

Romantic Tourists' Cognitive Dissonance and Willingness to Revisit Asian Hotels

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Abstract

Although romantic tourism is acknowledged as an essential aspect of the tourism industry, it has received little scholarly attention. A better understanding of romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance and their willingness to recommend the hotel could help hotel management allocate their scarce resources to concentrate their effort on creating tourist satisfaction. This study, therefore, attempts to bridge this important gap in literature by examining romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance and its impact on their tendency to spread negative word of mouth and its effect on their intention to recommend and revisit. Results of the study show that physical environment, physical goods, staff attitudes and customer expectations are responsible for romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance and willingness to recommend.

Introduction

Romantic tourists which includes honeymooners, wedded couples, vow renewal couples and dating couples constitute a significant market for tourism industry worldwide (ABTA, 2012). ABTA (2012) suggests that in the UK alone, 18% or 1 out of 5 couples tend to celebrate and anchor their love in foreign countries. According to Kuoni Travel trends report (2013), most of these couples choose to spend their time in exotic places and cultures of South East Asia, Pacific Ocean and Caribbean. On average, such customers spend around US\$10,000 (Lee, 2011) and contribute revenue of US\$12 billion per annum to the hospitality industry (Sardone, 2012). Most romantic tourists book their hotel accommodation via internet mainly based on travel reviews which allow them to evaluate tourist products (Tripadvisor, 2013). Researchers (Jurca, Garcin, Talwar and Faltings, 2010) argued that the use of the reviews should be carefully considered as some reviews are inaccurate and biased. Consequently, customers relying just on such reviews may experience unexpected problems (Honeymooner's Review Guide, 2012) generating dissatisfaction leading to cognitive dissonance (O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). Cognitive dissonance refers to the feeling of discomfort when a cognitive state and an action state are inconsistent

(Bourne and Russo, 1998). Cognitive dissonance can threaten business sustainability as it reduces customers' tendency to re-visit (Oliver, 1997) and recommend (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991). Despite the importance of the romantic tourism segment for the hospitality industry, research on the issue is scarce. Our study aims to bridge this gap by broadening our understanding of the effect of cognitive dissonance on potential romantic tourists' decision making. Specifically, our study attempts to answer following research questions:

RQ1: When do romantic tourists choose NWOM?

RQ2: Does NWOM negatively affect romantic tourists' future revisit intention?

Methodology

This study uses qualitative approach in collecting and analysing data. A total of 123 negative reviews and opinions from "The Asia's Top 10 Hotels for Romance" were content analysed to develop the themes related to the romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance issues. Towards analysing the data concerning the source of dissatisfaction, Lewis's (1983) model of customer dissatisfaction that provides a complete theme separation was used. The initial step was deductive followed by an inductive approach when coding began whereby themes were expanded/ collapsed depending on the themes emerging from the data.

The Sample

Sample of the hotels was drawn on the basis of Tripadvisor.com tourists' choice 2013 report titled as "The Asia's Top 10 Hotels for Romance" were selected as the sample population. These particular hotels are listed in Table I and represent the leading accommodation providers for romantic tourists in Asian region. Each of these hotels is reviewed by past customers on Tripadvisor website (www.tripadvisor.com). Customers rate their overall experience with hotel using a 5 point scale (Excellent, Very Good, Average, Poor and Terrible) and write reviews detailing their good or bad experience. Because our objective is to understand cognitive dissonance, we included only those reviews in our study which were rated as poor or terrible. This way, a total of 146 negative reviews about the selected hotels were collected of which 23 were excluded from the selection process as these were in foreign languages. Finally, 123 reviews were content analysed.

Analytic Procedure

Each review and opinion was first read over to identify any issues preventing the accurate completion of coding. An initial reading of the first few revealed that understanding of some comments needed knowledge of the surrounding circumstances. So, the full comments in each review were included in the coding process to provide an understanding of the issue. As the process continued, the themes were collapsed and emerging themes and additional themes were added. The final themes were developed and symbolised the current sources of romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance.

Variables Used

Dissatisfaction—this variable occurs when expectations and reality are very different; *NWOM*—a type of cognitive dissonance that includes unfavourable comments; negative recommendation (*NR*) – a cognitive dissonance that suggests avoiding a product or service.

Table I: The Asia’s Top 10 Hotels For Romance

No	Hotel	Country	Overall Customer Rating		Foreign Language	Total Reviews
			Poor	Terrible		
1	Baros Maldives	Maldives	5	1	1	5
2	Casa del Mar	Malaysia	13	8	3	18
3	Layana Resort & Spa	Thailand	3	5	1	7
4	Veligandu Island Resort & Spa	Maldives	7	9	1	15
5	Constantce Moofusi	Maldives	2	0	1	1
6	Cocoa Island	Maldives	2	0	1	1
7	Minhi Island Resort	Maldives	2	2	1	3
8	The Shore at Katathari	Thailand	5	0	3	2
9	Maafusi Varu	Maldives	1	2	2	1
10	Kuredu Island Resort & Spa	Maldives	42	37	9	70
			82	64	23	123

Results and Key Research Findings

An in-depth analysis of reviews shows the impact of online reviewers’ NWOM on loyal customers. A loyal customer sees purchasing as an involved process (Kassarjian, 1981) and is willing to provide feedback by word of mouth (WOM) (Wangenheim, 2005). Richins (1983) noted that WOM can serve as a platform to express a negative customer voice. Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM) threatens business sustainability and is one of the consequences of cognitive dissonance. Following comments support these arguments:

“I am very dissatisfied about the experience in -----; the price is too high for the quality (very poor). Dirty rooms, sheets, shower, staff (mediocre) and if you complain they are not happy at all... .. and after the complaint they were less friendly”

An individual who happened to be a travel agent used his own disappointment with their hotel to actively encourage other couples to go to the competitors:

“As a travel agent (I did not get discount on this one) I will not be selling this resort at all. I will only sell what I know, ----- and -----”

The above comments by unhappy customers show that dissatisfied customers resort to various steps including warning others. Gregoire and Fisher (2006) argued that this behaviour is shown when the relationship between the hotel and the customers turns

bitter, then the chance of retaliation becomes greater which motivates customers to reduce patronage, complain and engage in NWOM. Such NWOM from unhappy customers can be harmful as it reflects the reduced loyalty of customers (Triandis, 1994). In the following paragraphs, we answer our research questions:

RQ1: When do romantic tourists choose NWOM?

Understanding the core issue of romantic tourists' dissatisfaction is crucial for business sustainability. Lewis (1983) noted that the core dissatisfaction with the hotel industry is centred on the surrounding environment, physical goods, staff attitudes and customer expectations. Our findings reveal that these sources of dissatisfaction are valid in real life and easily identifiable through online sources. Some comments concerning these issues are provided below to support our findings.

Source of Dissatisfaction: Surrounding Environment

Surrounding environment refers to natural and manmade non biological elements that exist in one's surrounding place (Bell, Greene, Fisher & Baum, 2001). In this study, the concept of surrounding environment is related to natural rather than manmade element. Through its physical elements of such environment; i.e., land use (cleanliness), safety and accessibility, surrounding environment is believed to affect ones' behaviour (Annear, Cushman & Gidlow, 2009), emotion, and cognition (Han & Ryu, 2009). The inability to control such environment may affect hotels' image (Bittner, 1992) and ultimately reduces customer satisfaction (Han & Ryu, 2009). To illustrate,

“What did somewhat spoil the whole holiday experience for me were the dirty streets and beach outside of the hotel. The pavements are very high in places and not level or even finished. There is rubble and rubbish at the side of the roads on the way from the hotel to the various restaurants along the strip. Walking up the beach from the hotel needs to be done with caution. There was glass and a variety of rubbish items all along the beach”

Also, in the same vein, we found the following comment:

“The beach is polluted with litter. The hotel does clean the area immediately in front of the property but at the bar and restaurant you can easily see the plastic and rubbish scattered either side. It would be better to clear the beach surrounding the hotel rather than just immediately in front – or better still start a co-operative with the other businesses on the beach so everyone takes responsibility”

Source of Dissatisfaction: Physical Goods

In this study, physical goods refer to hotel facilities. Such facilities include in-room facilities (i.e., electronic equipment, guest safety and bathroom facility) and out-room facilities (i.e., fitness club and restaurants) (Losekoot, Van Wezel & Wood, 2001). Wood (1994) argues that ensuring these facilities are in good order is very crucial. He suggests that hotel needs to routinely check all their facilities and ensure that these facilities are cleaned and meet the standards. In contrast, Losekoot et al. (2001) argue that failure in managing these facilities in good order contributes to customers'

negative perception of hotels image and ultimately creates customer dissatisfaction. To exemplify:

“Room is not big not small either. The toilet keeps leaking all the time when we first checked in. You can hear the toilet sound every time your neighbours flush the toilet. Terrible sound at night! If you stay here just book the cheapest room. The so called beachfront studio or villa is just one step further and not a big difference in terms of size! – not worth the money at all”

In addition, we also found the following comment:

“We had a ‘refurbished’ room that was tired, dark and dingy, with a toilet that overflowed and an air conditioner unit that sounded like a POW white noise torture machine. We spoke to other people in the ‘refurbished’ rooms and they were sleeping with earplugs in. if you are very lucky you can have a Jacuzzi like we did in the ‘refurbished’ room, which despite turning it off, insisted on turning itself on every 90 minutes throughout the night. Ever so helpfully, the only comment we got from the staff was that it must be on automatic, which it wasn’t (the upside of this is that it helped to drown out the POW white noise”

Source of Dissatisfaction: Staff Attitude

Kuo, Chen and Lu (2012) argue that staff attitude is one of the prime elements to create interaction quality and outcome quality. That is, customer evaluates staff attitude as one of their evaluation criteria for the quality and image (Tantawy & Losekoot, 2008). According to Fry, Thompson and Chan (2004), negative staff attitude (i.e. rude, unfriendly and unhelpful) promotes customer frustration and anxiety. As a result, such high level of negative experience affects customer perception toward the businesses and ultimately reduces their intention to re-patronage (Richard, 2008). Following comment is presented to support this:

“I had a huge issue with a lady at the desk at ----, my boyfriend was ill and I wanted to get a plain meal for him to bring back to the villa, I asked the lady on the desk for pasta etc. and she was incredibly rude tutted, slammed down a menu in front of me, when I said ‘gee, I am sorry to disturb you’ she snapped ‘well I’m busy!’” to which I replied ‘and my boyfriend was ill so I need to get him a meal, can I speak to someone else please’ she rolled her eyes at this too but luckily a much nicer waiter came over and gave me a hand”

Similarly, we found the following comment from another tourist:

“The worst staff member at ---- was ----, we booked the sultan villa for the last two night of our honeymoon because we were in the water villa for 8 days prior. let me tell you it was not pleasant - - there were so many bugs and spiders on the towels, chairs, floors, walls, desk and the bathroom - when we called front desk to tell them about this they told some guys to come and spray the whole unit - my husband is asthmatic so he was coughing a lot but besides that they didn't even clean up the dead bugs! They left them there. When we told the manager he said we could go back to the water villa but we still had to pay \$ 1000 for the room we didn't stay in - not to mention he kept us in the lobby for over 3 hrs and then interrupted our dinner at night - he was very rude - I will never go back there again! These are therefore two

different accommodation types with their own distinct exclusivities. It is not surprising that, having stayed over water in the water villa, you were so fascinated with it. The Sultan Villa stood in stark contrast and did not earn your appreciation”

Source of Dissatisfaction: Unhealthy Statement in Respect to Expectations

Lynn (2001) argues that expectation is a strong wish that a particular event is believed to occur. According to Oliver’s (1981) disconfirmation theory, one’s ability to fulfil their expectation will determine the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Individuals experience many expectations, this include consumption expectation (Bhattacherjee, 2001). That is customers feel satisfied when they can fulfil their expectation, and in contrary, customers feel dissatisfied when their expectation was not fulfilled. To illustrate, following comment is presented:

“One particular issue which was of great annoyance to us all – was the “All inclusive” package is very far from inclusive. When we were there, we upgraded to the Gold all inclusive packages for an additional £50 per day, per couple because we wanted to be able to have cocktails etc. without paying excessive price. However, even “Gold all inclusive” – is not inclusive of everything when it was explained that it did include everything (such as branded spirits)!”

Also, another similar comment was found:

“My understanding of all inclusive was that everything is included in the price of your holiday. Not so at -----. Cocktails are not included if you are on a yellow band as well as a small stock of tea, coffee, sugar and dried milk in your room which when used you have to re-stock from the shop at an astronomical price. Ice creams are also an extra”

Source of Dissatisfaction: Inflexible Policies

Apart from the above, unfavourable hotel policy also contributes to dissatisfaction of romantic tourists which include cancelation, booking and other related policies. Inflexible policies create discomfort which in turn generates attitudinal change and stress (Seymour, 1991). Min and Min (2006) suggest that hotel policy represents its service quality and the degree of flexibility in the policy determines customers’ view about the service. Thus, lack of flexibility in policy generates customer dissatisfaction. For example,

“We also had a romantic meal booked on the beach for the Saturday night but because of the weather we were told we would have to have it inside or change it to another night, so we changed it then received a letter to tell us we had to have it on Saturday or not have it at all. Truly not acceptable in my eyes”

A similar comment as follows:

“Normally you don’t expect the staff of a luxury resort to be argumentative, but the --- had no problem in this area. After seeing how beautiful the house reef was, we wanted to take some underwater pictures so I headed off to the dive shop to rent a camera. I was told that this was possible, but the camera could only be rented from

9am to 12:30pm and from 1:30pm to 5pm, or I could rent it for the day. If I wanted it for the day, I had to pick the camera up at 9am and it absolutely had to be returned no later than 5pm. I looked at the staff member and said, "Really? I have to get up at 9am to get a camera? Can't I just come get it when I am done with breakfast?" I was then told that these were the rules and this is the way things are and there was nothing she could do about it. I remarked that it was odd to be told when I had to wake up while I was on vacation to pay money to a resort to rent a piece of equipment. Again, she pushed back on me saying these were the rules and this was the schedule. I took the camera (my desire to photograph the reef was stronger than my desire to continue this combative discussion). I told reception about the issue and I expected that all would be taken care of and perhaps the lady was having a bad day. When I went back to the dive shop to turn in the camera, the dive shop manager came out and quite gruffly said, "so, I hear you have complained about the dive shop." I explained what had happened and expected some semblance of understanding. Instead, he said, "these are the rules and these are the timings. Management has given us these rules and you should talk to them." Needless to say, I was very surprised by this tone and response. When I said that his timeline was "annoying", he then offered to find another solution. I had to really push back and express displeasure before he was willing to accommodate my request which went against management rules. Then again, I should not have been surprised as I had heard a similar remark the night before from the fishing guide"

As can be seen in both cases above, customers were disappointed at the inflexible hotel policies. Lack of communication of the policy to customers created further dissatisfaction. In both cases customers were left with unanswered questions which in turn increased their discomfort. Consequently, the unhappy tourists did not hesitate to communicate to the potential customers about the unpleasant experience.

Source of Dissatisfaction: Poor Food Quality

In addition, poor food quality also promotes dissatisfaction. Thomas and Irwin (2010) argue that in any place, especially relaxation place, the availability of different selection of food and their quality are very important in determining individual purchasing behaviour. In other words, the failure to provide the food quality will produce dissatisfaction. To illustrate:

"The food was always cold by the time you got it back to your seat, it was dry and not cooked properly and the selection was poor, the desserts were repetitive and nearly the same thing every night. The breakfast was poor and hardly any selection."

This comment corroborates Honeymooner Review Guide (2012) finding that hotel's poor food quality can lead to frustration and complaint with a hotel. Customer dissatisfaction can be explained by the romantic tourists' wider choice of hotels/resorts (MKG Hospitality, 2011) and availability of online reviews and opinions (Tripadvisor, 2013) which enables such customers to compare their pre-booked hotels against others (Wangenheim, 2005). When they find a hotel policy to be unusual, they seek explanations from management and the customers show dissatisfaction through online reviews if they are not happy with the explanation

Does NWOM negatively affect romantic tourists' future revisit intention?

Chen, Chen and Tsung (2007) argued that despite customers' familiarity with and knowledge of their service providers, it is still possible that they will switch their business to the competitors. Customers are strongly influenced by the negative reviews of others, provided they are close to them, such as family members, friends or colleagues (Triandis, 1994). Although we did not find any reviews that were influenced by NWOM, it is understandable that the negative reviews are helpful to other potential romantic tourists. One reason that we did not find follow-on comments may be due to the fact that Tripadvisor does not have a feature by which one can comment on posted reviews. Despite this, 'helpful' symbols indicate potential customers are keen to read NWOM reviews and find them helpful.

Despite signs to the contrary, however, East, Hammond and Lomax (2008) argue that some customers may not in fact be swung by negative experience. In contrast they still recommend the hotel to others. The following is an example:

“Currently the service in this hotel is not consistent with the above Awards and the category 5 stars. To my opinion it all depends on general manager. We were here two years ago and at that time it was much better. Currently this is a hotel of the second half of the list. It can be recommended to great lovers of sweets, for whom comfort is not of great importance”.

In support to above comment, we found a similar comment as follows:

“After complaining about the holiday and wished I would of stayed at home we got a voucher to use in -----'s which is the Al la carte restaurant and the steak was to die for so tender and the service was excellent. I would recommend that place even though it's not cheap. After the first week of disappointment ----- from reception told us there was a water bungalow available for our last three nights which we did upgrade to at an extra cost, what a surprise! “

This comment shows that such types of customers are willing to give the hotel management another chance. This finding is consistent with that of East et al. (2008) who noted that customers are willing to help a hotel because of a strong sense of attachment. Bickart and Schindler (2001) argued that a hotel's willingness to listen and compensate for customers' dissatisfaction influence customers' sense of forgiveness and consequently customers may continue to feel empathy for the hotel and continue to support it provided hotel's explanation for service or policy faults is genuine.

Conclusion, Limitation and Future Research

This research offers an important insight and understanding for hotel managers as they now have the means to identify the source of customers' cognitive dissonance by putting themselves in the customers' shoes. Four classic factors – physical environment, physical goods, staff and personnel, and expectations – are still major contributors to romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance. In addition, this research also found that inflexible and unfriendly hotel policies are also responsible for romantic tourists' cognitive dissonance. Interestingly, this research suggests that depending on their degree of dissatisfaction, romantic tourists are still willing to recommend the hotel.

Like any research project, the present study has several limitations. This study was carried out using the customer reviews available on Tripadvisor.com site. Although this site enabled us to read a large number of reviews, only those that were part of “The Asia Top 10 Hotels for Romance” were chosen for our study. Therefore, the sample may not be representative of all those hotel patrons with cognitive dissonance.

Our review suggests several avenues for future research. First of all, future researchers may want to extend the study by including other hotel categories. A wider range of hotel categories may bring a different perspective of cognitive dissonance. Secondly, the researchers may like to compare customer cognitive dissonance between these different hotel categories.

Implications for Business Marketing Practice

This particular research offers practising managers some strategic recommendations by suggesting that they prioritise and develop more accessible and customer friendly hotel policies. This Research has shown that most customers, particularly romantic tourists regard hotel’s policies as part of hotel customer service. In fact these policies provide hotel staff the direction and guidance for dealing with various issues of their customers. Often, hotel staff mentions to their customers that certain policy of their hotel does not allow them to act in a particular manner when customers approach them with their requirements or issues. This makes customers believe that it is the policy that is the hurdle in obtaining the desired service from the hotel staff. Therefore, we suggest that hotel policies should be flexible enough to accommodate customers’ genuine special requests. For example, it is not fair to keep charging customers for cancellations or curtailment of booking due to factors beyond their control. The high level of flexibility and staff’s understanding of their customers’ circumstances will not only produce a high level of customer appreciation, but it is also likely to create a greater level of satisfaction, which in turn will help the hotel increase occupancy due to positive word of mouth and recommendation and their personal willingness to revisit the hotel.

This specific study also emphasises the hotels to have better compensatory policies. Our study shows that when hotel staff is prepared to make up for their faults (e.g., by appropriate compensation) and demonstrates a genuine desire to improve then romantic tourists turn into loyal customers and they are more likely to give the hotel another chance. This is also supported by service recovery literature. The findings also indicate that when loyal customers are treated well, they are able to help the hotel financially by positive word of mouth and positive reviews, thereby helping the hotel with its image and reputation.

Finally, hotels need to realise that cognitive dissonance caused to the romantic tourists and not resolved threatens business sustainability. Our study has shown that two types of cognitive dissonance – Negative Word of Mouth and Negative Recommendation – are frequently used by dissatisfied customers in retaliation for what they view as bad service in their chosen hotel. The findings show that NWOM and NR by loyal customers in particular create followers who trust them which are supported by the many symbols of support from other readers and reviewers. This also indicates that NWOM and NR by loyal customers are seen as more reliable by new and other

potential customers and as a consequence, the negative impact of NWOM and NR is spread more quickly and more greatly. We therefore recommend that the hotels listen to their customers and deal with their dissatisfaction on the spot by taking necessary action. It is also very important to ensure that their loyal customers continue to remain happy so that they can spread positive word of mouth and recommend to others.

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