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## **“Discovering the Business of Asian Business”**

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# **What Makes Experience A Memorable One for the Customers of Top Indonesian hotels**

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

### **Introduction**

Indonesia has more than 17,500 islands with various different cultures, cuisine, history and landscape as a unique travel experience. (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014). The Indonesian Minister of Tourism and Creative Industry, expects up to 9.5 million international tourists to arrive in Indonesia in 2014 (Detiktravel, 2014). This significant growth is expected to contribute an additional 8% to Indonesia's national economy, an economy regarded as the fastest growing out of all G20 countries (WTTC, 2014). Top Hotel Project report (2014) suggests that 800 new hotels with 100,000 guestroom capacities are expected to open during the period 2012-2022. Such significant and continuous growth in hotel development not only will improve customers' selection options, but will increase new competition (Cai et al, 2000) and put additional pressure on existing hoteliers (Williams & Ashill, 2011) to maintain their hotel occupancy and increase loyalty (Thomas & D'Aveni, 2009).

In order to maintain their room occupancies, de Klumbis (2009) suggests that hoteliers need to offer different experiences. Customers want to experience something different and very personal (Pine et al, 2009); that is, they want an unforgettable experience (Verma, 2003). A positive memorable experience is likely to generate a higher intention to revisit (Yang, 2009) and to recommend the hotel (Woodside et al, 2004). To improve hotel customers' memorable experience, the hotel management is advised to fulfil customer psychological needs such as pleasant surprises, are both meaningful and memorable (Lo, 2012); to facilitate direct interaction with the local environment and culture (Gupta and Vajic, 2000); to focus on cognitive factors for example faultless services and products (Oh et al, 2007) According to Hinchliffe (2011), however, a memorable experience is multifaceted and its creation is challenging, and research into the 'memorable hotel experience' has produced inconclusive findings. The purpose of this study is to clarify, identify and generalise the most important

elements of the hotel customers' memorable experience in the context of the Indonesian hotel industry.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research using thematic analysis was employed to identify the important elements of a memorable hotel experience. Following the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2006), firstly, initial thematic map was adopted from the existing memorable experience literature (Herjanto & Gaur, forthcoming-a). Secondly, following de Medeiros et al (2008), all positive (excellent and very good) reviews and feedback comments relating to top 10 Indonesian hotel customers' experience posted on tripadvisor.com between 1 March 2013 and 31 March 2014 were recorded for thematic analysis. The top 10 hotels were identified from the report titled as "The Top 10 Hotels in Indonesia" and published by Tripadvisor. All the reviews and feedback comments were read thoroughly and then recorded on an excel file. Overall, a total of 5181 positive reviews and feedback comments were collected. 97% or 5013 reviews and feedback comments were excluded as they did not mention the experience to be a memorable one. As a result, a total of 3% or 168 positive reviews and feedback comments were found for the purpose of this study. Further, a list of key words or phrases describing a memorable hotel experience was collected and categorised into several themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Thematic analysis of these reviews and feedback comments resulted into five different memorable hotel experience themes: ambience, multisensory, space, perception of experience and perceived hospitality. Our findings show that 41% of hotel customers believed that their memorable hotel experience was generated by perceived hospitality. This was followed by perception of experience (26%) and space management (13%). In support of Walls et al. (2014), this study also found that 21% of hotel customers believed that their memorable hotel experiences were a product of a combination of the factors above.

First theme is ambience; the findings revealed that the ambience as the source of a memorable hotel experience. It supported Pizam (2010) who argued that positive ambience is perceived as a sign of high quality service, which leads to satisfaction and ultimately a memorable experience. Second the is multisensory; the findings showed that different types of senses – sight (view), smell (scent) and hearing (music) – enhance hotel customers' memorable experience. Harthold et al. (2013) stated that multisensory refers to individuals' ability to activate each of their senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell) and/or to integrate these senses into a multisensory experience when identifying and screening stimuli in the environment. Third theme is space; the findings explained that that architectural layout, such as the well-designed location of the hotel facilities (i.e., bungalows, and dining areas as well as the size of the pool) provides a different and memorable experience for the hotel

customers. It supported (Herjanto & Gaur, forthcoming-b) that explained space or physical environment and features of the hotel are regarded as the most classical factors in creating hotel customers' memorable experience. Next the fourth theme is perception of experience; the findings stated that the perceptions of meaningfulness, significance, novelty, social interaction and emotional arousal is important to create memorable hotel experiences. It is supported Hung et al (2010) that argued the perception of experience is regarded as more important than a hotel's physical environment because such perception creates a new definition that affects customers' emotional experience (Denzin, 1985) and memory (Treadaway, 2009). Finally the fifth theme is perceived hospitality; the findings revealed that staff professionalism, attitude (i.e., warm, welcoming and friendly), and behaviour (i.e., helpful, proactive, committed and dedicated to their jobs and customers) are considered as a part of the perceived hospitality themes. It is supported Teng (2011) which explained that the value of hospitality is very much felt, appreciated, honoured, and most importantly remembered by hotel customers.

## **Conclusions**

Based on thematic analysis, this study found that ambience, multisensory, space, perception of experience and finally perceived hospitality themes are key ingredients for creating a memorable hotel experience. In addition, the combination of these themes is equally important in ensuring a memorable experience. Moreover this study also has several limitations. Most serious one is related to the sample. The data was gathered from customers' reviews and feedback comments on tripadvisor.com website between 1 March 2013 and 31 March 2014. This limited sample may not be representative and puts some constraints on the generalisation of the findings. This limitation offers several avenues for future studies. First, future studies are recommended to extend this study by investigating other hotel categories to provide different view of a memorable hotel experience. Second, future researchers may also wish to investigate this phenomenon in different countries and cultures which may have different ways of offering and creating memorable experiences. Finally, researchers may like to compare memorable hotel experiences between these different hotel categories and cultures.

## **Implication for Marketing Practitioners**

First, the study encourages hotel management to be more creative and different. The study has clearly demonstrated that a new or different experience shapes hotel customers' memorable experience. In fact, a new and different experience not only creates a high level of excitement but also increases guests' curiosity and accordingly enhances their emotional experience. A new type of food, way of doing things, dress and language make the hotel guests feel that they are really on vacation and out of their daily routine. Therefore, we recommend that hotel management supports local culture by confidently utilising this culture when serving their guests. Secondly, the hotel also needs to be constantly aware of the beauty

of the nature around their hotel property. Our study found that maintaining the natural beauty not only creates positive emotions but more importantly generates a memorable hotel experience. We therefore recommend that hotel management seriously considers the natural beauty when refurbishing or expanding their hotel.

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