

CRUISE TRAVELER'S EXPERIENCE: DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF A SCALE

Huseyin Onur Ciftci, College of Hospitality & Tourism Leadership, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, 8350 N. Tamiami Trail Sarasota, FL 34243, onurciftci48@gmail.com

Faizan Ali, Dedman School of Hospitality The College of Business, Florida State University 288 Champions Way, B2200 University Center, FL 32306, faizanali7@hotmail.co.uk

Muhittin Cavusoglu, College of Education, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, EDU105, Tampa, FL 33620, muhittincavusoglu@gmail.com

Xiaotong Zhang, Warrington College of Business University of Florida, 100 Bryan Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611, xtzhang@ufl.edu

Cihan Cobanoglu, College of Hospitality & Tourism Leadership, University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee, 8350 N. Tamiami Trail Sarasota, FL 34243, cihan@cihan.org

ABSTRACT

With recent growth in the cruise industry, travellers are demanding better experiences. This research conceptualizes cruise travellers' experience as a second-order, four-dimensional construct which measures cruise travellers' experience by assessing their hedonics & escapism, social interaction, recognition & self-esteem and activities & facilities. Based upon a rigorous psychometric process of scale development and validation through intensive literature review and a large scale quantitative survey, the authors propose a comprehensive instrument for assessing cruise travellers' experience that is reliable and valid.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a rapid growth is observed in the cruise industry which is among the fastest growing segments of the entire tourism and leisure travel market [8]. During 1990 to 2011, the industry had grown at an annual rate of over 7% with 16.32 million passengers in 2011 and 17.2 million in 2012 [1]. Currently, Asia is the fastest-growing cruise market where increasing numbers of Asian holidaymakers now seeing cruising as an exciting and affordable vacation [5]. Despite an increasing growth, the cruise tourism sector has surprisingly little academic literature [7]. Recently, lack of research attention to this niche form of tourism has been stressed. Particularly, as an introductory issue in emerging markets, research on cruise industry and cruisers' behavior has been neglected by the international literature [8]. Considering the increasing numbers of travelers, improving the understanding of the cruise experience can benefit cruise lines [5].

Cruise ships, today, are offering an alternative form of holiday to many tourists providing them a total escape, safe transportation to exotic destinations, Vegas-style entertainment, luxurious pampering service, quality food and beverage, innovative onboard features, and awe-inspiring esthetics [6]. In addition, tourists are offered opportunities for active participation and engagement to create memorable experiences [7]. This has changed cruise tourism towards a more traveler-oriented development with an emphasis on travelers' preferences and experiences [9]. Consequently, cruise tourism can be viewed as an experiential consumption where the experiences of cruise travelers during their holiday develop their behavioral intentions [4]. It implies that cruise travelers who undergo extraordinary experiences during the consumption may result in satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions [5]. However, with some

exceptions, cruisers' experience remains relatively understudied. In this context, Hosany and Witham [3] call for further research in understanding cruisers' experiences and post-consumption evaluations. Therefore, this study intends to develop and validate a scale to assess cruise travelers' experience and its effect on their satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

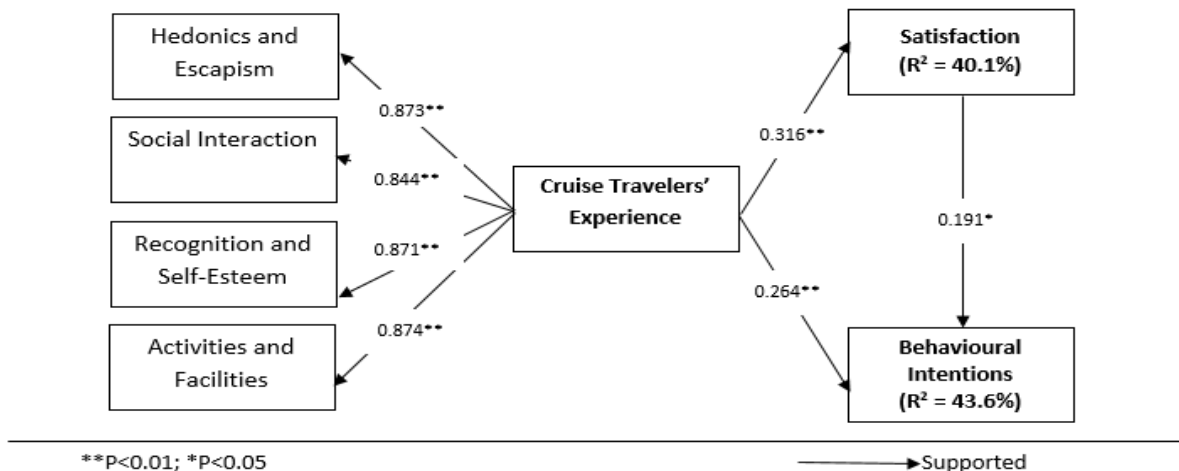
METHODOLOGY

Purposive sampling was used to draw a sample of Chinese cruise travelers at two cruise ports in Malaysia i.e., Langkawi and Klang. Data were collected using a questionnaire that included 15 items, based on extensive literature review, to assess cruise travelers' experience. Satisfaction and behavioral intentions were measured using two items each taken from Hosany and Witham [3] and Hung and Patrick [4]. A 7-point Likert scale was used. Of the 250 distributed questionnaires, 196 were returned including 56.1% male and 43.9% female. Around 35% of the respondents were between the age group of 18-35 whereas 65% of them were over the age of 35. Data was first subjected to exploratory factor analysis to get a basic factor structure followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm and validate the developed scale.

RESULTS

The analysis was conducted using Smart PLS M3 Version 2.0. All 15 items related to cruise travelers' experience were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. Results showed four factors with a variance of 64.836%. Three factors including 'Hedonics & Escapism', 'Social Interaction' and 'Recognition & Self-Esteem' included four items whereas the fourth factor was 'Activities and Facilities' having three items. Loadings for the items ranged from 0.580 to 0.885 with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.834. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then applied to test the validity of the questionnaire. Results indicate high standardized loading for each item (> 0.7) and composite reliability (> 0.7) and average variance extracted (AVE) (> 0.5) for each construct that satisfied the validity and reliability criteria. Moreover, a goodness of fit index (GoF) value of 0.476 was calculated showing a good model fit. Figure 1 shows that cruise traveler's experience has four dimensions with significant weights. Moreover, cruise traveler's experience has a significant influence on satisfaction and behavioral intentions. A simple test of mediation was also performed which confirmed that satisfaction mediates the relationship between cruise traveler's experience and behavioral intentions (z-statistic = 2.145; p < 0.05).

FIGURE 1: Structural Model



CONCLUSION

This study intended to develop a scale for assessment of cruise traveler's experience and validate it by examining its effects on cruise traveler's satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Findings indicated that cruise traveler's experience may significantly impact their satisfaction and behavioral intentions. These findings are in line with existing limited literature [3], [4], [5]. Literature related to cruisers' experience indicates that it is a complex construct involving their cognition and affect which makes it difficult to model [4]. It can, therefore, be observed that most of the studies on cruise travelers have focused on their motivations to cruise and expectations [2], [4], [5]; ignoring to model their onboard experience. The only exception to this argument is the study conducted by Hosany and Witham [3], where they applied to generic scale of 'experience economy' to assess cruiser's experience. However, specific scales to assess cruise traveler's experience are scarce in the literature. Hence, based on an extensive literature review and robust statistical analysis, this study demonstrated that cruise traveler's experience is comprised of four primary dimensions including 'Hedonics & Escapism', 'Social Interaction', 'Recognition & Self-Esteem' and 'Activities and Facilities' and it has a significant effect on cruise traveler's satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The findings of this study also highlighted the partial mediating effects of satisfaction on cruise traveler's experiences and behavioral intentions indicating that experience may be a more significant predictor of their behavioral intentions if it develops satisfaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that satisfaction with the onboard experience triggers their behavioral intentions. Hence, cruise marketers and developers should try to carefully design, manage, and stage the experiential offering to enhance cruise traveler's experience. Moreover, the activities and facilities and hedonics and escapism are observed to be the most significant dimensions of cruise traveler's experiences. Therefore, management should also focus on the additional facilities and activities on board so that the hedonic and escapist motivations of cruise travelers are fulfilled.

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