THE SERVICE EXPERIENCES OF DEAF HOTEL GUESTS

[1]MAGGIE CHONG, [2]AHMAD AZMI M.ARIFFIN

[1,2]Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: [1]maggie.chong23@gmail.com, [2]aama@ukm.edu.my

Abstract: This study explores the hotel experiences of people with hearing disability, which include booking of rooms, actual stay in the hotels, and decision to return in the future. Through snowball sampling, twelve deaf individuals served as participants in this study. Interview questions were generated from past studies and were based on the Social Model of Disability (Joseph 2007).

Keywords: Hotel Marketing, Tourists Experiences, Disable Tourists

I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the percentage of people with disability in the population and the frequency of travel activities in their community. It also discusses whether their tourism activities will be seen as market opportunities by the hotel service providers, and, thus, the requirement for them to be heard in the world with regards to the challenges that they face during their hotel experience.

II. STUDY BACKGROUND

According to the World Health Organisation (2011), approximately 15% of the world's population consists of people with disabilities. In Malaysia, a total of 284,000 disabled individuals registered themselves with the Department of Social Welfare in 2009 and the figure increased to 314,000 in 2010 (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2010). Unfortunately, going on trips is considered an activity that many people with disabilities feel entails sacrifice as it requires numerous combinations of physical, mental, and social capabilities, which are often adversely affected or compromised by a disability (Yau et al., 2004).

Hotel stays necessarily imply experience of hospitality. A study by Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) discussed five dimensions of hotel hospitality, namely: "personalisation", "warm welcome", "special relationship", "straight from the heart," and "comfort". This includes provision of services for the special needs of hotel guests on top of the normal service delivery. This is particularly crucial for guests with disabilities. The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) mandates non-discriminatory provision of services by hospitality-related businesses towards guests with disabilities (Grady and Ohlin, 2009). The provisions include adequate information about tours and attractions, food, mobility, and access for guests. In addition, they also include guidelines on rooms, doorways, parking, and building access (Clair, 2012). As regards deaf guests, the provision of auxiliary aids should be made available. Aids, such as interpreters, telecommunication devices (TTD), and closed-captioning on television, are helpful in assisting communication between deaf guests with hotel operators and their companions. There are also specific measurements on bed heights to accommodate guests in wheelchairs (Access Compliance Services, 2010). Pohlid (2011) detailed the requirements for hotels to comply with the ADA. The Malaysian Government has enacted policies similar to the ADA. Section 26 of the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD) of 2008 details the rights of people with disabilities in accessing public facilities, amenities, services, and buildings in Malaysia. Unfortunately, the law does not provide specific guidelines on how these are to be implemented. Kesavan (2009) further argued that there are no sufficient penalties imposed on violators of the PWD Act.

III. RESEARCH ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

There have been studies that focused on the experiences of blind and wheelchair bound individuals (see Poria and Reichel, 2011; Burnett and Baker, 2001). However, to the knowledge of the researcher, there are very limited studies that specifically address tourists with a hearing disability or to which this paper will refer to as "deaf." Deafness, although physical, is not a visible, conspicuous form of disability. As a result, there is less awareness from the public in facing and answering their needs.

Most of the time, deaf tourists find it challenging to voice their concerns, which make it particularly difficult if they travel without a hearing companion or an interpreter. Freeman and Selmi (2010) cited Richter and Richter (1999) in their paper, who reaffirmed that tourism for disabled people is an important area of study for academics, as well as in the tourism industry. These serve as the main reasons why the current study focused on deaf tourists, specifically, their hotel experiences. The researcher feels that it is crucial for the deaf to be able to express their needs, and, thus, improve their hotel experience for future travels.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

i. To investigate hotel-related experiences of deaf Malaysian tourists, including the challenges and strategies concerning how they address these difficulties, for both inbound or outbound trips;
ii. To generate suggestions concerning how the hotel industry can address the needs and overcome the challenges experienced by deaf tourists; and
iii. To provide information for hotel management and staff to help them better serve atypical guests' needs, such as small children and travellers who are unable to speak local languages.

IV. METHODOLOGY

- **Scope of Study**

One of the aims of the study was to explore the barriers faced by the deaf based on their hotel experiences. There have been previous studies done on tourism and people with disabilities, however, these studies focused on noticeable physical disabilities, such as mobility impaired (e.g., wheelchair or on crutches) or the blind (Darcy and Pegg 2011; Poria et al. 2011)

- **Research Design**

An exploratory qualitative research design was used in this study. The choice of the research design was primarily driven by the dearth in previous scientific research done on this topic. Given that the target participants were deaf, the researcher also needed to find the most appropriate data collection technique that was suited for this population. For deaf people, written conversation tended to be tedious, cumbersome and time-consuming (National Association of the Deaf 2000).

It has been noted that qualitative studies utilise observation or interviews as data collection methods (Sekaran and Bougie 2010). Similarly, Poria et al. (2009, 2010, 2011) recommend the use of the qualitative approach due to the lack of previous studies focusing on tourist experiences of people with disabilities as well as seeking to understand phenomena in context-specific settings not by comparing statistics or other quantitative methods.

- **Research Framework**

The current study applied the critical incident technique (CIT) to capture specific experiences of the participants during their stay in the hotels (Baker et al. 2007). In addition, the researcher referred to the ecological approach to recognise a situation where a person's disability becomes a handicap (Poria et al., 2011).

To design appropriate and relevant interview questions, the social model of disability (Darcy and Pegg 2011) was used. The Social Model of Disability views disability as a person's impairment that prevents their participation in society. This model implies that removal of barriers to disability would serve to improve the lives of people with disability, and, thus, give them a fair chance to live like others.

The experiences are grouped according to the expanded marketing mix of services, which are people, physical evidence and process (Zeithaml et al., 2009). The people element explores what deaf travellers experienced with regards to interactions with the hotel staff and related service providers (for example, restaurant waiters, swimming pool guard). The physical evidence concentrates on room designs, public places and restaurants, while for the process element, the researcher investigates check-in, the stay and check-out experiences of respondents.

The questions for interview sessions were prepared based on a review of previous studies that addressed barriers in tourism and hotel experience. In addition, some of the questions were also derived from the Social Model of Disability (Joseph 2007).

- **Sampling**

In terms of sampling, the choice of participants was limited to Malaysian deaf individuals who reside in the Klang Valley. In terms of inclusion criteria, participants had to have had travel experience within a 12-month period and stayed in hotels. Travel with friends, family members, hearing or deaf companions were considered irrelevant. Knowledge of check-in procedures, of their stay in the hotel and use of the facilities, and check-out procedures was considered essential.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Referrals were made among the respondents who shared a similar knowledge and interest of hotel experiences. Referrals were made through emails and sending text messages. The potential respondents were asked whether they had experienced any difficulties during their recent stay in hotels and whether they were willing to share their thoughts. Sometimes, copies of interview questions were sent to them so that they were clear on what to expect during the interview sessions. A deaf research assistant was recruited for this paper. As a research assistant, she was responsible for handling the video camera, constant checking on the communication progress during the interview sessions and locating new respondents. The presence of a deaf research assistant also served as a monitoring process to ensure that the sample had a variety of levels of deafness.

- **Data Collection**

The respondents were Malaysians who had travelled and had hotel experience within the country or overseas. Interviews were undertaken and the preferred mode of communication was the Malaysian Sign Language (MySL). To ensure the accuracy of messages communicated during the interview, the

researcher was accompanied by assistants who were trained in the MYSL.

- **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and framework analysis was used to analyse the data (Lacey and Luff, 2009). The steps included in this method included familiarization, identification of the thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation.

V. FINDINGS

- **Decision Making Process**

With the exception of those using tour guides from Malaysia who handled all travel arrangements, participants referred to the hotels' websites prior to booking any rooms. Websites needed to be interactive and informative incorporating many graphics to show the layout of the hotels, rooms, facilities, and rates. Once satisfied with the information in the websites, they would not hesitate to proceed with the bookings. A participant, however, pointed out that, "Websites are meant to induce people. What matters to me was the hotel operator replied to my queries through emails, promptly and politely". (no. 4)

There were some cases where deaf guests wanted further information, such as extra beds, extended check-out hours, late check-in, tour information, airport pickup, amongst others. Hotel personnel replied somewhat harshly and impatiently when they tried to request for more information. Some never received any reply. In such occasions, these participants searched for other alternatives.

- **Hotel Employees and Relevant Parties**

A. Hotel employees

The participants informed hotel operators in advance that they were deaf (n=7). Hotels were informed early to avoid panic among hotel staff as well as give them the opportunity to prepare to address their needs. It was not common for members of the public to be able to communicate in sign language, thus the exchange of handwritten notes was the next best alternative.

In addition to exchanging notes, most participants emphasized that respect must be given to them (n=7) whenever they started to communicate with the hotel receptionist in respect of any issues that may arise during their stay. A participant quoted:

"The hotel receptionist would reply to my queries through an exchange of notes. However, when my hearing companion came closer to check out what's going on, the receptionist turned to my hearing companion and started to talk. I was left alone halfway through the conversation and the receptionist would not bother to write to me. All my queries were directed to my hearing companion even though I was the one who approached and asked." (no. 4)

All of them felt appreciated when the hotel receptionists would continue to write with the deaf guests even though their hearing companions came forward. The only exception was when the deaf guests' request for the conversation to be taken over by the hearing companion. A conversation that started in writing must be ended in writing, said respondent no. 2.

B. Influences of tour guides

Participants that travelled with their hearing parents and other family members would engage a tour guide before departing Malaysia. These guides not only ensured their safety when they travelled abroad but also helped in possible miscommunication in foreign countries. As such, these guides were aware of the communication needs of the deaf guests. However, participants commented that they did not rely entirely on their tour guides to attend to their needs (n=4). It was a learning process whenever they travelled abroad and a tour guide only functioned as a support.

"In foreign countries where English is not the main language, we had to rely on our tour guides to communicate with the hotel staff. Sometimes, we wanted to be independent and especially when we could not reach our tour guide due to bedtime, we tried to communicate to the hotel reception on our room issues. The hotel staff would not understand our needs and we had to wait for our tour guide to rescue us." (no. 11)Participants commented that it was quite disappointing that some hotel reception staff would prefer not respond to their needs but rather wait for the tour guides to speak to them.

C. Language and literacy

Language remained the common barrier even when travels were completed within the country. Some deaf guests did not write well and had low literacy. They were very dependent on gestures (e.g., mime) to express themselves rather than writing notes.

The problem became worse when they travelled overseas where English is not a common language. Miscommunication occurred frequently and the deaf guests had to accept whatever was given to them. (no. 9) "There is no way we could communicate by exchanging notes, and, often, we had to resort to communicating our needs in physical actions, such as pointing to the map and show a confused facial expression to indicate that we could not find the location." (no. 3)

Some hotel receptionists had no knowledge about handling the needs of deaf guests, such as asking for directions to attractions, transportation and others. Sometimes, the hotel receptionists responded by talking to the deaf guests even though the deaf guests insisted they write to them on the paper. Such incidents occurred mainly because the hotel

receptionists have low English literacy (no. 2). In the end, information was not transferred effectively, leaving the deaf guests feeling uncomfortable.

D. Hotel Facilities

A. Lift

Generally, the usage of lifts did not pose any problems or issues for deaf guests. They had no problems with space in the lift, height of the buttons and announcement of levels reached. They relied on the screen on top of the lift to inform them which level they were at.

However, an issue came up when the lift suddenly broke down and stopped moving. Things became worse if there was no hearing companion and the lights were automatically switched off. Some of the respondents that experienced such incidents, quoted:

"I tried to press the button to ask for help. I was not sure if there was someone to answer my call but I just shouted "Help!" (no. 10)

It was always assumed that as long there is an emergency button to press, everything would be fine. Unfortunately, the needs of deaf guests were not taken into consideration There should be more than just a button for us to be heard. (no. 2).

"We hope the close-circuit camera in the lift is always working even though the lift stopped halfway. Sometimes, I waved at the camera, hoping someone would see us." (no. 3)As for respondents who never experienced such an incident, they were always prepared that such a day might come to them.

"I never experienced being stuck in the lift alone. However, if there would be a day, I know I would bang the lift door as hard as I could until I see the light out there." (no. 1)Therefore, the accessibility issue on lifts is not about entering the lift but also the ability to exit from it without harm or hassle.

B. Hotel rooms

Unlike the blind guests and wheel-chair users, although the deaf guests had no issues concerning the internal design of the room, such as furniture arrangements, that did not mean they had peace of mind while staying in the hotel. The majority of the respondents quoted that 'lights' in the room is the main factor in a satisfying hotel stay. "We are not particular about the sizes of room or decorations, but the lights remained our priority, especially at night. We wanted the rooms brighter so that we could see each other clearly when we communicated using our hands." (no. 12)

The respondents also commented about the doorbell. They might be able to hear someone ringing the bell if they put on their hearing aid (n=3), but this is not applicable if they decided to take off their equipment during a shower or bedtime. "There is no way we knew if someone outside our room was knocking our door or pressing the bell. That person had to wait like forever for us to open the door. However, if we were expecting someone to come over, we would open the door slightly but kept the latch locked." (no. 3)

In some western countries like Canada and the UK, there are hotels that are specifically designed as disabled friendly hotels. There are also laws and regulations (ADA Business Brief, October 2003) in the USA that hotel operators must adhere to in providing effective communication systems between deaf guests and hotel employees.

"I do not expect the hotel to provide us rooms that are disabled or deaf friendly, but I hope that they take extra steps to ensure zero communication break-down between the deaf guests and hotel staff. This is essential, especially during an emergency like a fire in the hotel where all of us are asleep. The staff could ring up all the guests but we would remain asleep because we are deaf." (no. 9)

C. Washroom

None of the participants reported any physical dangers in any washroom designs. Some of them carried their phones into the washrooms just in case they needed help from inside but when they were out of the country and phone lines were not available, they felt totally cut off from their communication network. It would not be an issue in general but the problem arose when the door locks malfunctioned and they accidentally locked themselves inside. There were numerous kinds of comments for such incidents and it depended on whom they travelled with. One participant who usually travelled with deaf friends, quoted, "We usually informed our deaf room-mate the approximate duration of each usage of the washroom, especially for showers. If the person occupied the room too long, we would sense something was not right and decided to ask for help to open the door." (no. 7)However, not everyone was prepared for such an event. Another participant quoted:"There was once I accidentally locked myself inside the washroom and could not get out. I tried to get some items like towels and tissues to slip under the door, hoping my deaf companion would get the signal that I needed help. However, if everything failed, all I could do was to wait." (no. 3)Such incidents posed danger that washroom users might be suffocated if they waited too long for help, especially if they were travelling and staying alone in the room. For the travellers with hearing companions, they had better options to rescue themselves. "If my young daughter (hearing) was with us in the trip, I would just shout out and hopefully she understood that I was trapped inside." (no. 12)

D. Reception

Most participants that travelled with deaf companions (n=12) reported that they had no choice but to leave their room to gain the attention of the receptionist. Phones in the room were only accessible by hearing guests, hence serving no purpose to deaf guests.

"We had to travel up and down to get the receptionist to handle our needs, such as break-down of air-conditioning or water heater not working. We could not use the in-room phone to communicate unless we travelled with our hearing companion." (no. 8)

E. Signboards

Signboards and notice boards in hotels were useful tools for deaf guests to navigate around the hotels. These directed them to other facilities, such as the gym, swimming pool, and dining areas. Although most deaf guests had no problems in understanding the signboards and reaching their destinations, there were some exceptions. ="Sometimes, signboards can be confusing. There was once I wanted to go to the swimming pool but I think I walked too far. I was not sure if I was on the right trail and suddenly felt afraid because I was alone. Consequently, I decided to turn back and never got the chance to use the facility." (no. 4)

Most hotel staff members were always available to assist but the participants appreciated it if there was a directory map in the hotel for deaf guests to locate the hotel facilities easily. They would prefer to know the schematics of the location of each facility and felt confident they could find their way. In addition, signboards should also be regularly visible so that the deaf guests feel able to find their way, if they ever got lost (no. 10).

F. Restaurants

Unlike guests with wheelchairs who were more concerned about the height of tables, the deaf guests had other concerns. The size of tables in the restaurants became an issue, especially for buffet meals when these guests tended to place too many plates, thus feeling no space at all to move around. In addition, due to the nature of deafness, these guests required more space at their dining table to move their hands to communicate with each other. Decorations, such as flowers in vases and promotional items on the frames on the tables were considered distracting. Deaf guests are visual people and need to maintain eye contact when communicating in sign language.

A respondent quoted:"These decorations are not only distracting our eyes but they could also be dangerous if we accidentally knock them with our hands and cause them to fall and break." (no. 6) Restaurants in Malaysia that serve buffet meals usually have labels for food.

However, there are some countries that do not place any label and guests may want to enquire about the type of food served. It was not a problem to get the attention of the restaurant servers but communication was difficult because these waiters do not know how to communicate through writing with the deaf guests.

- **Hotel Procedures**

Prior to arriving at their respective hotels, all respondents informed the interviewer that they informed the hotel in advance that they are deaf. This would prepare the hotel operators to be sensitive and patient towards them. The check-in process went fine except in some countries where the hotels kept the passports of guests for the first day (no 4). Not everyone went the extra mile to enquire, and some would just leave them with the receptionists, especially when they travelled with tour guides. "I asked for the reason for not returning my passport after the check-in process. They politely explained that it's for police inspection which was under the law of the country" (no 4).

All respondents commented about the helpful services of hotel operators in assisting with their bags and luggage to the rooms after the check-in process. However, some respondents did not wish to be assisted. They would rather carry their luggage themselves.

There were no problems during the check-out process. The participants would remind the hotel operators a day in advance that they were leaving the next day (n=4). This would also ensure that their airport transfer bookings were confirmed by the hotel operators.

- **Returning Decision**

The decision to return was mainly an economic issue factoring budget constraints on costs on stay and duration. In addition to room rates, there were other secondary factors to consider. A respondent quoted:

"It depends who I travel with. If I travel with my friends, regardless of whether they are deaf or hearing, I prefer hotels that are conveniently located and with low rates. For me, hotels are just meant for a place to sleep." (no. 5)Parents with children would consider safety issues, and stayed in hotels recommended by family members and friends. These hotels must be children friendly and family oriented. (no. 12)At times, customer service played an important role for returning guests. Deaf guests, however, are adventurous when they travel, especially overseas. They love to experience various kinds of hotels services and return home with a lot of tales to tell. One participant explained: "Although budget is an important issue, I tend to choose other hotels when I go back to the same country. I want to experience what other hotels might give even though the hotels I previously stayed in offered excellent customer service." (n=8)

1. CONCLUSION

This study showed how hotel operators were unaware that deaf guests required special attention as much as other guests with disabilities, such as those who were wheelchair bound or blind. Although the attention

required is not as detailed as other guests with disabilities, some of the deaf guests' needs may be life threatening if unattended or attended to too late.

The review of the previous literature concerning hotel experiences often looked at those of able-bodied guests whereas this research specifically highlighted the hotel experiences of deaf guests. These experiences might not be similar for guests with other disabilities.

Hotel experiences begin at the room booking session and finish at the time of checking-out of the rooms. The experiences in the hotel include public areas, room facilities, and hotel restaurants. It also highlights that human interactions are an important factor in providing a pleasant stay in the hotels.

It is hoped that the findings of this study create sensitivity among the public and hotel operators concerning the needs of deaf guests in the hotels. It hopes to remind hotel operators that not all guests with disabilities have the same needs and that it is always welcomed when hotel operators go the extra mile to take care of these needs in order to make their guests' stay a good one.

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