



Conceptualizing transformative guest experience at retreat centers



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ABSTRACT

Transformative experience in a hospitality service setting is an under-addressed area. The aim of this study was to understand the transformative guest experience at retreat centers and highlight the mechanism that helped trigger the changes. The analysis of 119 online guest reviews about four popular retreats in Thailand dissected the transformative retreat experience, including guests' pre-trip state of mind, domains of changes, retreat activity participation, and stimuli in the service environment. The changes were further conceptualized on a series of spectra based on durability, magnitude, and tangibility. The findings may serve as an integrative framework to understand the mechanism by which the retreat experience acts as a functional means to guests' well-being and personal transformation. Theoretical and managerial implications of the findings were discussed, followed by recommendations for future research.

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1. Introduction

Retreat has been defined as a special lodging segment which provides “most or all amenities throughout a guest's visit and supply access to substantial recreation or leisure space” (Brey, 2011; p. 287). As the word “retreat” conveys the meaning of “respite, refuge, and rest” (Kelly, 2010; p. 109), a retreat center provides classes, therapies, treatments, and dietary programs “for the purpose of learning or improving a body–mind–spirit activity (e.g., yoga, meditation)” (Smith and Puczko, 2009, p. 199). Most retreat centers tend to be landscape-based, having direct access to geographically distinct features, such as ocean or mountain (Smith and Kelly, 2006). While retreat centers may have different service emphasis, such as yoga and spiritual/religious, many of them tend to offer a holistic approach to wellness (Kelly, 2010; Smith, 2003). For example, yoga, Qigong, and meditation are designed to promote bodily health, as well as to facilitate reflection (Voigt et al., 2011). The theme of well-being is commonly shared across the service offerings and, thus, creates a point of delineation between retreats and other lodging segments.

In recent years, the quest for work-life balance has led to rapid growth in the wellness sector of hospitality and tourism (Heintzman, 2013). Retreat experiences, among other means, have

been sought after to accommodate the well-being of modern citizens. It has been noted that the retreat has emerged as a new form of tourist attraction, as individual and group visitors flock to domestic and overseas retreats for extended stays (Retreats Online as cited in Kelly, 2010). However, different from the traditional, more passive forms of holidays, retreat visitors tend to anticipate a more purposeful experience that contributes to holistic well-being in addition to physical relaxation (Smith and Puczko, 2009). However, the guest experience at retreats, compared to that at other lodging sectors, has received less attention. Those that viewed retreats as the unit of study focused mostly on the supply side rather than the guests (e.g., Kelly, 2010). Since the service content and context at retreat centers are different from other types of accommodations, presumably the guest experience possesses its own characteristics. In particular, given that the non-routine, vacation environment, such as that at retreats, offers time and space for reflection and contemplation, the visitors are likely to change their life perspectives and reconsider their lifestyle at home (Little, 2012; Reisinger, 2013). Although the transformative power of hospitality and tourism experience has been recently noted (e.g., Brown, 2009), it still remains an under-researched area, particularly in a concrete service environment.

Given the emerging popularity of retreats and the potential positive effects they have on guests' lives, a better understanding of retreat guest experience is warranted. In specific, the personal transformation during the retreat stays and the mechanism that triggers such changes is of interest in this study. Thus, the objec-

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tives of this study are (1) to examine the antecedents of retreat visits; (2) to identify the changes experienced as a result of retreat experience; (3) to investigate the guest activities that may trigger the transformation; and (4) to understand the link between service environmental factors and the transformation. Such aims place emphasis on several key elements of the guest experience, such as antecedents, consequences, and service contexts, which are essential to understand experience creation (Prebensen et al., 2014; Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003). Online user-generated data were employed due to its richness and usefulness in analyzing emerging markets and new service provisions (Zhou et al., 2014). The retreat centers in Thailand were chosen as the study context as the destination is well-known for accommodating health and wellness-oriented vacationers (Laing and Weiler, 2008). The study results could inform service providers of a more informed experience design that fosters customers' well-being and holistic development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Extraordinary customer experience

Customer experience as a critical concept in hospitality and tourism literature has received an increasing amount of attention. It concerns with the nature of the products and services offered in the hospitality industry. Many industry purchases, such as spa treatments or cruise vacations, are experiential in nature with the intention of acquiring an experience as opposed to a tangible product. As experience is considered "the essence of what customers are seeking and paying for" (Morgan, 2006; p. 305), consumption in hospitality and tourism is virtually about the experience itself. Although recent years have seen a rise of customer experience research in both hospitality (e.g., Han and Back, 2008) and tourism contexts (e.g., Tung and Ritchie, 2011), much remains to be understood about the experiential nature of hospitality and tourism consumption.

If experience is considered a process based on interactions between an individual and the environment (Dewey, 1938), then a service experience could be interpreted as a series of interactive moments between the customer and the service provision (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). While some moments pertain to basic goals or needs in life, other moments may address a higher level of human satisfaction, such as self-actualization, as proposed in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. The term of *flow* as coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) denotes one such experience which entails emotionally charged occurrences. For example, a backpacker who is completely engaged in wilderness adventure may experience intense feelings of enjoyment and competence, which is the optimal state of *flow*. Such occurrences are the peak experiences which are "likely to be experienced as a self-transformational shift in one's consciousness or spiritual perception" (Tsaour et al., 2013; p. 362).

While the expectation–disconfirmation paradigm is commonly used to evaluate customer experience, it may not be adequate for interpreting an extraordinary experience, which possesses two unique characteristics (Arnould and Price, 1993). First, customer expectations tend to be vague, although customers may anticipate intense emotional outcome. Since the emotion in an extraordinary experience is intense and personal, it is difficult to speculate what they are or which activity may trigger it. Second, evaluation of such experience is complicated as it may be derived from the meaning of the experience to one's life. For example, individuals engaged in extreme activities may interpret the feelings of pain as self-fulfilling.

2.2. Transformative experience in hospitality and tourism

Transformative experience represents one type of extraordinary experience (Walls et al., 2011). Transformative experience as a concept was proposed originally in the field of adult learning and development (Reisinger, 2013). The transformational learning theory (TLT) of Mezirow (1978) is an example of such. Transformative learning involves "an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings [and]... involves profound changes in self, changes in cognitive, emotional, somatic, and unconscious dimensions" (Mezirow, 1978; p. 161, 177). When previous perspectives fail to make sense of some life experience, one can revise or replace them with new perspectives (Mezirow, 1996). The outcome of transformational learning is a "perspective transformation", that is, prior values, beliefs, and assumptions through which personal perceptions and experiences were mediated are replaced by a "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" perspective (Mezirow, 2000; p. 7). For example, studying abroad can expose students to different ways of life and prompt them to adjust their attitude and behavior, which they tend to maintain upon return home (Brown, 2009).

Transformative experience is a less addressed topic in the service literature, although it should be considered as a value-added component to service offerings (Little, 2012). The transformational moments can play an important role in customer evaluation of service experience. Varey and Kahneman (1992) noted that, along the entire spectrum of service experience which may range from generic, logistical aspects to extraordinary service encounters, it is the latter that largely shape customers' retrospective evaluation. For instance, in Arnould and Price's (1993) research of a river rafting experience, many guests reported experiencing perspective changes. Three salient changes were personal growth and self-renewal, communion with friends, family, and even strangers, and harmony with nature. These changes were shown to significantly contribute to the overall satisfaction. Such experience also tends to have a long-lasting effect on customers since it goes beyond the service encounter and promotes a healthier lifestyle and psychological well-being (Boswijk et al., 2012).

Studying transformative experience in hospitality and tourism is meaningful from two perspectives. First, transformation is a benefit sought by certain traveler segments, such as backpacking (Noy, 2004), gap-year tourism (O'Reilly, 2006), and international sojourn (Brown, 2009). Transformation in hospitality and tourism can be multidimensional. For example, some seek transformation through service experiences that challenge the body; others travel to a place that allows them to be creative or altruistic; still others may achieve transformation at a destination where they feel more closely connected to the cultural environment (Kottler as cited in Ross, 2010; p. 55). Second, the service provision in hospitality and tourism can act as catalyst for transformation. Certain activities, such as meditation and yoga at retreats, allow for reflection and meaning-making which may lead to the discovery of the true "self" or personal transformation (Boswijk et al., 2012).

2.3. Transformative experience and service environment

Inside a service environment, customers are surrounded by a unique experience network where various stakeholders jointly partake in co-creating the customer experience (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009; Prebensen et al., 2014). Transformative experience, as well, does not occur in a vacuum. The nature and extent of the transformation may be influenced by the interaction between customers and the setting, as well as the interaction with other customers (Little, 2012). Thus, the role of contextual environment, such as service- and destination-related characteristics, should be

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