A Synthesis of Unique Product Attributes for Alternative Accommodation Types

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Abstract

This study aims to address distinctive attributes of alternative accommodation for user evaluation. In industry practice represented by leading online travel agencies (OTAs), user evaluation criteria identical with hotels/motels are adopted to non-traditional alternative accommodation properties, although these are fundamentally different products from their traditional counterparts. In order to fill this gap, this study utilises systematic review and meta-interpretation on alternative accommodation and identifies the distinctive characteristics that separate them from conventional accommodation facilities. As a result of the study, five unique attributes for alternative accommodation types are suggested: host to guest (H2G) interaction, guest to guest (G2G) interaction, neighbourhood, atmosphere, and flexibility. Practitioners and researchers may use these attributes to improve online consumer evaluation and enhance understanding on the emerging subsectors of lodging industry.

Keywords: alternative accommodation, accommodation attributes, systematic review, meta-interpretation

1 Introduction

During the past decade, the tourism accommodation sector has dramatically changed with the emergence of innovative lodging products such as Airbnb, guesthouses, and non-traditional hostels (Amblee, 2015; Guttentag, 2015). With the internet-based platform and people's ease in lending their properties, alternative accommodation businesses have grown explosively. It is estimated that total bookings would reach 80 million by 2015, by the time which it would have surpassed all of major hotel chains in terms of room bookings (Somerville, 2015).

It is often argued that the experience of guests staying in alternative accommodations is fundamentally different from the conventional options such as hotels and motels. In the former, guests enhance their stay experiences through interactions with host (H2G), residents and/or other travellers (G2G), whereas the latter does not facilitate such exchanges, or even when so, only to a limited degree (Rheem, 2012). Smaliukiene, Chi-Shiun, and Sizovaite (2015) suggest that value is co-created through the said interactions between travellers and other stakeholders, and serves as a major reason behind the overwhelming success. Accordingly, researchers have tried to define the non-traditional accommodation sector with limited success in reaching a consensus. Recently, Gunasekaran and Anandkumar (2012) used the term 'alternative accommodation' to refer to alternatives other than traditional hotels, citing commercial homes, bed and breakfast operations, guesthouses, homestays and service apartments as examples. Building on this definition, this study defines alternative

accommodation as a non-traditional subgroup of the accommodation sector offered as a direct alternative to hotels and motels for customers, the use of which is facilitated through internet and e-commerce, and not distinguished by the particular tangible or services attributes of the operation.

Meanwhile, small and medium-sized alternative accommodations are primarily operated by micro-entrepreneurs who usually lack their own websites or information channels outside of third-party intermediaries (Dombay, Seer, Magyari-Sáska, & Seer, 2010). Yet, by examining the leading online travel agencies (OTAs) or similar online platforms that provide information and/or booking services for the said accommodation facilities, identical customer rating items, usually comprising cleanliness, staff, facilities, location, comfort, and price, are applied to the evaluation criteria regardless of the accommodation types.

Nevertheless, evidence from available literature suggests otherwise. (Gunasekaran & Anandkumar, 2012; Wang, 2007; Wang & Hung, 2015), and therefore a gap between theory and practice is identified. A disregard on the notable differences in product attributes can lead to accumulation and dissemination of surmised product information. Furthermore, the expected incongruity between rating items and product attributes is likely to affect the alternative accommodation operations more severely, given the high reliance on third party intermediaries in their product marketing and distribution. In this light, this study aims to address the critical attributes of alternative accommodation facilities that are distinctive from the traditional lodging options and can be utilised for improvement in validity and accuracy of user evaluation.

2 Methodology

Meta-interpretation of published studies on alternative accommodation is utilised, by means of synthesis approach that is applied to broaden the body of knowledge of previous literature (Weed, 2006, 2008). For the systematic review, leading journals in hospitality and tourism management were chosen including *Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management, Journal of Travel Research, International Journal of Hospitality Management, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, and Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*. Research articles were searched with the keywords "guesthouse", "Airbnb", and "hostel". Studies that were published before the year 2000 was excluded due to the trend of rapidly shifting functionality of these accommodation types.

More than one thousand research articles were retrieved in the initial keyword screening, and the first exclusions were made by reading the study titles. Articles were further sorted based on the relevance of abstracts and keywords to the purpose and scope of the study on hand. Articles focusing on attributes overlapping with those of the traditional accommodation subsectors (i.e., cleanliness, staff, facilities, location, comfort, and price) were excluded as the second step.

Finally, a total of 14 research articles which focus on experiences and attributes of alternative accommodation were finally selected, systematic reviewed, and meta-interpreted. The coders as active interpretative agents created a start list of codes and

generated categories to identify the distinctive characteristics of alternative accommodation types into the corresponding attributes. Constant comparative analysis method was used until the coders reached a point where no new information was obtained from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the purpose of ensuring credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincole & Guba, 1985), member checking and inter-coder reliability were used and confirmed.

3 Findings

Findings of analysis identified five distinctive attributes for alternative accommodation types: H2G interaction, G2G interaction, neighbourhood, atmosphere, and flexibility. Each attribute was meta-interpreted, as listed in Table 1. Specifically, H2G interaction is distinguished from established staff service when customers expect personalized service from hosts of alternative accommodation. G2G interaction has seldom been mentioned in conventional accommodation environment, but is suggested as an important factor in alternative accommodation types. As internet has changed the tourism environment, individuals take proactive online and offline interactions. Neighbourhood is linked to the willingness of physical and psychological interaction with the community while travelling. Atmosphere that allows unconstrained social interaction without obligation is an environmental attribute enabling and facilitating other attributes. Flexibility is customers' autonomy supporting environment with less regulations or restrictions. These unique attributes in alternative accommodation could reflect demands of customers who seek homely accommodation when travelling, while supporting their desired roles of active participants and at the same time, controllers of experience.

Table 1. Meta-interpretation of unique attributes for alternative accommodation

Attribute	Interpretation	Synthesis
Host to Guest (H2G) Interaction	Host-guest interaction in alternative accommodation is regarded as an important factor. Guests can sense hospitality by interacting with their host, and often expect a higher level of interaction with a service provider when staying in alternative accommodation types. Both quality and quantity of interaction should be considered. However, some guests of alternative accommodation may seek a minimum level of social interaction.	1; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 11; 12
Guest to Guest (G2G) Interaction	G2G interaction stimulates information and sharing travel experiences. Interaction between guests includes both offline and online channels. Offline G2G interaction is seldom expected among users of traditional accommodation.	6; 8; 10
Neighbourhood	Neighbourhood for alternative accommodation has a different meaning from that for the traditional type. Whereas guests in traditional accommodation pay more attention to locational advantage such as convenience and accessibility, guests staying alternative accommodation seek the value from locale and authenticity of neighbourhood and are more likely to enjoy local culture.	4; 5; 11; 12; 14

Atmosphere	Atmosphere represents subjective and emotional characteristics of accommodation servicing guest experience. Guests seek a warm and relaxing home-like atmosphere in alternative accommodation. Moreover, they seek unique form of accommodation which offers a blend of local culture.	2; 9; 12; 13
Flexibility	Alternative accommodation tends to be more flexible and ambiguous in terms of regulation and the governance compared to standardised hotels. This flexibility allows travellers to have more comfort and freedom when planning arranging schedule, supporting their autonomy.	4; 8

1. Brochado, Rita, & Gameiro (2015); 2. Choi, Buzinde, & Lee, (2015); 3. Choo & Petrick (2014); 4. Hassanli, Gross, & Brown (2016); 5. Hernández-Maestro & González-Benito (2013); 6. Murphy (2001); 7. Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris (2008); 8. Park & Santos (2016); 9. Santos (2016); 10. Sørensen (2003); 11. Tussyadiah & Pesonen (2015); 12. Tussyadiah (2016); 13. Wang & Hung (2015); 14. Wang (2007)

4   Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study investigated unique, distinctive attributes of alternative accommodation types. Aside from the attributes currently used by booking websites and overlapping with published studies on alternative accommodation (i.e., cleanliness, staff, facilities, location, comfort, and price), five unique attributes emerged as a result of the synthesis of relevant literature. The attributes include H2G interaction, G2G interaction, neighbourhood, atmosphere, and flexibility. These unique attributes reflect important aspects of alternative accommodation experiences considered by guests and could be used by the intermediaries to improve measurement of customer evaluation on alternative accommodation facilities.

However, as new products are constantly introduced in the accommodation market, research efforts should continue understanding the new product types and the associated consumer perception on their varying attributes. Although unique attributes for alternative accommodation types have been proposed by this study, it should be noted that not all of the dimensions have equal importance in influencing the customer experience. Furthermore, additional attributes may be identified with time and accumulation of additional studies on this topic. Therefore, future research efforts can address estimation of relative weights for each attribute so that the respective effects of the attributes on customer experience are examined, as well as continuous examination of the growing body of literature with the purpose of building a comprehensive set of attributes.

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