

SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF TOURIST SERVICE EXPERIENCE IN HOMESTAYS

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ABSTRACT: Homestay tourism can be a lucrative service sector and the Culture, adventure and nature (CAN) have been recognized as the critical components of eco-tourism products for tourism-friendly nations like Malaysia. Many tourists have enjoyed the social and environmental aspects of the various tourist destinations and there are also tourists who are not very happy with certain aspects of their experiences. This research investigated the tourists' experiences with the homestay programmes using qualitative and quantitative techniques, namely the focus groups and questionnaire survey to discover their experiences and thereafter developed a multi-item measurement. Responses of 330 sampled respondents were analyzed. A total of nine dimensions were found and the measurement fit indices of these socio-environmental measurement was satisfactory. The socio-environmental issues included culture, guiding, accommodation, services, food and beverages, journey, natural environment, access and cleanliness. The homestay service environment indeed must be holistic and sustainable to create the memorable and delightful tourist experience which can generate more income and other benefits for the stakeholders. Implications and future research were also discussed for continuous improvement of the environment-driven performance measurement and management process.

Keywords: Socio-environmental, Measurement, Homestays, Tourist Service Experience.

INTRODUCTION

Culture, adventure and nature have been emphasized for optimum returns in eco-tourism. The natural endowments coupled with the man-made facilities are the imperatives. The social and natural aspects of the tourist destinations are essential to attract and maintain the critical mass of tourists for sustainable eco-tourism development for handsome socio-economic benefits for the multiple stakeholders. As such, tourism products such as homestays, tend to capitalise on these aspects to create memorable tourist experience. Undoubtedly, the contribution of tourism involves community, well-being of people, creating job, distributing income and sustaining regional development [1]. Specifically, the eco-tourism and cultural-tourism are well-manifested in the homestay programmes and these programmes are potential income generators for the local communities (e.g. Malays, Ibans, Bidayus, Kadazans, etc.). The effectiveness and competitiveness of homestay programmes if appropriately and systematically gauged, managed and thereafter enhanced will bring much social and economic benefits to the participating individuals, families and communities. This research explored and thereafter measured the tourist service experience for homestay tourism in the multi-cultural Malaysia which is rich in biodiversity, for sustainable development. The qualitative (i.e., Focus

Groups) and quantitative process (Structural Equation Modeling with AMOS) of developing the measurement cum management tool were scientifically done to develop the marketing construct (e.g. [2], [3], [4], [5]).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service can play an important role in creating and sustaining the required differentiation for competitive advantage. In fact, the consistent and continual offerings of new and beneficial services are critical in all service industries. In fact, creating the desired authenticity [6] is crucial for customer delight. The public and private service organizations have to keep on improving their service products and customer service to gain very high levels of customer satisfaction in order to create and sustain customer loyalty for optimum profitability. Superior service is commonly linked to increase profitability, and it is seen as providing an important competitive advantage by generating repeat sales, positive word-of-mouth, constructive feedbacks, customer loyalty and service differentiation. Services are the products offered to the targeted customers and/or stakeholders and have their unique nature as compared to goods [7]. It is normally characterized by intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity or variability, and perishability. Most services are intangible as they are performances. The functionality and technical

aspects of the service also need to be understood [8] as the more contextual specific domains are necessary to be managed to satisfy the technical needs of the customers (e.g. facility, homestay packages, food and beverages).

The hospitality service researchers such as Qin and Prybutok (2008) [9] suggested that customers were influenced by the physical environment, reliability of the service and attitude of the employees such as showing empathy to customer needs, being responsive, courteous, knowledgeable and trustworthy.

Tourist Experience for Sustainable Homestays

Undoubtedly, the customer experience plays an important role in the service sector, especially in the hedonic setting such as the cultural- and people-driven tourism sector. The very satisfied personal experiences of the tourists will most probably lead to repeat purchases from the same vendor (e.g. [10]). In fact, experience in hospitality services has been regarded as a competitive tool as well as a way to gain superior service performance (e.g. [11], [12], [13], [14], [4]). However, there should be greater emphasis on empirical research of investigating the social and environmental aspects of customer experience for the priority service sector such as homestay tourism.

The natural and engineered environments of the tourist destinations as well as the acts of service from the multiple stakeholders are instrumental to create favourable encounters and experiences. The service experience concerns the emotional feelings of the tourists during the service encounters. Generally, the service encounters are tangible series of interactions between the tourists and the service environment. Emotions are inevitably contagious in social situations [15] and social science researchers tend to agree that the favourable service experience can effectively satisfy the customers and make them more loyal to the services (e.g. [12], [9], [5], [14]).

METHODOLOGY

This measurement-based fundamental research aimed to identify the key dimensions for tourist experience in homestay tourism. The research employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to understand the tourist service experiences more effectively. In fact, the qualitative techniques had successfully generated various contextual specific items. The qualitative phrase which involved focus group interviews and personal interviews helped to capture the very satisfied and very dissatisfied experiences of the individual tourists. The main target population of the study was the tourists who had visited the homestay

establishments (e.g. villages, longhouses, residential houses) for the past six months in Malaysia.

The research carried out the relevant literature review on services marketing and management, hospitality management, and service quality theories and measurements in order to identify the tentative critical dimensions for the customer and service experiences. This was followed by the focus groups and personal interviews. Four focus group interviews were conducted in different locations in Malaysia to discuss the service and living experiences for excellent homestay service delivery and management. Each focus group interview consisted of 8-12 participants representing the various selected groups of customers (by age groups, gender and race). All the group discussions were audio-taped and content-analyzed accordingly to generate the required dimensions and their respective items for constructing the survey instrument (i.e., structured questionnaire).

The duly designed questionnaire was validated by a few experts in the field of services marketing and hospitality management and service management. The refined questionnaire was used and the printed sets of questionnaires were distributed to the respective respondents, selected through quota sampling technique (controlled characteristics include gender, age and types of tourist - local/foreign), who participated in the survey voluntarily. The tourists returned the duly answered questionnaires to the trained enumerator concerned at the respective homestay destinations. This was an anonymous survey where the respondents' answers would not be personally identified, to enhance the reliability and validity of the data.

The collected questionnaires were carefully checked and usable questionnaires were then analyzed accordingly using the SPSS software. Initially, all the items of the measures were subjected to reliability analysis to ensure an acceptable internal consistency of the items for further analysis. The item-to-total correlations of the items were gauged. Items with item-to-total correlation of less than 0.40 were discarded. After this process, the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) were done (e.g. [16], [17], [5]) on the survey data. The EFA helped to identify the meaningful dimensions of the tourist service experience. Structural equation model was developed to investigate the impact on tourist satisfaction. The numerous goodness of fit indices (e.g. CFI, GFI, RMSEA) were used to confirm the goodness of the model [18].

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The survey research obtained 330 usable questionnaires for quantitative analysis. The characteristics of the respondents who voluntarily

participated in the survey are generally in line with the characteristics of the target population. There were more female (53%) respondents who participated in the survey and most of the respondents were aged 21-30 years old. The foreigners accounted for 7% and about 54% of the respondents had bachelor degree holders. But, they were from different walks of life (i.e., Students – 48%, Government servants – 18.2%, Private sector – 19.1%, Self-employed – 10.3% and Unemployed 4.5%). About 81% of the respondents earned RM3000 or less per month.

The results of EFA which found nine dimensions of tourist service experience are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of Tourist Service Experience

Dimensions and Items (Total variance explained =64.1%)	Factpr Loadings
1. Culture (36.7%)	0.57
1. Fascinating traditional and customary practices.	0.57
2. Homestay cultural activities are very interesting.	0.51
3. Fascinated with the homestay architecture.	0.54
4. Enjoyed cultural activities organized by them.	0.81
5. Have opportunity to understand a new culture.	0.73
6. Enjoyed knowing the language of the people.	0.52
7. Have opportunity to learn their native language.	0.57
8. People of the homestay are special/unique.	
9. Unique cultures for the homestay.	
2. Guiding (6.8%)	0.67
10. Sufficient info. about the homestay before the trip.	0.72
11. Person in charge of the trip understands my needs.	0.65
12. Person who brings me there is friendly with me.	0.71
13. The person gives me individual attention.	0.62
14. The person is always willing to help me.	0.52
15. The person is knowledgeable about the homestay.	
3. Accommodation (4.8%)	0.53
16. Enough bathroom/toilet to accommodate visitors.	0.65
17. Do not have to spend much for accommodation.	0.68
18. Sufficient electricity supply in the homestay.	0.66
19. Water supply is enough for visitor's use.	0.53
4. Services (3.3%)	0.71
21. Good telecommunication services.	0.75
22. Tour guiding services are provided.	0.63
23. Good homestay packages/programmes available.	
5. Food & Beverages (2.9%)	0.71
24. There are many choices of food and drinks.	0.76
25. Can get exotic (special) local food in homestay.	0.75
26. Can taste foods that I have never eaten before.	0.74
27. Can taste drinks that I have never drunk before.	0.53
28. I enjoyed the food that they served.	
6. Journey (2.7%)	0.67
29. The journey to the homestay is enjoyable.	0.68
30. Enjoyed activities along the journey to homestay.	0.66
31. The visit to the homestay is memorable.	
7. Natural Environment (2.5%)	0.69
32. Good nature trail(s) is/ are found near homestay.	0.68
33. Serenity (quietness) surrounding of homestay.	0.71
34. Restful and relaxing atmosphere at homestay.	
8. Accessibility (2.3%)	0.71
35. Location of the homestay is easily found.	0.67
36. Homestay is accessible by right mode of transport.	0.67
37. Road condition along the journey is satisfactory.	
9. Cleanliness (2.2%)	0.61
38. Clean environment surrounding homestay area.	0.57
39. Guestroom cleanliness is acceptable.	0.61
40. Food and drinks served are hygienic.	0.53
41. Bathroom and toilets are clean.	

The 9 dimensions could explain 64.1% of the total variance and the main dimension was Culture which contributed 36.7% of the total variance explained. The other 8 dimensions and their respective variance explained were: Guiding (6.8%), Accommodation (4.8%), Services (3.3%), Food and Beverages (2.9%), Journey (2.7%), Natural Environment (2.5%), Accessibility (2.3%) and Cleanliness (2.2%). As such, there were social and environmental components of the homestay experience for the homestay operators to manage. These suggested that the homestay service environment needed to be holistic in order to create the memorable and delightful tourist experience.

A path diagram (Figure 1) was drawn and the measurement modeling was done using the AMOS software. The 9 dimensions indicated a satisfactory model fit and the indices (CFI=0.88, GFI=0.80, TLI=0.87, RMSEA=0.06) were considered acceptable.

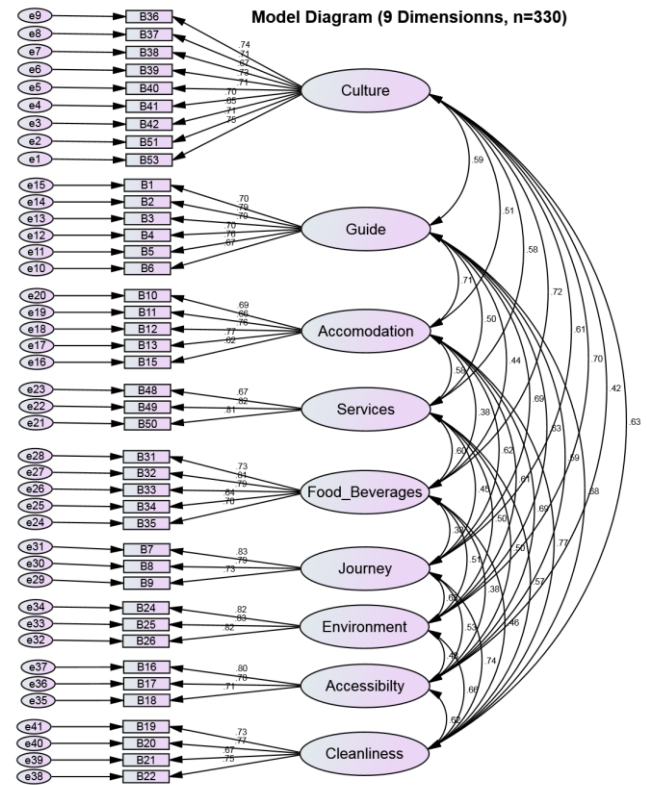


Fig. 1: Path Diagram for the Measurement Model

All the dimensions were significantly correlated among them and their correlation coefficients range from 0.38 to 0.72. The correlations were found to be weak to moderate and these levels of associations demonstrated a satisfactory validity of the measure. The convergent and discriminant validities were exhibited. Besides, the overall construct also related significantly (at 5% level of significance) with the meaningful variables namely tourist satisfaction

(path coefficient, 0.78) and behavioural intentions (0.24). The effect of tourist satisfaction on behavioral intentions was 0.71. This suggested an indirect effect (through tourist satisfaction) of tourist service experience on behavioural intentions.

The homestay programmes which could offer multi-dimensional service experience (social and environmental aspects, socio-environmental) for the visiting tourists should be managed and improved in terms of the various dimensions in order to please the tourists as well as for sustainable development which would benefit the multi-stakeholders. The social aspects would be very much people- and cultural-driven where human elements were essential. Training on human relations and cultural conservations would be essential to improve and sustain the competencies and authenticity which the local and foreign tourists treasure for the unique experiences. Besides, the components of service environment which were essentially tangibles and hence to a great extent could be carefully engineered and conserved, taking into consideration the human factors too. For instance, the accommodation, natural environment, accessibility, and cleanliness aspects could be engineered. The green engineering can be instrumental to preserve, conserve and enhance the original and authentic natural environment and biodiversity. The natural trails, building architecture, cultural artifacts, road system and landscape were among the homestay destinations and journey aspects in which the civil, electronic and electrical, ICT and human-factor engineers could assist to improve and sustain. What the homestays have as well as what and how the operators do would be important in order to create the delightful and authentic service experiences. Ultimately, the tourists must be very satisfied as the findings indicated that the tourists who had had very good experiences with the homestays would then to be very satisfied, and thereafter would like to revisit or tell other people about their good experiences with homestay programmes and destinations.

CONCLUSIONS

The results and findings of this empirical research suggested that tourist service experience of homestay programmes was multi-dimensional in nature. The homestay service environment indeed must be holistic and sustainable in order to create the memorable and delightful tourist experience which will most probably impact the tourists' behavioural intentions. The nine (9) socio-environmental aspects essentially required much attention from the multiple stakeholders for a more sustainable tourism development and improved quality of life for the homestay operators. The exploratory research suggested nine dimensions of experience for tourism marketing and management. Ideally, the homestay

destinations should be a 'living habitat' though on a temporary basis. Future research can employ relevant quantitative techniques such as logistics regressions and Kansei Engineering to identify items which will lead to greater tourist satisfaction or loyalty. Besides, samples from different cultural settings from other parts of the world can be used to understand the situations more contextually for effective tourist relationship management.

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