

# 10

## Alternative methodologies for studying the tourism experience

### Aims and objectives

This chapter discusses the research methods in the field of consumer behaviour and tourism studies. It offers both basic and advanced methodologies intended to serve academics, students, and tourism professionals. The chapter begins with a brief overview of quantitative and qualitative methods in the marketing and the tourism fields and continues with detailed discussions of current thought and practices in qualitative research and data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, surveys via the Internet and mobile phones, projective techniques, ethnography, netnography, etc. We hope that this will lead consumer researchers and tourism professionals to adopt new methodologies in order to explore and understand consumer experiences, behaviours and expectations in the tourism sector.

After studying this chapter, readers should be able to:

- Understand the research topics related to the use of qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Know the new methodologies to explore tourists' behaviours and experiences
- Understand the importance of using the Internet and multimedia devices as methodology tools.
- Explore new and alternative methodologies to understand the paradoxical behaviours of postmodern tourists.

It is commonly said that science tells us how things work and that the more exact sciences, the quantitative sciences, tell us more exactly how things work, and both are true (Stake, 2010). Scientific research is quantitative in many ways, but each of the divisions of science also has a qualitative side in which personal experience, intuition, and scepticism work alongside each other to help refine the theories and experiments. Unlike the quantitative approach, which relies heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis, the qualitative techniques rely primarily on human perception and understanding.

While both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their merit, the authors have decided to discuss only qualitative research in this book. Quantitative approaches can be very powerful and have been described extensively in various research methods books that the reader can refer to for further information. However, from the advances achieved in experiential research has emerged the need to develop further qualitative methods to address better the multiple facets of experiential consumption. Qualitative research encompasses a family of approaches and techniques for understanding and thoroughly documenting the behaviours and attitudes of tourists. Qualitative research has been used to study different aspects of tourism experiences through an in-depth understanding of tourists' behaviour, attitudes, expectations, and perceptions within a destination. The objective of this chapter is to explore the usual and more recent methodologies used in consumer and tourism studies.

## ■ **The use of traditional qualitative techniques in tourism studies**

Qualitative research employs a range of methodological tools for advancing scientific knowledge in the social sciences. There are a number of research areas and topics that are considered as having the potential to yield significant fundamental insights, findings, and understanding of subjects by using a range of qualitative research approaches (Mariampolski, 2001). The main methods by which information about consumers and tourists can be obtained (Stake, 2010; Churchill and Iacobucci, 2004; Gordon and Langmaid, 1988) may include various qualitative techniques such as: individual depth/intensive interviews, focus group discussion, projective techniques and observation methods.

### □ **Individual depth/intensive interviews in tourism research**

The first method 'individual depth/intensive interviews' is the appropriate interviewing style which can give natural interactions with the interviewer and deepen any topics as the conversation takes place. Before any interview can occur, con-

sideration must be given to every question that will be asked because at the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the consumer/tourist experiences and the meaning they make of their experiences (Seidman, 1991). The means to access those experiences range widely from open-ended, unstructured interviews to highly structured protocols with pre-set and standardized questions.

- At the top of this continuum, there are relatively unstructured approaches such as in ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology. These approaches may use an evolving set of questions where each participant might respond to queries in quite different forms from those who were interviewed earlier. These techniques bring very rich information, but this can be difficult to categorise at times due to the range of information gathered.
- At the middle of the continuum are semi-structured interviews that use open-ended questions based on the study's central focus, which is developed before data collection to obtain specific information and enable comparison across the different interviews. Interviewers remain open and flexible so that they may probe individual participants' stories in more details (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).
- At the other end of the continuum are surveys or standardized interviews whereby the goal is to expose each participant to the same interview guide (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Any differences are assumed to be due to variations among participants rather than to differences in the interview process itself (Singleton and Straits, 2002).

Qualitative tourism researchers have used interviews to understand the tourists' point of view and to uncover the meaning of their experiences. Interviews allow respondents to detail a situation from their own perspective and in their own words. They comprise a broad continuum of focused inquiry. Firstly, interviews may be informal, unstructured, nondirective and conversational. Secondly, they may be formal, highly structured, entirely directive, and administered identically across all informants. In addition, in-depth interviews could be grouped as: non-directive interview where the respondent is given maximum freedom to respond in a manner that he/she wishes to a non-directive intent, and semi-structured/focused interview where the initiative is retained by the interviewer, who has to prepare a specific list of points and questions, which have been decided before the interview taking place.