*(2), 65–82.

Kassarjian, H. H. (1977). Content analysis in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *4*(1), 8–18.

Keaveney, S. M. (1995). Customer switching behavior in service industries: An exploratory study. *Journal of Marketing*, *59*(2), 71–82.

Keegan, W. J., Moriarty, S. E., & Duncan, T. R. (1995). *Marketing*. NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kent, W. E., Meyer, R. A., & Reddam, T. M. (1987). Reassessing wholesaler marketing strategies: The role of travel research. *Journal of Travel Research*, *25*(3), 31–33.

Knisely, G. (1979). Financial services marketers must learn packaged goods selling tools. *Advertising Age*, *50*, 58–62.

Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. California: Sage.

LeBlanc, G. (1992). Factors affecting customer evaluation of service quality in travel agencies: An investigation of customer perceptions. *Journal of Travel Research*, *30*(4), 10–16.

Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for health professionals*. California: Sage.

Nozawa, H. (1992). A marketing analysis of Japanese outbound travel. *Tourism Management*, *13*(2), 226–234.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, *49*(4), 41–50.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, *64*(1), 12–40.

Persia, M. A., & Gitelson, R. J. (1993). The differences among travel agency users in the importance ratings of agency service features. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *1*(4), 77–97.

Pollack, D. M., & Pollack, L. J. (1996). Using 360° feedback in performance appraisal. *Public Personnel Management*, *25*(4), 507–528.

Prideaux, B. R. (1998). Korean outbound tourism: Australia's response. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *7*(1), 93–102.

Quiroga, I. (1990). Characteristics of package tours in Europe. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *17*(2), 185–207.

Ronan, W. W., & Latham, G. P. (1974). The reliability and validity of the critical incident technique: A closer look. *Studies in Personnel Psychology*, *6*(1), 53–64.

Ross, E. L. D., & Iso-Ahola, S. E. (1991). Sightseeing tourists' motivation and satisfaction. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *18*(2), 226–237.

Ryan, C., & Cliff, A. (1997). Do travel agencies measure up to customer expectation? An empirical investigation of travel agencies' service quality as measured by SERVQUAL. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *6*(2), 1–31.

Schmidt, C. J. (1979). The guided tour: Insulated adventure. *Urban Life*, *7*(4), 441–467.

Schuchat, M. G. (1983). Comforts of group tours. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *10*(4), 465–477.

Tourism Bureau (1998). *1997 annual survey report on R. O. C. outbound travelers*. Taipei: Tourism Bureau.

Vogt, C. A., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (1995). Tourists and retailers' perceptions of services. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *22*(4), 763–780.

Wang, K.-C., & Hsieh, A.-T. (1998). *An exploratory research of the unseen employees' job performance appraisal: From the customer appraisal perspective*. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Students Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, Houston.

Wang, Y., & Sheldon, P. J. (1995). The sleeping dragon awakes: The outbound Chinese travel market. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, *4*(4), 41–54.

Weber, R. P. (1985). *Basic content analysis*. London: Sage.

White, F. M., & Locke, E. A. (1981). Perceived determinants of high and low productivity in three occupational groups: A critical incident study. *Journal of Management Studies*, *18*(4), 375–387.