

Romantic Travellers' 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 travellers' cognitive dissonance and their willingness to recommend the hotel could help hotel management allocate their scarce resources to concentrate their effort on creating traveller satisfaction. This study, therefore, attempts to bridge this important gap in literature by empirically examining romantic travellers' 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 travellers' cognitive dissonance and willingness to recommend.

Track: Marketing in Asia, Services Marketing, Tourism Marketing, Revisit, Hotel, Traveller

INTRODUCTION

Romantic tourists which includes honeymooners, wedding 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 a revenue of US\$12 billion per annum to the hospitality industry (Sardone, 2012). Most romantic travellers 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, such customers 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 traveller's decision making.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative approach in collecting and analysing data. A total of 79 negative reviews and opinions from "The Asia's Top 10 Hotels for Romance" were content analysed to develop the themes related to the romantic travellers' 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.

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 travellers' 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

The Sample: Based on Tripadvisor.com travellers' choice 2013, "The Asia's Top 10 Hotels for Romance" were selected as the sample population. These particular hotels represent the leading accommodation providers for romantic travellers. A total of 79 negative reviews were collected of which 9 were excluded from the selection process as these were in foreign languages. Finally, 70 reviews were content analysed.

RESULTS AND KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Exploration of 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. This study found some comments relating to this issue:

"I am very dissatisfied about the experience in Casa del Mar Langkawi; 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, Royal Island and Komandoo”

The above comments by unhappy customers show that customers expressing dissatisfaction with hotels results in warning others. Gregoire and Fisher (2006) argued that this behaviour is shown when the relationship between the hotel and the customers turns bitter, 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).

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 finding reveals that these sources of dissatisfaction are valid and easily identifiable through online sources. Some comments concerning these issues are as follows:

In terms of the surrounding environment, one of the comments we found is as follows:

“What did somewhat spoil the whole holiday experience for me were the dirty streets and beach outside of the hotel are. 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”

In relation to physical goods, a comment was:

“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”

An example of unfavourable comment in relations to staff attitude was:

“I had a huge issue with a lady at the desk at Franco’s, 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, a 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.

An illustration of unhealthy statement in respect to expectations was:

“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)!”

Apart from the above, unfavourable hotel policy also contributes to dissatisfaction of romantic tourists which include cancelation, booking and other related policies. Flexible 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 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”

Another reviewer identified food issue and commented:

“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.”

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 travellers did not hesitate to communicate to the potential customers about the unpleasant experience. In addition, poor food quality also promotes dissatisfaction. This comment corroborate 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 travellers’ 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 travellers. 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.

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”.

This comment shows that this type of customers is willing to give the hotel management a 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, LIMITATIONS 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 travellers' cognitive dissonance. In addition, this research also found that inflexible and unfriendly hotel policies are also responsible for romantic travellers' cognitive dissonance. Interestingly, this research suggests that depending on their degree of dissatisfaction, romantic travellers 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 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 travellers 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 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 travellers turn into loyal customers and they are more likely to give the hotel another chance. This is also supported by service recovery literature. The finding 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 travellers 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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