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RESEARCH NOTE

EXPLORING THE SERVICE QUALITY OF AIRBNB

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Airbnb has become a strong competitor for hotels when it comes to accommodation choices. However, few studies have analyzed the service quality provided by Airbnb. In order to approach this gap and to support the industry to maintain competitiveness, this study identified related dimensions measuring the service quality based on a qualitative design, conducting a content analysis of Airbnb-related reviews. The following six dimensions are identified and discussed: Accuracy, Cleanliness, Rooms and Facilities, Location, Personalized Service, and Value. Findings indicate that competitive advantage can be maintained by improving target group-related service quality, the accuracy and relevance of information provided, flexible check-in and check-out slots and services, as well as the organization of tours and events for guests.

Key words: Competitive advantage; Hotels; Service quality; Sharing economy; Airbnb

Introduction

Before the emergence of Airbnb, a platform that allows people to rent their spare rooms or apartments, hotels were often the default choice for tourists' overnight stays. Airbnb describes itself as "a world where anyone can belong anywhere, providing healthy travel that is local, authentic, diverse, inclusive and sustainable" (Airbnb, 2019). Facilitated by web 2.0 technologies and an innovative business model of sharing economy,

Airbnb has become a strong competitor of hotels. However, even under the concept of sharing economy, its service quality is still an important factor that affects the decision of consumers because companies can improve their market share and profitability if they have high service quality (Basti & Goji , 2012; Priporas, Stylos, Rahimi, & Vedanthachari, 2017). A reliable and vital measurement tool advocated by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) commonly measures the service quality of existing services. In other words,

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531

it is the classic SERVQUAL model to identify gaps between customers' perceived service quality and the actual services quality provided by suppliers. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) develops five general service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Service Performance Scale (SERVPERF), which measures service quality in different service establishments, including hotels, has been widely applied in recent years. For example, Leong, Hew, Lee, and Ooi (2015) highlighted the advantages of SERVPERF over SERVQUAL to measure the service performance of airline companies including both low-cost airlines and full service airlines. In addition, the Service Quality Scale in the lodging industry (LODGQUAL) was developed based on SERVQUAL's dimensions for the hotel industry (Getty & Getty, 2003; Wilkins, Merrilees, & Herington, 2007). LODGQUAL covers tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, communication, and confidence. For example, Zhang, Ye, and Law (2011) investigated hotel service quality along six dimensions: "hotel class." "room attributes," "quality," "location," "cleanliness," and "service." Ye, Li, Wang, and Law (2014) evaluated hotel service quality through four aspects: "comfort," "location," "cleanliness," and "service." Furthermore, Sun, Tong, and Law (2015) used five categories: "service," "rooms and facilities," "location," "cleanliness," and "value."

Many scholars have realized the capabilities of social media in helping tourism and hotel companies to approach potential guests so as to improve their online public awareness and to generate more income (Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). Thus, based on the popularity of consumers to post comments on social media about their stay experience, the present study provides a framework to measure service quality under the concept of sharing economy. The main objective of this study is to identify the service quality dimensions of Airbnb by analyzing the comments posted on Airbnb's website.

Method

The present study is based on the service quality measurement dimensions of hotels to analyze the retrieved comments made by guests who had overnight stay experience in Hong Kong from the Airbnb website (https://www.airbnb.com/s/ Hong-Kong). The reason to select Airbnb in Hong Kong is that it is a commonly recognized popular international tourist destination. Data were collected in November 2015. The final data set comprised 304 comments for further analysis. The comments were analyzed by NVivo 10. Deduction method and open coding were adopted. For the deduction method, the service quality measurement dimensions of Airbnb were generated after reading the comments based on the service quality measurement dimensions of hotels. Six dimensions were finalized and representative comments were listed to represent each dimension. The six dimensions identified are accuracy, cleanliness, location, personalized service, rooms and facilities, and value, respectively.

The findings of the content analysis of the 304 comments show that positive comments far exceed negative comments. Based on the dimensions identified by previous studies and the nature of Airbnb, the present study identified six dimensions: accuracy (4.6%), cleanliness (13.3%), location (23.2%), personalized service (15.2%), rooms and facilities (22.6%), and authenticity (22.1%), with a frequency of 41, 119, 207, 136, 202, and 188, respectively.

Findings

Accuracy

The dimension of accuracy represents the accuracy of diverse information provided by Airbnb such as photos and description of individual service attributes. It is different from the accuracy of hotel service quality attributes because the description of hotel service attributes is relatively standard. Nevertheless, for Airbnb, there is a wide range of different apartments with diverse attributes. Hence, the accuracy of information has to be considered. Representative comments are provided. An example of positive comment is:

> Everything essential was provided as stated. The room size is like in the photo, so for a room in HK, it['s] actually very huge. Wi-Fi and TV is provided. (Comment A1)

The findings show that Airbnb is doing well in terms of ensuring the accuracy of the information provided.

Cleanliness

Previous studies have shown that cleanliness is an important factor that guests take into consideration when booking hotels (Lockyer, 2005). Similarly, consumers also consider the cleanliness of the rooms or apartments for their stay. For example:

> The place is very clean and well kept. Just like the pictures. Everything was very good. The apartment was exceptionally clean and neat. The bathroom and kitchen were all newer. It's an average size for HK and was just right for my stay. (Comment E1)

The comments indicate that, overall, rooms and apartments posted on Airbnb are clean, tidy, and comfortable.

Location

A number of studies have pointed out that location is one of the most important attributes considered by customers when they select a hotel (Liu, Law, Rong, Li, & Hall, 2013; Lockyer, 2005). Consumers also consider location when looking for accommodation on Airbnb. Nevertheless, the location that guests mention in most cases is not the physical position of the accommodation, but is the distance from Mass Transit Railway (MTR), shopping, and Hong Kong International Airport. The retrieved comments regarding relative location are positive. For example:

> The traffic is very convenient, the geographical position is superior, the downstairs have the security is very safe, there are many characteristics snacks around. (Comment G1)

The above comments indicate that the rooms and apartments posted on Airbnb are relatively in good locations. These comments show that customers are quite satisfied with the individual location of the Airbnb accommodation.

Personalized Service

On the Airbnb platform, the service dimension differs from the service performance of hotels, which comprises aspects such as the attitude of hotel staff, service efficiency, and service responsiveness. On the Airbnb platform, guests have to communicate with their host or their representative in advance to confirm the check-in time based on the availability of both parties, unlike 24-hr check-in availability in hotels. Hence, the Airbnb service starts before guests' arrival rather than upon arrival for traditional hotel service. This is regarded as a personalized service reflected mainly in communication and check-in.

The host plays an important role in communication/check-in. Before guests arrive, they must communicate with the host about a series of issues, such as the exact location, transportation, check-in time, and so on. For example:

> Melody sent me e-mail with map images to explain the hotel location in advance. It was so helpful and I can arrived very well. Moreover, the hotel is near Jordan subway station. (Comment H1)

A majority of guests had smooth communication with their hosts. Where Airbnb differs from hotels is the communication before and during the stay. Before guests arrive, they usually communicate with their hosts via email, message or WhatsApp. During guests' stay, hosts also give advice about local restaurants and activities. On the other hand, there are also some complaints about lack of communication.

Rooms and Facilities

Previous studies have showed that rooms and facilities are important attributes of measuring hotel service quality (Zhang et al., 2011). The following comments show that consumers who choose rooms or apartments on Airbnb, like those booking hotel rooms, also consider rooms and facilities during their stay. For example:

> The unit was small but well-maintained. We had a very pleasant stay and we will consider booking him again when we visit HK. (Comment C1)

Here is one negative comment:

> However, the mini fridge is not usable and there is a lack of wardrobe space. During my stay, the lift was down for upgrading, we have to climb 7 floor up the block. (Comment D1)

In summary, the comments retrieved reveal that in general, the rooms and facilities satisfy guests' needs. Nevertheless, there are also some negative comments about facilities related to Wi-Fi and air conditioner. In a hotel, the rooms and facilities are relatively standardized. However, the rooms and apartments on Airbnb vary greatly, and it is hard to avoid complaints.

Authenticity

It is commonly agreed that hotels should provide continuous value to customers (Ye et al., 2014). On the Airbnb platform, guests also consider the value gained, but it differs from the value guests' gain in hotels. The value gained by guests booking rooms or apartments on Airbnb is a kind of homely feeling and authentic experience.

The present study provides a framework to evaluate the service quality of the rooms and apartments posted on Airbnb based on the dimensions identified by previous studies. Through analyzing 304 comments, the present study identified six dimensions to measure the service quality of the rooms and apartments on the Airbnb platform: Accuracy, Cleanliness, Location, Personalized Service, Rooms and Facilities, and Authenticity. The findings show that hotels can improve the accuracy of the information they provide (e.g., room description vs. picture), give detailed directions to the hotel's location, allow flexible check-in and check-out services, and organize events for guests to maintain their competitive advantage. As it is an exploratory study, there are several limitations. First, one limitation of the present research is the limited number of comments retrieved from Airbnb. Second, only comments posted in English were retrieved. Hence, future studies are suggested to enlarge the sample size (i.e., comments) and include comments in different languages to test whether the findings remain the same or not.

Acknowledgment

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