

Online Evaluation and Tourist Purchase Behaviours for Urban Homestay Selection

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Homestays are an accommodation option many tourists are willing to consider. Compared to rural tourism online purchase behaviours, tourists place more emphasis on the location, environment and facilities at urban homestays. This study analysed the influencing factors for urban homestay accommodation based on online tourist ratings and comments to explore the impact of urban homestay purchase behaviours. Tourists intending to book homestay accommodation online were interviewed and analysed using descriptive analysis to assess the degree to which they paid attention to and trusted online evaluations. It was found that tourists tended to pay attention to online evaluations when making their homestay accommodation selections and paid particular attention to negative reviews. Therefore, it was concluded that online evaluations played a significant role in online purchase behaviours for urban homestay accommodation.

Key words: *Urban homestay, urban tourism, online evaluation, tourist purchase behaviours.*

Introduction

Urban tourism studies (Jamal & Robinson, 2009) have covered marketing/place imagery, management and planning, city case studies, typologies for tourist cities, sustainability, visitor perceptions, and satisfaction with urban homestay (Ashworth & Page, 2011), which was also the particular focus of this study.

Homestay accommodation has been a common tourist choice in many countries for over half a century (Lynch, 2000; Ranasinghe, 2015). Homestays have been most commonly used for international students to live and experience life in another country while studying languages or attending long and short study courses (Richardson, 2003), with farmstays being an

extension to meet rural tourism needs (Hogh, 2001; Ye, Xiao & Zhou 2019). In Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, people choose homestays to experience the local culture, language and customs (Ismail, Hanafiah, Aminuddin & Mustafa 2016). Since tourism management focus on urban tourism and rural/town tourism (Lin, 2019), homestays are now divided into rural homestays and urban homestays (Ferrerri & Sanyal, 2018).

Urban homestays often involve tourists living alone in apartments or residences (Brauckmann, 2017; Guttentag, Smith, Potwarka & Havitz, 2018) in metropolitan areas where they can experience local culture or in downtown or city centres from which it is easy to travel around (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). Therefore, when tourists choose urban homestays, they often consider transport availability, location and local environment (Gutiérrez, García-Palomares, Romanillos & Salas-Olmedo, 2017; Lin, 2020; Yang & Mao, 2020).

Past research on homestay has mainly focused on rural homestays, but there has been little focus on urban homestays. Online evaluations of urban homestays have tended to review the tourist's evaluation of the website, rather than their choices and there have only been a few papers on the connection between online evaluations and tourist purchase behaviours.

To fill this gap, this paper examined the impact of online evaluations on tourist purchase behaviours to understand the factors affecting their purchase behaviour when choosing an urban homestay.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the related research on the urban homestay market in the Chinese tourism industry. Section 3 describes the sampling procedure and gives the descriptive static analysis. Section 4 discusses the results. Section 5 provides the discussion and implications of the findings and Section 6 gives the conclusions.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Online Evaluation for Urban Homestay

Online evaluations have been found to play a vital role in urban homestay bookings (Tran & Filimonau, 2020). Many online homestay agencies such as Airbnb encourage clients to evaluate their experiences (Drosos & Tsotsolas, 2015; Mills & Law, 2004), and potential clients tend to read other online evaluations after reading the homestay property introductions (Melián-González, Bulchand-Gidumal & González López-Valcárcel, 2013). It has been found that potential homestay clients in Europe (Daries, Cristobal-Fransi, Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2018), Thailand (Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2011), Malaysia (Jamal, Othman & Muhammad, 2011), and China (Long et al., 2018) all believed that the online

homestay evaluations were very important when choosing an urban homestay as it helped them decide whether the homestay was suitable (Jamal et al., 2011; Ramli et al., 2014; Sabaruddin, Abdullah & Jamal 2012).

Therefore, potential homestay client purchase behaviours are affected by previous online evaluations (Chen & Chang, 2018; Fagerström et al., 2017). Tourist research over the past few years has been employing psychographics, perceived value and consumer satisfaction measures (Awang Razli, A Jamal, Zahari & Salehuddin, 2017; Bokyeong & Cho, 2016; Jamal et al., 2011) to assess the value of online evaluations and the degree to which different tourist characteristics affect homestay requirements. Perceived value or the value the consumer receives for what they give has indicated that convenience is more important than decoration (Jiang, Balaji & Jha, 2019; Zeithaml, 1988). If a homestay is unique in some way it can get a high evaluation, which can encourage greater guest traffic. For some guests, the homestay location and convenient transportation are very important and for others, the higher the services offered by the homestay, the higher the satisfaction and the higher the subsequent evaluation. Therefore, most often the homestay environment, service, facilities and location make up the basis for the online homestay evaluation (Lin, 2020).

Environment

High environmental online evaluations would be more likely to encourage further purchases, but if the homestay location is in the centre of the city, a peaceful environment might also be a factor (Villeneuve & O'Brien, 2020). Besides, according to Liu & Mattila (2017)'s research, urban homestay distinguished itself from traditional star hotels by offering guests a "feeling at home" and an "atypical place to stay". Many potential homestay guests also appreciate greenery; therefore evaluations that describe a green environment could enhance purchase behaviour. Some guests may also be concerned about privacy, particularly if they are staying at a whole property rather than just a room in a house with a family. Security has also been found to be a major concern for many potential homestay guests and especially for families and single females (Tasci & Boylu, 2010). Since the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2003) included safety and security as a determinant for quality tourist products, many homestay guests prefer better security. Therefore the first hypothesis is:

H1. High online environmental evaluations are positively related to high homestay guest purchases.

Service

Service evaluations have been found to affect the online homestay guest purchases (Ju, Back, Choi & Lee, 2019). Service is an important part of tourism, hospitality management and urban tourism, but for urban homestays the service is more detailed (Priporas, Stylos, Vedanthachari & Santiwatana, 2017). For example, many city homestays are in residential areas or apartment buildings and guests need to check-in by themselves. Therefore, guest feedback that they can easily find the homestay and the check-in is convenient would make the homestay more attractive. Further, as urban many tourists arrive by car; free parking could make the homestay more competitive. Because unlike hotels, guests cannot go to the counter for help and contact can only be made through WeChat or Facebook or through the homestay applications, timely responses can increase the willingness to stay (Sthapit & Jiménez-Barreto, 2018). Further, with the internationalisation of tourism, urban homestays that can provide English services can receive greater foreign patronage (Chen & Chang, 2018). Therefore the second hypothesis is:

H2. High online service evaluations are positively related to high guest purchases.

Facilities

Facility evaluations are one of the most important components of potential homestay guest purchase behaviours (Ju et al., 2019). It has been found that many potential guests care about the quality of the bedclothes and towels at the homestay; therefore a positive linen evaluation could encourage a positive purchase (Lemonis, 2015). Many tourists choose to stay in homestays because they want to have the feeling of home and therefore facilities such as the kitchen, children's rooms, gardens, etc. can increase the willingness to stay (Liu & Mattila, 2017).

As many younger tourists care about the homestay decorations and worry that the photos may have been photoshopped, the photos posted by other tourists may have a significant impact on purchase behaviours. Therefore the third hypothesis is:

H3. High online facility evaluations are positively related to high guest purchase behaviours.

Location

Location has been found to significantly influence purchase behaviour, especially in relation to public transport such as subway stations and bus stations and easy access to other facilities such as shopping malls and restaurants around the homestay (Long et al., 2018; Zervas, Proserpio & Byers, 2015). Walking time to stations and shopping malls has also been found

to be a key focus for homestays, with a walking time with 20 minutes being found to encourage purchase behaviour. Therefore the fourth hypothesis is:

H4. High online location evaluation is positively related to high guest purchase behaviour.

Methodology

The survey period was from October 1 to October 31, 2019 which covered both peak and slack seasons for the Chinese tourism industry.

Before the main survey, some of the largest online homestay retailers and hostel owners from several large online travel booking websites were interviewed: Airbnb, Fliggy, Trip.com, Qunar and Tujia. As these organisations have partnerships, the survey employed cluster sampling whereby the major online travel retailers provided hostel guest lists from which the cluster samples were chosen. As this study was focused on urban homestay evaluations and particularly on negative reviews, only homestays close to major tourist attractions or traffic hubs within five kilometers of rich tourist resources in first-tier Chinese cities were considered.

The lists were cross-referenced to exclude duplication. One month after a series of meetings with two major online travel wholesalers, clients from the four largest online homestay retailers were selected as the study subjects for this research. A total of 800 questionnaires were issued and after the invalid responses were omitted, there were 712 valid surveys ($n = 712$, approximately 89%) received and analysed in this study.

The primary purpose of the study was to gain a clear idea of the perspectives of urban homestay guests when they read reviews from experienced guests. The results of this study could assist city tourism offices determine effective tourism strategies for individual travelers and suggest how services could be enhanced for urban hostels. As this study was focused on the factors that determine online urban homestay purchases, the questionnaire had four main dimensions: the internal environmental factors and service quality, and the external facilities and location. In the pre-test stage, each sub dimension was generated from the opinions of the respondents. A Likert 1to5 rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was employed for each question and internal consistencies for each survey item checked to ensure reliability and validity (Cronbach's alpha value = 0.7).

Results

Of the 712 valid survey respondents: 53 % were female; the average age distribution was 20 to 29 (35 %) & 30 to 39 years old (38%); 62% were single; the average spent on the urban



homestay rooms were RMB 300–499 (approximately US\$43.56 – US\$72.45); and most were salaried employees (90%).

The KMO value was 0.81 and the Bartlett test was significant ($p < 0.001$). Table 2 details the subject recognition for the key factors in the sub dimensions with the largest percentages under each main dimension. In the potential guest perceptions for the environmental factors, the principle concern was quiet (43.1%), followed by the space to feel physical and mental relaxation (39.6%). The most highly rated item for the online urban homestay guests was service in terms of responding to guest needs, such as attitude (46.2%) and bilingual abilities (37.9%) (commonly Mandarin Chinese and English). While the facilities (43.1%) offered at the homestay accommodation and the appearance (36%) were found to be important, urban homestay photos from other guests was the least important factor for urban homestay selection. External factors such as proximity to famous sightseeing spots (21.6%) and closeness to the downtown area (13.5%) were not as important as predicted. Note that for each dimension, there were significantly more negative online urban homestay reviews than positive reviews.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for respondent (N = 712) reading of online urban homestay reviews.

Survey dimensions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Environmental</i>		
Noisy room	307	43.1
Green scenery	201	28.2
Mind healing and a physical relaxation space	282	39.6
High security	186	26.1
<i>Service</i>		
Poor unfriendly attitude of reception staff	329	46.2
Sufficient car parking	187	26.3
Respond well to my needs in my language	270	37.9
<i>Facilities</i>		
I preferred to use my own when I saw the provided services: hairdryer, air-conditioner, toiletries etc. provided by this homestay.	307	43.1
I really appreciated the interior or outdoor design.	257	36.1
When I saw the photo posted by the previous guests, I liked this homestay immediately.	196	27.5
<i>Location</i>		
This homestay has very convenient public transport.	72	10.1
There is a large shopping mall and/or famous sightseeing spots near the homestay.	154	21.6
This homestay has an excellent location in the city centre.	96	13.5

Discussions

Online urban homestay evaluations and especially those related to the environment, service and facilities were found to have a positive effect on potential guest purchase behaviours. Although urban homestays are different from starred hotels, the respondents expressed a desire for a peaceful environment, friendly service and comfortable facilities.

In China, urban homestays are generally located in high-end residential areas with relatively good security, which may have been why the respondents paid less attention to security. Further, when tourists visit first-tier cities for travel or business trips, they generally do not have cars because of the traffic congestion in first-tier cities and because of the well-developed public transport; therefore few respondents cared about parking services.



An interesting finding was that respondents did not pay much attention to the photos posted by previous guests, with most saying that they usually provided written evaluations and rarely posted photos. However, respondents did comment that the more photos posted and the more detailed the photos, the greater the doubt on the authenticity of the homestay reviews as they thought these might be “praise” arranged by the homeowner.

The online evaluations for location were found to only have a weak influence on tourist purchase behaviours, possibly because most urban homestays are located in city centres close to shopping malls and because first-tier China cities have good public transport and subways.

Therefore when choosing an urban homestay, respondents were found to pay less attention to location and more attention to the evaluations of the surrounding environment, service and facilities.

It was found that more respondents paid greater attention to negative reviews than positive reviews as these were more likely to influence tourist purchase behaviours, which was also why many hosts provide more explanations and/or apologies for negative reviews.

Conclusion

This study examined the positive effects of online urban homestay evaluations on tourist purchase behaviours, from which it was found that the evaluations for the homestay environment, service and facilities were the most important. These results provide guidance to urban homestay hosts who wish to increase their competitiveness and to potential guests who are seeking to find the most suitable accommodation when travelling.

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