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A QUALITATIVE METHOD TO DETERMINE PROBLEMS IN TOURISM SECTOR: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

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Abstract

As being one of the most fragile sector; while planning tourism, planners have to fully understand the reasons of problems and develop solutions sensitively. In that scope, it is observed that, focus group interview technique has gained acceptance as a qualitative research method. There is increasing acknowledgement of the value of qualitative research approaches in social sciences. More recently, focus group methodology has gained considerable popularity as an alternative means of gathering qualitative data in the study of social sciences.

Three successful focus group experience during the process of İstanbul Tourism Master Plan is subjected in article. A group of academician were responsible for the Master Plan and organised focus groups. The first part in article consists of the literature survey regarding with focus group interviews. The definitions, data analysis approaches, the ways of planning/organising groups are mentioned. Second part focuses on a sample study for İstanbul Tourism Sector. The details of three focus group organisation as a significant part of İstanbul Tourism Master Plan, analysis of focus group data and basic comparative findings of these three group interviews are presented. As a result; focus group participants' contribution to İstanbul Tourism Master Plan is comparatively presented in terms of identifying problems and developing solutions.

Key words: Qualitative Research, Focus Group, Tourism, İstanbul, Tourism Master Plan.

Introduction

There are a number of reasons for using focus groups, including the development of a new measuring instrument (Gray- Vickery 1993, McKinley et al. 1997). However, the literature does not explain how focus group data can be transformed systematically into a new questionnaire, although Powell et al. (1996) examine their usefulness. Firstly, focus groups may pay explicit attention to consumers rather than professionals, with the consumer being regarded as the expert. Secondly, they depend on dynamic interaction to provide the information sought (Kitzinger 1996). Thirdly, they can provide major insights into attitudes, beliefs and opinions (Carey 1994). However, Kitzinger (1996) identifies a disadvantage, in that they can silence individual voices of dissent.

A focus group methodology was used to obtain in-depth information describing community leaders' and businesspersons' attitudes and perceptions of the process of tourism development (Wilson, et al. 2001). More specifically, the focus groups explored how communities had developed their local tourism industries and community leaders' understanding of the reasons why some communities were successful at developing local tourism and others were not. Participants were asked to discuss, in detail, their experiences (i.e., their successes and failures) in stimulating tourism in İstanbul.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine and assess the experience of İstanbul Tourism Master Plan team had. More specially, objectives of the paper are (1) to express the practice of three focus groups, (2) to identify the methodology used while organizing the focus group meetings, (3) to express strategies, thoughts and solution suggestions.

Focus Group Interview: A Qualitative Data Collection Method

The definition of focus group interview

A focus group is, according to Lederman (Thomas et al. 1995), '*a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being 'focused' on a given topic*'. Participants in this type of research are, therefore, selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, are within the age-range, have similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001).

In a more basic meaning, a focus group is, '*an informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics*' (Beck et al. 1986: 73). Although there are many possible variations on the basic method (Kitzinger 1990, Krueger 1994), centrally it involves one or more group discussions, in which participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher, and presented to them (most commonly) as a set of questions, although sometimes as a film, a vignette, a set of advertisements, cards to sort, or a game to play. The participants (usually 6-8, and rarely more than 12) may be pre-existing groups of people (e.g. family members, work colleagues) or they may be drawn together specifically for the research- in which case it is usually recommended that groups are relatively homogeneous, particularly in relation to 'prestige' or 'status' factors such as occupation, social class, or age (Carey 1994: 229).

Focus groups are commonly conducted among a small nonrepresentative sample of participants who share one or more characteristics that are of interest to the researcher. The characteristics participants share may be demographic, situational, behavioural, ideological or any combination of these. The sample selection is purposive and based more on suitability and availability, rather than on representativeness (O'Brien, 1993). Thus, focus group samples are often small and nonrepresentative, allowing for in depth description of phenomena but not for generalization to a larger population.

Focus groups could provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals. Focus groups can generate large amounts of data in a relatively short time span, and the findings may be used to precede quantitative procedures. Like one-to-one interviews, the results of focus-group interviews can be presented in uncomplicated ways using lay terminology supported by quotations from the participants. Krueger & Casey (2000), while describing in detail the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, point out when to use focus-group interviews and when not to use them.

Data analysis approaches and Interpretation of focus group data

Compared with the extensive advice available on how to conduct focus groups, there is relatively little in the focus group literature on how to analyse the resulting data. Data analysis sections of the focus group handbooks are typically very brief, and most commentators suggest (or imply) that the techniques suitable for analysing one-to-one interview data are equally applicable for use with focus group data. In published focus group studies, researchers often omit, or briefly gloss, the details of exactly how they conducted their analyses (categories are 'identified' or themes 'emerge') (Wilkinson, 1998).

As one of the leading academic, Wilkinson (1998) refers to Morgan (1987:64) who identifies two main approaches to analysing focus group data: 'systematic coding via content analysis' and 'strictly qualitative or ethnographic' analysis. The former produces a summary description of the data, usually incorporating a quantitative element, while the latter relies primarily on direct quotation from the group discussion. Very briefly, **Content analysis** is, a matter of debate whether qualitative data should be quantified at all (as is typically the case when it is subjected to some form of content analysis). However, the main advantages of content analysis are to allow for a relatively systematic treatment of the data and to enable its presentation in summary form. **Ethnographic analysis**, by contrast, is rarely systematic, in the sense of ranging across the full data set-it is much more selective and limited in scope. Its main advantage is to permit a detailed interpretative account of the everyday social processes of communication, talk and action occurring within the focus group. The key issue in ethnographic analysis is how to select the material to present (whether this is framed up as 'themes', 'discourses'.

As a qualitative research technique, focus group interviews generate a great deal of data. Thus, a central aim of data analysis, according to Robson (1993), is to reduce data. Yin (1989) points out that data analysis consists of a number of stages, i.e. examining, categorising and tabulating or otherwise recombining the evidence, in order to address the initial goal of a study. Krueger & Casey (2000) build on this concept and suggest that the purpose should drive the analysis; they believe that 'analysis begins by going back to the intention of the study and survival requires a clear fix on the purpose of the study'. Following this concept, although hard at times, is extremely helpful for managing the data, making sense of what is going on, getting rid of extra and irrelevant information and travelling safely through the maze of large and complicated paths of information (Rabice, 2004).

The process of collecting data in a focus group is a delicate and complex one, for four main reasons (Sim, 1998):

- Data need to be collected not only on what participants say, but also on how they interact with one another
- Quotations need to be attributed accurately to individual group members,
- The process of data collection should not interfere with or detract from the coordination or the group
- The method of recording data should not itself have reactive effects upon the group participants.

Sim (1998), the analysis of focus group data is likely to follow the same process as for other sources of qualitative data. Many of the problems can rise in analysing data like any qualitative data in general. At the very least, the researcher draws together and compares discussions of similar themes and examines how these relate to the variables within the sample population. In general, it is not appropriate to give percentages in reports of focus group data, and it is important to try to distinguish between individual opinions expressed in spite of the group from the actual group consensus. As in all qualitative analysis, deviant case analysis is important-that is, attention must be given to minority opinions and examples that do not fit with the researcher's overall theory (Kitzinger, 1995).

The only distinct feature of working with focus group data is the need to indicate the impact of the group dynamic and analyse the sessions in ways that take full advantage of the interaction between research participants. In coding the script of a group discussion, it is worth using special categories for certain types of narrative, such as jokes and anecdotes, and types of interaction, such as "questions," "deferring to the opinion of others," "censorship," or "changes of mind." A focus group research report that is true to its data should also usually include at least some illustrations of the talk between participants, rather than simply presenting isolated quotations taken out of context (Kitzinger, 1995).

Planning and Organisation of the focus group

One of the most interested issue is the number of focus groups. Krueger (1994) suggests continuing with running focus groups until a clear pattern emerges and subsequent groups produce only repetitious information (theoretical saturation). However, several authors, including Krueger (1994), suggest that for a simple research question the number of focus groups necessary may only be three or four (Burrows & Kendall, 1997).

The optimum number of participants for a focus group may vary. Krueger & Casey (2000) suggest between six and eight participants, as smaller groups show greater potential while Morgan (1997) mentions six to twelve participants for each focus groups. However, the number generally suggested as being manageable is between six and ten participants; large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented. However, the size of the group depends on the aims of the study. Experience of researching these groups suggests that lack of confidence and low self-esteem often prevent these individuals participating in a group discussion. Focus-group interviews could, therefore, be used as a vehicle to empower the participants from these communities. Another potential problem in using focus groups is the number of non-attenders. The recommendation is, therefore, to over-recruit by 10–25%, based on the topic and groups of participants. In order to maximise participation it is important to obtain an agreed date from the informants well in advance of the interviews and to remind them a few days before they start. Each group interview usually lasts approximately 1–2 h, based on the complexity of the topic under investigation, number of questions and the number of participants (Morgan, 1997) and consist of between six and twelve participants (Baumgartner, Strong, & Hensley, 2002; Krueger, 1994, 2000).

The number of times a focus group meets can vary from a single meeting to multiple meetings. Likewise, the number of different focus groups can vary. However, using multiple focus groups allows the focus group researcher to assess the extent to which saturation (Morse, 1995) has been reached, whether data saturation (i.e., occurring when information occurs so repeatedly that the researcher can anticipate it and whereby the collection of more data appears to have no additional interpretive worth; Sandelowski, 2008; Saumure & Given, 2008) or theoretical saturation (i.e., occurring when the researcher can assume that her/his emergent theory is adequately developed to fit any future data collected; Sandelowski, 2008). Focus groups can be formed by using pre-existing groups (e.g., colleagues at a place of work). Alternatively, these groups can represent newly formed groups that the researcher constructs by selecting members either randomly or, much more commonly, via one of the 19 or more purposive sampling techniques (e.g., homogeneous sampling, maximum variation sampling, critical case sampling, or multistage purposeful sampling; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Krueger (1994) and Morgan (1997) have suggested that three to six different focus groups are adequate to reach data saturation and/or theoretical saturation, with each group meeting once or multiple times.

The group should be coordinated by a moderator or facilitator, who is often assisted by a co-researcher. The personality, social identity and interpersonal skills of the focus group moderator will influence powerfully the process of interaction that takes place, and the way in which moderator behaves and verbal and non-verbal cues that she/he gives to the group, are crucial in this respect (Vaughn et al, 1996). A particular difficulty lies in striking the right balance between an active and a passive role. The moderator must be sufficiently involved in the group to fulfil the role of facilitator, but not so dominant as to bias or inhibit discussion (Goldman, 1962). Nyamathi and Shuler (1990, p 1286) describe the moderators in their study as providing mild, unobtrusive control over the group.

The typical instrument for a focus group study is a discussion guide. The guide establishes a set of issues for the group to discuss and is used to channel the discussion towards accomplishing the

research objectives. The guide may be more or less structured, depending on the purposes of the study. Expletory studies call for relatively unstructured discussion guides that specify the broad topics participants are to discuss but not the order in which topics are introduced. Unstructured discussion guides facilitate insight into participants' thinking by allowing them to discuss any dimension of a topic they wish. In contrast, structured discussion guides usually specify the order in which topics are introduced and include probes for specific types of information. They are most appropriate in studies designed to obtain information on a particular aspect of a topic. For example, in studies designed to compare differently defined groups, structured guides ensure that specific points are discussed or that similar points are discussed across groups (Hughes and DuMont, 1993)

An Example For Focus Groups: İstanbul Tourism Master Plan

Istanbul, a rapidly developing metropolis and the financial and cultural centre of Turkey, is a popular tourist destination as well. In order to manage this popular destination, local and central authorities of Istanbul has formulated policies and initiated development projects. One of these efforts is Tourism Master Plan which is administrated by İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Tourism Master Plan is prepared by a group of academician from Yildiz Technical University, Department of City and Regional Planning.

Istanbul is a huge city and a destination, which offers multiple touristic options. It is one of the most crowded cities in the world. Therefore occurring problems of the city are large-scaled as well. Not just tourism, but instead every and each subject that effects the urban life should be investigated in depth. Although the city has always enjoyed a fair share of national tourism revenue, until recently it lacked tourism strategies –in general meaning- designed particularly to attract tourists. Although İstanbul's reputation is mostly more known than Turkey, for now İstanbul has an image of having no formal strategies for tourism. Tourism Master Plan (TMP) was one of the head of the projects that had been made to determine a road map for İstanbul. Project lasted in (two years) 2013. During the process, many different topics related with social, economic and spatial issues are evaluated analytically. Comprehensive analytic studies processed within subsidiary source as well as primary sources. The techniques of primary sources such as survey, interview, and focus group meetings were all preferred for the Master Plan. Surveys were planned with households and tourists, on the other hand focus group meetings, the subject of this article, are organised respectively.

In order to determine tourism road map for İstanbul, 3 focus group meeting have been organised. For this meetings, 3 critical sectors were chosen and related professionals were invited. In the planning process of focus group meetings, two common purposes are determined: (1) To explore the attitudes of a range of sector representatives towards the problems and potentials of sector and get the view to manage them, (2) to use focus group data to develop these attitudes quantitatively. In accordance with these purposes, the organisation of the meetings, the analysis of focus group meeting analysis and the outputs are presented below.

Organising the Focus Groups for İstanbul Tourism Master Plan

Development of the interview guide

The interview guide was developed through literature search, fact reports and various searches done by İstanbul Tourism Master Plan team. A preliminary list, containing the key issues to be explored during interviews, was produced. This list was examined, and broad issues were identified and incorporated into the interview guide. Broad questions were used and participants were informed of the questions prior to coming to the group. The interview guide was prepared to direct group discussion and to stimulate conversation about the research topic, besides to ensure that all the desired information is sought. Principles of interview questions were put forward like progressing from

general to specific. Interview guide was sent to group members via mail and they were given information about the focus group theme and the way to be followed.

Composition of the groups

In order to compose İstanbul Tourism Master Plan study groups, three homogenous groups were designed depending on their sector and the institution they work for. The sectors and institutions were all critical in the sense of contributing the general plan study. All the professional guests were well known in their community. As recommended in literature, homogeneous groups -almost the age, status, class, occupation and other characteristics were similar- were created. These meetings were realised in following 6 weeks. The most effective meetings were tried to organise with limited financial sources and time pressure.

The first focus groups were conducted with a group of Culture/Art Sector, Entertainment Organizers, Creative Industry Representatives (participant number=12), the second: tourism sector enterprisers and public institutions representatives (participant number =20), and the third: publicity and promotion professions and marketing specialists were the last group (participant number =9). It is known that sample size is one of the most contentious issues, as there is little consensus as to what is most appropriate. In this context, it is tried to form the groups as advised size but in İstanbul TMP experience second focus group's participant number is a little more than acceptable average. Although more than accepted number of participants were attended to second focus group meeting, this did not limit the efficiency. But in all circumstances, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) also suggest that there is no general rule as to the optimal number of focus groups. They put forward the rationale of working out the number of groups according to the homogeneity of the potential population, and the ease of research application.

Recording the data

Data were collected using both video record and an audio recorder, and team members took notes as well. This is to be in the safe side, if the machines would have failed, data would still have been recorded by the team members. In order to keep field notes and simultaneously facilitate the interview, as this required following the flow of discussion and asking questions for purposes of clarification or explanation. During the meetings the project team did neither state any opinions nor guide the meeting, but instead just attended as an observer.

Analysis of the Focus Groups Interviews' Data /Findings

Three of the focus group meetings started with two basic open ended questions. Moderator gave each participants 10 minutes and the participants were asked to write down their opinions.

The data gathered from meetings is methodologically qualitative data and analysis were done by qualitative research method. This environment of stating opinions ended up beneficially in means of determining problems, finding the potentials and generate suggestions. Participants were asked to develop ideas on these three points respectively: (1) Problem definition, (2) Benchmarking destination through the world, (3) Solution oriented thoughts. On this major axis, before each meeting, participants were informed about expectations for their reason of being. Participants were asked to answer questions in their professions.

1. Focus Group Meeting: The participants of first focus group were representatives of Culture-Art Sector, Entertainment Organizers, and Creative Industry Representatives. The first issue was about **identifying the art and culture, cultural and creative industry** sectors' problems facing in İstanbul. **Barriers** that are limiting the developments? **Sorts of support** expected from both public and private

sector? The second issue was about good models abroad. What kind of lesson should we take from those examples and very lastly who could do what in order to overcome those issues. What kind of spatial arrangements are required?

2. Focus Group Meeting: The participants of meeting were tourism sector enterprisers and public institutions representatives. On this focus group meeting the enterprisers and the state employers discussed the problems and potentials of İstanbul. Participants mentioned to the problems from their own perspective. Advantages and disadvantages also been discussed throughout meeting. Then, as planned, participants expressed opinions regarding with good models and solution recommendations. Also in order to manage worldwide problems of İstanbul, the spatial development and organization issues are mentioned.

3. Focus Group Meeting: The least participant number has achieved in this third focus group meeting with 9 participants. Participants were representatives of publicity and promotion professions and marketing specialists. The same subjects were in the agenda and the same method was followed as in the previous two. From their specialized view, the subject was focused on “How to promote İstanbul as a tourism brand?” The responsibilities of public/private sector, the sorts of collaboration were asked and participants presented their opinions.

Findings And Conclusion

Environmental plan (in 2009) identified İstanbul as a multi-cultural and city’s one of the development axes was based on tourism. Following year, in 2010, İstanbul was accepted as European Cultural Capital City. Although İstanbul’s reputation is mostly more known than Turkey, for now İstanbul has an image of having no formal strategies for tourism. TMP was one of the head of the projects that had been made to determine a road map for İstanbul. During the process, many different topics related with social, economic and spatial issues are evaluated analytically. Comprehensive analytic studies processed within subsidiary source as well as primary sources. The techniques of primary sources such as survey, interview, focus group meetings were all preferred for the Master Plan.

Within the context of İstanbul TMP, the most critical three problem domain area were chosen. From this point of view professionals were invited regarding with the issues and it was aimed to gather information from those participants. The first focus groups were conducted with a group of Culture/Art Sector, Entertainment Organizers, Creative Industry Representatives (participant number=12), the second focus group were; tourism enterprisers and public institutions representatives (participant number =20), and the third focus group were; publicity and promotion professions and marketing specialists were the last group (participant number = 9). At the beginning of each focus group meeting; participants were told about expectations by moderator. In every focus group meetings; main route was based on the same context: (1) Problem definition, (2) Benchmarking destination through the world, (3) Solution oriented thoughts. The consequences from the meetings are presented below:

1. Step of the Focus Group Meetings: Defining the Problem

No matter how different discipline of the participants are, the definition of the problems were almost the same because of the similarities of the problems.

Table 1: Findings of First Focus Group Meeting

Problem Definition	Lack of Management, Lack of coordination, organizational problems		Physical deficiencies		Financial deficiencies		Public recognition, conscious		Sense of tourism, extend of tourism		Total	
	Frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	Frequency	%	frequency	%	Fre	%
1. Focus group meeting	14	50	5	18	6	20	3	12	0	0	28	100
2. Focus group meeting	13	24	12	24	0	0	6	12	21	40	52	100
3. Focus group meeting	20	29	20	29	0	0	12	18	16	24	68	100

In each three meeting; the main point was based on the organisational problems. To put a finer point on it, people of different professions built consensus on the problems of İstanbul's tourism management. It is important that it did not matter which sector they represent.

2. Step of the Focus Group Meetings: Benchmarking

Second meeting was regarding to successful country models that would be a good example for Turkey. For about this issue, benchmarking proposals for the perspective of urban conservation (especially for second meeting) were in limited number but deepened as well. But in the third meeting; due to the reason of being outward looking structure of the sector, participants diversified country and city experiences for İstanbul/Turkey.

During each meeting; generally the successful examples were usually from EU countries. Two far but worldwide famous and substantial brand cities were mentioned: New York and Sidney. The answers and referred information gathered were mind opening for TMP team.

3. Step of the Focus Group Meetings: Solutions

The last question of meetings were about solution oriented thoughts. How should disadvantages be managed and create into a positive step.

Table 2: Findings of Third Focus Group Meeting

SOLUTIONS	General politics, bringing a new perspective		Urban infrastructure		Strategic management, coordinational improvement		Minding over sector specific infrastructural problems		Total	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
1. Focus group meeting	7	23	-	0	3	10	20	67	30	100
2. Focus group meeting	20	30	7	11	18	26	21	32	66	100
3. Focus group meeting	7	23	2	7	11	37	10	33	30	100

The prominent subject of third focus group meeting was about developing strategic management system. The diversity of words and concept is mentioned, quality of sticked answers to the point were best in those three.

It is known that; it is unlike and harder to create solutions than problem identification. The financial model of proposals, prioritize the strategies and mode of organisation need to be studied in depth. Even though all the difficulties and time pressure, focus group meetings were successfully realised.

Participants of the meetings contributed to TMP process. They simplified problem definitions and solution proposals. As a real advantage, in an economic way, the master plan team got the views of professionals in very different views and institutions. Participants probably felt supported and empowered by a sense of group membership and cohesiveness contributed as well. If the team had had possibility to organise one more meeting, the fourth meeting would have focused on actors (and their roles) and financial modelling.

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