DIMENSIONALITY OF HOTEL EXPERIENCES AMONG DEAF GUESTS

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Abstract - This article discusses the six core dimensions of hotel service experiences in the context of deaf hotel guests. The six dimensions are trust, convenience, safety, reliability, satisfaction and communication. This article also elaborated on the implications of the dimensionality to the practice as well as to the general public. Finally, recommendation for future research are outlined.

Keywords - Hotel Marketing, Tourists Experiences, Disable Tourists

I. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to examine hotel experiences of deaf guests. This study was based on a study by Poria et al. (2011) who investigated the physical and human service environment interactions in hotels of guests with disabilities, specifically, those who were wheelchair bound and blind. In this paper, the focus was on guests with hearing disabilities. The participants were Malaysians with travel experience and who had stayed in hotels during these trips. They were encouraged to share their hotel experiences including meeting hotel employees, usage of facilities and rooms, and challenges faced during interactions in these hotels.

II. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research was conducted by the use of qualitative interviews of 12 participants. A research assistant was employed to facilitate the interview sessions. Interviews were conducted using the Malaysian sign language and the sessions were recorded using a video camera. An interview session lasted from 30 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on the willingness of participants to share their experiences and provide constructive feedback and suggestions for the hotel operators.

The framework adapted for the interview questions was based on the social model of disability whereby removal of barriers to disability would serve to improve the lives of people with disability, thus giving them a fair chance to live like others. As such, participants were encouraged to suggest reasonable methods that would facilitate their mobility within the hotel environment.

The reliability of research data was determined by engaging a second sign language interpreter to view the video and review the results in written form. A second sign language interpreter confirmed the transcription of the signs. Data were displayed in quotes to highlight the main factors that influenced hotel experiences by deaf guests. Based on the data, five common attributes were generated. The results also show communication as a common theme underlying the experiences of the deaf guests.

III. FINDINGS

The variety of feedback on hotel experiences by the respondents can be categorised into five (5) attributes – trust, convenience, safety, reliability and satisfaction. All five attributes are related to a common theme, i.e., facility in communication, which is the main factor considered for the best hotel experiences for deaf guests. Figure 4.1 below shows the attributes that influenced the results of the hotel experiences for deaf guests.

Trust

The respondents had difficulty getting in touch with potential hotels prior to any room bookings. If there was any word-of-mouth recommendation, they would book the rooms without any hesitation, trusting the information provided to them.

However, for prior bookings without word-of-mouth recommendation, the respondents that travelled without any tour agents would search over the Internet for hotel websites. These websites created a bridge of communication between the respondents and hotel operators where necessary information, such as rates, locations, and hotel environments are made available.

In addition, the respondents preferred if these websites included email addresses for further enquiries, such as airport pickups and informing that they are deaf travellers. This allows hotel operators to be well-prepared to welcome them. If the hotel did not reply to the emails, the respondents might think that the hotel did not exist at all (No. 4). In such an event, they would look for other hotels.

Convenience

The convenience attribute showed how respondents appreciated less hassle during their stay in the hotels. Unlike a normal guest who could utilise room

amenities, such as the telephone, to contact the reception for housekeeping, a deaf guest must walk to the reception in the lobby to ensure their needs are attended. A non-sensitive hotel receptionist who would not bother to communicate in writing with deaf guests would result in even more inconvenience for the deaf guests to have their problems addressed.

There were also instances where language caused inconvenience for deaf guests, especially staying in overseas hotels. Not all hotel operators could write in English, especially in countries where English is not the first language. In addition, the respondents had a tough time communicating with hotel employees when writing notes was not a good option. It became a 2-way commitment that hotel employees must be patient in handling the enquiries and deaf guests to convey their messages in the most effective way. The best would be hotel operators that were able to communicate using sign language with the deaf guests.

The convenience element also involved hotel procedures. Hotel check-in and check-out processes must also be easy and fast. The respondents appreciated when they were allowed to check-in earlier before the usual check-in hour, and to check-out later without further charges.

Safety

Safety issues are closely related to hotel facilities, amenities and, surrounding environments. The hotel public areas, especially lifts are dangerous to deaf guests in the event of system breakdown. Although the danger of lift breakdown affects normal guests just like deaf guests, the deaf guests would have difficulty being 'rescued' due to the inability to speak over the intercom in the lift and they can only rely on their hand-phones to get help.

Things are worse if they were staying in overseas hotels and get trapped. They do not subscribe to international roaming, which limits their ability to contact their companions outside the lift.

Hotel private areas, such as bedrooms and washrooms also posed some unknown dangers and some could be life threatening. The respondents related issues with washrooms, such as accidentally locking themselves inside and having a difficult time to attract the attention of their companions in the main room. There were some efforts made to get the attention of their companion, such as slipping a paper underneath the door, hoping someone would realise it as a message, or pouring out water to wet the room. A smart companion might suspect something amiss if the person was taking too long in the washroom.

Room safety is related to how fast deaf guests can inform the reception of any untoward incidents. In the event of accidentally locking themselves in the room, they would require assistance for someone to open for them from the outside. There were also events in which the door latches went wrong and stuck. Although these were not life threatening, they could face the chances of missing their flights in the early morning.

Life threatening safety issues often relate to fire emergency, especially at night when everyone is asleep. If the deaf guests are not travelling with hearing companions, it is less likely for them to realise if a fire breaks out and the hotel operators have no way of waking them up by calling on the phone or knocking on doors. In addition, emergency news on predicted natural disasters, such as typhoons and storms are not communicated effectively to the deaf guests for precautionary purposes. Thus, deaf guests have to rely on daily news publications or information over the Internet.

Reliability

The feeling of reliability assures the deaf guests that their stay in the hotel would be a good one. Often, tour guides reassure the deaf guests that the choice of hotels was right and that they would have a good experience. They added that there must be a mutual understanding between the tour guides and hotel operators that the needs of deaf guests must be met, such as communicating through writing notes and being patient in handling their problems.

This attribute also addresses the information provided concerning the hotel surroundings, such as signboards for directions to places, the main directory, food labels and descriptions in the restaurant menu, and verbal information by hotel employees. Deaf guests that travelled without any tour guides would depend on the hotel receptionists for tour information and how to navigate in the town. A deaf guest would encounter excellent hotel experience when the hotel employees were able to attend to their problems effectively. An example would be a hotel operator constantly checking with the airport authority for the arrival of lost luggage and to inform the deaf guests when the luggage arrived safely (No. 4).

Satisfaction

Satisfaction refers to services rendered by hotel operators, as well as the waiters in the hotel restaurants. A satisfied deaf guest in the hotel restaurant would regard the service provided by the restaurant operators as being excellent when showing patience when taking orders and accepting the mistake for delivering wrong orders without blaming the deaf guest for being unable to convey messages in the normal way (through speech).

Respondents were satisfied with hotel services if they decided to return to the same hotels when they were travelling to the same destination in the future. They

would also provide positive recommendation to other friends travelling the specific destinations.

A satisfactory hotel experience often relates to a pleasant environment, friendly hotel employees, good locations, and appropriate conditions of facilities.

Implications concerning Communication

Communication acts as the most important factor in influencing hotel experiences for the respondents. The impact of the five attributes mentioned earlier on hotel experience depends on the communication flow between the deaf guests and hotel operators and the supporting facilities.

Due to the nature of their disability, they experience difficulties in communication with the hotel operators. Such difficulties are examples of the limited choices in getting to know the hotels prior to booking, struggling to get their messages conveyed effectively to the intended party, being the last person to be informed of updated news surrounding the hotels, doubting whether the information they collected is accurate and being satisfied with their stay as much as normal guests.

Trust exists when hotel operators reply to emails. It was deemed convenient when communication became easier when hotel operators displayed patience and agreed to write notes, as a means of exchanging information. The safety of deaf guests was assured when they had no problems in getting around easily without depending heavily on others. The respondents could rely on hotel signboards and verbal information conveyed to them if they got it right the first time, and, finally, the respondents were satisfied when communication is not a barrier during their stay in the hotel. All these five attributes lead to communication being the common element determining excellent hotel experiences.

Communication could be direct or indirect. Direct communication involves human interactions between the deaf guests and hotel employees. Such events usually occur during the check-in and check-out process, housekeeping issues, and other ad hoc enquiries from time to time. Such communications would be by way of writing notes and sometimes body gestures or mime.

Indirect communication refers to how the layout and structure of hotel websites and facilities influences the communication process for deaf guests. The design of the websites and facilities often creates barriers in effective communications between the deaf guests with the hotel employees, as well as among the guests themselves. Although most respondents are able to address these barriers, they highlight crucial moments, especially during emergencies where communication must not be blocked.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Implications to the Public

In relation to the social model of disability, this research opens the eyes of the public to be more sensitive towards the needs of guests with hearing disability. Participants were given opportunities to share about the challenges they faced during their stay in the hotels. Such barriers as the physical environment result in the deaf guests being unable to participate in the interactions in the hotel. A research based on such a model would be easily achieved when the participants were willing to open up about their issues.

In addition, the public is often left unaware of deaf people due to the fairly inconspicuous nature of their disability. As such, deaf guests are often ignored and are nominally taken care of by the public and hotel management. While some hotel operators might encounter deaf guests during their tenure in the organisation, in general, employees would be shocked and at a loss concerning how to handle deaf guests. It rarely occurs to them that communication can be done through exchanging notes and even some basic body gestures. None of the participants mentioned any experience concerning interactions with other guests.

It was also uncommon that communication be done in written English, especially when English is not widely spoken. In such situations, communication through body gestures required patience.

Implications towards Hotel Environment

A normal hotel guest, especially a business traveller would consider a hotel as a place to sleep while some leisure travellers would try as much to experience the facilities and even spend longer hours in the room. A deaf guest has more communication-related concerns throughout their stay in the hotel. Although communication with deaf guests need not be in sign language, it is the preferred way.

Being unable to hear, deaf guests rely heavily on their eyesight and intuition. As such, visual communication works better for deaf guests. Rooms must be equipped with visual devices to allow communication between the deaf guests in the room and the hotel employees outside the room. These visual devices are designed not only to get the attention of the deaf guests to open the door for visitors but also as a signal to the deaf guests in rooms in case of emergencies like fire or flood that require instant evacuation.

In addition, such visual devices are also helpful in the hotel public areas. At times when deaf guests require the assistance of hotel employees, they could opt to use visual devices to get their attention. A good example would be a “bell” at the receptionist table

that flashes lights when being pressed to indicate that the bell was working. This would avoid the deaf guests constantly pressing the bell, thinking the bell was not working and subsequently creating a disturbance in the environment.

The closed circuit camera television (CCTV) must be constantly working, especially in the lift in the event that it breaks down. The participants commented that they hope the CCTV cameras were working well so that when the lift stops they could wave to it, hoping someone would realise that they were trapped and required instant assistance. Unless they had hearing companions in the lift, there was no way for them to communicate their way out apart from using the available facilities in the lift (alarm system).

Implications towards Hotel Services

In respect of services rendered by hotel employees, participants mentioned the importance of staff attitude in respect of their hotel experience. A research by Baker et al. (2007) stated that guests with disabilities expect the hotel employees to provide a feeling of welcome. This shows that not all experiences are based on the physical environment but also involve human interactions, which are mainly with hotel employees.

Not all hotel employees were prepared to serve guests with hearing disabilities and the majority assumed that guests with such disabilities were often accompanied by a hearing companion, which is not always the case. The participants desire that the hotel operators be more empathetic towards their needs, and provide equal treatment in terms of friendliness and responses to queries.

In addition, hotel managers should make the effort to be in the frontline once in a while to experience direct interactions with guests. This aids in the understanding of different guests with various needs and continuous improvement in service provision. Hotel managers themselves should be hands-on in understanding the challenges to serve guests with disabilities, which can translate to better training for frontline hotel officers in dealing with similar situations.

The services rendered were not limited to physical human interactions by hotel employees but also extended to websites that served as a tool to provide information to potential guests. Websites that provide sufficient visual information, such as pictures of room, locations and facilities helped the deaf guests decide to book the rooms. In addition, there should be detailed contact information available, such as email addresses for further enquires like late check-in, airport pickups, and other special requirements. Hotel operators could enhance their services by promptly replying to emails and accurate information rendered through emails.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The major limitation of this study refers to the reaction of potential respondents towards the medium used in data collection. Due to the nature of respondents (deaf), the researcher had to record the interview session using a video camera and engage a research assistant to avoid miscommunication during the interview session. As such, there was a lack of privacy during data collection and some potential respondents rejected the invitation to participate in the research.

As a result, the researcher had to restructure the sampling method for this study. Instead of maximising the number of respondents through snowballing, the researcher opted for maximising variation sampling by having a wide range of categories of respondents. This resulted in a smaller number of respondents than initially planned. There were seven categories of participants and a maximum of two respondents per category obtained due to the nature of topic and time.

In using a video camera to record the interviews, the researcher faced the problem in locating a suitable place to conduct the interview session. The chosen place needed to have the lowest foot traffic to avoid distracting the participants, have a workable electric plug to charge the video camera battery, and consent from the café owners for the researcher to conduct the assignment.

Another limitation was the lack of signs to express the questions in sign language. There was a particular question in the interview questions list that both the researcher and the research assistant (deaf) struggled to explain the requirement of the question and the respondents kept giving opinions that was off the topic. To address this, numerous methods were tried to express the question, such as giving examples of similar events to what the respondents might experience and the research assistant on some occasions performed a short skit to visualise the requirement of the question.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted on the hotel experiences of deaf Malaysian travellers without specifying whether the locations of hotels were local or international. In addition, the decisions on hotel room bookings were quite random without considering factors like the culture of room booking in the deaf community, behaviour in decision making, and processes involved which might influence their decisions. The most important element for deaf travellers in hotel experience – communication – was often treated lightly and assumed that there were many alternatives in dealing with such barrier.

As such, there are numerous suggestions for future research to study deeper into specific areas concerning the hotel experience of deaf guests.

Location of Hotel

Further studies could emphasise hotels in Malaysia whereby the deaf guests could share their experiences and thoughts about their stay in hotels in Malaysia. The respondents in the study do not need to be limited to Malaysians and deaf guests from other cultures can be sampled. Participants from Malaysia would enable local hotels to understand the local needs of deaf guests. Malaysian needs in local hotels might not relate to communication issues as both hotel providers and guests could communicate in written form in local languages, such as English and Bahasa Malaysia. When communication is not the issue, it would be interesting to identify what other issues may arise when dealing with local deaf guests.

International deaf guests could provide wider insights into their challenges and needs in hotel experience. While communication proved paramount, there might be other unknown needs of these international travellers, such as culture shock in the hotel, expectations of hotel services, and privacy.

The results from such studies could provide suggestions for hotel operators to welcome travellers from all places and be prepared to meet the requirements of deaf guests as well as other travellers with special needs, such as children and travellers who are non-English speaking.

Intention to Choose a Hotel

Further studies can be conducted to investigate the motivation of deaf guests in choosing their hotels. There were numerous characteristics to consider by deaf guests prior to booking a room, and while websites and emails are important, there are other factors that influence their decisions.

While there have been studies conducted to investigate factors in booking hotel rooms and the decision to return, there are other interesting factors to consider in respect of deaf guests. The culture in the deaf community is worth examining to understand whether it influences the booking of rooms or the decision to return.

In addition to culture, the behaviour of deaf guests is another interesting area. They might take into consideration how society affects their behaviour in choosing the right hotel. Such behaviour could also be associated with the companions they are travelling with, whether a deaf companion who requires the same needs or a hearing companion who could assist in their needs.

The processes in getting their rooms booked also influenced their decisions. There are hotels that required booking deposits while others only requested credit card details. Deaf guests may encounter different experiences in such booking processes that influence their decision to return.

Communication Element – Associated Cost and Benefits

Throughout the whole research paper, communication was emphasised as the most important factor in the hotel experience for deaf guests. In view of that, there are numerous further studies that can be conducted to investigate deeper into this element.

While hotels are not expected to be converted into deaf-friendly hotels, the deaf guests would appreciate hotel operators that enforced certain elements that ease the communication process between the deaf guests and hotel employees, as well as other guests. Such further studies could investigate how hotels could improve their communication process with deaf guests whether through the physical environment like rooms and facilities or human services management like frontline hotel officers and other hotel employees that may interact with deaf guests.

Alternatives, such as exchanging notes, were often regarded as the next best thing that hotel operators could do. Deaf guests would be very appreciative if they are greeted by hotel receptions and managers who could communicate in sign language or at least took the effort to communicate using some basic body gestures.

Such communication improvement needs might necessitate some cost and benefits analysis. As such, it is debateable whether hotel operators should invest in improving their hotel services and facilities to attract more guests with disabilities or to remain in their comfort zone. The cost associated for such improvements may include sending employees for training to understand the special needs of guests with disabilities, attending sign language classes and investment in visual devices to ease the interactions for deaf guests during the stay in the hotels. Although the benefits may only see an increase in the number of deaf guests, there could be other benefits that further research could investigate.

Improvement in Research Methodology

While the general methodology that involved interviewing using a video camera would seem appropriate, a venue for interview sessions with less foot traffic would be better. Restaurants and cafes in shopping centres are not ideal as participants might be distracted by other surrounding events and people passing by. It would be best in the homes of the participants where they are most comfortable.

A more extensive literature review on the deaf community must be conducted to understand their reasons for certain behaviours, and, as such, the categories of results formed would be good to explain the findings of the research. Researchers should also work together with related non-government organisations (NGOs) that specifically cater to the needs of the deaf community in order to obtain a better sample for participants in the research data.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the research reported respondents' comments on their experiences and potential events that could happen to any of them in the hotels. These experiences occurred in the hotel's public areas as well as rooms and washrooms. For deaf guests, human interaction is important to feel confident in staying in the hotel as well as for barrier-free communication.

Such findings were grouped into five attributes to describe their hotel experiences. The communication process influences the results of these five attributes, directly and indirectly. The respondents considered that communication breakdown would cause hassle and difficulty in getting their needs attended to, and result in a general negative hotel experience. A good hotel experience would include pleasant communication with hotel employees and usage of facilities hassle-free.

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