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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT

Editors

Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu

Dr. Valentina Della Corte



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Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu, University of South Florida, USA

Dr. Valentina Della Corte, University of Naples Federico II, Italy

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Conceptualization of Ecotourism Service Experiences Framework From the Dimensions of Motivation and Quality of Experiences: Four Realms of Experience Approach

Jennifer Kim Lian Chan

Faculty of Business, Economics, and Accountancy
University Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

Abstract

The paper explored ecotourism service experience dimensions from the ecotourists' motivations and quality of experiences. Based on these empirical dimensions, an ecotourism service experience framework is conceptualized and guided by the four realms of experiences. A total of 51 international ecotourists were interviewed at the ecolodges. Motivation responses and quality of experiences were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings of motivation dimensions were cross-checked with the dimensions of quality of experiences. Consistent findings revealed that tangible – wildlife and nature/environment, learning, being away from workplace/home (escapism), aesthetic (amusing scenery) and entertainment experiences driven from river boat cruise, cultural performance and viewing wildlife are key dimensions of ecotourism service experiences. Suggested ecotourism service experience dimensions can be interpreted as educational, aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment, similar to the four realms of experiences and fit well with the experience economy model of Pine and Gilmore (1999). A novel approach to explore and interpret ecotourism service experience, which is subjective, individualistic and interpretive. An ecotourism service experience framework encapsulating the core ecotourism service dimensions is proposed. It serves as a beneficial guide for ecotourism operators and destination managers to offer quality ecotourism experiences. Findings have implications for the management and marketing of ecotourism destinations and experiences.

Keywords: ecotourism service experience dimensions, motivations, quality of experiences, four realms of experience, experience economy model, service experience framework

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Introduction

Ecotourism is one of the fast- growing sectors in tourism (Hultman, Kazeminita and Ghasemi, 2015). Tourists are increasingly interested in the enjoyment of the natural environment (Rivera, 2010). Extensive research has been focused on ecotourists' motivation. The motivation to travel to a destination is of prime importance in destination management for marketing strategies. The contribution of tourist motivation, expectation, and perception of the quality of tourism experiences to customer satisfaction has been well-documented. Quality experiences influence the motivation and positive perception of ecotourists. The quality of tourism experiences is

critical in the context of ecotourism destination management, marketing, delivery as well as policy. Likewise, tourists have different motives for visiting nature or ecotourism destinations (Chikuta, du Plessis and Saayman, 2017), which is well recognized in respect of ecotourists (Alvarez, 2012). Extensive empirical studies on ecotourists' motivations, expectations, and perceptions of service quality attributes have been documented in literature. These include motivations by Meric and Hunt (1998) and the famous ECOSERV – service experience in ecotourism by Khan (2003). Robinot and Giannelloni (2010) emphasize environmental aspects and green attributes as important service attributes in the context of hotels.

The nature of ecotourism and its attractions are deemed as 'experiential' products (Ritchie and Hudson, 2009; Tung and Ritchie, 2011) that stimulate ecotourists' senses. Ecotourism, being multidimensional in character, stimulates the senses, generates emotions, seeks novelty, and engages in activities and cognitive processes. Accordingly, 'tourist interactions with nature, the environment, and other sources of stimulation are elements of the very product or service that they wish to experience' (Chan, 2006, pp. 21). An insightful understanding of the service experiences dimension to attract and satisfy ecotourist can no longer be ignored. Indeed, such understanding supports the delivery of the types of ecotourism experiences that ecotourists seek, leading to a level of satisfaction with high intention to return. Despite this, significant past studies tended to focus on ecotourist satisfaction and quality of tourism experiences, disregarding ecotourism service experience aspects, which are an important area in managing ecotourism. While the literature documents the link between motivation and destination choice and the importance of the quality of tourism experiences in satisfaction, little is known about how these motivations and quality of experiences can contribute to the overall tourism service experiences, especially in ecotourism while visiting a destination. There is limited empirical evidence on the extent to which these dimensions can be conceptualized and interpreted in a more meaningful and practical framework, which can be extended and empirically linked to the experience economy framework of Pine and Gilmore (1998). Such a framework is vital, as it displays relevant tangible and intangible elements of ecotourism service experiences, a more comprehensive understanding thereof and a practical way of describing them outside their key attributes. The framework is deemed a useful guide for ecotourism suppliers and destination managers in staging and managing ecotourism experiences for experiential consumption.

Individual experience consisted of both emotive and cognitive aspects. The term experiences refer to 'human interactions with people, places, spaces, products, services, organizations, governments and cultures.' (Gayle, Lee, Ayling, Lunny and Ollenburg, 2009, pp. 297). Accordingly, experiences comprise individual behavior, perception, cognition, and implied or expressed emotions of individual's (Oh, Fiore and Jeong, 2007). Tourists' feelings towards their visit will shape their experiences (Chan and Baum, 2007a). Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 11) defined experience from an organizational/business sense, thus, 'experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of an individual'.

Existing studies on ecotourism experiences are primarily rooted in the socio-psychology perspective and guided by experience domains (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). The five components of experiences are to sense, feel, think, act, and relate (Schmitt, 1999). The four core elements of experiences include emotional impression, learning or information, capacity building, and transformational impact (Aho, 2001). A prominent two-dimensional economic experience model of the four realms of experience dimensions consists of education, escapism, aesthetics, and

entertainment (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The model has been empirically analyzed and tested in tourism and leisure experiences (Asan and Emeksiz, 2018), accommodation experiences and bed and breakfasts (Oh et al., 2007), theme parks, museums, music events, wine tourism (Hosany and Witham, 2010; Park, Oh and Park, 2010; Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011), and rural tourism experiences (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques, and Loureiro, 2018). Multiple studies confirm that these conceptual dimensions fit the model, except regarding ecotourism service experiences. Simply put, the nature of ecotourism experiences is subjective, involving emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual, and highly personal responses to various aspects of the service experience and delivery. Thus, a holistic perspective of the service experiences framework is essential in the ecotourism context. This framework provided practitioners with information on how to manage better the ecotourism service experience at destinations and maximize satisfaction.

Therefore, this paper addressed the gaps by proposing an ecotourism service experience framework based on multiple data sources of responses regarding motivation and quality of experiences from ecotourists who visited Lower Kinabatangan. It also discussed the service experience dimensions essential to ecotourists' satisfaction and ways to stage and manage ecotourism experiences in a more practical manner.

Research Objectives

- To explore ecotourists' motivation dimensions.
- To describe the quality of ecotourism experiences from the ecotourists' perspectives.
- To propose an ecotourism service experience framework based on the identified ecotourism service experience dimensions.

Literature Review: Ecotourism Experiences and Co-Creation

Ecotourism is extensively defined as 'a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment or some component thereof, within its associated cultural context, preferably in a way that enhances the natural and cultural resources' (Weaver, 2001, p. 15). Ecotourism offers unique experiences based on the destination's products, services, and environments. Experience determined value and competitive advantage. Ecotourism suppliers become 'experience stagers', by offering personal and memorable interactions (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, pp. 3–4). Thus, delivering memorable ecotourism experiences required an insightful understanding of the service experience from the interpretative perspective, guided by the relevant framework. The nature of experiences is subjective, with emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual and highly personal responses to various aspects of service delivery.

Ecotourism experiences are co-creations derived from the individual tourist's participation in activities and interactions with subjects such as wildlife, people and even the place itself, during their trip (Larsen, 2007). Such experiences added value and make ecotourism more competitive. Creation of desirable experiential environments can be an essential competitive advantage (Tsaur, Chiu and Wang, 2007). 'A co-creation tourism experience is the sum of psychological events a tourist goes through when contributing actively through physical and/or mental participation interacting with other subjects in the experience environment' (Campos, Mendes, Oom and Scott, 2015, pp. 23). Ecotourism experiences formed and gained are attributed to the presence of resources, hosts, ecotourists, and the environment; experiences involve dimensions

such as physical aspects of the environment, social actors, participants, host dynamic, and features of services, which ultimately affect ecotourists' on-site experiences.

In addition, the concept of co-creation through interaction and participation is an important aspect of the tourism service experience (Reichenberger, 2017). Co-creation experiences are vital in staging and managing ecotourism experiences that are often not captured by the ecotourism operators. Ostensibly, ecotourists participate, engage, connect, and interact with communities at the ecotourism destination. Thus, the experience is co-created through the process of visiting, participating, learning, and enjoying activities in a peaceful environment (Stramboulis and Skayannis, 2003). Participation, interaction in co-creation experiences, and on-site experiences are vital to understanding how ecotourists connect and act in diverse situations. Thus, it is postulated that ecotourism service experience can be posited in four different possible scenarios: active participation, passive participation, absorption, and immersion as documented (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Briefly, absorption implies ecotourists' level of engagement, whilst immersion is the act of ecotourists' involvement in activities at the ecotourism destination. Active experiences included educational or escapist situations, while passive experiences comprise aesthetic and entertainment experiences. Arguably, these scenarios of co-created ecotourism experiences form a network that can be linked to the theory of Pine and Gilmore (2002) and Stramboulis and Skayannis (2003) about the four realms of experience: education, escapism, aesthetics, and entertainment (1999). The term educational experience involved cognitive aspects and requires active participation and absorption in mind and body interaction. It enhanced the tourists' knowledge and skills through active participation during the customer journey. Aesthetic experience is passive participation and immersion with feeling through senses or sensual pleasure. On the other hand, escapist experience involves active participation and immersion in the environment and activities. New perspectives and feelings of being at a destination that offers specific resources or activities to act differently. Finally, entertainment experience is passive absorption of the activities and performances of others. However, there is no specific empirical research on this.

Ecotourists' Motivation and Quality of Tourism Experiences

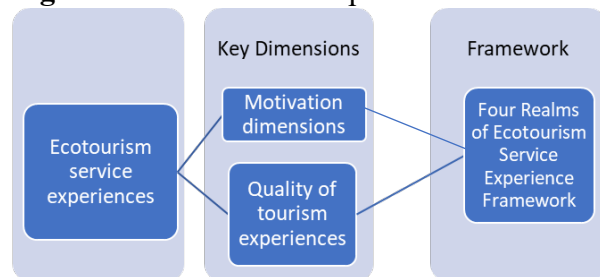
The ecotourism destination selection process is greatly influenced by tourists' motives, perceptions, and expectations. Wong, Cheung and Wan (2013) show a strong interrelationship among traveler expectation, motivation, and attitude; Lee, Jeon and Kim (2011) show the correlation between tourist expectation and motivation. Motivations, expectations, and perception are important aspects that influence tourist behavior, as well as attract and market tourism destinations. Motivation has drawn extensive attention from the tourism industry (Wong et al., 2013). Generally, tourists are motivated to travel based on two aspects: push and pull factors. The push factors refer to the psychological forces that influence tourist choices and service experiences (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Pull factors relate to external forces of the destination attributes, including the attractions at a specific site or destination (Beh and Bruyere, 2007). Extensive research has been conducted on ecotourist motivation. The principal motivation factors can be categorized as destination attributes, namely, natural attractions, wildlife, local lifestyle, eco-activities, wilderness settings, pristine areas and a sense of closeness to natural attractions and local communities (Chan and Baum, 2007a). These themes are also documented in the ecotourism literature (Ayala, 1996; Wight, 1996; Ryan, Hughes and Chirgwin, 2000). Wight (1997, p. 218) notes that ecotourists seek 'uncrowded, remote, wilderness, learning about

wildlife, nature, and local cultures, community benefits and having a physical challenge’. They search for an authentic and complex learning activity as part of a leisure experience, as well as the destination’s diverse natural and cultural resources (Ayala, 1996). Travel motivations and their association with destination choices are vital to the tour operators’ economic viability and sustainability in delivering those experiences for consumption. Jang and Cai (2002, p. 111) state that ‘people’s travel motivations and their association with destination selection plays a critical role in predicting future travel patterns’.

Quality of Tourism Experience

The quality of the tourism experience can be conceptualized as ecotourists’ affective responses to their desired social-psychological benefits. It involves both the attributes provided by the supplier and those brought to the opportunity by the ecotourists. The meanings of quality tourism experiences are constantly reconstructed and reinterpreted (Schwandt, 2000). Consequently, understanding the quality of the ecotourism experience requires recognition of the context in time and space, as well as participants’ specific social groups. Studies on tourism/tourist experiences have used motivation and perception as focal “lenses,” showing linkages between tourist experiences and motivation (Ryan, 1997). Research on the quality of service experience is particularly important in ecotourism, because of the complexity of ecotourism services. Ecotourists usually participate in numerous activities and interactions, causing them to feel, react and decide in different ways. Past studies of ecotourism experiences were underpinned by the socio-psychology perspective of Otto and Ritchie (1996), whose experience domains consist of hedonic, interactive, novelty, comfort, safety and stimulation; though these domains linked well to ecotourist motivations (Chan and Baum, 2007b), what constitutes ecotourism service experiences remains unknown. As the motivations and quality of tourism experiences influence ecotourism experiences, this paper aims to explore the key dimensions of service experiences from these. Hence, the conceptual framework of the research is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework



Methods

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative research method, designed to explore ecotourism service experience dimensions rooted in the ecotourists’ motivations and quality of experiences. Subsequently, an ecotourism service experience framework guided by the four realms of experience dimensions is proposed. Qualitative research allows the collection of rich, in-depth, and expressive data (Fodness and Murray, 2007), to ‘understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences, that is “how do people make sense of their experience?’ (Merriam and Associates, 2002, pp. 5). It discovers, interprets, conceptualizes and illuminates ecotourism service experience dimensions by locating the *meanings* people place on

their motives and quality of experiences. An inductive approach was adopted to address the research objectives, since they are subjective in nature within an interpretative paradigm.

Sample

The sample consisted of 51 international ecotourists who stayed at three ecolodges at Lower Kinabatangan. A convenience sampling method was used to determine the sample size, when information and theoretical insights reached saturation, which constitutes in hearing the same information being reported without anything new being added.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 51 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the international ecotourists of Lokan, Sukau, and Bilit, located at Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah from March to November 2018. Semi-structured open-ended questions with face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted on-site. The open-ended format of the interview questions gave respondents relative freedom of expression, making them feel more at ease, thereby allowing them to voice their personal views and opinions. The researcher also had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to clarify any unclear points, to elicit additional information, or reduce ambiguity. Interview questions were related to motivations and the quality of ecotourism experiences at Lower Kinabatangan, the ecotourism sites visited.

The data was analyzed using an inductive qualitative-phenomenological approach. Data was analyzed manually and guided by the ground theory, which involves descriptive coding from key words or phrases of responses and thematic and analytic analysis to interpret the meaning and findings. Coding was mostly based on a single phrase or significant meaningful statements that generated themes related to the research objectives. Key themes and patterns emerged from the coding process and related to the descriptive themes – motivation dimensions- wildlife, nature environment, learning, forest and experiences derived from ecotourism activities by Newsome, Rodger, Pearce and Chan (2017) and self-development (enriching knowledge), interpersonal relationship (relationship with family and friends), rewards (fun and experiencing different things), escapism (away from home) derived by Carvache-Franco, Segarra-Oña and Carrascosa (2019). The quality of tourism experiences was based on service experience domains formulated by Otto and Ritchie (1996). Upon completion of thematic analysis, data interpretation was carried out, guided by the four realms of experience dimensions – education, aesthetics, escapism and entertainment (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

Findings

Respondent Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 show that most ecotourists from each group were between 25 and 34 years (29.2%), less than 10% were seniors between 55 and 64 years (5.3%). The gender distribution showed that the majority of international ecotourists were male (53.1%); 49.6% of all tourists had a university education (degree) and were employed in different fields. By nationality, 62.8% of the international ecotourists were from Europe. Europe is identified as a primary target market in the Sabah Marketing Plan, because ecotourists from Europe display a consistent interest in nature tourism and have a high purchase rate for tour packages (Wood, 2002). In terms of trip duration,

most ecotourists had a short stay of 1–3 days, with some staying 4–6 days. Most of the respondents travelled with family members.

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Characteristic		%
Gender	Male	53.1%
	Female	46.9%
Age	<16	8.0%
	16–19	9.7%
	20–24	18.6%
	25–34	29.2%
	35–44	18.6%
	45–54	10.6%
	55–64	5.3%
Region	Europe	62.8%
	Asia	7.1%
	South America	4.4%
	North America	15.9%
	Australia	9.8%
Education	No Formal Education	0.9%
	Primary and Secondary School	23.9%
	Diploma	8.8%
	Degree	49.6%
	Post-Graduate	16.8%
Profession	Manager	15.0%
	Professional	38.9%
	Technician and Associate Professional	10.6%
	Clerical Support Workers	2.7%
	Service and Sales Workers	8.0%
	Student	24.8%
	First timer/Repeat visit	First Timer
	Repeat	11.5%
Mode of travel	An Organized Tour with Travel Agencies	70.8%
	On Your own	29.2%
Travel group	Family	58.4%
	Friends	10.6%
	Couple	24.8%
	Alone	6.2%
Duration of stay	1–3 days	84.1%
	4–6 days	9.7%
	7–10 days	3.5%
	11 days or more	2.7%

Findings on Ecotourists Motivation Dimensions

The interview responses showed ecotourist motivations attributed to the varieties of wildlife, nature environment, experiences gained from riverboat cruises, jungle walk, cultural performance, desire to learn and expand knowledge, as well as exploring new environment. It seems wildlife and natural environment were the most significant themes found in the ecotourists' motivation to visit Kinabatangan. It was not surprising, as Kinabatangan's reputation as a well-known wildlife haven. The sanctuary itself lies within a large alluvial floodplain and is home to over 50 mammal species. It is one of the few sites in the world where 10 species of primates co-exist (Boonratana and Sharma, 1997). Among the fauna are several iconic and endangered species, including the rare and endangered orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), the endemic proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*), and the pygmy elephant (*Elephas maximus*). The findings are consistent with those of past studies that found that an interest in viewing wildlife,

exploring new environments, expanding knowledge, and seeing wildlife varieties were the primary motivations to visit Lower Kinabatangan (Carvache-Franco et al., 2019; Newsome, et al., 2017; Chan and Baum, 2007b; Ayala, 1996; Ryan et al., 2000). These are evidenced from the following interview responses:

Table 2. Interview Responses

Respondent	Response
Respondents 1,3,5,7,20,25	Come to Kinabatangan to see wildlife, experience natural environment.
Respondents 2,8,9,13,19	Want to have a closer look at Borneo's wildlife such as the proboscis monkey and orang utan here.
Respondents 4,15	Wanted to experience a vacation like never before, wild and untamed.
Respondents 22,25	Want to spend time in the jungle and see wildlife... it's a different place!
Respondents 11,18	Want to see animals (proboscis) that can be seen only in Kinabatangan and enjoy the pristine environment.
Respondents 10,33,46	Want to see orang utan and other unique animals in Kinabatangan.... also the local cultures and ways of life here...
Respondents 30,36, 43	Escape from work and this is perfect place because it is different from home!
Respondent 28	I learn more about wildlife and Kinabatangan is premier ecotourism destination.
Respondents 44,49, 51	We are attracted to forest scenery and the dense green forest around us.
Respondent 1	Seeing a lot of animals, birds, especially orangutan and pygmy elephants.
Respondent 12	We want to see wildlife in their natural habitat.
Respondent 22	We see diverse and rare species.
Respondent 40	We want a high value placed on preserving the "natural" aspects of the area, also the education aspect (educational talks, knowledge of guides etc., attention paid to sustainability practices).

Findings of Quality of Ecotourism Experiences

The interview responses on the quality of ecotourism experiences based on encounters/experiences at the sites are presented in Table 2 below. Key themes that emerged from the interview responses were interpreted based on the service experience domain of Otto and Ritchie (1996) and the four realms of experience. A significant number of respondents indicated that their quality of ecotourism experiences related to the education dimension. It seemed learning about wildlife in the wild or undisturbed areas and to experience or enjoy a unique natural environment are regarded as quality ecotourism experiences. Many respondents indicated ecotourism destinations as a perfect place to escape from busy work life. Being away from home allowed them to do something different. Some reported feeling able to become a different person. Other respondents acknowledged and appreciated the natural environment, a peaceful site where wildlife and rainforest co-exist. These findings were in line with the motivational findings. These outcomes resulted from interactions and co-creation between ecotourists. This corresponds to the finding of Stramboulis and Skayannis (2003) that the outcome of ecotourism experiences is a process of visit, participation, enjoyment and learning at the tourist destination. Indeed, the site environment and resources/facilities can be related and underpinned by Pine and Gilmore's (1999) Experience Economy Model, which considers how experiences have two dimensions: engagement *versus* immersion and active *versus* passive, as well as four realms of experience: education, aesthetic, entertainment, and escapism. Consequently, eco-tourism operators can orchestrate unique experiences based on these four areas. Memory can be a vital product of ecotourism. What constitutes ecotourism experiences can be identified as "experiential dimensions". Notably, ecotourism is a differentiated and multi-dimensional tourism product and therefore the kind of service experience will be different.

Table 3. Themes of Quality of Ecotourism Experience

Interview responses	Elements/subthemes (Otto and Ritchie, 1996)	Theme/Four realms of experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998)
The experiences have made us more knowledgeable about wildlife and nature settings (Respondents no. 5, 6, 8) Enhanced my expertise in nature settings; stimulated my curiosity about local lifestyle (Respondents no. 31, 32) Experiences were highly educational and valuable (Respondents no. 1, 5, 7, 22, 25, 44) Learned about wildlife and nature conservation (Respondents no. 14, 20, 37) Ecotourism experiences were learning about nature (Respondents no. 40, 47) Real learning experiences about nature, wildlife, and local cultures (Respondents no. 3, 8, 10,15,16, 38)	Elements: wildlife, nature, conservation, local cultures Subthemes: knowledge, expertise, education, learning experience	Education
I learned that Lower Kinabatangan is one of the premier ecotourism destinations in Malaysia (Respondents no. 48, 49) Personally experienced the Borneo Rainforest and unique wildlife (Respondents no. 11, 28, 39) Personally experienced and saw wildlife with my own eyes! (Respondents no. 12, 29, 31, 32) We felt a real sense of peace at the lodge (Respondents no. 42, 46) To experience the different settings...being in the dense green rainforest... (Respondents no. 45, 51) Nature, forest was very attractive and tranquil (Respondents no. 32, 41, 47) Surroundings pleased my senses (Respondents no. 16, 43) Just being very amused during the riverboat cruises (Respondents no. 17, 26)	Elements: Borneo rainforest, wildlife forest, riverboat cruises, nature Sub-themes: unique, marvellous, real sense of peace, attractive and tranquil	Aesthetic
Opportunities for us to do something different from our daily routines (Respondents no. 20, 23, 45). I felt I became a different person in the untouched nature environment (Respondents no. 1, 3) Perfect place for us to escape from work-life (Respondents no. 2, 4, 10, 15) Got away from busy work life (Respondents no. 12,18, 41) I felt experiences gained there made me become someone else (Respondent no. 17) It felt like living in a different place. Being in a natural environment is a different environment (Respondents no. 29, 34) Gained unique and memorable experiences that are very different from our home country (Respondents no. 3, 29, 36) To experience the rainforest, which is very different from a big city like London (Respondents no. 6, 7,13)	Elements: opportunities, felt perfect, work-life Subthemes: something different, different person, untouched environment, escape from work life, different place, unique and memorable, different	Escapism
Jungle walk was tiring but fun (Respondents no. 1, 2, 21) Enjoyed watching and viewing the proboscis monkey on the trees during the cruises (Respondent no. 2, 5, 33) Enjoyed sharing my experiences with other groups of tourists at the lodge (Respondents no. 41, 43) The riverboat cruise was interesting; fun to watch the river scenery during the evening (Respondents no. 22, 34, 35) The cultural dance performance was enjoyable (Respondents no. 8, 9, 13) Enjoyed the scenery of people living along the riverbank; seeing the rainforest (Respondent no. 19)	Elements: jungle walk, wildlife sightings, riverboat cruises, river scenery, cultural performance, riverbank scenery. Subthemes: fun, enjoy, interesting, enjoyable	Entertainment

In short, the finding revealed the tangible components to be wildlife, natural habitat, natural environment, riverboat cruises, forest, and local lifestyle. These components are consistent with responses regarding the motivation and quality of ecotourism experiences. Therefore, they suggest that motivations are connected to the quality of ecotourism experiences. Similarly, the experiential dimensions that emerged from Table 2 can be categorized as education, aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment.

Above all, ecotourism is an experience-based product, and the experience economy model is profoundly relevant to conceptualize ecotourism service experiences. An overall ecotourism service experience is integrated into the Experience Economic Model and The Four Realms of Experiences Dimensions, as presented in Figure 2 below. Hence, the ecotourism service experiences framework is presented.

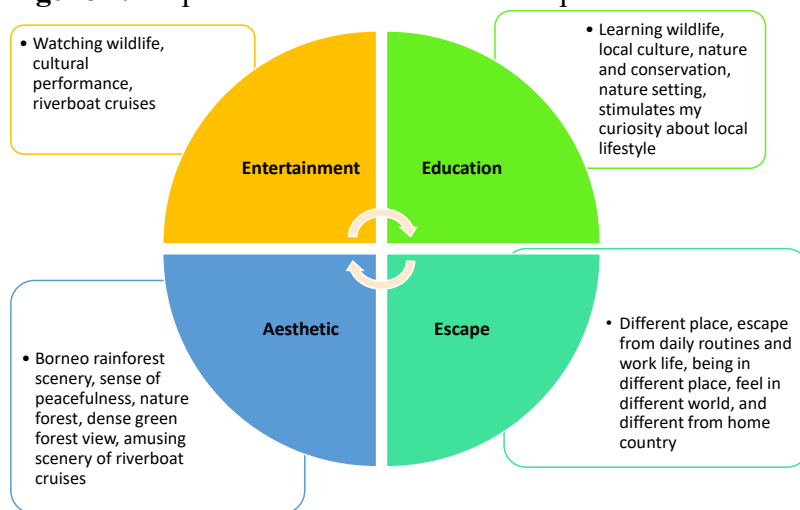
It seems education is the most significant dimension of ecotourism experiences. Learning about wildlife, nature, and the environment are key elements of the ecotourism service experience at Lower Kinabatangan. This learning required ecotourists' active participation and absorption into activities, their interactions with the environment, and cognitive (thinking) actions within their surroundings.

Escapism is the second-most significant experience dimension, as the ecotourism destination is considered a unique environment for ecotourists to act differently. Escapist experiences require ecotourists to immerse themselves in nature, which offers new perspectives that encourage new or different behaviour.

Aesthetics is the third experience dimension, involving ecotourists feeling and appreciating the appeal of a pristine natural environment. It requires passive participation and immersion. Experiences can entail enjoyment, appreciation, fun, peacefulness, and sensory pleasure.

Entertainment is the fourth experience dimension, which has less significance within the ecotourism experience context. It involves passive participation and watching wildlife during river cruise activities and cultural performances.

Figure 2. Proposed Ecotourism Service Experience Dimensions Framework



Conclusions

The paper leads to the conclusion that ecotourism service experience dimensions can be related to the motivation and quality of experience dimensions. The key service experiences dimensions were attributed to the tangible elements: wildlife and nature, environment and the senses: learning and knowledge, escapism, aesthetics and entertainment, offering an insight into ecotourism experiences that can be interpreted based on the four realms of experiences. This is relevant, as ecotourism is concerned more with experiential products; and ecotourism experiential dimensions are attributed to ecotourists' motivation and quality of experiences. This paper substantiated the notion that ecotourist experiences are derived from both tangible and intangible elements of a destination, the former focusing on the destination's tangible attributes, and the latter referring to the emotive aspects of ecotourists. It appears that the motivational

factors and quality of experiences are attributed to the ecotourism experiences delivered. Evidence of quality experiences shows how ecotourist experiences are strongly correlated with education, aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment. Hence, the ecotourism experience consumption dimensions conceptually fit the four realms of tourism experiences.

Consequently, ecotourism experiences can be theorized and can underpin the Experience Economy Model of Pine and Gilmore (1999). The elements of engagement and participation are vital to the ecotourism context and contribute to a new theoretical understanding of ecotourism based on experiential dimensions. The interaction and co-creation among the ecotourist, the site environment/setting, and wildlife/nature resources is an emotional experience around which ecotourism marketers can develop compelling and attractive ecotourism destinations. The experience that ecotourism destinations deliver can be its most meaningful promotional tool.

Implications

The paper provides numerous contributions to understanding the dimensions of the ecotourism experience. This has implications for the management of ecotourism experiences, satisfaction and marketing of the ecotourism destination.

The paper confirms that the dimensions of ecotourism service experiences are associated with motivation and the quality of experiences empirically: a novel and expressive way of exploration of service experience dimensions.

Guided by the concept of four realms of experience, dimensions can be expressed as ecotourism service experience dimensions. These ecotourism service experience dimensions have been interpreted and extended into the four realms of experience by Pine and Gilmore (1999). Thus, an ecotourism service experience framework is proposed. The framework is a pertinent and valuable guide to enhance ecotourist satisfaction and sustainability of the destination, an important aspect that has been overlooked so far.

The prominent dimensions (education, aesthetics, and escapism) have been highlighted in this paper, which have not been documented or acknowledged in previous ecotourism literature. These dimensions enable ecotourism managers to establish marketing strategies and to improve the service according to these service experience dimensions, enabling an increase in the impulse to visit these protected areas. More or equal attention should be given to both the tangible (wildlife and nature) and intangible elements (types of experiences: education and learning, aesthetics of the environment, escapism and entertainment from the activities) at Lower Kinabatangan. This underscores the need for information, interpretation facilities, and knowledgeable service staff. In short, these are the key sustainable dimensions to transform Lower Kinabatangan into a competitive ecotourism destination.

Specific Recommendations

This novel perspective of managing ecotourism destinations is guided by the service experience dimension framework, in which emphasis should be placed on the dimensions of education, aesthetics of the environment, and escapism; these elements are valued as well as the destination's tangible elements (attractions). Staging ecotourism destinations based on these dimensions will enhance the quality of tourist experiences and satisfaction of ecotourists.

Though experiences are subjective, individualist, and complex, they are important components of ecotourism products. Hence, the four realms of ecotourism experiences that were identified can be used by ecotourism operators to stage authentic, unique, and memorable experiences at the destination. Ecotourism service experiences can be improved according to the identified realms of experiences in the proposed framework. For instance, learning experiences of specific wildlife and forests can be staged to enhance satisfaction.

Thus, effective marketing of ecotourism destinations requires an understanding of the importance of various ecotourism experiences. This includes marketing ecotourism destinations as a unique destination for escapism and being educated about nature conservation, local cultures, lifestyles, and natural settings. Experiential marketing is recommended as a sound and holistic approach to ecotourism destinations. Such approaches are deemed more practical and relevant in context. The nature of ecotourism as an emotional experience is an important outcome.

Further Research

Due to the small sample size of respondents and qualitative research of the paper, new avenues for future research are suggested. Such research can explore the realms of experience at different ecotourism destinations and sites. Domestic tourists can be included as respondents in future research. A comparative study should be carried out to include other ecotourism destinations. The use of mixed methods research design would also probably produce more holistic findings.

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