



Original Research Article

Investigating customer loyalty formation for wellness spa: Individualism vs. collectivism

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ABSTRACT

Visitor retention is undeniably a major issue for every destination marketer. This study was an attempt to develop an international tourists' loyalty framework for wellness spa tourism destination by considering quality and value of spa tourism in Thailand, affect, satisfaction, desire, and culture. Our proposed framework and hypothesized relationships were evaluated by using a structural analysis. A field survey was used. Results indicated that our conceptual model included a satisfactory fit to the data. Quality and value were found to have a critical role, and other study constructs were identified to act as direct/indirect driving forces of loyalty intentions. In addition, mediating role of affect, satisfaction, and desire was found. Moreover, moderating impact of culture (individualism vs. collectivism) on the loyalty formation was identified. Overall, our theoretical framework was demonstrated to be capable of explicating wellness spa tourists' destination loyalty formation. Implications for destination marketers in Thailand are discussed.

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1. Introduction

For the past few decades, increasing number of individuals travel abroad for wellness in the international tourism industry (Han and Hwang, 2013; Reddy et al., 2010). In fact, the wellness tourism market outgrew the tourism sector in the last few years. Since 2013 the wellness tourism industry grew by 14% compared to the growth of 6.9% by the overall tourism sector (McCarthy, 2017). This phenomenon in the tourism sector reflects individuals' growing interest in attaining improved health and well-being by engaging in wellness-related activities (e.g., massage and spa) as an important part of trip (Han and Hwang, 2013; Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). Unlike a traditional style of pleasure-seeking travel, this emerging form of international tourism is wellness spa tourism. This is a general consensus that wellness spa tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the global tourism industry as this lucrative market has a potential to generate huge revenues and profits for many destinations (Hashemi et al., 2015; Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). In the Asia-Pacific region, such potential is believed to be greater than other regions throughout the world (Hashemi et al., 2015; Jonkman, 2008; Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014). The number

of visitors in these wellness spa destinations indeed continuously increases, bringing tremendous monetary benefits to the countries.

As a leading spa and massage tourism destination in the region, Thailand valued the international spa travel industry to worth approximately THB 31 billion (USD 1 billion) in 2015 (Sritama, 2015). The Tourism Authority of Thailand branded the country as the 'Spa Capital of Asia' and in 2013 launched the 'Find Your Fabulous' digital marketing campaign to help promote both the destination as well as local businesses (Thongpan and Yu, 2015). Even though the spa and massage have been gaining popularity in the last few years, there are signs indicating the growth will continue. The Thai Spa Association (2014) reported the shortage of skilled therapists, not only in Thailand but also in other ASEAN countries. The majority of such increase in demand has been the growing interests by travelers from other Asian countries such as China, Japan, India, and more (Tanyatanaboon and Brennan, 2016; Thongpan and Yu, 2015). Moreover, male spa-goers have been increasing prompting many spa and massage parlors to start developing packages suitable to their male clients (Tsai et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, along with such growth, the wellness and health-care market is also becoming increasingly competitive (Han and Hwang, 2013; Mechinda et al., 2010). International tourists visiting such countries as Thailand (Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017; Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014), Philippine (Atienza et al., 2014), China (Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014), and Malaysia (Hashemi et al.,

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2015) in Asia are attracted mostly to the reasonable price level for wellness spa and massage (Hashemi et al., 2015; Smith and Kelly, 2006) rather than their deeply-held commitment or loyalty for destination. Given this market situation, For the long term success of the wellness spa tourism industry in the countries, gaining destination competitiveness through loyalty enhancement is undeniably becoming fundamental (Boo et al., 2009; Mechinda et al., 2010). Thus, boosting the level of travelers' destination loyalty is nowadays accepted as one of the most crucial goals for destination marketers in the regions.

Many researchers in existing tourism studies have examined the factors influencing traveler loyalty as it has long been regarded to be an essential constituent of every destination's success (Chi and Qu, 2008; Chua et al., 2015; Cronin et al., 2000; Gallarza and Saura, 2006; Mechinda et al., 2010; Oh, 2000; Oppermann, 2000; Song et al., 2012). These researchers have asserted that tourists' perceived quality (Chua et al., 2015), perceived value (Han and Hwang, 2013; Oh, 2000), affect (Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017), satisfaction (Chi and Qu, 2008; Gallarza and Saura, 2006), and desire (Song et al., 2012) are of great importance in building traveler loyalty. According to these studies, comprehending international tourists' loyalty generation formation and identifying the key driving forces of it are critical aspects of successful destination management.

More specifically, the quality dimension is usually the first facet when evaluating a product (Ryu et al., 2010). Interestingly, quality alone is often not the only variable in most consumers' decision-making process equation. Value is a significant indication of competitiveness, it usually requires comparisons to be made with other alternatives (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of this study, quality and value constructs can help reveal the state of the Thai spa and massage industry. The pursuit of the highest possible quality may not always equate to offering the best value for money and vice versa. At the same time, products such as spa and massage services are not considered necessities when traveling. Therefore, services such as these are often classified to be luxury consumptions. In this service category, consumers' choice may not always be driven by cognition and rational motives (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). A number of studies found emotional responses essential to this type of services (Correia and Kozak, 2012; Hausman, 2000). The results of this study can enlighten both local spa and massage operators as well as policy makers when developing future marketing campaigns.

Despite the tremendous growth of the wellness spa tourism market, empirical research centering on international spa tourists and their behaviors is not abundant. In addition, while the recent international tourism industry has witnessed such growth in the Southeast Asian countries, only a few studies have examined visitor's loyalty generation process for Thailand as a wellness spa tourism destination. In addition, little research has examined how quality and value of Thailand spa and massage elicit affect, satisfaction, desire, and loyalty in the context of wellness tourism. Moreover, the importance of affect, satisfaction, and desire as mediators has been relatively well documented in consumer behavior and marketing, but apparently, no study has jointly demonstrated the mediating impact of these variables on wellness spa-goers' destination loyalty formation. In addition to practical contributions of this study, the variables and the proposed relationships in this study further help validate the role of affect and desire. Satisfaction as an antecedent of attitudinal loyalty has been widely accepted (Han et al., 2011). However, in recent studies, the emergence of affect as a predictor of cognitive constructs such as satisfaction has proven to improve the overall predictive ability of future behaviors (Erevelles, 1998; Del Bosque and San Martín, 2008; Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017; White, 2014). A similar notion has been found with desire, its mediating effect has often been found to enhance the explanation power

of loyalty intentions (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Han and Yoon 2015).

Culture is broadly known to influence international traveler purchasing behavior (Cho et al., 2013; Han and Hwang, 2013; Lee and Lee, 2009; Meng, 2010; Park and Lee, 2009). Numerous researchers in hospitality and tourism have come to a consensus that substantial differences on overseas travelers' decision-making process and behaviors are derived from cultural dissimilarity. Such potential differences, particularly between individualism and collectivism aspects of culture, are becoming important in a growing manner especially for international destination/tourism marketers in inventing product development, quality improvement, traveler retention, and loyalty enhancement (Cho et al., 2013; Han and Hwang, 2013; Park and Lee, 2009; Saad et al., 2015). The two cultural values coincide with the international wellness tourism market in Thailand. Traditionally, hotel spas in Thailand cater primarily European and North American travelers (Tanyatanaboon and Brennan, 2016). These group of tourists came from individualistic cultures. In the last few years, tourists from collectivist cultures such as China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan have been increasing. Chinese guests alone accounted for roughly 50% of hotel spa guests (Sritama, 2015). Therefore, including individualism and collectivism as moderators can add additional contribution regarding both managerial and theoretical. Nevertheless, an empirical evidence of such cultural impact on wellness spa tourists' loyalty formation remains largely unexplored.

Filling these gaps in the destination loyalty literature, the objectives of this study were 1) to examine wellness tourists' loyalty formation toward wellness spa tourism destination by investigating the possible associations among quality, value, affect, satisfaction, and desire, 2) to evaluate the relative importance of these research variables in determining destination loyalty intentions, 3) to uncover the moderating impact of culture (individualism vs. collectivism) on the relationships among research variables, and 4) to identify the mediating role of affect, satisfaction, and desire within the proposed conceptual framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. Wellness spa tourism and wellness spa tourism in Thailand

For past decades, the wellness spa tourism industry has emerged and witnessed the growth stage of its life cycle as a response to travelers' needs and desire for well-being (Cohen, 2008; Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014). Increasingly health-conscious tourists throughout all age groups have contributed to facilitating such growth. These individuals who are also highly aware of their lifestyle often feel responsible for their health (Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014). To meet such health-related needs, the wellness spa tourism sector centers on the maintenance of health, the improvement of physical and psychological well-being, and the prevention of any illness (Kucukusta and Heung, 2012; Mueller and Kaufmann, 2001). Today, international tourists more actively search for spa and massage services and desire to engage in wellness tourism activities as a central part of their overall tourism experience (Kucukusta and Guillet, 2014).

Wellness, which is a lifestyle, indicates "a special state of health, incorporating the harmony of body, mind and spirit" (Hashemi et al., 2015, p. 2). The term, spa, is described as water/non-water based facilities that offer diverse types of treatments/cares for health, relaxation, and beauty (Hashemi et al., 2015). Wellness as a lifestyle and spa activities are dominant and normal during vacation or holidays (Brymer and Lacaze, 2013). This implies that wellness spa activities are unavoidably related to vacationers' behaviors (or tourism activities). In the present study, wellness spa tourism

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