Exclusive Memorable Experiences of International Cruisers at Thailand's Ports of Call

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Article info

Abstract

This study investigated key factors contributing exclusive memorable experiences among international cruisers who disembarked from foreign cruise ships at three ports of call in Thailand: Laem Chabang, Phuket Island and Samui Island. Questionnaires were distributed on site to 1,216 international cruisers from November 2015 to January 2016. The data was analyzed in two phases to propose exclusive memorable experiences model (Ex-Me-Exs). The first phase aimed to verify factors and to reduce the number of indicators in questionnaire items by using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The second phase was conducted by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ascertain that the proposed exclusive memorable experiences model (Ex-Me-Exs) was well-fitted with the data. The Ex-Me-Exs Model consists of ten key factors influencing international cruisers' exclusive memorable experiences. They include (1) conspicuousness, (2) prestige, (3) quality, (4) learning, (5) meaningfulness, (6) involvement, (7) refreshment, (8) interaction, (9) novelty, and (10) hedonism. This study yields implications in two layers. The first is for academic purposes. Since studies on cruise tourism in Thailand are underexplored, this study helps bridge the literature gap. The second is for national tourism development reasons. Due to the rapid growth of cruise tourism in Thailand, the Thai government and stakeholders can use the findings from this study as a guideline to develop ports of call countrywide to serve an escalating number of international cruisers.

Introduction

Cruise tourism is one of the fastest growing businesses compared to other business domains in tourism industry. It welcomed a great number of international cruisers and an increase in number of cruise ships (Sun, Jiao, & Tian, 2011). To elaborate, during the period of 2011-2016, there was a 20.5 percent growth of cruisers globally. As a result, 449 new cruise ships were built to serve the higher demand. Additionally, the increasing number of ports of call worldwide also affirms the continuing expansion in cruise tourism. The number of ports of call across the globe expanded from 270 to

350 between the year 2009 and 2010 (Cruise Line International Association: CLIA, 2014).

At present, more cruise line companies tend to extend their routes to Asia, consequently, this region has become a new global market with strong potentials (Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association, 2012). Considering the total number of routes in Asia between 2013 and 2017, there was a 55 percent increase in routes to Thailand (Asia Cruise Trends, 2014); which influenced Thailand to rank top 3 for accommodating cruise line routes in South East Asia.

Due to the tremendous growth in cruise tourism business, the Thai government has adjusted its 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) to develop cruise tourism in Thailand with an emphasis on fostering fundamental service system, service quality, and safety of ports of call. This aims to improve its competitiveness in the region. Furthermore, the 2nd National Tourism Development Plan (2017-2021) aimed to alter the image of Thailand from being a destination with great value for money to being a high-value destination. This is to welcome high-quality tourists including international cruisers whose spending power is deemed greater than other types of tourists.

Aside from the growth in tourism infrastructures, tourists in the modern era tend to take many new factors into account when purchasing tourism products and services based on social and emotional benefits and values. These new factors include exclusiveness and uniqueness which bring new senses for them aside from what they are used to. As a result, they are willing to pay higher prices to obtain new experiences in new exotic destinations. They also want to experience new ways of life, cultures, and foods in places they have never been before. Thus, many stakeholders in tourism industry have developed their strategies to be aligned with such trends to have an edge over their competitors, and are able to maintain their high-quality customers in a long term (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

When focusing on port of call, it includes both tangible and abstract items. To explain, it is not merely about the port where cruise ships dock to let cruisers embark and disembark; it also includes the proximity areas where cruisers can enjoy every touchpoint they experience. This includes facilities at the port itself, local infrastructure, and surrounding areas. These cruisers often take part in a variety of tourist activities such as sightseeing, joining local activities, and purchasing souvenirs. Furthermore, port of call also includes human

professional and cultural interactions with local tourist guides, staff members, and local people (Gui & Russo, 2011; Greenwood & Barron, 2005).

In Thailand, there are three ports of call-one in Laem Chabang, one in Phuket Island and another in Samui Island. Laem Chabang Port of Call covers the area of Chon Buri Province and Bangkok. That means once cruisers disembark from a cruise ship, they experience the Laem Chabang Port itself. Then, they usually get on a coach provided by the cruise line company and local travel agency to take part in various excursions such as Nong Nooch Tropical Botanical Garden in Chonburi Province, world's heritage sites in Ayutthaya Province, and the Grand Place in Bangkok. These locations are not located merely in Chonburi Province where the port itself is located, but it also includes surrounding areas where cruisers can enjoy an excursion (Thangthong, 2011; Thangthong, Inmoonnoi, & Khuanmuang, 2019). The port of call on Samui Island covers a myriad of tourist attractions on the island ranging from beaches, mountains, waterfalls, rubber plantation, elephant sanctuary, and fisherman village. As soon as cruisers disembark from a cruise ship, they can experience these exotic local activities provided by local tourist companies (Thangthong, 2017). In Phuket, cruisers can enjoy local settings and activities on the island, as well as nearby islands such as Phi Phi Islands and James Bond Islands (Thangthong, 2016).

Realizing the importance of ports of call as destinations contributing to creating exclusive experiences among international cruisers, the researchers aimed to investigate factors leading to such exclusive memorable experiences among these tourists during their visits at Thailand's ports of call. This study yields implications in two layers. The first is for academic purposes. Since studies on cruise tourism in Thailand are underexplored, this study helps bridge the literature gap. The second is for national tourism development reasons. Due to the rapid growth of cruise tourism in Thailand, the Thai government and stakeholders can use the findings from this study as a guideline to develop ports of call countrywide to serve an escalating number of international cruisers.
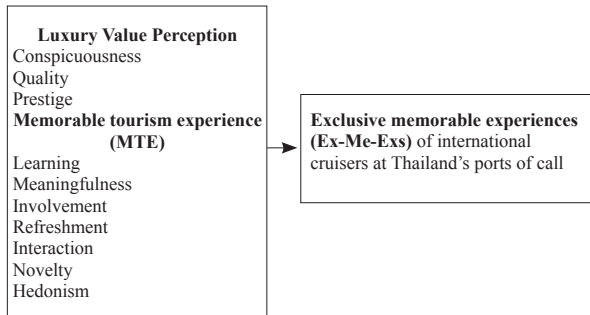
Conceptual framework

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Objectives

This study explored the exclusive memorable experience of international cruisers at Thailand's ports of call. To do so, two research objectives need to be achieved.

1. To investigate key factors contributing exclusive memorable experience of international cruisers' perception while at Thailand's ports of call,

2. To propose a conceptual model to explore exclusive memorable experience of international cruisers while at Thailand's ports of call.

Research methodology

1. Population and samples

The population of this study consists of international cruisers who disembarked from cruise ships in three ports of call in Thailand: Laem Chabang, Samui Island and Phuket Island. These locations are where international cruisers had an opportunity to visit attractions which allowed them to have pleasurable experience at each port of call. Since the actual number of population was unknown, 380 samples must be included in the study to ensure the 95 percent of level of confidence (Cochran, 1953). As a result, the samples in this study included 400 respondents at Laem Chabang, 415 at Samui Island, and 401 at Phuket Island, making the total of 1,216 respondents. They were selected based on accidental purposive sampling.

2. Research instrument

The total of self-administered 1,216 question-naires were employed in this study. Each questionnaire includes 5-point Likert type response scale, ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. There were 38 questionnaire items reflecting the respondents' perception towards their experiences while at Thailand's ports of call.

3. Collection of data

The data was collected on site using accidental purposive sampling from November 2015 to January 2016 at the three ports of call in Thailand: 400 respondents at Laem Chabang, 415 at Samui Island, and 401 at Phuket Island, making the total of 1,216 respondents.

4. Data analysis

The data was analyzed in two phases to create exclusive memorable experiences model (Ex-Me-Exs). The first phase aimed to verify factors and to reduce the number of indicators in questionnaire items by using exploratory factor analysis (EFA). By doing so, factor loading scores and factors influencing exclusive memorable experience were determined. The second phase of data analysis was conducted by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ascertain that the exclusive memorable experiences model (Ex-Me-Exs) is well-fitted with the data.

Results

To achieve the first research objective-to investigate key factors contributing exclusive memorable experience of international cruisers' perception while at Thailand's ports of call, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used with the 38 observed variables based on 10 selected key factors contributing to exclusive memorable experiences to find out the suitability of each factor as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 The results of exploratory factor analysis

Factors (KMO)	Loading	Eigen value	Variance explained
Conspicuousness (0.58)			
I can proudly present the place I have been to.	0.82	1.66	55.53
I can go to the place that my friends want to go.	0.71		
I tend to show off the souvenirs that I have bought.	0.69		
Prestige (0.54)			
I participate in this port of call trip to obtain social approval.	0.85	1.68	56.17
I travel to this port of call to have certain status.	0.72		
I have a feeling of being liked and respected by the service providers.	0.65		
Quality (0.87)			
The local transportation facilities are upscale.	0.73	3.63	40.43
The historical and cultural tours are exclusive.	0.73		
The foods are clean and taste excellent.	0.71		
Local employees show genuine care for customers.	0.68		
Traveling in this place is worth the money, time, and effort.	0.67		
The places that I visit are beautiful, nice, and clean.	0.64		
The local guides are always supportive and informative.	0.55		
The infrastructures are of high standard.	0.53		
The service staff members are courteous and hospitable.	0.64		
Learning (0.63)			
The tour program makes me more knowledgeable.	0.82	1.78	59.57
I learn from new cultures.	0.77		
I enjoy activities and have an opportunity to do something by myself.	0.71		

Table 1 (Continued)

Factors (KMO)	Loading	Eigen value	Variance explained
Meaningfulness (0.62)			
The trip helps me improve my self-confidence.	0.86	1.91	63.72
The trip helps me develop my personal identity.	0.83		
I do something meaningful during this tourism experience.	0.68		
Involvement (0.5)			
I visit the place where I really want to go.	0.87	1.54	77.13
I am interested in the main activities of the tour experience.	0.87		
Refreshment (0.69)			
I feel refreshed and revitalized.	0.85	2.05	68.47
I enjoy the sense of freedom.	0.82		
I relief my stress and tension.	0.80		
Interaction (0.65)			
I can touch the local ways of life.	0.76	1.96	49.11
I can immerse myself in local festivals and cultural ceremonies.	0.69		
I visit authentic local restaurants/ food outlets/ local markets.	0.69		
Local people in the trip are friendly and helpful.	0.64		
Novelty (0.84)			
The architectures are exotic.	0.80	2.90	58.09
I cannot find something like this in any other places.	0.78		
I feel that I am in a different world during the trip.	0.77		
The trip is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.	0.73		
The trip includes tailor-made activities.	0.70		
Hedonism (0.65)			
I feel excited during the trip.	0.84	1.91	63.84
I really enjoy this tour experience.	0.77		
I indulge myself in the activities during the trip.	0.77		

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with the 38 observed variables to determine the dimensionality of the proposed Ex-Me-Exs Model. The criterion used to select suitable key factors was based on the number of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) which must be higher than 0.5, the loading factor values which must be higher than 0.6, eigen value which must be higher than 1 (Kaiser, 1958).

Table 1 illustrates that the KMO scores for all 10 key factors are higher than 0.5 indicating that all key factors presented are suitable. Also, the factor loading scores of 38 observed variables are higher than 0.6 showing that all 38 observed variables are also suitable. Additionally, the scores for eigen value are higher than 1 illustrating that all key factors presented are suitable.

To achieve the second research objective-to create a conceptual model to explore exclusive memorable experience of international cruisers while at Thailand's ports of call, all key factors were analyzed by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ascertain that the exclusive memorable experiences model (Ex-Me-Exs) is well-fitted with the data as displayed in Figure 2.
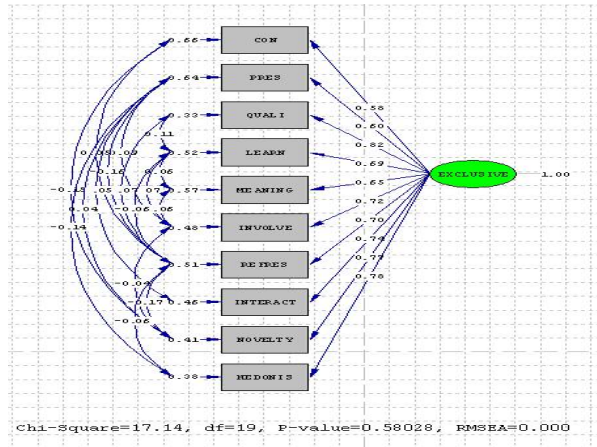

Chi-Square=17.14, df=19, P-value=0.58028, RMSEA=0.000

Figure 2 The results of structural equation model

To analyze the goodness of fit index of model, Figure 1 shows that the model has comparative fit with empirical data, all the indexes pass the criteria: $\chi^2 = 17.14$, df = 19, p-value = 0.58, CFI = 1.0, GFI = 1.0, AGFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.000, SRMR = 0.000. Thus, the structural equation model fits with the empirical data (Criteria: $\chi^2/df < 2.0$, RMSEA < 0.05, CFI ≥ 0.95, AGFI ≥ 0.90). The results show exclusive memorable experiences of international cruisers at Thailand's ports of call comprising of 10 factors ranking from the most memorable: (1) involvement (2) interaction (3) hedonism (4) meaningfulness (5) refreshment (6) novelty (7) quality (8) learning (9) conspicuousness (10) prestige.

Table 2 Results of testing the construction validity of exclusive memorable experiences

| Variable | Factor loading | | | | |
	Coefficient	SE	t	Factor Score	R²
CON	0.58	0.027	21.36	0.58	0.34
PRES	0.60	0.029	20.53	0.60	0.36
QUALI	0.82	0.024	33.72	0.82	0.67
LEARN	0.69	0.026	26.22	0.69	0.48
MEANING	0.65	0.026	24.87	0.65	0.43
INVOLVE	0.72	0.026	27.60	0.72	0.52
REFRES	0.70	0.028	24.54	0.70	0.49
INTERACT	0.74	0.025	29.23	0.74	0.54
NOVELTY	0.77	0.025	30.14	0.77	0.59
HEDONIS	0.78	0.025	31.61	0.78	0.62

Chi-Square (χ^2) = 17.14, df = 19, p-value = 0.58028, RMSEA = 0.000, GFI = 1.00, AGFI = 0.99

To determine the Goodness of Fit of a proposed model, the chi-square (χ^2) score was divided by the degree of freedom (df) score: (χ^2/df). The result must be less than 2. According to Table 2, $\chi^2 = 17.14$ and df = 19. That is, 17.14 / 19 equals 0.90 which was below 2. Also, the

p-value score must be higher than 0.05. Table 2 reveals that the p-value score of the proposed model was 0.58028, which is over 0.05. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) values must be less than 0.08. The data in Table 1 indicates that the RMSEA score was 0.000. What's more, the Goodness of Fit (GFI) score must be 0.95 or above. As can be seen in Table 2, the GFI was 1.00. Finally, the Adjusted Goodness of Fit (AGFI) must be 0.90 or above. As displayed in Table 2, the AGFI for the proposed model (Kline, 2005; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). As a consequence, the findings indicate that the fit of the proposed exclusive memorable experiences model was satisfactory.

Discussion

The exclusive memorable experiences of international cruisers towards ports of call in Thailand are as follows: (1) The *conspicuousness* that the cruisers attempt to impress others by displaying their wealth throughout their journey. Attractions at Thailand's ports of call are well known and worth for cruisers to present to their acquaintances and loved ones, notably through social networking platform. (2) The *prestige* can be consumed from travel experience in Thailand's ports of call. It also includes being liked and respected by the service providers. (3) The *quality* is a fundamental characteristic of products or services that the cruisers perceived through the informative tour guides as well as the friendly, courteous and supportive staff members, nice meals, fully-infrastructure, tourist attraction's beauty and hygiene. (4) The *learning* is a cognitive aspect of the tourist experience during their journey. The cruisers gain more knowledge from tour programs, Thai cultures, Thai history and ceremony, and Thai cooking recipe. (5) The meaningfulness is impressed by every one of the cruisers' perspective when they feel that their lives are meaningful during their trips in the different atmosphere as mentioned by (Uysal, Perdue, & Sirgy 2012). (6) The *involvement* reflecting the success of creative tourism organized through community tourism. This calls for the involvement of the tourists or cruisers to learn new things in the new culture by getting involved in the Thai cuisine cooking classes, riding elephants, and rubber tapping as mentioned by (Swinyard, 1993). (7) The *refreshment* is concentrated on the cruisers' experiential engagement in activities such as sunbathing, nice breeze by the sea, getting massage on the beach, beach sport activities as mentioned by (Croce & Peri, 2010). (8) The *interaction* with local people gives the cruisers the opportunity to exchange ideas, to learn local wisdom, and to learn and share the way of living especially at the floating market. This notion supports the previous findings that interaction with local culture brings the understanding of other cultures through cultural activities in high levels of recollection of travelers' past experience (Kim, Ritchie, & Vincent, 2010). (9) The *novelty* is a core input for memories that are linked to the cruisers' experience in novel tour programs, Thai architecture, Thai ways of life, authentic activities and exotic cuisine as mentioned by George & George (2004). (10) The hedonism is somewhat visible through facial expressions on the faces of the cruisers, particularly the voices of positive comments on the activities they have been involved in as mentioned by (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012).

From these 10 factors, international cruisers gained exclusive memorable experiences as viewed through their points of view and their understanding of the different cultures. Such cultural differences are not perceived as strange, but rather intriguing. These also help form their personalities at a later time. The most impressive experience are the involvement and the interaction with local people through hand-on activities. In addition, they gain more self-confidence, and are glad to be noticeable by the people in their social environment. Importantly, the ports of call in Thailand bring the quality and the novelty because the cruisers learn new architectural styles, new cultures, and new ways of living. That is, they witness and learn something different from their own cultures. To sum up, these 10 key factors signify what exclusive memorable experiences at Thailand's ports of call means to the international cruisers.

Suggestions

The findings from this study yield implications in two layers. The first is for academic purposes. Since studies on cruise tourism in Thailand are underexplored, this study helps fill the literature gap. The second is for business reasons. Due to the expending pace of cruise tourism growth in Thailand, the Thai government and stakeholders can use the findings from this study as a guideline to develop Thailand's ports of call to serve an escalating number of foreign cruisers. To elaborate, the Thai government and stakeholders should develop Thailand's ports of call in four main areas. The first one is the advertisements. The uniqueness of the three ports of call should have more advertisements on social media

platforms where high-end tourists such as cruisers gather. Moreover, a corporation with international online influencers or celebrities through movies or short films may be another option to help boost the popularity of the ports of call among a wider audience. The second area is the infrastructure. Since cruisers only spend a short period of time at port of call, great transportation system should be built to provide access to as many local attractions as possible. By doing so, a more variety of trips and excursions at each port of call can be created. For the convenience of these tourists, accommodations and restaurants should also be located at places where cruisers are taken to. The third area is local authenticity. These cruisers expect something different from what they have experienced, therefore, the well reserved nature and the Thai ways of living can build exclusive experience. This can be done by offering more activities where these cruisers can participate and interact with the locals. They can learn new culture and gain exclusive experience via the interaction and hospitality of the locals. The fourth area is the manpower. Because the locals can directly create exclusive experience among these cruisers, they should be professionally trained in the domain of communication and customer handling skills. By doing so, the local hospitality can be transferred and perceived by the cruisers without barriers in language and cultural differences.

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