Youth Visitors' Travel Experiences in Cultural Heritage Attractions: A Case Study of Ayutthaya Historical Park

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage tourism is considered a core foundation for the sustainable tourism development of a country. Visitors' travel experience, attitudes, and behaviors are crucial elements for destination marketing and provide useful information for analyzing the performance of a destination site's management. The purpose of this research was mainly to investigate the experiences of Thai youth visitors including their specific motivations, attitudes, and behaviors towards cultural heritage attractions in Thailand. With the aim to gain the detailed information from the participating youths regarding their views and previous experiences with cultural heritage attractions, in-depth personal interview method was selected as a research tool. A total number of six youth visitors who were Thai nationality at the ages of 15 and 25 years and had visited Ayutthaya Historical Park more than twice within one year, were selected as the key informants for this study. The Ayutthaya Historical Park, the World Heritage Site designated by UNESCO, was selected as the data collection site. The findings showed that most of the youths visited cultural heritage sites with the aim to experience and observe cultural attractions as well as to participate in the events and the festivals organized at the attractions. In terms of attitudes towards cultural heritage attributes, the quality of maintenance at the attraction sites was accounted as the most important attribute for youths when visiting the cultural heritage attractions. In the other hand, attributes considered weaknesses of the attractions were also found. These included the staff's service quality, the limited numbers of public transport, site's information, and the limited numbers of toilet and resting area. According to the findings

regarding the youth's behavior, being culturally friendly visitors who visited the cultural site in order to explore other cultures and increase knowledge through self-discovery, was also found as one of the important behaviors of Thai youth visitors in the current study.

Introduction

Clearly, tourism has become a major component that drives the economy in many countries; however, it is ineffective if tourism marketing strategies are created without an understanding of tourists' perspective when visiting the destination. In the tourism marketing context, young people aged 15-25 years have been one of the important sectors and generated huge number of income in many countries where tourism is the major source of income for the country.

Because young people tend to travel often, many organizations conduct tourism studies on this particular demographic in many fields such as tourism behaviors and marketing in order to better understand their travel patterns and preferences. Among several types of tourism, the interest of cultural and historical attractions appears to influence youths to travel (Ashworth, 2000; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Moisa, 2010; Prentice, Witt, & Hamer, 1998). Misiura (2006) indicates that the preference of tourists between the ages of 18-35 years old is to travel to areas with cultural attractions rather than to another leisure activity. Furthermore, the Scottish Executive (2001) cites one of the most important characteristics of youth tourists

discovered was that they had positive views regarding cultural attractions and preferred to participate in the events to preserve the attraction sites and their heritage.

Since there is a positive relationship between youth tourists and cultural tourism, the tourism organizations and institutions that are responsible for cultural tourism planning in many countries have adopted cultural tourism policies and strategies to serve youth and student tourists (Boukas, 2008). Although many researchers focus on youths and their travel patterns, not many studies have been conducted about their experiences when traveling to cultural heritage destinations.

Youth tourist motivations

In terms of marketing, the youth tourists are considered big tourism spenders, and so are important to the tourism industry. For example, they tend to spend more money to stay in a hotel rather than in a guesthouse or hostel because of the new high-tech accessories provided (WYSE Travel Confederation, 2011). They also spend money more often to travel by low-cost airlines rather than by bus or train for domestic trips (WYSE Travel Confederation, 2013). Furthermore, they prefer to stay longer in one destination

and spend money for local tourism services such as local products and local tour services (Moisa, 2010). As a result of these changes in spending habits, they bring a lot of tourism income to the destinations they visit.

Since youths are highlighted in recent tourism, several researchers study youth tourists to gain insight into the specific motivations of this group. King and Gardiner (2013) studied youth tourist motivations and revealed that youths mostly traveled in order to learn different cultures, meet new people, gain experiences for career development and knowledge of other cultures, and enhance their self-development. The study above is consistent with Esichaikul (2012) who illustrated that sometimes youths traveled because they wanted to lean the different culture and interacted with people who lived in a different environment.

Information provided by the travel agency also indicates that the timing of the trip is significant to youths when they are in planning phase (UNWTO & WYSE, 2012a). The possibility of accessing a product tailored specifically for young people, the variety of available products (UNWTO & WYSE, 2012b), and the ability of the travel agency to offer information technology for tasks such as booking online are among the most influential motivational factors for young tourists (Interarts, 2008; Moisa, 2010). Since students and young people are familiar with information technology, it is easier for them to search for information or reserve the trips by using this means versus collecting information from many places. If the information is interesting and meets their requirements, their decision will be made quickly.

Another determining factor for youth travelers is the quality of service provided by the chosen destination. Moisa (2010) and UNWTO and WYSE (2012b) mention that the quality of service, such as an up to date booking system and staff member's performance, are the key aspects that the youth looks at when planning their trips. The service quality encompasses the atmosphere that represents the desires of their age group; quick service, response with multiple options, or utilization of information technology to manage the trip. Moisa (2010) reveals that one of the motivations of youth travelers is the ability to participate in activities arranged by the destination; specifically local activities. Moisa continues stating that young people sometimes travel because they are eager to explore new cultures, and prefer to get involved in activities that they have never experienced. Moisa's study is consistent with the study conducted by Perrett (2007) that examined youth travel motivations and found that one of the biggest motivations driving youth to travel is to interact with local resident and to experience different culture and way of life of the people in a certain area.

Guo (2011), Interarts (2008), and Park, Latkova, and Nicholls (2006) claim that some youth tourists desire to participate in activities arranged at the site or destination, especially outdoor and recreation places.

The study above is related to the result revealed by Buffa (2015) who studied the attitudes and behaviors of young age tourist towards sustainable tourism. The study found that young travelers would make a decision to travel if the activities offered at the attraction sites did not harm the environment.

Cultural heritage as tourism motivations

Cultural heritage contributes to the tourism industry through the symbols of the past that are represented in the present time (Shaw & Williams, 2004). Cultural heritage is related to tourism because one of the tourist travel motivations is to visit old places and learn about the history of the site (Pansukkum, 2006). According to Chhabra (2010), cultural heritage links with tourism since those heritage attractions draw tourists who desire to visit and see the old buildings and architecture that represent the uniqueness of the past from each period.

Masip (2006) argues that considering cultural heritage as tourism product has been one way to meet the needs of the diverse market since the 1980s, when travel became more flexible and segmented compared to the previous mass tourism standard. Timothy and Boyd (2006) explains that cultural heritage can be viewed in two different ways: a) as the interest in a region's past including its culture, artifacts, buildings, and landscapes, and b) as the selective marketing in the past, based on the values that society places upon it. Because the demand to participate in cultural heritage tourism is continuing, almost 40 percent of all international tourist trips involve a component of culture and heritage as a part of the overall experience.

Ayutthaya Historical Park is selected as the location of the current study. This site is located in the center of Ayutthaya province, the second capital city of Thailand for more than 400 years. Ayutthaya province is now an archaeological site and among the most popular tourist attractions in Thailand. Because of the unique architecture and the importance of the site's history that represent the pride of the nation, Ayutthaya Historical Park was designated to be a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1991.

Ayutthaya Historical Park covers 720 acres comprising six historical ancient attractions that represent the unique style of architecture of Ayutthaya period. The attractions in the park consist of Wat Chai Wattanaram, Wat Mahathat, Wat Maheayong, Wat Phraram, Wat Phra Si Sanphet, and Wat Ratchaburana.

Ayutthaya Historical Park has welcomed many visitors each year. In late 2012, there was disastrous flood in Ayutthaya province which negatively affected many heritage buildings and constructions at the sites. After the crisis, many government organizations were responsible for tourism marketing and the site's preservation, such as Tourism Authority of Thailand and Fine Art Department, worked closely with the private sectors to increase the number of visitors to the attraction sites. However, in 2014,

the number of student visitors, counted as youth visitors, decreased sharply while other groups of visitors such as Thai and foreign visitors only slightly decreased (Department of Tourism, 2014).

Therefore, to understand what motivates tourists to travel, especially travelling to the cultural heritage attractions, is crucial to the ability to identify and create effective marketing strategies. This will help tourism marketers gain further insights into tourist motivations for the purposes of product development, service quality evaluation, image development, and promotional activities.

Purposes

The current research aims to investigate the experiences of Thai youth visitors towards cultural heritage attractions in Thailand in the hope that the expected outcomes can result in guidelines to improve the site's performance. These expected outcomes include understanding Thai youth visitors' motivations, attitudes, and behaviors when visiting cultural heritage attractions.

Benefits of Research

As youth tourists are an important market segment for cultural tourism according to the previous studies, there is a need for understanding their motivations, attitudes, and behaviors when visiting cultural heritage in order for the tourism policy makers to adjust tourism plans for them. Understanding these expected outcomes can help tourism

planners create appropriate strategic plans to attract youths based on their perspective. Moreover, this research provides some guidelines for managers in other cultural heritage attraction sites, initially Thailand, to consider and monitor closely while mapping appropriate plans for each cultural heritage attribute. The study could also provide guidance to tourism policy makers to create effective tourism policies based on the strengths and weaknesses of the attractions and the requirements of youth tourists.

Research Process

Key Informants

The setting for this study was Ayutthaya Historical Park, located in the center of Ayutthaya province. The site consists of six cultural heritage attractions namely Wat Chaiwattanaram, Wat Mahathat, Wat Maheayong, Wat Phraram, Wat Phra Si Sanphet, and Wat Ratchaburana. A total number of six youth visitors (one interviewee: each attraction site) who were Thai between 15 and 25 years old, and had visited Ayutthaya Historical Park more than twice within one year, were considered eligible to participate in the study. The researcher referred to the number of the participating youths for in-depth interviews as stated by Greenbaum (1998). The previous studies referred to the moderate sized of participants of in-depth interview ranged from six to ten participants. They supported that this range was widely used and was the most popular

in marketing research to find out the in-depth information from the key informants in order for the interviewer to focus on each individual participant.

Instruments

The study used in-depth personal interview as a research instrument to collect data. The interview consisted of eight unstructured questions based on related previous studies such as Boukas (2008), Guo (2011), Moisa (2010), and Murphy and Pearce (1995). Questions used in this segment were related to: 1) the reasons for visiting the cultural heritage attractions, 2) the features that attract youth to visit the cultural heritage attractions, 3) the features that do not attract youth to visit the cultural heritage attractions, 4) the activities that are more likely to participate when visiting the cultural heritage attractions, 5) the tourism attributes that are the most important when visiting the cultural heritage attractions, 6) the tourism attributes that are the most satisfactory when visiting the cultural heritage attractions, 7) the strengths and weaknesses attributes of the cultural heritage attractions, and 8) suggestions to improve the cultural heritage attractions' performance.

Data Analysis

Because the qualitative data was varied in content, content analysis method was used in this part of the study. The researcher created a set of category, subcategory, and axial code in order to reduce the number of information units suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). They defined the term category as a concept that stands for phenomena. Whereas subcategory refers to a concept that gives clarification of the category and axial code refers to the process of relating category to the subcategory. They also recommend creating the central category which is the key point of the study representing the theme of phenomena.

Research results

After gathering information from in-depth personal interview, the information was grouped and travel experience was chosen as a central category to explain the variation made by the data associated with the youths' motivations, attitudes, and behaviors towards cultural heritage attractions. The concept map was created to illustrate the data and to describe the relationships that exist among categories (Canas & Novak, 2009). The concept map is shown in Figure 1.
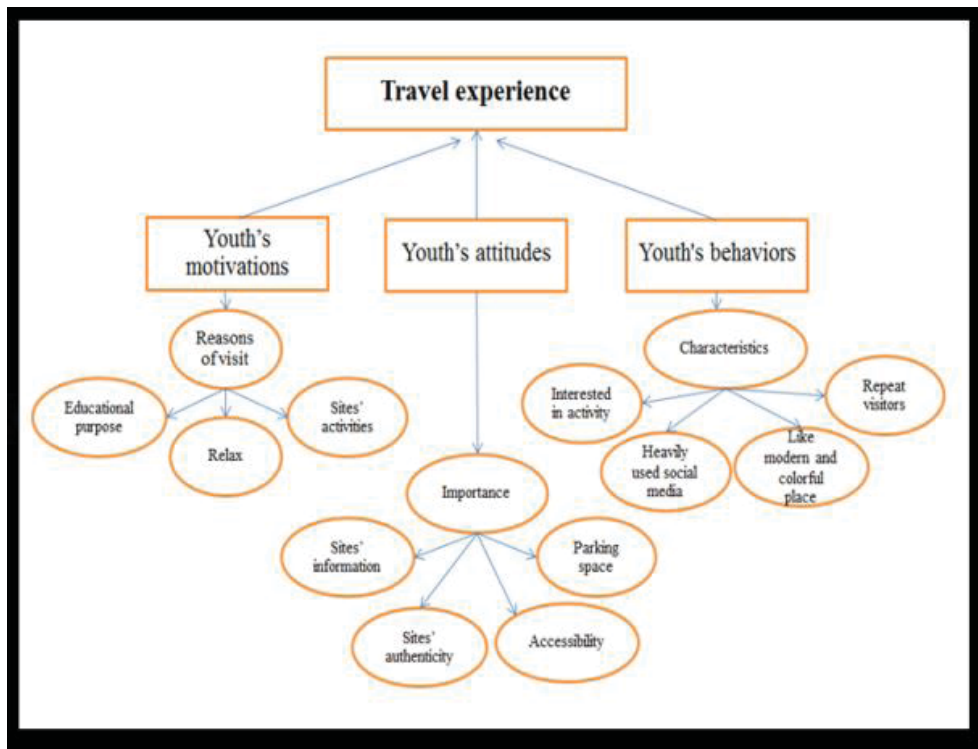
Figure 1: The Analysis of In-depth Personal Interview Method.
Source: Researcher's fieldwork

Figure 1 illustrates the youths' motivation category as the most important factor that drives an individual to travel (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Under this category, the reason to visit the cultural heritage attractions was set as a subcategory to clarify the motivations of youth visitors to travel to cultural heritage attractions. The reasons to travel can be divided into three main reasons. The first reason was for educational purposes. In the in-depth personal interviews, this reason influenced the youth participants to visit the attractions more than other reasons.

The second and third reasons to visit to the cultural heritage attractions were to relax and to participate in the activities organized at the attractions. It was observed in this study that a lot of foreign and Thai visitors visited the attractions for relaxing in the evening. Since some sites are located on the banks of the Chao Praya River such as Wat Chaiwattanaram, the location attracts many visitors, especially the local residents of Ayutthaya province, to spend time for leisure after work or school. Additionally, some youths visited the attractions to participate in the activities that were organized as claimed by the interviewees.

The youths' attitudes toward cultural heritage attractions is one of the most significant findings found in the current study. The sites' information had been mentioned several times as an important attribute by the participating youths. The sites'

authenticity is another attribute youths prefer to experience during their cultural heritage trip. One interviewee, when the researcher asked what attributes are important, stated, "I like the way they preserve the cultural heritage buildings and surrounding areas. All buildings are in very good condition and the surrounding area is clean".

Basic tourism infrastructure is one of the most important elements that drives young people to visit cultural sites. According to the participating youths' views, the accessibility and parking space were considered important attributes when visiting the cultural heritage attractions. The researcher noticed that many visitors parked their cars alongside the road because the parking spaces available at the attraction sites were not enough during the weekend to accommodate the volume of visitors and were located far away from the main entrance.

The travel behaviors associated with cultural heritage travel experience were divided in this category which focused on youths' characteristics. It was found that social media and the World Wide Web were heavily used both for entertainment and tourism purposes. Another significant characteristic found in this study was that youths were counted as repeat visitors of the cultural heritage attractions. According to the frequency of their visits, most youths have visited the cultural heritage attractions for many times per year with different purposes for each visit.

Being interested in doing the activities at the attractions was also mentioned often by the youth participants. Some youths visited the attractions because they wanted to participate in the activities that were organized in the attraction sites. However, one of the youth behaviors that deterred them from visiting cultural heritage attractions was that they liked to travel to modern and colorful places.

However, the current study also found the negative views associated with some attributes that could be considered weaknesses of the cultural heritage attractions. The negative experiences included staff's impoliteness, the limited number of public transport, incorrect information, the limited number of toilets, parking spaces, and resting areas available at the attractions, and the limited number of activities that were organized at the attractions. These attributes were mentioned negatively in association with their cultural trips.

Research discussions
Youths' motivations

With respect for youth visitors' behaviors, it is found that experiencing cultural heritage is one of the strongest motives for traveling (Boukas, 2008), which is supported by the frequency of the visits of the respondents of this study. The findings showed that most of the respondents have visited the cultural heritage sites more than once before the current visit. This result is very interesting because it indicates

an interest of youth visitors in visiting cultural heritage attractions. Importantly, this interest is not only found in the current case, Thai youth visitors, but also in many countries as mentioned in the studies conducted by Smith (2003), Tourism & Events Queensland (2003), and Youth Tourism Consortium of Canada (2004).

The finding regarding the purpose to participate in the events and the festivals shows significant characteristics of young people towards cultural activities. Cultural activities could be a significant factor attracting youths to visit cultural heritage attractions (Guo, 2008; Moisa, 2010; Park, et al., 2006). It can be concluded, according to their purposes of visit and behaviors, that one of the unique characteristics of Thai youth visitors is their desire avidly to learn about the culture and history of the attractions through the events and the festivals organized at the actual place.

Youth's Attitudes

Referring to the visitors' attitudes, some significant findings were established and could be highlighted for the cultural heritage sites' development. These findings are in accordance with Boukas (2008), who stated that the quality of maintenance process at the attractions is accounted as the most important attribute for youths when visiting cultural heritage attractions in Greece. The statement above is agreed by Pedersen (2002), revealing that excellent maintenance of the authenticity of heritage

places influences tourists to visit those cultural sites. The viewpoints of youth visitors on the quality of sites' information and the sites' authenticity indicate the significance of attitudes as they are aware of the accurate information and the preservation process of the heritage buildings and objects. This shows a positive trend for the cultural tourism industry, as information and the preservation of the sites concern the youths who are going to be the quality adult visitors of the future.

Youths' behaviors

The results of the current study show that young people nowadays have high interest in holistic cultural destinations with an emphasis on quality. The current case and previous studies are in accordance with the youth characteristics that could be counted as culturally friendly visitors as mentioned by Youth Tourism Consortium of Canada (2004). The terms culturally friendly refer to the visitors who visit the cultural sites in order to explore other cultures and increase knowledge through self-discovery, at the same time, they pay attention to more practical matters such as the preservation of the cultural heritage site's authenticity, maintenance, and the cleanliness of the places.

According to the finding derived by the in-depth personal interview method, several attributes were mentioned negatively and could be counted as weaknesses of the attractions as well. The unsatisfied attributes included staff impoliteness,

the limited number of restaurants and dining areas, site activities, toilets, and resting areas. Since the findings show that all the above attributes are considered as weaknesses and may definitely disrupt the trend to visit the cultural heritage attractions, the sites' manager needs to monitor and improve those quickly in order to create a positive travel experience for the visitors.

Research Implication

The data of the current study suggest implications for possible guidelines for site managers and policy makers to incorporate into the cultural heritage attraction sites' plans. Because tourism infrastructure is one of the important elements that drives people to visit cultural heritage attractions, it will be an important challenge for the site managers to provide visitors with high quality attributes to meet their expectations. In order to attract more visitors, not only youths but also every group of visitors, the responsible parties should focus on the weak attributes for improvement. The amenities that should be monitored closely, according to the current case, were to increase the number of parking spaces. This issue is very important and has to be provided at the attractions since it is considered basic tourism amenity. Because relaxation was rated as the second most important reason to visit the sites. If visitors are not satisfied with the amenities, it will be hard for them to relax and they may easily change their mind and go to other kinds of attractions such as shopping malls or amusement parks.

Because cultural activity is cited as an interest of youth visitors, site managers should create more activities that offer the opportunities to the young people to learn about local cultures. Providing youth visitors with information about the cultural heritage sites as well as emphasizing the importance of the sites could be done during these activities and events. The sites' staff will need to be trained regularly in order to offer updated information and quality service to ensure that they create a positive experience rather than a negative one.

Another implication that should definitely be of concern, since it could increase the number of young visitors, is the effectiveness of the medium used to promote the cultural heritage attractions. According to the current findings as well as previous studies, youths today are in the internet of things era. They surf the Internet and World Wide Web heavily for tourism purposes, such as searching for information, booking a package, or sharing their travel experience with the others. Therefore, web designers of an attraction website should design its webpage based on the characteristics of young people, who are eager to learn about the local culture, and give them an opportunity to learn the way of life and a culture that they have never experienced.

It is also important to realize that the awareness of young visitors can be increased if greater attention is given to study their

behaviors and to provide what they need. A strategy targeting young people will increase their awareness of heritage and culture, and brings more young visitors to the heritage attractions. It also appears that under the appropriate guidance, young visitors can really appreciate their culture and gain positive experiences during their visit. The results of this study are very useful underlining the significant study of young visitors at cultural destinations. Youths do not seem to be strangers or passive towards culture and heritage, however sometimes they do not understand their heritage and cannot appreciate it adequately. An increased interest is indicated and the immediate need for studying this specific special segment of population is obvious and crucial.

Recommendations

While the current study reveals some significant findings that should be highlighted for the development and management of cultural heritage sites, the study has a number of suggestions for future research in this area. The researcher of the current study would like to make some recommendations for further study to be focused as follows:

First, the current study used the in-depth interview methods to collect data. Other quantitative research methods, such as survey, are able to offer more information especially in terms of respondents' demographic and their general behaviors when visiting the cultural heritage attractions.

Second, this study selected Ayutthaya Historical Park as a data collection site. To collect data in other cultural heritage sites that have similar characteristics is able to prove beneficial. A comparison between visitors of different cultural destinations will give further insights into the attitudes and the behaviors of young visitors.

Third, since cultural activities are strong motivators driving youths to visit cultural heritage attractions, further study focusing on youth preferences for cultural activities is able to prove constructive. The data regarding the demands and preferences of young visitors are able to potentially help tourism organizations and site managers to create activities and guidelines that will increase the number of youth visitors who visit these cultural heritage attractions.

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