

## Research note

# An investigation into customer satisfaction levels in the budget accommodation sector in Scotland: a case study of backpacker tourists and the Scottish Youth Hostels Association

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**Abstract**

This research note reports a summary of the results of a survey carried out with the support of the Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA). The focus of this research was to gain a better understanding of the requirements of budget accommodation users in Scotland, the characteristics associated with their accommodation choice and the levels of importance and satisfaction associated with the main Scottish provider of budget accommodation (SYHA).

The research reported in this note is part of a wider study which focuses on a particular tourist segment commonly known as “backpackers” who are also defined in the specialist literature as “independent travellers”, “youth/budget tourists” and “uninstitutionalised tourists” (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 22(4) (1995) 819–843; Elsrud, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 28(3) (2001) 597–617; Murphy, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 28(1) (2001) 50–67; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, *Ann. Tourism Res.* 29(2) (2002) 520–538).

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**1. Introduction**

There is increasing competition in tourism destination marketing and there is an opportunity for destinations to focus on the youth and backpacker markets that have “been neglected by researchers” (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2002, p. 55). Keeley (2001) suggests that although it is recognised that Britain has the opportunity to benefit from backpacker tourism, little is known about the size and commercial value of this market. Despite a fairly rapid expansion in the provision of budget accommodation, backpacker tourism tends not to benefit from public sector support and current research does not reflect the potential benefits associated with backpacker tourism and backpacker travel patterns. These should be the subjects for further investigation (Keeley, 2001;

Robson, 2000; Seekings, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002; Elliott, 1997).

Currently backpackers account for “10% of overseas visitors to the UK—an estimated 2.5 million travellers and Britain has huge potential to benefit from further development of backpacker tourism” (English Tourism Council, 2002, p. 1). There are many advantages to targeting the youth/backpacker market and these are outlined in Table 1.

Keeley (1995, p. 7) suggests that hostels are the preferred option for backpackers in the UK but they tend to vary enormously in quality. The main providers of budget accommodation in Scotland are the Scottish Youth Hostel Association (SYHA). This organisation differs in terms of its constitution and charitable status, its size and international affiliations and its approach to accessing the countryside and culture of Scotland from the independent hostel providers, who in the main, are focused on making profits. There are wider differences

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Table 1  
Advantages of the youth/backpacker market

- They travel year round
- They travel country-wide
- They use public transport
- They stay for long periods of time
- They are likely to return to Britain at later stages in their lives
- They only tend to carry essentials with them and will therefore spend on local businesses

(Adapted from Keeley, 2001).

between the SYHA and other hostels that relate back to the early self-help approach of the SYHA. All visitors used to have to be members and everyone was asked to assist in cleaning duties in the hostel. Age restrictions and closing times were in force and motorised means of travel were not allowed for arrival at hostels. The focus was very much on the youth market, self-help and improving awareness of the countryside (SYHA, 2003). This research provides a better understanding of their existing and potential customer base, as well as identifying their requirements and levels of satisfaction with the SYHA product.

In Scotland there has been some data collected by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2000) on hostels in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and also some by VisitScotland (1999) on the hostel market. It notes that there has been a large increase in provision from 29 independent hostels in 1990 to 151 in 1999. “In 1999 there were 1.4 million hostel bed-nights, with an expenditure of £40 million (about £36 per person per night), split equally between the Scottish Youth Hostels Association (SYHA) and independent sectors.” (VisitScotland, 1999, p. 1). It is this increase in provision and the lack of research into the backpacker tourist (in the UK) that prompted this study.

## 2. Backpackers—definitions

There are considerable problems associated with defining exactly what or who a backpacker actually is, because backpackers are not easily distinguished economically or demographically. A variety of terms have been used by authors to describe a backpacker and these are outlined in Table 2.

A summary of literature outlined in Table 2 has established the following characteristics associated with backpackers:

- A preference for budget accommodation.
- An emphasis on meeting other travelers.
- An independently organised and flexible travel schedule.

Table 2  
Authors for various definitions of the backpacker

Terminology	Author (Year)
Backpacker	Loker-Murphy (1995) Keeley (2001) Ryan and Moshin (2001) Reisinger and Mavondo (2002)
Youth tourist	Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) Reisinger and Mavondo (2002)
Traveller	Vogt (1976) in Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995)
Non-institutionalised tourist	Uriely et al. (2002)
Budget tourist/economy tourist	Elsrud (2001)

- Aged between 20 to 24, but can range from 15 to 60 years of age (as is the case with SYHA).
- Longer rather than brief holidays.
- An emphasis on informal and participatory holiday activities.

## 3. Satisfaction and service quality

There is discussion and disagreement in both the marketing and hospitality literature about satisfaction and service quality (Gronroos, 1988; Botteril, 1987; Moutinho, 1987; Johns & Howard, 1998; Oh, 1999; Tsang & Qu, 2000; Giese & Cote, 2000; Lee, Lee, & Yoo, 2000; Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000; Choi & Chu, 2001). Satisfaction can be defined as “a judgement that a product, or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption—related fulfilment, including levels of under or over fulfilment” (Oliver, 1997, p. 13). Customer satisfaction has been noted as a major element “needed to create and sustain a competitive business” (Ueltschy, Laroche, Tamila, & Yannopoulos, 2002, p. 2).

Customers will be satisfied if the services they receive are at least as good as they were supposed to be, “a consumer is considered satisfied when his weighted sum total of experiences shows a feeling of gratification when compared with his expectations. On the other hand, a consumer is considered dissatisfied when his actual experience shows a feeling of displeasure when compared with his expectation” (Choi & Chu, 2001, p. 280). This naturally involves an element of expectation associated with the service. However, in this research the focus was not to enter into the already well-developed debate associated with expectations and quality/performance (Oh, 1999; Giese & Cote, 2000;

Lee et al., 2000; Choi & Chu, 2001; Ueltschy et al., 2002). The focus for this study was to identify what characteristics associated with accommodation choice were important to the backpackers and how satisfied they were with the SYHA product.

#### 4. Method

Data were collected through a self-completion questionnaire. To aid in the design of the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were undertaken with international and domestic visitors staying in SYHA hostels throughout Scotland; a mixture of urban and rural locations were used. In total, 22 interviews were undertaken with a mixture of age groups, nationalities and gender. Responses from the interviews were compared with findings in the literature to aid questionnaire development. There were seven main sections in the questionnaire and these are outlined in Table 3.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on 20 hostel visitors, resulting in a few questions being changed, mainly due to syntax recommendations. In total 1200 questionnaires were distributed to 12 hostels (spread throughout urban and rural areas). Hostel staff and managers administered and returned the questionnaires. Of the 1200 distributed, 309 completed questionnaires were returned (25.7% response rate). These were analysed using SPSS software.

Many of the questions required the respondent to complete a 7-point Likert scale, usually to signify the importance/satisfaction of a particular part of the hostel/backpacking experience. The overall sample means, standard deviation and size of the sample for each scale item was checked. These were considered satisfactory, with no major discrepancies apparent between the standard deviations. A reliability analysis was also undertaken on the items included in each of the scale sections; all  $\alpha$  values were above the 0.7 thresholds which Nunnally (1978) and Peterson (1994) recommend. As a consequence the scales were deemed reliable.

#### 5. Results and discussion

##### 5.1. Nationality

The findings in Table 4 contrast with figures supplied by VisitScotland (1999, p. 2) who suggest that “hostels are popular with both Scottish and English residents, who alone account for 50% of their visitors.” However, they tend to support the findings of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2000, p. 4): “overseas visitors are the most significant source market for hostels in the Highlands and Islands, accounting for 60–70% of all holidaymakers using hostels. Visitors from the UK account for 27%.” The fact that the British visitors only represent 30% of all users of the SYHA is surprising

Table 3  
Summary of the content of the questionnaire

Question subject	Details about the question	Number of questions
Details of holiday in Scotland	Length of stay Regions visited Travel companions Holiday planning	4
Reasons for travel	Motivations Expectations/perceptions Attractions visited/intend to visit Activities undertaken/intend to undertake	82
Transportation	Types of transport used Reasons for choosing transportation modes	11
Accommodation	Types of accommodation used Reasons for choosing accommodation types Importance/satisfaction of accommodation facilities Overall satisfaction with accommodation Suggested improvements for accommodation Reasons for staying in SYHA Booking procedure for accommodation	34
Spending	Estimate of how much was spent on holiday Estimate of budget for holiday	3
Information sources	Types of information sources used to plan trip	13
Demographics	Gender Age Education Work situation Household income	7

Table 4  
Breakdown of all nationalities

Nationality	% of respondents
British	30
Australian	14
German	10
USA	9
New Zealander	7
Danish	4
French	4
Dutch	3
Spanish	3
Swiss	3
South African	3
Chinese	2
Japanese	2
Greek	1
Polish	1
Russian	1
Others	3

given that the SYHA is a Scottish organisation. A reason for this could be the data were collected in September and October when there would be less British visitors (British people tend to take their holidays in July and August). Additionally international backpackers are likely to be less constrained by the time of the year because of the possibility that they may have extended travel periods.

### 5.2. Length of stay in Scotland

There is a tendency for visitors (69%) to stay in Scotland between 4 and 14 days and nearly 40% of respondent's stay less than a week, the majority being British. The length of stay is comparatively short when compared to other studies (Table 5). Certainly, the average length of stay in research conducted by Keeley (2001) in Britain was 4 weeks. It is important to note here that the majority of backpacker visitors to Scotland also visit other parts of the UK, mainly England, with a focus on London (Keeley, 2001). This goes some way to explaining the relatively short length of stay (in backpacker terms) in Scotland. Despite this Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2000, p. 6) suggest that the length of stay by backpackers in the Highlands is longer than for visitors in general: "the average length of stay by holidaymakers using hostels is 8.9 nights." The norm for visitors in general is 6.9 nights.

### 5.3. Sources of information

The sources of information that respondents judged to be important before and during their stay in Scotland include maps (54%), travel guidebooks (46%), the Internet (42%), and information from word of mouth

Table 5  
Length of stay in Scotland

Time scale	% of respondents
1 day to 3 days	6
Over 4 days to 1 week	33
Over 1 week to 2 weeks	36
Over 2 weeks to 1 month	10
Over 1 month to 2 months	4
Over 2 months to 3 months	6
Over 3 months to 6 months	3
Over 6 months	2

Table 6  
Most important sources of information used by respondents

Sources of information	% of respondents
Maps	54
Travel guidebooks	46
Internet	42
Information from word of mouth	42
Brochures	40
Past information/knowledge	33
Youth Hostel Association guide book	33
Visitor Information centres	29
Travel writing	17
Travel agents	6
Television travel shows	4
Adverts on TV, radio, press	4
Travel & trade fairs	2

(42%). The SYHA guidebook was judged important by 33% of respondents (Table 6). Information mediated by the press, television and radio did not feature as important in the planning of respondents' visit to and around Scotland. Furthermore, results suggest that travel agents play a minimal role.

Most customers rely on marketing messages as a basis for their holiday decisions and therefore buy the product without seeing it and this implies a high level of trust in the delivery of the product. The findings in Table 7 are supported by other studies (Westerhausen & Macbeth, 2003; Keeley, 2001; Robson, 2000; Highlands and Islands Enterprise 2000) in that the Internet, guidebooks, and word of mouth are considered to be of primary importance in backpacker decision making.

### 5.4. Accommodation

The types of accommodation mainly used by respondents during their stay in Scotland include SYHA hostels (49%), independent backpacker hostels (15%) and bed and breakfast accommodation (14%). These results are supported by Seekings (1998) who suggests that hostels and backpacker hotels are the preferred

accommodation for backpackers, mainly as a result of a preference for low cost accommodation.

### 5.5. Reasons for staying in an SYHA hostel

Participants to the survey were then asked to select all the reasons for choosing to stay in a SYHA hostel as

Table 7  
Types of accommodation used by respondents

Type of accommodation	% of respondents
SYHA hostels	49
Independent backpackers hostels	15
Bed & breakfast	14
With family/friends	8
Self-catering accommodation	4
Hotels	4
Tent/caravan	3
Guest house	2

Table 8  
Reasons for staying in an SYHA hostel

Reasons	% of respondents
Good price	76
Good location	66
Already a member	60
Ease of booking facilities	47
Good cooking facilities	44
Good bathroom facilities	29
Found more information on SYHA	24
Good bunk facilities	23
It is safer	23
Better facilities than independent hostels	22
Good price promotions	17
Bigger than independent	14

opposed to another form of accommodation or hostel (Table 8).

The most frequently cited reasons relate to price (76% of respondents) and location (66%). These findings are supported by a study conducted in Byron Bay, Australia, by Firth and Hing (1999). Already being a member of the Youth Hostel Association was cited by 60%, thus indicating that advantages associated with membership are more relevant than consideration of comfort such as “good bathroom facilities” (29%), “good bunk facilities” (23%) and consideration of safety (23%). This is an important finding because it serves to highlight the ethos of members of the SYHA, many of whom are long-term members and who often have a loyalty to the organisation. Although respondents demonstrated that they were sensitive to price, only 17% refer to “price promotions” in this particular question. This may suggest that the impact of such promotions is limited in its effectiveness.

### 5.6. Aspects of accommodation

Respondents were asked to rate facilities and specific features of their chosen accommodation on a Likert scale (see Fig. 1 for a description of the facilities listed). They were asked to indicate how “important” certain facilities and features of that accommodation were to them, and how “satisfied” they had generally been (1 = not at all important/satisfied; 7 = extremely important/satisfied). A one-sample *t*-test was run on the responses to the Likert scales to identify the significant differences between the importance and satisfaction ratings.

Fig. 1 shows that levels of satisfaction exceed levels of importance for all facilities, particularly for “self-catering facilities”, the provision of “a TV room” and

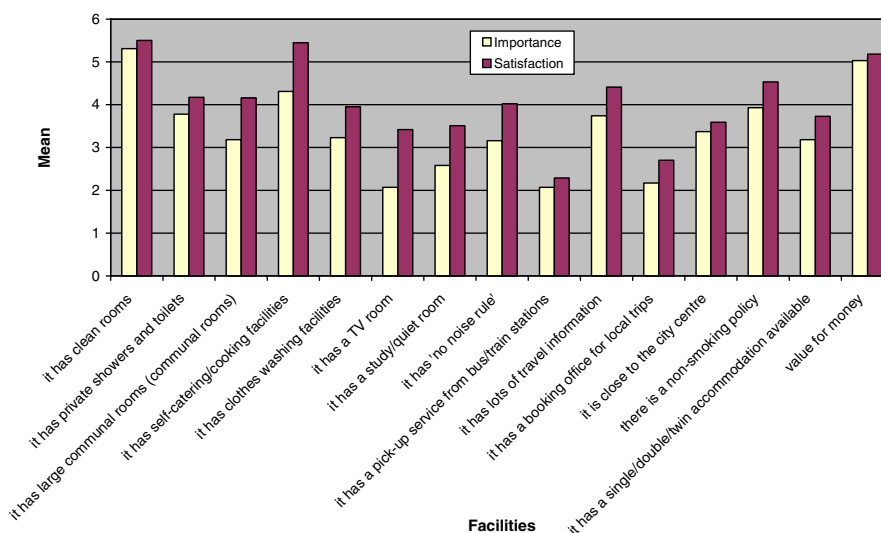


Fig. 1. Difference between level of importance and satisfaction regarding facilities offered in SYHA hostels.



a study/quiet room, and a “no noise rule”. In terms of age two sets of age range tend to be the most frequent users of hostels (under 30s and over 50s). According to VisitScotland (1999, p. 2) “hostels continue to attract visitors of all age groups, although younger age groups are increasing. However, the SYHA tends to appeal to the older visitor who may have a long history of using its hostels.” In an Australian context Ryan and Mohsin (2001, p. 79) suggest that older respondents (over 30) were more demanding about what they wanted from their accommodation.

Keeley (2001, p. 61) suggests that there is “considerable consumer dissatisfaction with the quality of budget accommodation in Britain.” He pointed out that only 26% of visitors to Scottish hostels thought the standard of accommodation was good, 32% thought it was acceptable, 24% thought it was poor and 18% thought the standards were very poor. These results were indicative of the rest of the UK (with the exception of Wales where there is a well-established quality standards scheme set up by the Wales Tourist Board). In particular Keeley (2001) points out that Australasians regard budget accommodation in the UK as expensive. However, in this study an overall majority of respondents (71%) were satisfied with the current accommodation offered.

### 5.7. *Aspects of accommodation—significance test*

A series of one sample *t*-tests highlighted a number of factors that had significant differences between the level of importance attached to them by respondents and the level of satisfaction expressed. Table 9 highlights the factors, the level of importance, the level of satisfaction and the significance associated with each one.

Cleanliness of rooms, value for money and the presence of self-catering facilities were considered to be the most important factors. In a study on hotels Choi and Chu (2001, p. 279) point out that attributes such as “cleanliness, location, room rate, security, service quality, and reputation of the hotel chain are regarded as important to travellers”. It is important to mention the halo theory which according to Leuthesser, Kohli, and Harich (1995) involves a tendency to be influenced by a single most dominant factor when formulating opinions. This means that whatever factor was considered to be the most important to respondents (in this case cleanliness) the level of satisfaction associated with the whole product may be focused on the one single factor. In this study the cleanliness of the rooms was considered to be the most important factor in choosing accommodation (cleanliness was also considered to be one of the most important factors in studies by authors such as Knutson (1988), Weaver and Oh (1993) and Lockyer (2002)). This is important in this study because the level of satisfaction was not significantly different to

the level of importance. If the halo effect were to be taken at face value then no matter which factors were considered most important by respondents the halo effect could produce positive results in this study.

## 6. Conclusion

This research has addressed a gap in the literature and has provided a comprehensive picture and profile of the behaviour of tourists/visitors who have stayed with the largest budget accommodation provider in Scotland. It is acknowledged that there are limitations associated with this research, the most obvious limitation, being the time of year of the data collection. A more appropriate time to collect the data would be in the summer months from June–August when the hostels are at their busiest and when the majority of British visitors take their holidays.

Further limitations relate to the number of responses, and it is acknowledged that this could be increased in order to obtain a more representative view of the market. This could be achieved by the researchers actually being on site during the data collection at the individual hostels. The research could also be expanded to include independent hostels as well as SYHA hostels. This would have the dual aim of increasing respondent numbers and addressing the bias associated with the data collection from one source organisation and the influence of the specific ethos associated with that organisation and its members.

Backpackers have a preference for active and participatory holiday activities (which reflects the tourism product in Scotland) and they have a tendency to stay for longer periods of time. Both of these factors are good news for Scotland. The largest market for hostels in Scotland still remains the home market and the dominant user groups are the under 30s and over 50s. Again, this could be good news for Scotland because, one of the major markets for the Scottish tourism product are the over 50s. The majority of hostel visitors stay between 4 days and 2 weeks and the most important sources of information used by respondents include maps, travel guidebooks, the Internet, word of mouth and the Youth Hostel Association guidebook. With the ongoing growth in the use of the Internet, there is an opportunity to target backpackers who are keen users of the Internet as a source of information.

The most important factors for backpackers in this study were price, location and being a member of the Youth Hostel Association. In terms of levels of importance and satisfaction (aspects of accommodation—significance test) cleanliness of rooms, value for money and the presence of self-catering facilities were considered to be the most important factors. In all, the predetermined options, levels of satisfaction with the

Table 9  
Aspects of accommodation—significance test

Factor	Mean	Significance level ( $p < 0.05$ )	Comment
<i>Importance</i> —It has clean rooms	5.31	0.223	This factor was considered to be very important and the level of satisfaction was not significantly different to the level of importance
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has clean rooms	5.50		
<i>Importance</i> —It has private showers and toilets	3.78	0.022	This factor was considered to be important but not as important as cleanliness of rooms and the level of satisfaction was high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has private showers and toilets	4.17		
<i>Importance</i> —It has large communal rooms at budget prices	3.18	0.000	This factor was less important than private showers and toilets but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has large communal rooms at budget prices	4.16		
<i>Importance</i> —It has self-catering/cooking facilities	4.31	0.000	This factor was considered to be important and again the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has self-catering/cooking facilities	5.45		
<i>Importance</i> —It has clothes washing facilities	3.23	0.000	This factor was less important than the availability of catering facilities but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has clothes washing facilities	3.95		
<i>Importance</i> —It has a TV room	2.07	0.000	This factor was not considered to be important but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has a TV room	3.42		
<i>Importance</i> —It has a study/quiet room	2.58	0.000	This factor was not considered to be important but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has a study/quiet room	3.51		
<i>Importance</i> —It has a “no noise” rule	3.16	0.000	This factor was considered to be relatively important and again the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has a “no noise” rule	4.02		
<i>Importance</i> —It has a pick-up service from bus/train station	2.07	0.154	This factor was not considered to be important and the level of satisfaction associated with the service provided was low
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has a pick-up service from bus/train station	2.29		
<i>Importance</i> —It has lots of travel information	3.74	0.000	This factor was considered to be important and the level of satisfaction was high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has lots of travel information	4.41		
<i>Importance</i> —It has a booking office for local trips	2.17	0.000	This factor was not considered to be important but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It has a booking office for local trips	2.70		
<i>Importance</i> —It is close to the city center	3.37	0.130	This factor was considered to be relatively high and the level of satisfaction was not significantly different to the level of importance
<i>Satisfaction</i> —It is close to the city centre	3.59		
<i>Importance</i> —There is a non-smoking policy	3.93	0.000	This factor was not considered to be important but the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —There is a non-smoking policy	4.53		
<i>Importance</i> —It has single/double/twin accommodation available	3.18	0.000	This factor was considered to be relatively important and again the level of satisfaction was very high
<i>Satisfaction</i> —There is a non-smoking policy	3.73		
<i>Importance</i> —Value for money	5.07	0.277	This factor was considered to be very important and the level of satisfaction was not significantly different to the level of importance
<i>Satisfaction</i> —Value for money	5.18		

range and quality of facilities offered exceeded the levels of importance that respondents attributed to such facilities, including their perception of “value for money”.

Despite the fact that Keeley (2001) pointed to the levels of dissatisfaction with the quality of budget accommodation in Britain, the levels of satisfaction suggested by respondents in this study, are generally good. This may be partly as a result of its membership base (and the consequent repeat custom), but irrespective of that, the overall findings of this research are positive.

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