A study of preferences of business female travelers on the selection of accommodation

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Abstract

Female business traveler has become one of the major markets for the hotel industry. Hotels have put an enormous amount of efforts in improving the hotel services to meet the needs of these growing markets. However, a fast growing sub-segment of the market — business female traveler — has not been receiving special attention on their preferences of product needs. This study, surveyed 150 female working adults in Malaysia, to determine that solo business female travelers tend to be younger, unmarried and engage in personal leisure activities. According to the survey, safety and location are the main concern areas when selecting a hotel. It is concluded that female business traveler requirements must be accommodated if hotels establishment with to attract this growing market. Based on a survey carried out by the travel industry in America in 2005, a total of 43 percent of American business travelers’ are female. In addition, a study on conducted by New York University identified the female business traveler as a ‘baby boomer’ with a college degree, who earns over $75,000 per year (Fields, 2006). Travel marketers and researcher have become aware of the potential of the female business traveler have begun addressing this segment. Female labor in Malaysia currently leading at 45.7 percent in the country total labor force; where there is a strong need to focus on this consumer groups (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006).

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1. Introduction

As part of the process of rapid growth, the tourism industry has become more diversified, targeting different consumers with more sophisticated products. The bulk of mass tourism is gradually being segmented into such varies submarkets as urban tourism, nature tourism, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, business tourism, religious tourism and recently dark tourism (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002).

In addition to this topical segmentation, the industry is being further subdivided to cater to the needs of special population groups such as elderly tourists; Disabled tourists; gay tourists and so on. Likewise, general aspects of tourist needs such as the relationship between psychological urges and tourists role preference patterns for men and women being investigated (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002).

As the tourist market becomes global, identification of gender differences in tourist behaviors and the ability to meet the gender specific needs will be the key to successful differentiation of the tourism product. Unfortunately, there is reluctance by many tourism writers and practitioners to recognize gender specific differences and to fully incorporate gender issues into the design and marketing of travel and tourism products. There is an assumption that all tourists, regardless of gender, consume tourism marketing identifiably. This assumption is wrong and leads to gender blindness and consumer dissatisfaction (Wearing & Wearing, 1996). Also in various studies there is a gender bias that subsumes female behavior into that of the dominant male pattern of behavior. Thus, there is no allowance made for gender differences in social research (Breathnach et al., 1994 cited in Smith, 2006). There are a clear need to incorporate gender differences into tourism studies and tourism marketing research, and to develop marketing and service strategies which would cater specifically for such differences (Breathnach et al., 1994 cited in Smith & Carmichael, 2006). Gender tourism marketing research reveal differences power between women and men (Wearing & Wearing, 1996).

The hospitality industry (service industry), strives to satisfy customer needs in a competitive environment (Heo, Joganatnam & Buchanan., 2004; Lockwood & Medik, 2001; Powers, 1997; Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999 cited in Weidenfield, 2005). Hoteliers go to great pains to provide tourists with rooms that are clean and neat as they are able to furnish, depending on the level, grade and standard of the hotel. However, hoteliers sell the same products to all tourists regardless of their differences in desires. They rarely go further to tailor the hotel products in general and the hotel room in particular special requirements and preferences of any specific group of tourists (Heo et al., 2004).

Female business traveler has become one of the major markets for the hotel industry. Hotels are packaging their room products to meet the needs of these markets. Female business traveler needs such as separate check in desks, meeting room space, in room fax facilities, cellular phones and discreet meeting places are seen in most hotels (Baker et al., 2000). Additionally, hotel floors are classified as executive floors and presidential suited geared towards the needs of VIPs and wealthy people with exclusive furniture, fittings and special services (Baker et al., 2000).

Based on a survey carried out by the travel industry in America in 2005, a total of 43 percent of American business travelers’ are female. In addition, a study on conducted by New York University identified the female business traveler as a ‘baby boomer with a college degree who earns over $75,000 per year’ (Fields, 2006). Travel marketers and researchers have become aware of the potential of the female business traveler and addressing this segment. Female labor in Malaysia currently leading at 45.7 percent in the country total labor force, there is a strong need to focus on this consumer groups (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006).

1.1. Background of the Study

According to Boston Consulting Group, ‘Women are the controlling purchases and driving shift in the economy, as women will soon earn more than men’. Travel related companies are creating new products that go beyond the standard for the female traveler e.g. ‘Female centric’, the buzz words for the heart of the new business women’s movement (Muxlow, 2007). Currently, chains, groups and independent hotels are creating ways to cater specifically for woman or ‘feminine requirements’ in order to cater to the needs and preferences of their female customers (Chan, 2007). Hotels are innovating products and service which are beyond the standards. Front office staffs are better trained to be more considerate by ensuring all the information such as room number is not read out when checking in female guests. They offered better spas treatment and organize in-house yoga classes for the female
guests. ‘Based on global market research firm Mintel argues that hotels need business environment and facilities require ‘feminizing’ touch by offering better pampering products, as well as childcare facilities for working mothers’ (Chan, 2007, P.1).

1.2. Problem Statement

There is a lack of research of women and travel in general (Swain, 1995). The focus of women business traveler has been relegated to a few articles on service quality issues. In tourism research, a bias has formed which has led to many assumptions that women's travel behavior mimics the patterns of their male counterparts (Breathnach, Henry, Drea & O’Flaherty, 1994 cited in Smith & Carmichael, 2006). There is currently limited research being done on female business travelers’ preferences on their accommodation selection for their business trip especially if they travel alone. Moreover, there is little research on domestic female business traveler and their preference on accommodation selection.

1.3. Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine Malaysian female preferences on accommodations and how it affects the accommodation industry’s sales. This research aims to help hotel establishments to realize the importance of this new market segment which represents a key component to the industry’s future growth. These will eventually help the hotel establishment to capture female business traveler preference which will have an impact on the establishment sales and future growth.

1.4. Research Question

1. What are the demographic characteristics of Malaysian female business traveler?
2. How does trip characteristic help hotel develop suitable marketing method in capturing the female business traveler market?
3. What are the particular requirements or needs of the female when selecting hotel accommodation during a business trip?
4. Are there opportunities for hotels to capture market share by improving the business travel experience for female?

1.5. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

According to Gibson and Yiannakis (2002) in a study of travel preference over time, found that women and men tourist preferences were significantly different. Women were found to be the primary decision maker in relation to business travel and are more brand loyal than man (Anon, 2003 cited in Smith & Carmichael, 2006). In order to capture this market, the accommodation industry has to ensure female purchase decision triggers points are captured. Six criteria consisting of location, price, facilities, cleanliness, safety and service are analyzed to find out which is the most important factor of preference (Lockyer, 2005). By selecting and analyzing the key elements in theory by Lockyer, (2005), the researcher devised a conceptual framework for female business traveler hotel selection preferences as shown in Figure 1.
1.6. Question Significance of Study

The term female preference on accommodation selection can be found in articles and journals from books, online and even magazines. But there is no proper research conducted specifically on Malaysian on their preference of hotels selection. Realizing the potential of this new and growing market, this study is conducted in order to help the hotel establishment in Malaysia to realize the importance of this new market, understand the factors that affect female business traveler purchase decision and how it affect hotels’ sales in Malaysia and overseas.

1.7. Question Scope and Limitation of Study

This study considers only Malaysian female business traveler purchase decision trigger points. The key variables or factors considered in this study include: location, price, facilities, cleanliness, safety and service.

The survey data in this study was collected from 1st April 2008 to 14th April 2008 at KL Sentral (Brickfield, Kuala Lumpur). All the data in this research is only correct at the place and time as stated above.
2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism Industry in Malaysia

The tourism sector has shown strong economic growth despite the challenges from events faced such as the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis, the September incident in 2001, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and Tsunami. The tourism sector contributes as a key foreign exchange earner, contributing to the growth in others subsectors and infrastructure, as well as attracting investors and increasing employment opportunities. According to the Eight Malaysian Plan (2001 -2005), tourist arrivals increased from RM10.2 million in 2000 to RM16.4 million in 2005 which shows an increase of 10% per annum. During these times it helped increase the country’s foreign exchange earnings. The country’s foreign exchange earnings showed an average annual increase of 12.4%, showing robust steady growth. Accommodation stands as the highest component of tourist expenditure, followed by shopping and food and beverages (Ninth Malaysian Plan, 2006).

The tourism sector is a service oriented sector which requires people to run its daily operation. Without the people or employee, the tourism sectors will not be successful even with the most advance technology. Based on Ninth Malaysia Plan, (2006), the tourism industry employment grows at an annual rate of 2.9% from 390,600 in 2000 to 451,000 in 2005. It creates jobs and other opportunities in rural areas, small towns, and even in mountains and islands. These are the reasons why the Malaysian government is concentrating on the Tourism Sector to help the country’s economy for the future. In support of this plan, the government has launched a series of tourism programs aimed at boosting tourist arrivals, the most notable of these program is Visit Malaysia Year 2007 (VMY 2007).

2.2. Female Traveler

Female are travelling more and more without male counterparts. There are four major subdivisions of female travelers as defined by Bond (1997, p.1):

- ‘Women are increasingly travelling without their spouses or a partner. These women still take vacation with their spouses or significant others but they are more trips on their own. These additional trips either short trips to visit relatives and friends or longer domestic or international trips with a female friend or join a tour group.’
- ‘Business female traveler represents a growing and influential market segment. They are bold, confident and adventurers. These women travel independently where they do not depend on a husband or friends to travel.’
- ‘Another diversifies women travel market is female-only tours. First, female-only adventure travel companies were founded twenty years ago which offered the first tour of shopping trips. They offered athletic, skill-development opportunities such as hiking, climbing, rafting or backpacking adventures. Today the market has grown to over 75 companies in North America who offer female-only adventure, cultural and historic worldwide. Rainbow Adventures, the oldest and largest women-only tour company, reports a yearly increase of 20 percent in sales over the past twenty years.’
- ‘Women experiencing life-style changes such as divorced or widowed represent a profitable new group of travelers. They are travelling alone, in groups or with their daughters or friends who mostly make numerous long trips per year.’

2.3. Female Business Traveler

According to Smith and Clurman (1997) cited in Gray and Kerstetter (2001), ‘Women have become independent operators in the marketplace’ and in the 1990 they have become an increasingly influential market force (Warner 1993 cited in Gray & Kerstetter, 2001). Fundamental changes in educational and industrialized world during the past twenty years have encouraged more women to enter the labor force. The growth in the number of business women could provide a clear explanation in the growing number of women business traveler yearly.
‘Female business travelers’ is defined as a female traveler whose expenses are paid by the business she works for (AskOxford.com). Wyndham hotels in the United States conducted extensive research on the women business traveler (Anon, 2003 cited in Smith & Carmicheal, 2006). In their research they have found that women business travelers averaged 4.4 trips per year while spending on average US $3763 per annum on domestic business trips and US $4,052 on international trips (Anon, 2003 cited in Smith & Carmicheal, 2006). Women were also found to be the primary decision maker in relation to business travel within their organization and were more loyal to certain brand compared to men. Wyndham hotels also noted that women traveled more for association or corporate meetings (Anon, 2003 cited in Smith & Carmicheal, 2006).

In the demographic characteristics of female business traveler, Wyndham, (2007) identifies them as less likely to be married and younger in comparison to male business travelers (Anon, 1995). In contrast, a study by Anon, (1996) found that marital status and having children has no difference in the likelihood of taking an overnight business trip. In that study, women were found to be highly educated than their male counterparts. According to Anon (1995) Marketing to Women (“Women Traveler,” 1995) magazine concluded that female business travelers are more likely to be younger in general with 24 percent of their respondents being under the age of 34. Based on these profiles, female business travelers are more likely to be young, single and childless. The same study also reported that women, while traveling on business, were most likely to engage in shopping activities (33 percent) and exercising (20 percent). Women were less likely to go out at nights with others but were more likely to order room service.

2.4. Travel Industry Experience

Expotel, hotel booking agency which specialize in hotel, conference and event reservation launched a Woman Aware campaign. This campaign started in response to comments received from clients pertaining to their hotel stay. Many women reported to have encountered negative experience and they felt unsafe to stay in hotels. The campaign is used to communicate the special needs and preferences of female business travelers to hotels and how it can improve satisfying these needs. In order to be labeled as ‘female friendly hotels’, the hotel must fulfill the following key criteria:

- Well lit, secure car park or valet parking
- Room security locks as standard
- Permanently lit corridors during hours of darkness
- Room door security peepholes as standard
- Room number allocation is discreet at reception
- Lone female is never allocated a ground floor room (unless requested or hotel is ground floor only)
- Provision of hairdryer (near a mirror)
- Ironing board and iron available from room service
- Space to work comfortably in room
- Provision of full-length mirror

(www.expotel.com/women awareness campaign)

The airline industry noticed the increase and potential of their female frequent flyers. The German airline Lufthansa made an effort to cater to female frequent travelers by publishing a magazine ‘Women World’. The content of the magazine highlighted the topics on business travel and articles and recommendation on shopping, grooming, fashion and foods. More than 180,000 women in Germany fly at least once a year which clearly indicate the large volume female travelers which Lufthansa airline cater to (Chan, 2007).

Networking site Ladiesaway.com is a new networking website designed for businesswomen. The site helps female travelers to stay connected and kept them informed of other female travelers who are staying in the same hotel or neighborhood. With ladies away, members can find a companion who shares the same interest, meet new people, or even for expanding business network. Members can post their trip’s experience and give recommendation to others member’s. This helps other members to keep up to date on the current market which is catering to the female market (www.ladiesaway.com).
American Airlines, the first airline to introduce a website for female travelers, www.AA.com/women. This website services as a reservation portal; offering useful information’s on travel safety and wellness, tips and experience from customers and recommendation on travel packages. According to American Airlines, females represent 48 percent of their total passengers. Besides the Web site, American Airlines has upgraded its Admirals Club airport lounges with children’s playrooms and bathrooms and private showers stocked with lotions, mouth wash, soaps and towels. The business-class cabins of its long-haul 767-300 and 777 fleets were also upgraded with lie flat seat. The design displays a ‘feminine’ touch by providing a bigger private space (American Airlines/Women Travelers Connected).

2.5. Hotel Industry Product

The hotel industry has started to note and reacted to the changing demographics of business travelers. Male business travelers used to be the prime customers of the hotel industry and most of the facilities and services were provided based on male preferences. With the growing number of female business traveler, hotel chains have found been re-marketing themselves by offering more personalized services as well as providing additional facilities specifically catered to female business travelers. This is to accommodate females who have different wants and needs compared with male (Bedford & Burrell, 2000).

Wyndham was the first hotel to launch women friendly policies. In 1995, Wyndham established the ‘Women on their Way’ program, targeting the emerging female business traveler market. This program provides a platform for females to do research on travel products and to plan for their travel. This program allows them to make the most of their time with work and everyday life. Now women account to half of Wyndham’s travelers and more than a third of the company’s business travel base (Chan, 2007).

One of the prime concerns of females is personal safety. According to female frequent traveler by Chambers Travel, it was found that 95 percent of its respondent stressed safety as being highly significant (Bevan, 1996 cited in Bedford & Burrell, 2000). Research conducted by Barclaycard revealed that car parks were the prime concerns of most female travelers, and suggested needing some safety improvement (Chetwynd, 1998 cited in Bedford & Burrell, 2000). Hotels chains such as the Renaissance and Choice groups have made the effort to provide a reserve parking space near hotel entrances for women. Copthorne has also look into this by escorting their female travelers to and from its less well lit car parks. London Hilton Park Lane dedicated a whole floor that is only for females. Radisson Edwardian hotels ensure their security by ensuring a requirement of key cards in elevators limiting only room guests to access non-public spaces (Chan, 2007).

Several hotels in Tokyo have dedicated special check-in desks for female business travelers and pampering them with amenities such as aromatherapy bath in their rooms upon check in (Bedford & Burrell, 2000). According to the survey carried out by The Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sport Management of NYU, found that female traveler’s prefer amenities that has to do with personal comfort than business. Their want list include; ‘a mini bar’ (24 percent), quality bath toiletries (56 percent), spa services (47 percent), fitness centre (24 percent), high speed Internet access (25 percent) and in room coffee maker (31 percent). Females are more likely to order room service with menus that include healthy options such as salads are more preferred by female who are weight conscious (Muxlow, 2007).

2.6. Gender Differential in Travel Needs

Gender research on business traveler (Lutz & Ryan, 1993; McClearly et al., 1994; Westwood et al., 2000 cited in Reisinger & Mavondo, 2001). Women and male have significant differences in preference for tourism services and facilities (Zalatan, 1997 cited in Reisinger & Mavondo, 2001). The report indicated that men favored food and bar facilities, parking and catering, while women favored services such as cleanliness, style of bathroom and room, access to shopping malls and fitness facilities.

A study of perceptions of airline services reported that businesswomen typically felt men receive preferential treatment on flight (Westwood, et. al., 2000 cited in Smith, 2006). One respondent in the Westwood et.al. (2000)
report noted, ‘Men do receive better service … the front line people are often women, they are programmed to receive requests from men.’

In the study of hotel guest’s satisfaction among female business traveler, the prime complaints were: sexist attitudes from staff members, lack of security provision and supply of irrelevant facilities (Foster & Botterill, 1995 cited in Smith 2006). Based on Mason and Gray (1995) cited in Smith (2006), business travel is segmented into three areas. Female is categorized under the ‘informed budgeter’ segment where they were most likely to have a higher travel frequency and prefer self-ticketing.

2.7. Female Workforce in Malaysia

Female labor force in Malaysia currently accounts for 45.8 percent of the country’s total labor force (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development). This is due to the improving access to equal education and education opportunities provided for both male and female. This eventually led to an increase of female employment participation rate. Traditionally being viewed as employees working in low paying occupation, females are now working in high paying jobs. Females working as senior officials and managers increased from 4.8 percent in 2000 to 5.4 percent in 2005 (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006). Kindly refer to appendix B for international comparison: labor participation rate 2006.

The increasing percentage of female in the labor force is link to the increase of female business travelers. Females in high rank position in an organization are required to take up business trips more frequently. These findings suggest that there is a need to examine the needs of the female business traveler in Malaysia to obtain a better marketing plan for the hospitality industry’s future growth.

2.8. Power’s Model

With higher education level among female business travelers, they are less likely to be influenced by their friends and relatives. They will personally go through the ‘information search’ and ‘alternative evaluation’ process in the Power’s model before booking (Power, 1997 cited in Chan & Wong, 2005).

According to the Powers model, consumer buying process consists of problem solving behavior in five different stages. These stages start with problem awareness, information search, alternative evaluation, decision and post purchase concern. Problem awareness occur when consumers have an unfulfilled need, want and desires where he/she will look for a solutions to the problems by searching for information’s either internally or externally. The consumer will often refer to his/her own prior experience and memory first and then identify alternatives that help to solve the problem. In the third stage, consumer will screen and evaluate all the possible alternatives. After the consumer has perceived a problem and sought information, they reach a decision that is to decide what to purchase to fulfill his/her needs and wants. The final stage is post-purchase concern, where the consumer evaluates the product’s performance in light of his/her own expectations.

Therefore, the hotel marketer should be concerned with their advertisement whether in magazine, internet or TV to ensure accuracy and avoid misinterpretation of information delivered to prospective consumers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology

There are two types of research methods which are quantitative and qualitative. The research design chosen for this study is quantitative in nature. It will use quantitative methods to measure and analyze the female business travelers in Malaysia on their preference of hotels selection based on six criteria. The measurement will show a clear idea of female’s business traveler preference of needs.
3.2. Research Design

Generally there are two type of approach which is qualitative and quantitative approach. Quantitative survey questionnaire is used as the primary research tool in this research. The respondent completed survey questionnaire is designed to measure the female business travelers lodging preference in Malaysia. The questionnaires consist of multiple choice questions (MCQ) to collect quantitative data, and gain a wide variety of comments. Street survey is done to collect the survey data.

3.3. Sources of Data

The research is presented in a descriptive manner in the data presentation. The research uses both primary and secondary data. Secondary data provided the base of information, whereas primary data keep the research updated and make the information more objective.

4. Finding

4.1. Safety Factor

The researches is only showing the safety factor for the data collection as it is the important and top criteria for female business travellers.

![Safety](image)

Fig. 2. Percentage of respondents view on hotel safety

Figure 2 measure the importance of safety in the aspect of 1 – female only car park, 2 – effective room locking system and 3 – soundproof rooms.

Security criteria top the list for female business traveler as stated in figure 2. Effective room locking system top the most important criteria as females need to feel safe when they are alone in the room. Female only car park top as the second most important safety feature as more female are driving their own transport, this would prevent them from any unforeseen incidents in the dark and empty car park area. Soundproof room list as the least important.

This chapter focuses on analyzing the data obtained from survey questionnaire conducted in KL Sentral, (Brickfields and Kuala Lumpur). The objective of this chapter is to interpret the solo female business travelers’ preference on the selection of hotel accommodation.

To give the readers a clear understanding of this research; tables, charts and graphs are used to supplement each relevant analysis. 150 questionnaires were collected in KL Sentral and completely returned. The response rate was
100%, and the survey was successfully completed by target respondents. Kindly refer to Appendix C for a copy of the survey questionnaires.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary

Although female business travelers are regarded as an insignificant niche market today, soon it will become an influential market force. As stated in chapter 2, airline and hotels have started to realize the important of this market and come up with special products to cater to them. As an emerging new market travel and tourism, hoteliers should take a close look at this market trend, as a source of new opportunities and growth. This will benefit them in the long term. To cater to this market, hoteliers must consciously improve travel experiences of female business travelers by offering trigger points in their delivery of service or promotion of hotel products, as suggested in this research.

5.2. Recommendation for Future Study

One of the major limitations of this study is that only 6 criteria were listed in the questionnaire which might not be sufficient to point out an exact outcome. An extension of study could be carry out in qualitative interview obtaining others dimension of criteria which is not limit to hotel only. Others dimension which could be explore are the airports, reservation centers or royalty program. In addition, comparisons between male and female business travelers can be research to gain a better understand of this growing market. Finally, this study can be conducted on a wider population such as different races in Malaysia so as to see any different among different cultures.

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