

Tour Leader's Service Attributes Towards Customer Retention

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the level of tour leaders' service attributes towards customer retention. It also examines the most influence factors of tour leaders' service attributes towards customer retention. The factors that affect customer retention was also investigated. The primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire with Malaysian outbound tourists who travelled by group package tour (GPT) to Asian and non-Asian countries and had an experienced a tour leader service. The results revealed that the service attributes of the tour leader are significant to customer retention. The findings also revealed that tour leaders' professional attitude and ability, professional knowledge and personal integrity and Islamic Values were significantly positively affected towards Customer Retention. The result mentioned, if the tour leaders' service attributes is high, it is likely that the customer retention will be increased. However, to sustain and create business repetition, the travel agency should improve the presentation and communication skills even though after carefully examine, presentation and communication ability independent variable need to remove from the initial model due it has the highest value non-significant probability value. Thus, travel agencies also need to pay special attention to the performances and attitudes of the tour leaders' services to ensure long term growth and success of the firm.

Keywords: Tour leader; service attributes; customer retention; customer satisfaction; group package tour; travel agency; outbound travel

INTRODUCTION

Today the outbound tourism is developing and becoming one of the economic contributions to many developing countries including Malaysia. In 2013, Malaysia registered 26 million tourist arrivals, which placed it as the 10th most visited country (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2013). As the country is progressing well, its purchasing power is also increasing; its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased from RM 905.9 to RM 952.6 billion. In 2012 to 2013 respectively (Annual Gross Domestic Product, 2013) the outbound tourism is also showing a trend of growing similar to the inbound arrivals. Referred to by the Putrajaya Immigration Department of Statistic (2013) the survey showed that the total number of Malaysians

during their trips abroad in 2013 has increased at about from 31 million in 2012 to 43 million in 2013. The figures showed that outbound tourists are increasing faster than inbound tourists. Although this reflects more Ringgit Malaysia is being traded overseas, it nonetheless gives income to many local outbound travel agencies in Malaysia.

The increase of outbound traveling is not experienced by Malaysia, but it is a trend worldwide, including Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America are top regional growth markets while Europe and North America are recorded higher levels of outbound markets (Berlin, ITB World Travel Trends Report 2013). Asian countries as recorded by (China National Tourism Administration [CNTA], 2013) stated the growth of economic as well as the rising income levels does create the disposal income of tourist expenditure

whereas crafts more traveling trips to abroad. In addition, Wong and Lau (2001) reported that Asian tourists buy all-inclusive tour packages much more than do western tourists.

In outbound tourism, Kuo, An and Tzung (2000) classified that there are two types of tours, which consists of the group package tour (GPT) and the (FIT) original definition is the foreign independent tour. It is now more commonly used as an acronym for flexible independent travel or free independent traveler or tour. Particularly, the GPT is one of the main modes of outbound travel in many parts of Asia indicated by Wong and Lee (2012). Therefore, there are two main differences between GPT and FIT. First is the GPT buying process involving purchase directly through retail travel agencies. On the contrary, FIT customers usually contact the travel agencies directly in order to get travel information and counseling. Another difference between these two types of outbound tourism was in terms of their customer relation services, for GPT the customer relationship is having a single "contact employee" wherein the travel agency would assign a tour guide to escort the tour. Hence, Wong and Lee (2012) stated that, in some countries or cities such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, Paris, Vienna, and London; local guides are also provided, but this is not necessary for FITs.

GPT which is better known as escorted tour is the most structured tour package which fully provides or accommodates all-rounded tourism components such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverages, sightseeing and a tour leader (TL). The TL will be coordinating and escorting a particular travel group throughout their journey. In fact, almost the entire detail of this type trip is prearranged and the participating tourists have nothing to worry about in terms of planning their own trip. Wong and Lau (2001) had clearly pointed out that Asian tourists' travel pattern for outbound tours generally indicates that they were favorable for an all-inclusive tour package as compared to western tourists.

In support of that, the Taiwan Tourism Bureau (2005) as well as Wang, Hsieh, and Huan (2000) has stated that in many Asian countries, such as China, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, the (GPT) is very popular and has become one of the main modes of outbound travel or international trips. The most distinctive feature or vital characteristics of GPT and the importance of the tour leader have been confirmed by Wang et al, (2000) in which GPT provides critical service features consisting of accommodation, transportation, food and beverages, sightseeing, shopping, optional tour as well as a tour leader. Besides that, the importance of the tour leader's role in the tourism industry had also been intensely mentioned in various previous studies.

According to the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents MATTA (2011) currently the number of travel agencies registered under MATTA consists of 2,800 members and it comprises local tour and travel organizations as well as numerous overseas affiliations. Moreover, the number of tour operators and travel agencies companies licensed by the Ministry up to July 2012 was 3,143 while the new upcoming branch's license that has been approved was 936. The total number of licenses that have been approved was 4,079. This indicates that the outbound tour is one of the core businesses for some if not most travel agencies and tour operators in Malaysia.

Tour leaders are the front-line employees working for the travel agencies implementing an outbound GPT, and they are the ones who will have long-term contact with tourists Wang, Hsieh and Chen, (2002). Moreover, Heung (2008) stated that the various roles and responsibilities of tour leaders include providing security and protection, providing information, promoting group interaction, and acting as a surrogate parent, pathfinder, mentor, leader, mediator and entertainer. On top of that, the tour leaders are also responsible in managing a particular group's passage over a multi-day tour and possess an intense contact with the tour participants. This person may be an employee of the tour operator, a professional tour escort hired by the travel agent or a representative of the organization sponsoring the trip (Bowie & Chang 2005). Bowie and Chang (2005) again mentioned that tour leaders are frontline employees in a particular travel agency who plays an important role in coordinating the tour group members through their travel experience to a destination and they are the person who escorts the tour participants throughout their journey.

Ap and Wong (2001), also indicated that role and duty of tour leaders are making tourists happy, providing necessary, updated, and accurate information. The others' role and duty of tour leader stated by (Wang, Hsieh and Huan 2000; Wong and Wang, 2009) is a middle person between the host destination and the tour participants and also as a front-line employee who is a main factor influencing the customers' perception of travel service quality.

Besides that, Wong, and Wang (2009) stated that tour leaders may work on a permanent or freelance basis. Permanent tour leaders usually have a monthly basic salary, and they may earn extra income by getting tips from tour participants and commissions on shopping activities as well as optional tours, whereas freelance tour leader usually work on a tour-by-tour basis.

However, Eid and El-Gohary (2014) reported that there is an Islamic value for customers in the hospitality and tourism industry is a competitive advantage. The interesting marketers determine this is an essential element

of consumer decision making. Again, according to Eid and El-Gohary (2014) to be successful in the hospitality and tourism industry, companies must provide superior customer value, and this must be done in a continuous and efficient way. Furthermore, tourism companies should improve the quality of their service offerings and ensure that the needs and expectations of their customers are being met. As a result, a religious perspective on travel and other purchase decisions is preferable to other segmentation variables such as demographic characteristics of age and life stage, which have traditionally been used to identify market segments Gardiner, King, and Grace (2013). Means that, Hodge (2002) briefed with the distinctive requirements of Muslims in terms of food, daily prayers, and travel patterns it meet the standard of the Islamic values daily practice. Thus, Islamic values are practices regarding health and hygiene, such as washing before performing the daily prayers, identifies what food is permissible to be consumed; for example, pork and alcohol are proscribed, and how some food should be prepared; Muslims are to eat Halal meat, which requires Zabih (Slaughter) of an animal according to Islamic specifications. This is important to have the characteristic of TL Islamic value service attributes to cope or suit with the demand of Muslim customers.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING

To generate sufficient responses, several established travel agencies in Kuala Lumpur were invited to participate in this study. The travel agency was briefed on the purpose and procedure of this study. The sample for the study was all Malaysian outbound tourists who joined GPT to Asian and non-Asian countries. As for that, the demand of the outbound travel packages will be increased around that time. This study focused on Muslim travelers only. Samples of 500 Muslim travelers were targeted, who were currently on or had an experienced and previously joined a group package tour for holiday and had a tour leader service.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT DESIGN

During collecting the required information for this study, a self-administered questionnaire has been developed based on the variables in the study framework. However, several issues should be considered in constructing instruments such as language and wording. In this study, because of the questionnaires were distributed to Malaysian outbound

tourists, the English language was used to form the questionnaire. The questions adapted were already in their simplest form and easy to be answered to ensure the respective tourist will easily understand the questions (Potts, 2012). However, to make more understanding of respondents, translated into simplified Malay language has been used. Thus, to revise the grammar of questionnaire the researcher sent the instruments. The type of scale used is the five-point Likert scale measuring the level of agreement. Value 1 indicated most negative attitude (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) as most positive attitude.

Therefore, the researcher decided to use an identical five-point scale for each section. For the contents of the instrument, six sections were formed (Section One, Two, Three, Four, Five and Six). Section 1 looks at the respondents' demographic profiles. Next, in Section 2 the ranges of questions were developed to look at the item of tour leader presentation and communication ability. Items in the Section 3 were concentrated on tour leader service attribute professional attitude and ability. Meanwhile, Section 4 is for the professional knowledge of tour leader. Whereas Section 5 is the personal integrity and Islamic values of the tour leader. Lastly, the Section 6 is in repeat business for customer retention. The questionnaire had 41 items and 9 demographic questions.

QUESTIONS USED IN SECTION TWO OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This section is about the presentation and communication ability attributes associated with the tour leader(s). A total of seven items were adapted.

TABLE 1. Survey Instruments in Section Two: Presentation and Communication Ability

No	Items	Sources
1	The tour leader is punctual	Heung (2008)
2	The tour leader provides clear information on safety and security	Heung (2008)
3	The tour leader delivers the daily briefing on the tour itinerary	Heung (2008) Heung (2008)
4	The tour leader is friendly	
5	The tour leader respects the tour members	
6	The tour leader communicates well in English.	Zhang and Chow (2004)
7	The tour leader has a good communication and presentation skill	Heung (2008); Zhang and Chow (2004)

QUESTIONS USED IN SECTION THREE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This section is about the professional attitude and ability attributes associated with the tour leader(s). There is a total of eight items in this section. In this study, three main actions

of the accelerator pedal (half press=HP, release=R and full press=FP) were recorded as shown in Figure 3. Roughly, five seconds is taken for each pedal action. This study is conducted to investigate the reaction of the leg muscle while performing the HP, R and FP

TABLE 2. Survey Instruments in Section Three: Professional Attitude and Ability

No	Items	Sources
1	The tour leader has a sense of humour	Heung (2008); Zhang and Chow (2004)
2	The tour leader pays attention to details during the tours	Heung (2008) Heung (2008)
3	The tour leader is always helpful	
4	The tour leader is patient	
5	The tour leader is able to solve the problems	
6	The tour leader appears well-trained for his/her job	
7	The tour leader has the ability to respond to any emergencies	Wong and Lee (2012)
8	The tour leader is ready to help group members after the journey ends; e.g.: stayed to help tour members get their luggage at the airport.	

QUESTIONS USED IN SECTION FOUR OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This section was about the professional knowledge attributes associated with the tour leader(s). There is a total of six items in this section.

TABLE 3. Survey Instruments in Section Four: Professional Knowledge

No	Items	Sources
1	The tour leader always appears neat and tidy	Heung (2008)
2	The tour leader has the knowledge about the destination	
3	The tour leader arranges all the services as promised on the itinerary	
4	The tour leader provides reminders beforehand; e.g.: currency exchange, weather forecast and time difference	Wong and Lee (2012)
5	The tour leader shares and informs the reliable and affordable shops to the tour members	Zhang and Chow (2004)
6	The tour leader reminds frequently any important information and the details of the itinerary	Wong and Lee (2012)

QUESTIONS USED IN SECTION FIVE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This section was about the professional integrity and Islamic values attributes associated with the tour leader(s). There is a total of six items in this section.

TABLE 4. Survey Instruments in Section Five: Professional Integrity and Islamic Values

No	Items	Sources
1	The tour leader always appears to be honest and trustworthy.	Heung (2008)
2	The tour leader is polite and courteous.	
3	The tour leader clarifies regarding the optional tours.	Wong and Lee (2012)
4	The tour leader always keeps us updated with the praying time	Eid and El-Gohary (2014)
5	The tour leader is an obedient to the common Islamic value and practices; e.g.: recite doa before the journey begins.	
6	The tour leader makes sure there are no alcoholic beverages served to tour members during the tours.	

QUESTIONS USED IN SECTION SIX OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This section is about the customer retention attributes associated with the tour leader(s). There is a total of five items in this section.

TABLE 5. Survey Instruments in Section Six: Customer Retention

No	Items	Sources
1	I will purchase other group package tour with this travel agency again because of the services provided by the tour leader	Sim, Mak and Jones (2006)
2	As a result of the services provided by the tour leader, I am really dedicated to this travel agency	
3	I will tell all my friends and relatives to purchase group package tour because of the services provided by the tour leader	
4	As a result of the services provided by the tour leader, I will not go to any other travel agency	
5	I am loyal to this travel agency because of the services provided by the tour leader	

DATA ANALYSIS

To check the quality of the research instrument was used in this study, the reliability of the measurement was tested. The analysis of Cronbach's Alpha-Coefficient was performed to access the reliability of the measurement. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), the widely

accepted social science cut-off is that alpha value should be .70 or higher for a set of items to be considered scale, but some use .75 or .80 while others are as lenient as .60. Cronbach's Alpha values are quite sensitive to the number of items in the scale and the Cronbach's Alpha values will reduce below 0.60.

TABLE 6. Summary Results of Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Presentation and Communication Ability	.732	7
Professional Attitude and Ability	.759	8
Professional Knowledge	.753	6
Personal Integrity and Islamic Values	.748	6
Customer Retention	.784	5

Table 6 shows the results of the reliability of the entire measurement. There was substantial variation in Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables, ranging from .732 to .784. Given that alpha values greater than .70 are generally considered to indicate a reliable set of items, and alpha values greater than .70 are generally confirmed that the grouped items were at an acceptable, reliable set of items. Since all the measurements in this study meet the threshold of this analysis (Cronbach's Alpha > .70) and the Cronbach's Alpha for each variable was above .70, it can conclude that the measurements were acceptable, valid and reliable.

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE (ANOVA) TOWARDS DEPENDENT VARIABLE (TOUR EXPERIENCE)

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used in order to know if a significant difference exists among tour experience groups in terms of the average level of customer retention due to the tour experience group being more than two groups. These analyses have an assumption that needs to be fulfilled in order to get an unbiased and valid result. The assumptions are: (a) the populations from which the samples have been drawn should be normal, and (b) the scores in each group should have homogeneous variance (Field, 2009; Pallant, 2010). Table 7 confirms that all variables were normally distributed and allows the researcher to analyze using ANOVA analysis. Assumption (b) was accessed by performing Levene's test (Pallant, 2010; Sheridan et. al., 2010). If the Levene's test was statistically significant, it is indicated that the scores in each group was not homogeneous variance.

TABLE 7. Summary Results of ANOVA towards Customer Retention (Tour Experience)

Variable	Group	Mean (SD)	F-test (p-value)
Customer Retention	One time	4.04 (0.60)	.050 (.952)
	2-3 times	4.03 (0.59)	
	4 times or more	4.01 (0.63)	

Table 8 indicated that, difference there is no significance in average of customer retention among the group of tour experience ($F(2, 365) = 050, p = .952$). It is indicated that, the respondents that have experienced once in travelling ($M = 4.04, SD = 0.60$), two-to-three-time tour experience ($M = 4.03, SD = 0.59$) and have experience 4 times or more in travelling ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.63$) having a same average of customer retention level. In addition, the results of ANOVA were valid since the variance across the group of tour experience were equal (Levene Statistic = 0.440, $p = .645$ Table 4.4: Summary Results of t-test towards Customer Intention (Tourist Destination)

TABLE 8. Summary Results of ANOVA towards Customer Retention (Tourist Destination)

Variable	Group	Mean (SD)	T-test (p-value)
Customer Retention	Asia	4.03 (0.64)	.072 (.943)
	Non-Asia	4.02 (0.57)	

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study had proven there was the customers' perception towards tour leader service attributes. The finding discovered more than half of the customers' perception towards tour leaders' service attributes response in the agreeing category. Whereas, more than half of the respondents answered are at an agreed level to retain, sustain or keep the tour leaders' service in the future.

Tour leader presentation and communication ability came as the most important factor that influences customer retention. There is a positive relationship between the dimension of tour leaders' service attributes towards customer retention. On the other hand, the attribute presentation and communication ability is the most influential factor on tour leaders' service attributes towards customer retention followed by professional knowledge, personal integrity and Islamic Values and professional attitude and ability. This is because presentation and communication ability play the important role in influencing message delivery, handling complaints and inquiries.

Additionally, under respondents' profile descriptive analysis to test whether there are significant differences in terms of tour experience with respect to customer retention, it indicates that the respondents that have one time traveling experience, two-to-three-time tour experience and respondents that have 4 times or more having a same average of customer retention. Moreover, the result also appeared there was no significant difference in terms of tourist destination respect to customer retention. This is because, tourists who go to Asia continent tourist destinations have an equal or the same average of retention with the group of tourists that go to non-Asia continent tourist destinations. Furthermore, Chang (2006) said that the tour leader is the best person to develop a close relationship with customers and generate repeat business. This is like the findings of the study. Finally, an understanding of TLs' service attributes towards customer retention helps to advance the distinct body of theory and operational knowledge about the travel business. However, future research is needed to increase our knowledge of TLs' characteristics to extend the epistemology of outbound travel and customer retention.

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