

STUDYING GROUP TOURS TO XISHUANGBANA, CHINA FOR STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This research is motivated by a lack of knowledge explaining how tour operator can make use of how the tourists perceive and react to the destinations targeted, and the overall tour services and the tour guide arranged, to formulate tour operations strategies to yield similar-trip performances and tourist loyalty to similar trips. Seven hypotheses were assumed and organized in a stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory and model of tourist behaviors, which included the moderating role of “perceived trip personality matching”. The data were collected with the help of a tour operator bringing Thai tourists to Xishuangbanna, China, via the R3A route, from Chiang Rai, stopping over to Laos and various other places located in the proximity of Xishuangbanna. A total of 118 valid data were collected. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis demonstrated excellent model fits, and yielded a significant level of ability invariance explanation of the dependent variables, as evidenced in R^2 in the ranges between 0.34-0.53. Numerous important implications are derived, which include trip personality matching and the concept of marketing centralizing on “experiencecapes”.

Keywords : Xishuangbanna, Tourist behavior, Stimulus Organism Response (SOR), Tour guide, Destination images, Tour program.

Introduction

This research is motivated by a lack of knowledge explaining how tour operator can make use of how the tourists perceive and react to the destinations targeted, and the overall tour services and the tour guide arranged, to formulate tour operations strategies to yield similar-trip performances and tourist loyalty to similar trips. To succeed in a tour operator business, it is important tourists are asked of their perceptions and attitudes, formed of tourist experiences, which can form important source of knowledge for tourism companies (Hall and Williams, 2008). Based on a brief exploratory case study carried out by qualitative interviews and observations of service encounters in a boutique hotel in Copenhagen, Sorensen and Jensen (2015) argue for the role of value co-creation by both the tourists and the service providers, which this research infers further by replacing with tour guides and a variant of services arranged by the tour operator.

It is aimed that by capturing how tourists form favorable perceptions and attitudes towards the tour experiences, the tour business operations may thrive in the long run. Although the concepts and models of tourist behaviors have been empirically suggested and validated by many researchers (Balogly and McCleary, 1999; Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Cai, 2002; Echtner and Ritchie, 2003; Grant, Human and Le Pelley, 2002; Hernandez-Mogollon, Duarte and Folgado-Fernandez, 2018; Kani, Aziz, Sambasivan and Bojei, 2017; Martin-Santan, Beerli-Palacio and Nazzareno, 2017; Moon, Connaughton and Lee, 2013; Qu, Kim and Im, 2011), none has consider “trip personality matching” construct as a moderator in the study, and also, no others have considered “similar-trip loyalty”. From a sustainable perspective, a successful tour business has to address the factors that drive tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Williams and Soutar, 2009). The literature review section would

address the stimulus variables and the results as represented by tourist learning, tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, and similar-trip loyalty.

In short, the purpose of this study is to suggest and validate a tourist-behavioral model that describes the factors that can significantly influence on similar-trip loyalty, so as to provide strategic implications for tour operators in their group tour programs.

Literature Review

Four domains of tour operator stimuli are considered, namely (1) overall tour services, (2) tour guide roles, (3) perceived significance of experiences, and (4) destination images. Tour guides play numerous nature of interactive roles, such as social role, interactional role, communicative role, instrumental role, caring role, and dealing-with-emergency role, which serve to connect the tourists to the destination visited, the overall tour services arranged, and to foster tourist experiences, learning, and induce the formations of tourist perceptions of the destination and the tour services. Tour guide roles studied in this research include (Tan, Phakeephirot, and Sereewichayaswat, 2019):

- Social role – which presents the tour guide’s ability to create opportunities for interactions and sharing among the tour members, initiate conversation and establish friendships.
- Interactional role defines the extent the tour guide makes efforts to introduce tourist attractions and thus encourages tourist to experience and involve in local life.
- Communicative role identifies the efforts of the tour guides in describing destination attractions patiently and informatively so as to ensure knowledge is transmitted.
- Instrumental role describes how tour guides instrumentally provides local travel information and the needed in order to make the trip successful.
- Care role demonstrates the empathic caring attitude and behavior of tour guide.
- The management by exception role defines the ability of tour guide to handle exceptions.

Though tourism is recognized as a key sector for the exploration of customer experience, based on the literature efforts of Matson-Barkat and Robert-Demontrond (2018), they discover that “limited attention has been given to the co-production of symbolic value creation or meaning among participants in the tourism context” (p. 566). If tourists can make use of their experiences with their trips, they can also lead to tourist learning (Tan, 2017) and bring significant values to the tourists themselves, spiritually and with meaningfulness, leading the tourists to connect to the world and also to discover themselves (Daniel, 1996). Three particular experiential sources are considered in this research as causing the tourists to experience and leave with memories (Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2008): (1) the interactions with the tour guides, (2) the overall tour services offered in domains of transportation, trip management, food and beverages, stopovers, and hotels, and (3) the destination attractions.

Destination images can be defined as tourist perceptions of a destination through the features and activities associated with the destination, which tourists form from both cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001). The aspects which the tourists rely on to form perceptions of images are, for instance, the local distinctiveness, which can include special social, economic, or unique environmental characteristics of a place that makes it special to the tourists (Grant, Human, and Le Pelley, 2002). Other dimensions that have been considered include natural/cultural resources, general tourist leisure infrastructures, atmosphere, social setting and environment, and sun and beach (Beerli and Martin, 2004), and softer or intangible aspects, which are hospitality and friendliness, ease of communication, opportunity for adventure (Moon, Ko, Connaughton, and

Lee, 2013). Targeted at domestic visitors, who stopped at five selected welcome centers in Oklahoma during an eight-week period in July and August 2002, Qu, Kim, and Im, (2011) provide numerous important conclusions: for instance, destination image is a multi-dimensional construct, influenced by the cognitive and affective images, and will positively affect the visitor's overall image of a destination, and loyalty i.e. intention to revisit and to recommend.

In addition, based on the data collected from the attendants of the two annual cultural events in Merida, the capital of the Spanish region of Extremadura, with almost 60,000 inhabitants, Hernandez-Mogollon, Duarte, and Folgado-Fernandez (2018) argue that the perceptions of tourists over the destination is the product of the tourist's experiences of the place and the perceptions each person develops (p. 171). In particular, the perceived significance of tourist experiences during the trip is considered in this research, which is a very important variable in the study of tourism and tourist behaviors; noting that the motivations of tourists are highly diverse, ranging from curiosity to a search for meaning (Jiang, Ryan, and Zhang, 2018), and thus, a close examination of the perceived significance of trip experiences can offer an important cue for market segmentation and integrated marketing communication contents-development.

Based on the concrete experiences of the tourists with the destination, that is associated with the cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination, and the supporting role of tour guide, through the trip journey as manifested in the tour operator services, Tan (2017), and Tan, Phakdeephrot and Sereewichayaswat (2019) illuminate that the different aspects of these stimuli can yield different domains of "organism" and "responses" in accordance with the SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theory of consumer and tourist behaviors. In particular, tourist learning, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty are considered as the "O" and "R" of the conceptual model to be discussed in the sequel.

The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1, which postulates that similar-trip loyalty is a result of three organism and response variables typified in an SOR model, namely tourist learning, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. In a survey that collected the tourists randomly at different locations in and around Kuala Lumpur such as Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Petronas twin towers and Arab Street, Putra Mosque located at Putrajaya, and a selected number of Iranian and Arab restaurants randomly selected from Malaysia Yellow Pages and Trip Advisor Malaysia, it was reported in Kani, Aziz, Sambasiyan, and Bojei (2017) that tourists who show satisfaction are more likely to return in the future. While tourist satisfaction is indicative of the perceptual organism of the SOR model, which assesses the degree of pleasurable level of tourist experiences with the trip, the responses by the tourists are represented by how they form the positive attitude towards the destination (destination loyalty), the similar-trip loyalty, and tourist learning.

Four antecedent variables, constitutive of overall tour services, tour guide roles, perceived significant of tourist experiences, and destination images (cognitive and affective), are considered as the stimuli factors. The "perceived trip personality matching" variable is a moderator, which is assumed to have a significant impact influencing the relationships between the stimuli factors and the organism and responsive variables.

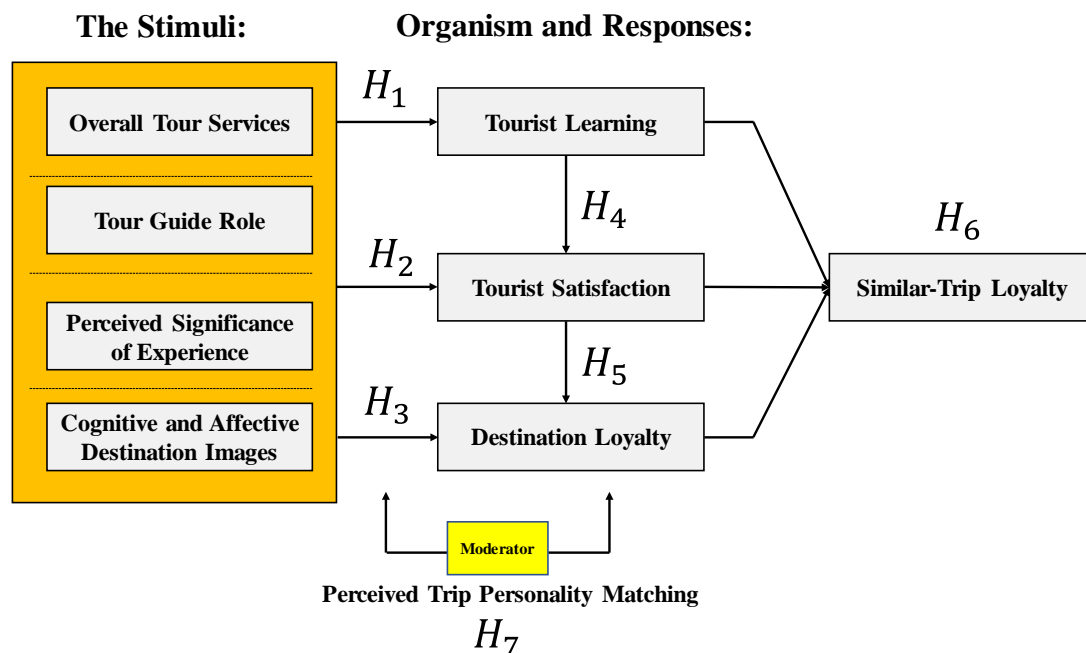


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

The conceptual model assumes that tourist learning, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty are results of some cognitive or rationalist process (i.e. as manifested in perceived significance of experience) and affective evaluations (Williams and Soutar, 2009), such as relating to affective images of destination. As reported in Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez and Moliner (2006), “consumer behavior in general has been studied basically from a rationalist perspective, though attention is increasingly being paid to the emotional component” (p. 395).

The seven hypotheses, which form the structure of the conceptual model, are stated as follows:

Hypothesis 1. The stimuli, constitutive of overall tour services, tour guide role, perceived significance of experiences, and destination images (cognitive and affective), has a positive significant impact on tourist learning.

Hypothesis 2. The stimuli, constitutive of overall tour services, tour guide role, perceived significance of experiences, and destination images (cognitive and affective), has a positive significant impact on tourist satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3. The stimuli, constitutive of overall tour services, tour guide role, perceived significance of experiences, and destination images (cognitive and affective), has a positive significant impact on destination loyalty.

Hypothesis 4. Tourist learning has a positive significant impact on tourist satisfaction.

Hypothesis 5. Tourist satisfaction has a positive significant impact on destination loyalty.

Hypothesis 6. Tourist learning, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, collectively, have a positive significant impact on similar-trip loyalty.

Hypothesis 7. Perceived trip personality matching plays a significant moderator role in the SOR model.

The stimuli shown in Hypotheses 1 to 3 are, as inferred from Moutinho (1987), any unit of the tour program and its activities and attraction sites, which affect any of the senses of the tourists. Specifically, perceiving stimuli considered in H1 to H3 involves “exposure, reception and assimilation of information” (p. 11) the tourists acquire from their sensorial experiences

and encounters in the trip journey, which include the tourist's attitude formed towards a number of cues related to the destination attributes known as destination image (Moutinho, 1987, p. 16). According to cognitive learning theory, tourist learning is manifested in mental processing, which refers to comprehension or knowledge about the tourist product that can be used as the basic material for further decision making (Moutinho, 1987, p. 13), i.e. to acquire new skills and obtain unique experiences to benefit life and career of tourists as this research instrument measures. Through learning, tourists form attitude to respond in a consistent way toward an object (Moutinho, 1987, p.19), such as the destination and future similar tips.

Research Methodology

The Sample the data were collected with the help of a tour operator bringing Thai tourists to Xishuangbanna, China, via the R3A route, from Chiang Rai, stopping over to Laos and various other places located in the proximity of Xishuangbanna. A total of 118 valid data were collected.

The Destination Xishuangbanna is the final destination of the tour program considered in this research, located in the south end of Yunnan Province, and which shares a boundary of 966 kilometers with Myanmar and Laos in the east, south and west, being a vital pass from China to ASEAN countries. Numerous attractions were targeted by the tour operator during the trips: city tour in Xishuangbanna, Dai ethnicity villages, Xishuangbanna Primitive Forest Park (West Gate), Wild Elephant Valley, Manting Imperial Garden, Mengle Dafo Temple, Xishuangbanna Wanda resort and theme park, Manchuan Buddhist temple, Xishuangbanna Menghai Aini Village, and Xishuangbanna Mengbalanaxi dance and show. Partial aspects of the destination attraction sites are given in Figure 2.



Figure 2: The Destination Sites

The Constructs and the questionnaires to collect data, a questionnaire that has nine parts (of nine constructs) was developed. The statements were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: "Strongly disagree" to 5: "Strongly agree"). The constructs considered in the conceptual model are measured which reflect the following domains and definitions:

- Perceived significance of experiences are indicative of the extent “the trip was a special experience for the tourist personally,” “the trip was a once-in-a-life-time experience for the tourist,” “an extraordinary experience,” “unique experience,” and “the trip provided positive values that can benefit personal growth and career”.
- Destination image, in its operationalization, can be approached by viewing it as an attitudinal construct consisted of cognitive and affective evaluations (Maloglu and McCleary, 1999), which can be related to unique features and activities of the destination (Cai, 2002). Cognitive images include attractive shopping opportunities, interesting cultural attraction, unique food choices to enjoy, tourism events to enjoy, unique and creative souvenirs, and the impressions relating to the well-management of the destination, beautiful landscapes, and the overall impression of the destination relating to safety, value for money, and quality holiday trip. Affective destination image is operationalized in an overall impression context, relating to being “pleasant, exciting, relaxing, enjoyable, and fun” (cf. Qu, Kim, and Im, 2011).
- Tour guide roles considered in the measurement instrument include social role, interactional role, communicative role, instrumental role, caring role and exception role of tour guides (cf. Tan, 2017; Tan, Phakdeephrot, and Sereewichayawat, 2019).
- The overall tour services include transportation, food and beverages, trip management, stopover, and the hotels arranged by the tour operator. For instance, the trip management considers the timely operation and well-planning, and execution of the trip schedule, including service attitude and quality of the trip arranged. Stopover involves “timing was enough for stopovers,” “the stopover environment is pleasantly experienced,” and “I did not feel overcrowded at stopover facilities.” Hotel service quality measures the extent “the organization of departure and arrival transfers from the hotels were good,” “hotel service, in general, was generally satisfactory,” “hotel was appealing and in good design, tidy and clean,” and “hotel was, in general, visually appealing, on its facilities and environment.”
- Tourist learning measures the extent the tourist had learned about the various things experienced during the trip, including new and unique experiences, that is educational, and can help the tourist know more of himself or herself, and acquire new skills.
- Tourist loyalty to the destination – “I will visit this destination in the future,” “I will say positive things about this destination,” and “I would advise and recommend other people to visit this destination site.”
- Tourist satisfaction – “I am very satisfied with this trip,” “I enjoyed myself greatly from this trip,” and “I was very pleased during the trip.”
- Similar-trip loyalty – “I would certainly join any future trip of similar performance,” and “I would certainly join any future trip of similar destination attractiveness as on this trip.”

Research Results

118 travelers participated in the survey in year 2017-2018 based on the assistance of a tour agent in Chiang Rai, Thailand, who brought the tourists to Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China, via R3A – a bus-route.

Besides the other organism and response parts of the SOR model studied, Table 1 also indicates the interrelationships of the five components of stimuli considered to influence tourists in their learning of the destination and the trip experiences, and their affective states and attitude formed of the destination and the tour operator. The interrelationship structure of the stimuli

can offer numerous important insights, for instance: both cognitive and affective images are shown positively related to tourist experience, tour guide and the overall tour operations services, which according to Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001) it can be reckoned that the different components of the stimuli can shape each other, such as through information reinforcement (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003) and the experience of the destination which causes a greater positive change in image (Martin-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, and Nazzareno, 2017), and can open up many further research opportunities, such as considering the system dynamics in the stimulus elements (Tegegne, Moyle, and Becken, 2018).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, AVE (in **bold**), and Correlations between Destination Stimuli, Organism and Response (S-O-R) Variables (Note: Only the correlation coefficients significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed, are shown)

	Mean	S.D	Reliability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Perceived Service Experience	4.16	.66	.897	0.79								
2. Cognitive Destination Image	3.96	.53	.891	.32	0.76							
3. Affective Destination Image	4.05	.52	.821	.34	.70	0.76						
4. Tour Guide Role	4.24	.51	.917	.24	.37	.28	0.84					
5. Total Tour Service Quality	3.92	.52	.862	.54	.51	.35	.54	0.77				
6. Tourist Learning	4.21	.52	.876	.63	.44	.43	.43	.56	0.84			
7. Tourist Satisfaction	4.24	.61	.792	.36	.45	.46	.26	.54	.47	0.84		
8. Destination Loyalty	4.17	.70	.786	.31	.58	.59	.23	.39	.28	.58	0.84	
9. Similar-Trip Loyalty	4.17	.67	.765	.40	.40	.37	.27	.42	.44	.52	.40	0.91

Table 1 also provides the scale validation. The convergent validity of each construct was examined by calculating the score of average variances extracted (AVE) (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). A substantial convergent validity is achieved when all item-to-factor loadings

(not shown, but over 0.70) are significant and the AVE score is larger than 0.50 within each dimension (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The discriminant validity of the constructs was examined by comparing squared AVE in higher value than the correlations between each pair of constructs. Shown in the bold diagonal of Table 1 in the construct correlations sections is the squared root of AVE.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses stated in the Literature Review section, and in order to achieve greater parsimony, we constructed the structural equation modeling (SEM) and studied the model fitness. Shown in Figure 3 and Table 2 are evidences supporting Hypotheses H1 to H6, which employed the maximum likelihood method. The results indicated that the structural equation model (SEM) is satisfactory, with Chi-square = 10.2789, $p = 0.113$, NFI = 0.979, RFI = 0.875, IFI = 0.991, TLI = 0.994, CFI = 0.991, RMSEA = 0.078, and with the fit indexes exceeding 0.90 (except RFI = 0.875, close to 0.9), and RMSEA value not exceeding the recommended maximum of 0.08. These results, as shown in Figure 3, demonstrate that:

- 53 per cents of the variance of tourist learning is explained by 0.44 (standardized coefficient) of perceived significance of experience, 0.14 affective destination image, 0.18 tour guide roles, and 0.16 of tour overall services. The evidences support H1.
- 41 per cents of the variance of tourist satisfaction is explained by 0.21 tourist learning, 0.26 affective destination image, 0.25 tour guide roles, and 0.43 overall tour services. The evidences support H2 and H4.
- 51 per cents of destination loyalty is explained by 0.36 tourist satisfaction, 0.25 cognitive destination image, and 0.27 affective destination image. The evidences support H3 and H5.
- The similar-trip loyalty is predicted based on tourist learning (with Beta = 0.24), tourist satisfaction (Beta = 0.33), and destination loyalty (Beta = 0.14), for a variance of 34 per cents. The evidences support H6.
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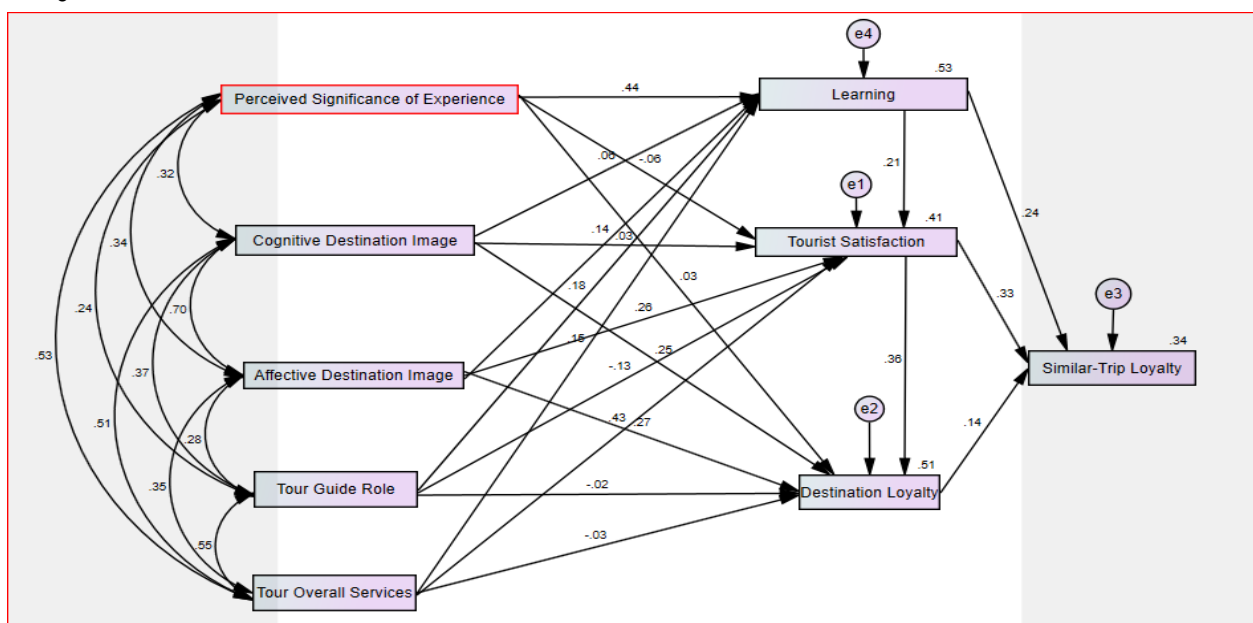


Figure 3: The SEM Structure Validating the Conceptual Model

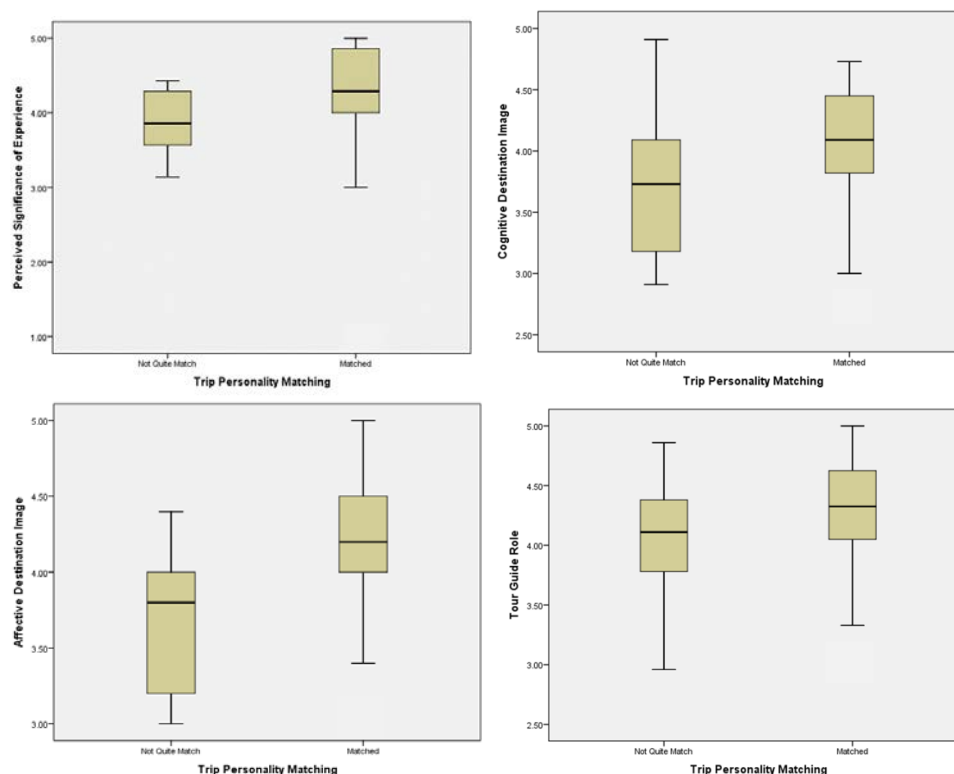
Table 2: Model Fit Summary

CMIN					
Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF
Default model	48	10.279	6	.113	1.713
Saturated model	54	.000	0		
Independence model	18	492.172	36	.000	13.671

Baseline Comparisons					
Model	NFI Delta1	RFI rho1	IFI Delta2	TLI rho2	CFI
Default model	.979	.875	.991	.944	.991
Saturated model	1.000		1.000		1.000
Independence model	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

RMSEA				
Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
Default model	.078	.000	.157	.241
Independence model	.329	.304	.355	.000

Moderating Effects the moderating effect of perceived trip personality matching is shown significant by means of T-Test (with a variable indicating matched and not matched/not quite matched), with boxplot evidences shown in Figure 4, and thus supports H7.



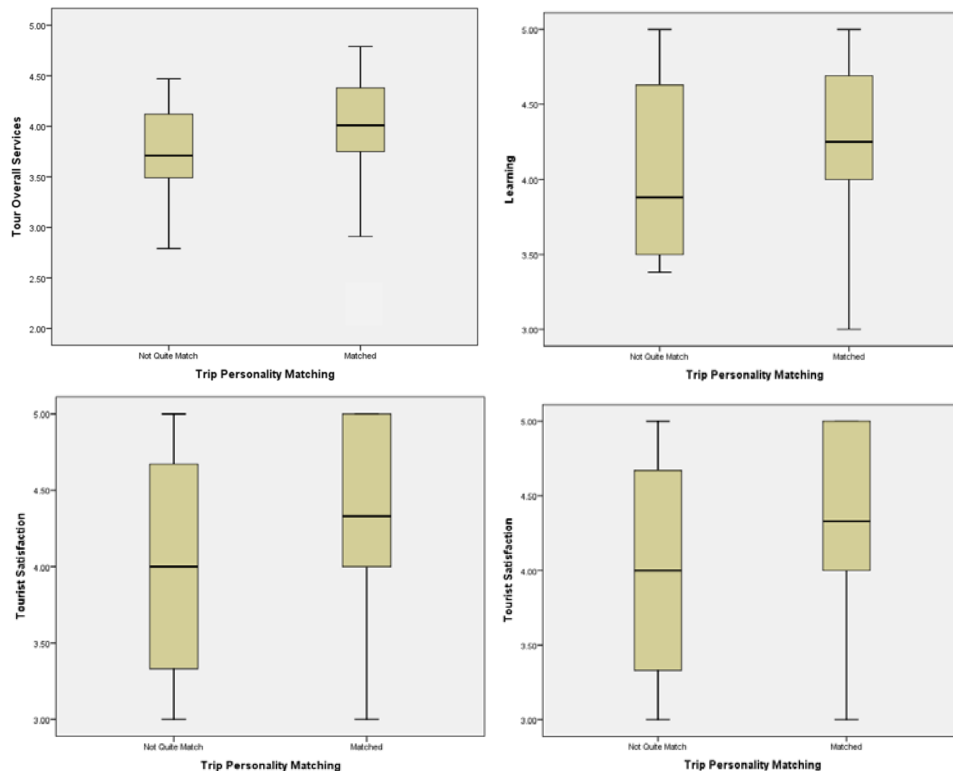


Figure 4 Boxplots of the Constructs Demonstrating the Moderator Role of Trip Personality Matching

Discussion of Research Results

The main conclusions of this paper are as follows. First, a SOR model of tourist behaviors is shown important, and the tour agents should consider the SOR structure in their tour operations design and implementation. Four stimulus domains that would influence tourist learning, tourist satisfaction and how tourists are loyal to a destination, and ultimately to benefit the tour operators, should be considered in the design and implementation of tour programs, and be supported by tour guide roles, the overall tour services offered (i.e. food and beverages, stopovers, trip management, and hotel accommodation, and transportation), and the perceived significance of tourist experiences.

Secondly, to induce tourists to form positive attitude towards the trip operation, tour operators should ensure loyalty is developed of the destination visited, and tourist being satisfied and engaging in learning.

Thirdly, based on the tourism experience concept which takes roots in Cohen (1979), and was later applied to consumer behaviors and branding in Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and expanded to experiential economy context by Pine and Gilmore (1998), and based on the statistical significance revealed in the SEM analysis, it is recommended that the tour operators should consider whatever the tourists experience as “experiencescapes”, such as tour guides, services offered (i.e. hotel, food and accommodation, stopover, trip management, transportation) and the destination attractions, that the tourists would respond and form perceptions, attitudes and learning.

Fourthly, the trip personality matching of tourists is shown as a significant moderator influencing the relationships among stimulus (known from the third point, as “experiencescapes”), organism, and responses in the SOR model, in that the tourists adjust their perceptions of the tourism products to be more consistent (less dissonant) with his or her

matched personality to the destination.. In other words, tourists respond to experiencescapes that also appeal to their sense of self and reproduce these identity values to contribute to and reinforce the experiences (Lugosi, 2014; Matson-Barkat and Robert-Demontrond, 2018, p. 568).

Fifthly, based on the concept of experiencescape and the moderation role of “trip personality matching” of tourists, we also suggest that marketing of tour programs and their communication contents should be made more interactive and relational that can cause to stimulate the active experiences and learning of tourists, by making use of tour guides through their different role-competencies (i.e. social interaction). It is by means of these meaningful and appreciable memories that tourists would eventually form attitudes and behavioral predisposition to use the similar-trip tours that benefit the tour operators.

In addition, on the sixth, food and beverages should be carefully planned and executed by the tour operators, especially tourists who travel to experience novelty and some cultural artifacts. As stated in Matson-Barkat and Robert-Demontrond (2018), food is an essential element of authentic regional culture and sustainability (Alonso, Kok, and O’Brien, 2018), and is also important to the destination’s story (Ellis, Park, Kim and Yeoman, 2018).

Suggestions

As with any research, our work has several limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting its findings. One of the limitations of the study is that the data were collected from travelers using a bus-logistics mean, and were restricted to the tourists located in Chiang Rai. As such, the results may not reflect the perceptions of travelers who are dwellers of larger cities and cosmopolitans like Bangkok. Another limitation is that this research excluded demographics variables or other relevant psychographic factors, which may be important in helping the tour operators identifying relevant market segmentation features. Only a generic “perceived trip personality matching” variable is considered.

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