Analizing The Structural Relationship Between Global And Latent Quality Of Tourism Online Distribution

Abstract

PURPOSE: To investigate the measurement of the website quality and the relationship between observable and unobservable perceived quality by online tourism consumers, with the aim to assist the tourism agents involved in electronic channels.
METHODOLOGY: Based on the review of the specialized literature, the research identifies reflective indicators and criteria as potential dimensions of a level of latent quality from the online tourist consumer's perspective. Several first-order measurement models and one second-order measurement model are tested. Then, a cause-effect relationship is proposed between latent quality and global perceived quality through Structural Equations Models. The data was gathered through a survey addressed to a sample of an Internet users' panel administered by a specialized marketing research company.
RESULTS: The first-order measurement models as well as the second-order model are validated. The postulated relationship through a structural model is confirmed. The latent quality reflected by different first order dimensions explains almost 50% of the global perceived quality of the tourism online distribution channel.
CONCLUSIONS: Each confirmed dimension reflects, in a different level, the latent quality variable. This fact suggests different kind of approaches to be followed by the tourism companies in order to improve the latent quality of their online services. Tourism companies should try to improve the different dimensions of latent quality in order to be better appreciated by users as providers of a higher global quality. There are other determinant variables, not included in the cause-effect model validated, which have to be identified through future research in order to explain a higher level of global perceived quality.

Key words: Dimensions, Global quality, Latent quality, Online distribution channel, Tourism.

Acknowledges: IMPROVE, Consolidated Research Group. Diputación General de Aragón (Spain) & University of Zaragoza (Spain) Research Project: JIUZ-2016-SOC-06: "Processes of the Tourism Sector. The Participation of tourist and the Implementation and Management of e-WOM".

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1. Introduction

Since 2010, tourism activity is increasing in Spain. In 2016, tourism was the main engine of economic growth and employment of the country. It provided the 16% of national GDP and the 20% of employment. Spain received 75,6 millions of visitors, mainly from the United Kingdom, France and Germany (Exceltur, 2017). The online travel reservation at the end of
2016 accounted more than 12,500 millions of euros. The data show the importance of the tourism industry in the Spanish economy.

The distribution system in the tourism sector serves to an effective production and distribution of the tourist product (service). The fact is that more than 60% of visitors use the electronic channel to book, confirm and pay for tourist services (Frontur, 2012). Given that the structure of the distribution system influences consumer decisions, business models and marketing strategies (Pearce et al., 2004), determining the success of the business (Vázquez et al., 2009), first of all, companies need to know the perspective of the consumer.

Quality, the first output offered to customers and consumers by a company, has to be measured both regarding the different service attributes and the global perceived quality level. Therefore, it is essential to review the role of the perceived quality in the new scenario and the available measurement instruments. In this way, the development of online tourism channel might require a re-identification of the perceived quality components from the users' point of view and its measurement instruments.

Bearing in mind the new role of the consumer in the distribution of online tourism services as an interactive participant in the online purchase process (production and distribution processes) and as the final judge of service, the aim of this research is to investigate the multidimensionality of the perceived quality by users of tourism websites and its measurement, as well as the relationship between observable and unobservable perceived
quality by online tourism consumers. The final objective is to provide some lights to the tourism agents involved in electronic channels. The research questions are as follows:

- How to measure the perceived quality of the different online service attributes offered by tourism companies in electronic channels?
- Which is the relationship between the perceived quality of the electronic tourism services attributes and the global perceived quality?

- What are the implications of measuring perceived quality through the evaluation of its components and of doing it through the global evaluation of the service quality?

In order to provide an answer to the first question, we take an advantage of the prior contributions of the literature to identify potential components of perceived quality, postulated as a multidimensional variable. Different measurement models will be tested, both first and second-order. To answer the second question, a structural cause-effect relationship is proposed between latent variable and global (observable) quality. The validation and confirmation of the different models allow us to conclude a validated measure of web site perceived quality components as well as the existence of differences between this measurement way and a global measurement. Companies have to take into account this differences when they decide the measurement procedures.

2. Literature background

The online channel has restructured the tourism sector and changed the behaviour of involved agents. Authors as Cooper et al. (2008) affirm that Internet and e-commerce have been positive for tourism consumers, providers and intermediaries. Anyway, the consumer assumes new functions (Berné et al., 2012) and the service co-creation is easier, and involves emotional links, communication and knowledge as factors in progress.

Transactions in digital markets are unique acts, being essential to establish emotional links with the customer through communication and knowledge. Currently, digital consumers are able to evaluate sell activities and business strategies. Their active role in the online channel allow them sharing knowledge and experiences, using effectively the technology, and having a stressed participation in commercialization of products. The digital tourist (Marques et al, 2011) is also called "adprosumer" because of performing a triple function announcing, producing and using tourism services (Okazaki et al., 2011).

The required higher level of participation of customers in the online purchase and distribution tourism processes is essential to promote market and distribution channel changes. In this sense, Mills and Law (2004) affirmed that Internet has changed the tourism activity and consumers behaviour. The

behaviour of the consumer moves towards greater dependence on their know-how through the use of the technology, increasing their expectations of choice to achieve greater added value, better results and greater convenience in the purchase of their travel products-services. Moreover, Internet allows avoid to the intermediaries (Kaynama y Black, 2000) and activate B2C direct channels through their websites. The intermediaries react in order to maintain positions. The tourism distribution system has moved from disintermediation to re-intermediation (Myung et al., 2009). Re-intermediation reinforces the system because of the value added by intermediaries, which may be taken advantage of by providers and consumers (Sarmiento, 2016), where direct and indirect channels coexist as well as vertical and horizontal competition, increasing rivalry.

On the other hand, the first customer experiences are key to build reminds and expectations. Instinctively, customers compare each new experience with previous, positive or negative experiences. Market conditions complement this feelings (market concentration, industry characteristics and rivalry), as well as competition, communication and personal situation of

the customer. Therefore, the traditional system of value creation, focused on business, is obsoleted.

Both, new position of the consumers and new market conditions, claim reviewing the measurement of the tourism service offered by the company through online channels. The improvement of the three levels of results considered by a company focused on the customer, which shape the chain of value quality-satisfaction-loyalty, depends on the use of effective measures. Focusing on the research on the online service quality, we consider Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) statement, which affirm that quality is a measurement of the customer judgement regarding overall excellence and superiority of a company or entity. Perceived quality is defined as the first level of output offered by companies that will determine to a large extent the second level, and this in turn the third, loyalty (Berne et al. 1996). As a latent (unobservable) variable, it can be included in a model as a result of the combination of other indicator variables. In this case, they are attributes of de service, valued by customers and consumers. Global quality is other way to measure the first level of output that a company offers. It deals with an observable variable resulting from collecting the direct manifestations of global perceived quality of a service by customers, online tourist in our research context. Its usefulness is limited to a global appreciation. For this reason, establishing a relationship between the two variables can offer explanatory elements of the processes under study.

Before deciding to make an online purchase, a user perceives certain level of quality of the offered service through the electronic medium. This perception, if it is at least equal to the user's expectations, could lead them to make the decision to purchase. While the electronic medium provides perceptions pertaining to the use thereof for contracting services, tourists enjoy those services at a later time, wherefore their experience is a combination of both digital

and in-person actions. Both are essential for identifying the results of a market-oriented company (Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012).

The measurement of e-commerce perceived quality

The research on perceived quality in the e-commerce context -mainly focused on the web page used for a purchase- has configured it as a multi-dimensional concept. In this regard, prior research was initially targeted at identifying the utilitarian aspects and their measurement scales (e.g. Kaynama and Black, 2000; Law and Leung, 2000; Kim and Lee, 2004; Kim and Lee 2005; Ho and Lee, 2007), and hedonic aspects were considered later (e.g. Vázquez et al., 2009). Nevertheless, empirical applications either avoid the measurement of these latter aspects, or use indirect measurements such as the web page design (García and Garrido, 2013), a utilitarian attribute that leads back to visual appealing (Park and Gretzel,
2007), or the level of sociability perceived by users (Barnes and Vidgen, 2014). Moreover, whenever that a direct measurement has been used through indicators of visual appealing (Park et al., 2007), it hasn't been found as a significant determinant of the results. In general, there is a parallelism of all these web page elements with the e-store or e-channel attributes identified in other online contexts (Ganesh et al., 2010, Betancourt et al., 2017).

3. Methodology

Data collection and measurement

A structured questionnaire was prepared to obtain the necessary information to be able to provide answers to the research questions. The questionnaire was targeted at online travel consumers who responded some questions about their latest consumption experience. A company

specialising in market studies was engaged to distribute the questionnaire and select a sample. The total of valid questionnaires delivered by the company in charge of the fieldwork was 408. Participation quotas were initially requested from the company for an approximation to the specifications observed in literature.

The measurement of the perceived quality of a web page included the indicators used the most in literature, three of which referred to utilitarian quality (ease of use, information provided by the page and customer service) and one to hedonic quality (attractiveness of the web page). This latter criterion was measured through an overall measure, on a points-scale from very unattractive to very attractive (Sauro, 2015). Thus, the perceived quality of a web page is postulated as a second-order latent variable (Table 1).

Table 1. Criteria, indicators of the questionnaire and prior references

EASE-OF-USE	
P1. Ease of access to the web page. P2. Possibility offered by the company to combine tourism products in a single order. P3. Perceived clarity (ease of identification) about the company's products and services on its web page. P4. Preciseness (absence of ambiguity) of the definition of the products and services on the company's web page. P5. Purchase payment modes offered through the online service. P6. Task of consumers in the event that they may have combined products in the last transaction or in other, previous transactions with the same company to get the desired combination. P7. Time used to finalise the purchase.	Kaynama and Black (2000) Donthu (2001) Jeong and Lambert (2001) Madu and Madu (2002) Kim and Lee (2004) Kim et al. (2005) Park et al. (2007) Verhoef et al. (2007; buying time) Seiders et al. (2007; accessibility) Jaiswal et al. (2010) Ganesh et al. (2010; ease of payment)
INFORMATION ATTRIBUTES	
P8. The information provided by the company, online, for making the purchase. P9. … provided by the company's web page about the characteristics of the contracted tourism service. P10. … from the web page about the variety of the online tourism products-services offered by the company.	Kaynama and Black (2000) Jeong and Lambert (2001) Madu and Madu (2002) Kim and Lee (2004) Kim et al. (2005) Park et al. (2007) Verhoef et al. (2007) Ganesh et al. (2010) (merchandise variety) Hung et al. (2014)
CUSTOMER SERVICE	

P11. Procedure for sending the confirmation of reservation, discounts and/or invoices by the company. P12. … for cancelling the contracted online tourism service. P13. Customer service and/or complaints and claims system available on the company's web page. P14. Privacy and security policy followed by the contracted online service with respect to the customer's personal data.	Kaynama and Black (2000) Madu and Madu (2002) Kim and Lee (2004) Kim et al. (2005; 2009 – security-) Park et al. (2007) Jaiswal et al. (2010; privacy, security)
VISUAL ATTRACTION	
P15. Attractiveness of the web page where the tourism service has been contracted.	Kaynama and Black (2000) Kim et al. (2005; 2009) Bauer et al. (2006) Urban et al. (2009) Ganesh et al. (2010) García and Garrido (2013)

The opinion questions were measured through semantic differential scales of 11 points, from 0 for the least favourable option to 10 for the most favourable option regarding the specific proposal. Global quality was measured through a direct affirmation, from 0 (totally disagree) to 10 (totally agree).

Characteristics of the sample

Sex, age and level of studies are shown in Table 2. Regarding the geographic origin of the respondents, the greatest weight by autonomous community corresponds to Madrid (19.6%), followed by Catalonia (18.1%), Andalucía (14.5%) and the Community of Valencia (10%). This matches the population distribution in Spain.

The total of different companies hired specified by the respondents is of 62. The companies used the most by order of frequency are Booking (14.5%), eDreams (10.8%), El Corte Ingles (10.3%) and Rumbo (7.1%). The study by Sarmiento (2016) coincides with the results regarding the companies Booking, eDreams and Rumbo as the online travel agencies named the most by respondents in the same geographic context of study (Spain). These data are consistent with the concentration of companies in the sector: the top 5 of the Hosteltur Ranking of Online Agencies is led by two mega-groups resulting from international mergers (Odigeo-eDreams and Bravofly-Rumbo).

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample

Sex		Level of studies	
Male	50.7%	Primary education	1.5%
Female	49.3%	Secondary education (mandatory secondary education)	6.6%
Age		Higher secondary education	19.1%
18-30	28.2%	Uncompleted university studies	10.5%
31-55	46.6%	Associate Degree / Bachelor's Degree / Masters Degree	
Over 55	25.2%	Post-graduate/Doctoral studies	51.9%
		Vocational training (post-secondary)	2.2 %

Measurement Models and Structural Model

The literature reviewed serves to identify the proposed variables and allows supporting the content validity of the indicators selected for latent quality. First of all, we identify the underlying structure for each of the proposed dimensions (Exploratory Factorial Analysis, EFA, Principal Components PC, Varimax rotation). Subsequently, the measurement models of the various postulated first order dimensions of the latent quality of web pages are empirically validated (Confirmatory Factorial Analysis, CFA are therefore conducted). After confirming the corresponding measurement models by analysing their statistics and the overall goodness-of-fit indexes, the relationship between latent and global quality is tested through SEM (SPSS 22 and EQS 6.0).

Ease-of-Use Model

After the corresponding PCA with Varimax rotation (VM) of the first seven indicators (P1 to P7), one component that explains 59.54% of the variance is obtained (Table 3). It groups together all the indicators (F1); it is called Ease-of-Use (EU). This component refers to functionality, to the accessibility of a website, to consistency and effective browsing, to search capacity and to the search for desired products and services. EU is a dimension that refers to the degree of effort that online customers give to the electronic medium (Donthu, 2001). Table 4 shows CFA model overall goodness-of-fit statistics and indexes.

Table 3. Ease-of-Use. EFA-PCA-VM

	F1
P1 Ease of access to the web page…	0,719
P2 Possibility offered by the company to combine tourism products in a single order …	0,696
P3 Perceived clarity (ease of identification) about the company's products and services on its web page …	0,845
P4 Preciseness (absence of ambiguity) of the definition of the products and services on the company's web page …	0,818
P5 Purchase payment modes offered through the online service …	0,772
P6 The task to get the desired combination, in the event that you may have combined products previous transactions with the same company...	0,737
P7 Time used to finalise the purchase…	0,803
% of explained variance	59,544
Cronbach's alpha (Nunnally, 1978)	0.885

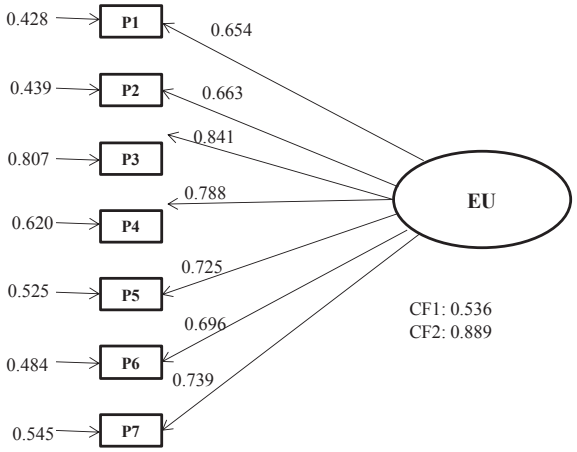
Table 4. EU Model. Goodness-of-Fit

	d.f.	$\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}$	*P*	R-RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	AGFI	R-BBN	R-CFI
EU	14	29.479	0.009	0.054	0.038	0.957	0.913	0.964	0.981

The reliability coefficients of the majority of the observed variables have values that exceed

0.5, except for items P1, P2 and P6, whose estimated parameters take values of 0.654, 0.663 and 0.696. However, due to the importance given to these aspects in literature, the decision was made to keep them. On the other hand, a comparison of the values taken by the standardized factor loadings and the correlations between factors demonstrate the discriminant validity and the convergent validity of the model (Figure 1).

Figure 1. EU Model. Ease-of-Use Parameters and Coefficients



Service Information Model

For P8 to P10, the PCA-VM resulted in a single component that explains 75.5% of the variance. The indicators reflect the importance of offering quality information. An appropriate quantity of information/content is essential to attracting visitors to a website. The purchasing experience of customers is increased by the integrity, uniqueness, preciseness and entertainment value of a website, as well as the opportunity for information/content (Kaynama and Black, 2000; Aladwani and Palvia, 2002; Sigala and Sakellaridis, 2004).

Service information (SI) can be defined as the degree to which a user believes that the information or content is useful, updated and reliable. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient results in a value of 0.862, thus allowing its reliability to be accepted (Table 5).

The corresponding CFA was subsequently conducted. Since this model did not show degrees of freedom, a restriction was imposed on the equality of factor loadings, which allowed obtaining two degrees of freedom for the model (see Table 6 and Figure 2).

Reliability coefficients of the dimension (CF1and CF2) offer evidence of reliability and of the convergent validity of the analysed latent variable.

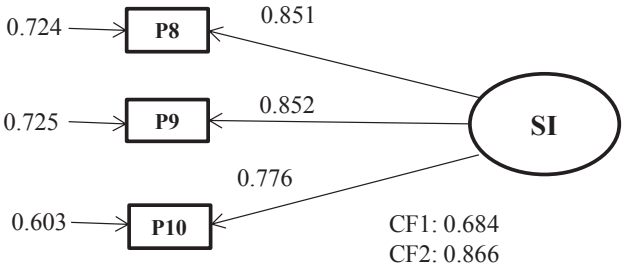
Table 5. Service Information. EFA-PCA-VM

	F2
P8 The information provided by the company, online, for making the purchase…	0,891
P9 The information provided by the company's web page about the characteristics of the contracted tourism service…	0,904
P10 The information from the web page about the variety of the online tourism products-services offered by the company…	0,863
% of explained variance	75,523
Cronbach's alpha	0,862

Table 6. SI Model. Goodness-of-Fit

	d.f.	$\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}$	*P*	R-RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	AGFI	R-BBN	R-CFI
SI	2	0.6012	0.740	0.0001	0.029	0.996	0.988	0.998	0.999

Figure 2. SI Model. Reliability Parameters and Coefficients.



Customer Service Model

Customer service is determined through the transmission of an appropriate response to e-mail requests or complaints, as well as order confirmations, which represent an important factor in the assessment of a web page by customers (see Yang and Jun, 2002; Long and McMellon, 2004). The dimension could be defined as the desire or willingness for customer service, thereby providing a quick, streamlined service in an online context.
There are four indicators recorded in literature (P11 to P14). Using PCA-VM, the existence of a factor that we call Customer Service (CS) is confirmed. It explains 64.1% of the variance and groups together the 4 proposed items pertaining to the transmission both reservation confirmation and related information (discounts, invoices), the reservation cancellation procedure, the customer service system and the privacy and security policy. Cronbach's alpha takes a value of 0.805 (Table 7).

The estimate of the CFA model shows the overall goodness-of-fit statistics and indexes shown in Table 8. This CS Model presents adequate values of the R-RMSEA statistic and of the goodness-of-fit indexes. The variable pertaining to the procedure for cancelling the tourism service is the one that receives a lower value, but the decision was made to keep it in the model due to the importance given to this aspect in literature (see Yang and Jun, 2002; Long and McMellon, 2004) (Figure 3).

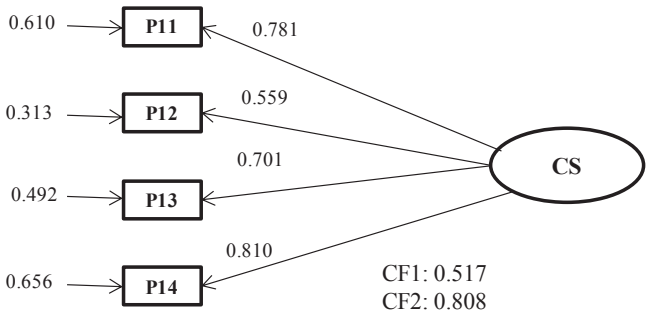
Tabla 7. Customer Service. EFA-PCA-VM

	F3
P11 Procedure for sending the confirmation of reservation, discounts and/or invoices by the company…	0,825
P12. Procedure for cancelling the contracted online tourism service…	0,709
P13. Customer service and/or complaints and claims system available on the company's web page…	0,813
P14. Privacy and security policy followed by the contracted online service with respect to the customer's personal data…	0,848
% of explained variance	64.085
Cronbach's alpha	0.805

Table 8. CS Model. Goodness-of-Fit

	d.f.	$\chi^2_{S\text{-}B}$	*P*	R-RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	AGFI	R-BBN	R-CFI
CS	2	9.455	0.009	0.098	0.040	0.974	0.868	0.966	0.973

Figure 3. CS Model. Reliability Parameters and Coefficients.



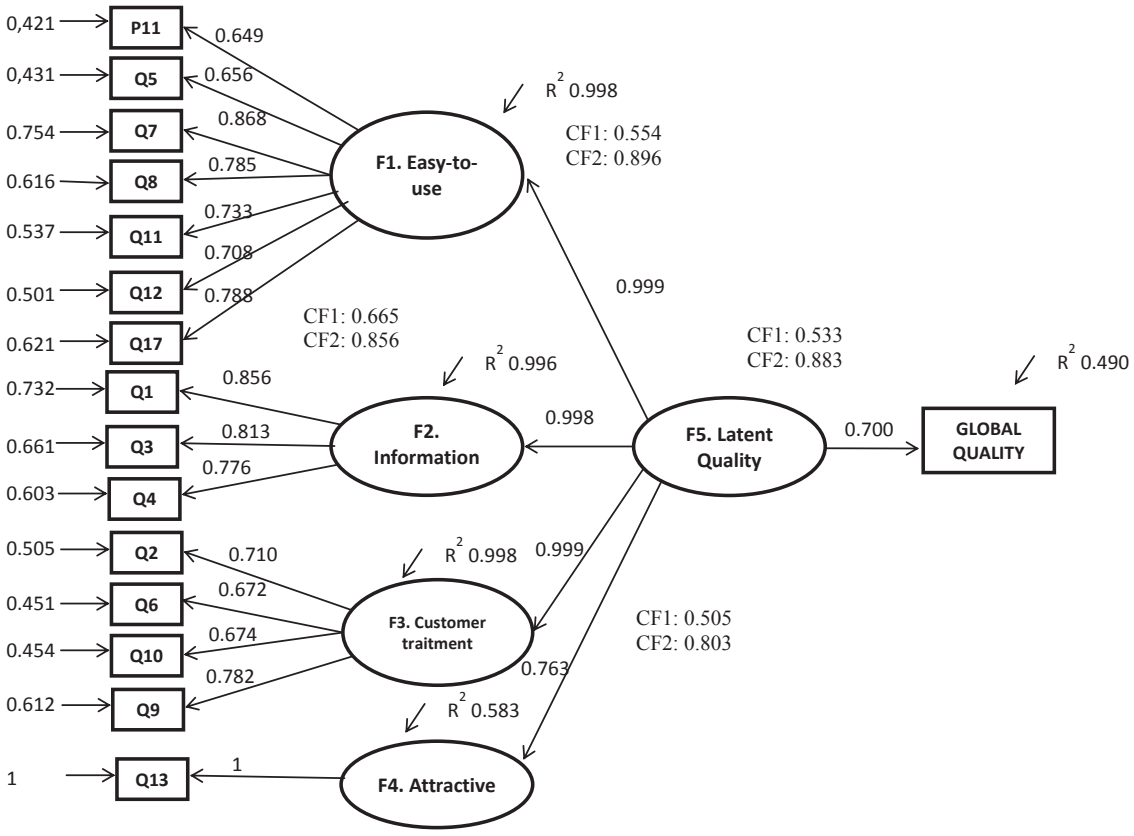
Adding the visual attractive variable to this three identified first-order dimensions, the next step is testing their participation as reflective variables of a second-order latent variable: (multidimensional) web site quality. The confirmatory analysis of this model and the relationship between the second-order latent variable and the observable global perceived quality are tested through Structural Equations Models, with EQS software. Based on these results and on the goodness-of-fit (Table 9), we can accept the adequacy of the entire model.

Table 9. Entire Model. Goodness-of-Fit

	g. l.	χ^2 S-B	P	R-RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	AGFI	R-BBN	R-CFI
Entire Model	101	147.8777	0.00165	0.036	0.040	0.881	0.840	0.939	0.980

This construct explains almost the 50% (R2 value of 0.49) of the level of global perceived quality offered by online tourism companies from the consumers' point of view. The estimated parameter of the relationship between the two quality measurements is 0.7. Both results indicate a remarkable approaching between the two measures and warn of some differences between them (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Results of the Second-order measurement Model and Structural Relationship between Latent and Global quality of website tourism services



4. Conclusions

This research has achieved to provide an answer to the three formulated questions. First of all, the results obtained corroborate the existence of a latent quality of the tourism web site reflected by four dimensions of the first order. They are related to the ease-of-use of the instrument, the information it provides to the perceived customer care through the online medium, and the attractiveness of the web (entertainment). The first two reflect to a greater extent the latent quality of the tourist online service for the user, taking into account their participation in the production. In addition, the third one dimension is a new incorporation in quality measurement models with perhaps more development in the future due to his hedonic character.

The second research question is answered through the confirmation of a significant effect of latent quality dimension on the overall web page quality, perceived by the digital tourists. This means that both measuring ways may be considered in order to evaluate the first level of output offered by online tourism agents. Nevertheless, they are not exactly the same and its use has to be differentiated.

In this point, the answer of third research question emerges: management can take an advantage using the validated structure of latent quality, through its different dimensions and items, as a detailed performance measurement whose results will serve to assist the decision- making. The importance to control the value of the different service attributes, from the point of view of digital tourist consumer, increases having proved its direct impact on the overall perceived quality of the offer. Nevertheless, the direct measurement of global quality might be used too. In this case, our research highlights that there are differences to be considered. On the one hand, a global measure of perceived quality simplifies the procedure, but does not include the detail. On the other hand, the use of the latent quality scale, while offers more detail, does not provide the entire explanation of the global perceived quality. This fact has academic implications in terms of modelling that have to bear in mind.

The application of the research is limited to the Spanish context so that should be checked in other contexts. Although the explanatory capacity achieved by structural model is almost
50%, future research should be aimed at identifying other explanatory variables of global quality. In addition, it is matter of interest to check the perceived quality effects on the fallowing variables belonging to the value chain quality-satisfaction-loyalty.

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