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Research paper

Enhancing the Tourism Operation Success in Sabah Malaysia: a Conceptual Framework

Zou Danting[1]*, Farzana Quoquab[2], Nomahaza Mahadi[3]

[1,2,3] *International Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 54100, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*
**Corresponding author E-mail: dzou2@live.utm.my*

Abstract

In recent years, the tourism industry is in the rise and contributes significantly in the economy of Malaysia. Although Sabah is one of the main tourism attractions in Malaysia, the studies towards the factors that can ensure the tourism operation success have not been fully concerned at the same time. Considering this, the present study proposes a conceptual framework that addresses internal as well as external factors towards the tourism operation success in Sabah. This study utilized scientific way of reviewing literature in gathering the relevant information. Relevant articles are reviewed pertaining to the tourism operation success. Content analysis approach is considered to analyse the data. The framework suggests that, the internal and external issues faced by the tourism operators are the key factors that determined the successful performance and development of the tourism operators in Sabah. The proposed internal factors are proper cash flow management, human resource management and brand image whereas, the external factors are the usage of online social media and the cooperation from the online travel agencies. Together, these two big forces (internal and external) enhance the performance of tourism operations in Sabah which eventually contributes to the tourism operation success.

Keywords: *Malaysian tourism industry; Cash flow management; Human resource management; Brand image; Social media management; Online travel agency.*

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the primary sources of income for Malaysia. From 2010, tourism industry has grown faster than the previous decade. Globally, the international tourism revenues grew to over 1 trillion USD in 2011 with the number of over 1 billion international tourists in 2012 for the first time.

Sabah is one of states located on the island of Borneo in East Malaysia. There are many famous tourist destinations in Sabah which help the state attracted millions of domestic and international tourists. The tourism industry in Sabah is being well-developed, 158 tourism operators registered under Sabah Tourism Board by the end of 2014, which assist the country to create over 2 million jobs in the related field.

In Sabah, most of the tourism operators are operating as small business. They receive and provide tourist-related services to tourists in the region. Their operations and development were considered stable and successful during the last decades. But, since 2010, the pace of the development in the tourism industry in Sabah did not match the fast-growing number of incoming tourists. The government noticed these issues and continued contributing to the development in the tourism industry by updating the facilities such as expanding the airport in the major tourism cities and towns; assisting the tourism operators to design new attractive tour packages; improving the professional knowledge and skills of the participants in the industry, providing tourism training and courses in the local institutes; managed and organised the tourism operators in the tourism industry to ensure healthy competition in the industry. However, the growth of revenue in the industry remain as negative since 2013, and there are totally 33 tourism operators shut down their business since 2015. It is recognized that there might have issues that the tourism operators may face and need to settle by themselves.

Currently, there are 125 registered tourism operators in Sabah, which located in 5 major cities of Sabah; namely Kota Kinabalu, Kudat, Sandakan, Semporna and Labuan. Kota Kinabalu is the capital city of Sabah. It is a coastal city located at the bottom of South China Sea in Borneo Island. The Kinabalu National Park, with Mount Kinabalu, which gave the city its name, was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2000. Besides that, there are many other tourist attractions in and around the city, which make it a major tourism destination. On the other hand, Kudat is a town which is situated at the northernmost point of Borneo Island. It is located 190 kilometers north of Kota Kinabalu, about three hours driving distance from Kota Kinabalu. The tourism industry here is benefited by the leisurely lifestyle and charming culture of the native people, and fresh seafood. Sandakan is located at the northeastern coast of Borneo Island. The city is famous in its history, culture, wildlife preservation center, natural caves, and beautiful islands in the region. Semporna is in the east coast of Sabah. The nearby small islands make it one of the world's famous diving destinations, such as Sipadan Island. Conversely, Labuan Island is located off the coast of Sabah, it used to belong to Sabah, but in 1984 it became a federal territory of Malaysia. Labuan Island is a well-known tourist destination in the region for tourists who love diving and fishing. The Airport in Labuan provides flights to Kota Kinabalu regularly.

Previously, most of the studies on the tourism operators in Sabah only focused on the aspects of customer satisfaction, facilities and services provided by the tourism operators. However, less attention has been paid to the internal issues within the tourism operators and external issues that influence the tourism operation suc-

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cess in Sabah. Considering this, the present study attempts to shed some lights on the internal and external issues that are faced by the tourism operators in Sabah. More specifically, this study attempts to develop a framework towards the tourism operation success in Sabah.

This study expects to benefit tourism operators in Sabah to figure out the important issues that impact their tour operation success. Besides, the objectives of the study are to inspire those traditional tourism operators in Sabah to generate new ideas on how to utilize the online social media to attract more customers, engage with the customers and build a famous brand; and how to cooperate with the online travel agencies to expand their business. Not only this, but also to help to improve the entire tourism industry, by raising the awareness of branding power in the industry. Tourism operators should have their famous brands instead of famous destinations only. Besides that, this study will inspire future researchers to develop more variables that will impact tourism operation success in other tourism places.

This study is fivefold. The next section discusses the theoretical underpinning of the study followed by highlighting the internal issues of tourism operators. In the fourth section, external issues are briefly discussed. Lastly, the paper ends with a concluding section.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

This study is built upon the stakeholder theory from R. Edward Freeman in 1984. The theory defines stakeholders as the people or parties which impact the corporation. It also includes the impact of the corporation on these people and parties. The theory also points out the importance of figuring out the stakeholders of the company, based on that, the company is only able to develop the accurate strategies to deal with these stakeholders in the business operations and developments.

Generally, stakeholders can be categorized into two groups including internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. The internal stakeholders can be divided into three categories such as owners, managers, and employees. Examples of external stakeholders are the society, government, shareholders, customers, suppliers, and creditors (1).

In this study, both internal and external stakeholders are going to identify; and there are discussions about their influences towards the tourism operation success. Then, it could help the tourism operators to figure out how to engage with these stakeholders according to their different interests, so that, it could help them to manage these stakeholders to achieve the tourism operation success.

3. Internal Issues of Tourism Operators

The internal stakeholders include employees, managers and owners. Most of managers in the tourism operators in small business are the owners who oversee all management issues such as finances and human resources. The employees in the industry are mostly tour guides including those in charge of field operation and reception.

3.1. Cash Flow Management

(2) studies cash flow management in the small business. The author explains that small businesses have several natural weaknesses including limited resources. It states that among small business owners, no more than 40% have knowledge about cash flow management. It also states that the key factor leads business into success is the cash flow management. It is the essential power which keeps business in operation. It also indicates the significant effort of good cash flow management towards the business performance in the study. It states that with a well-planned cash flow management system in the business, the business can obtain higher profits and avoid unpredictable risks.

Unfortunately, (3) state that in the real practice, most the small business owners are lack of the knowledge in cash flow management, especially in how to avoid the risk and earn value. The way they manage their cash flow in business operations only carry out by their experience. It further discovers the roots of poor cash flow performance in the small business. By the reason of lack of cash flow management knowledge, the small business always overtrades when the owners believe that there is a good fortune. This always cause of lack of cash flow in their business operations, which brings in all kind of negative impact to the company. It also describes in the study about these potential negative impacts towards business development which can be caused by the poor cash flow management. It includes low productivity of the business operations, and loss of confidents and satisfactions from both suppliers and customers, in the end, it may result a loss in business opportunity.

Furthermore, according to (4), these small business owners not only lack of financial knowledge, they don't acknowledge the power of the cash flow management. Usually, they will hire the professionals to handle their financial management, but it is only in taxation services. They don't really put attention with all the financial data in their business except the overall amount. Improper use of financial information and management skills will eventually lead to unstable performance and development in the business.

(5) declares the importance of a cash flow management perspective for the small business owners. In the study, it states that in the tourism industry, the cash flow usually run very fast, so the small business owners must have clear understanding all through their business operations ever since the planning process. It states that a good vision in cash flow management can always help the small business owners arrange their limited resources into the right place.

3.2. Human Resource Management

According to (6), there is a direct link in between the tourism operation success and the performance of tour guides during the business operations. It is important for the tour operators to be sure that their staff are well trained and being professional all through the business operation. It highlights that human resource is the most important element that lead the business to be success in the service industry.

This is also supported by (7), who explains that the major factor influences the business success in the service industry is human resources. To provide a standard professional service to the customers, the company need to have manpower in both quality and quantity. It is essential for the tourism operators to invest more in to the aspect of human resource management by employ enough professional tourism practitioners and provide regular training programmes to help them sharp their skills and update their knowledge in the field. It also declares that regular training programs are as importance as employee recruitment.

Furthermore, (8) declare the company should invest in the vocational training program for the employees. It will not only benefit the employees in their self-developments, but also help the employees to be able to perform more effectively in their works. In that case, the company will receive job satisfaction from the employees and customer satisfaction as well. It will bring good effects in creating a sustainable business development for the company.

However, due to the fast increasing of customer numbers, the tourism industry in Sabah now face a problem with not enough professional to serve the customers. Although the government try to train more locals who working or willing to work in the tourism industry, it still cannot fulfil the large gap of lack of qualified tourism practitioners at the period. To meet the business demands, some of the small tourism operators start to hire the unexperienced staff without enough training and knowledge to work in the industry now.

In line with this, (9) claims that in the tourism industry, there is a huge demand for well-trained people. However, many unprofessional staff have also been recruited by tourism operators who believe that experience could be earned during tasks, even knowledge and skills can be easily gained without proper training. It states that in some developed countries like Britain, where the tourism industry is quite mature, the working experiences and formal training background are not the primary factors that the employers will considered in the first place during recruitments. The employers usually look for the candidates with good character and personality. Hence, there is no proper training plan in place for them.

3.3. Brand and Reputation Building

According to (10), brand and reputation are very important for the tourism industry, that is because it is one of the essential reasons that the tourists will take into consideration when they choose the tourism operators. A famous brand and good reputation will help the tourism operator attract more customers, and benefit the tourism operations during the process. However, it is a time-consuming process for the small business to build its own brand and reputation in the industry. It needs all the efforts that contribute by the employees of the company. The brand and reputation must be built accumulatively from every single effort during the business operation, but a small mistake could ruin all the efforts in one night. In additional, to build and maintain a good image, the tourism operators should be always keep a polite manner and professional way when they deal with the customers, and all kinds of media.

(11) study the steps to build good reputation in the tourism industry. At the beginning, it starts with dealing with the potential customers during consultation. This is the very first impression that the tourism operators could present to the customers. A good image of the company depends on whether the potential customers satisfied with the way and content that the tourism operators response. Although the first impression could help the company to establish a good image in the mind of customers, its reputation still depends on the services delivered by the tourism operators during the trip. Bear in mind, in the service industry, a courteous manner to the customers could be more important than the service quality itself. The last step is to engage with the customers after the trip. The first-hand response from the customers could not only help the tourism operators to figure out how to improve their service, but also help the tourism operators maintain a good relationship with the customers, which could contribute the reputation building for the tourism operators as well.

(12) study other paths for the small business without enough resources to do their brand building, which is collaboration with other famous brands. In conjunction with the events organised by those famous brands is one of the practical way. On the other hand, with the help of the internet technology, the small tourism operators could join the online promotion by the other famous brands, which is a more cost saving method. By cooperation with those well-known brands online, it will increase the chances for the small business operators to attract new customers.

(13) discusses about to invest and build a collective branding in the tourism attractions. Although the benefits of the investment may not result immediately, it is still an optimum way for the small tourism operators to practice. In their study, it is proven that there is significant positive impact to the small tourism operators after establishing a collective branding for the tourism destination.

(14) also state in their study that in most of the mature tourism attractions. It is considerable for all the tourism operators there to build a destination brand. With the contribution by all these tourism operators in the region, it is possible to build a more competitive destination branding. This could be one of the best options for every small tourism operators.

4. External Issues of Tourism Operators

The external stakeholders include suppliers, customers, competitors, shareholders, and government. However, this study only focused on the suppliers, customers, and competitors. Customers, as one of the main stakeholders, are going to be measured by studying customer engagement through multi-channels especially online social media. On the other hand, the study of suppliers and competitors was focused on the opportunities and threats from new online travel agencies.

4.1. Online Social Media

The internet technology is developing rapidly in this century; it has been applied into every aspect in human's life. The applying of internet technology in tourism industry has been proven have significant influences with tourism operations in management, marketing, and trading methods. It motivates this traditional service industry to carry out innovation within its organization, service, and marketing strategy.

Many countries consider internet technology as an effective instrument in developing tourism industry. For example, majority of the tourism operators in China are using social media and mobile apps to promote their business, engage potential customers, communicate with their agents and customers, and to deal with the payment issue. Furthermore, in Australia, the government encourage the tourism participants in the industry to utilize the internet technology in their business developing process by providing their information and website links on its official websites and Facebook page. Besides that, the Australia government also offer education and guidance to the tourism operators on how to use internet technology efficiently during their business operation (15).

Online social media refers to websites and mobile apps. Online social media is considered as the most effective new instrument to develop businesses. According to (16), tourists prefer to obtain information through tourism websites and relevant social media online rather than to speak to a traditional travel agent in the office. It also states that in Europe, the tourists give more credits to the online information than other sources. With the online social media, comments are more likely to be honest and will remain on the website for a much longer period. In addition, everyone who access the internet can read the information at any time. And because the information could be reviewed and commented by the public, it made them more trustworthy. That is the reason people valued this kind of information.

(17) discuss the benefits of using the online social media to promote the business by the tourism operators. It helps the tourism operators to engage with their customers more flexible. It is possible for the small tourism operators to understand the desires of the customers by gathering and analysing the online information, and design the right services to fulfil the demands. Furthermore, it helps the management level of the tourism operators to obtain the first-hand feedback from the tourists, then the managers can find out the issues that need to be fixed during their tourism operations.

Another benefit for utilizing online social media is its low cost and high effectiveness in engaging with customers. (18) state in their study, that other than the press releases they used to use before, organizations prefer to use online social media to contact with their customers. It helps them to promote their latest updates directly to the target audiences. Through the help by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the tourism operators could send their messages in more attractive ways such as pictures and videos to the public and target potential customers. This is much more effective way than posting a press release or advertisements before. Furthermore, it is more easy to narrow down the target audiences; hence, the advertising send through online social media could remain for a longer period than the normal advertising send through traditional media; besides that, it is much more cheaper when using online social media to do advertising; lastly, the links

that on the advertising send through online social media could help the customers get more detail information about the products and service, therefore, it is more easy to generate business.
In addition, (19) declare in their study that grouping and organizing the customers as members of the organization's social media could obtain more business opportunities. That is because good relationships with this group of customers could be built through offering special discounts, and engaging with them on social media, and it could probably foster these customers into long term customers. It also states the loyal customers are important in the service industry. They are the free ambassadors for the organization, the testimonies through them are more trustworthy than advertisements.
There are some successful examples of utilizing online social media to develop businesses. (20) studied travel blogs that developed and utilised by small tourism operators in Taiwan. The study states that the development of tourism industry in Taiwan is highly depends on these small tourism operators, with the help of the online social media, these small tourism operators have successfully promoted their products and services to all over the world with a minimum cost. These travel blogs contain all kinds of creative ideas and useful information in form of notes, photos, and videos. The owners of these blogs usually help the potential customers to arrange their trips online which help the regional business development and their own business as well.
However, (21) states that although there is no doubt about the power of social media. Due to the limitation of human resources, most of the small tourism operators haven't put enough efforts in utilizing the online social media during this business operations. It also discovered that in Italy where the tourism industry is quite developed, most small tourism operators still have not adapted to input resources in establishing their own tourism websites or social media network, but the owners of these small tourism operators understand that the use of internet is an unstoppable revolution to the tourism industry.

4.2. Online Travel Agencies

The online travel agencies in this study refer to the travel agency websites especially giant companies like TripAdvisor and Expedia. Most of these online travel agencies only deal with the customers online. They have enough resources in terms of finance and human resources. The new business operation model made online travel agencies more attractive to customers.
Tourism study finds that nowadays travelers consider that information from internet websites more trustworthy than the traditional travel agents. The sources from the internet websites, especially the comments left there, play an important role during the decision-making process for the travelers. Globally, around one fourth of the tourists deeply depends on the internet websites to determine their travel plans in terms of destinations, activities, and other services (22).
Nowadays, people can use the internet more frequently through their mobile devices. The tourism industry could use this trend as an opportunity in the business development. However, (23) have a different opinion. They declare that for traditional tourism operators, it is difficult for them to compete with these new online travel agencies. The existing of this new business model in the tourism industry made the traditional small tourism operators have no chance to win the competition, especially with those giant online travel agencies.
(24) conducted an interview with a few successful owners of tourism operators in the America. These owners considered these online travel agencies as both threats and opportunities. They all affirmed that online travel agencies will become strong competitors and grab the market share that the traditional tourism operators used to dominate. On the other hand, there is no doubt that these online travel agencies contribute in expanding the entire tourism market, and these online travel agencies may only occupy the market share that once belonged to less qualified small tourism operators.
(25) have a different opinion. It states that the threat is not come from the online travel agencies but the traditional tourism operators themselves. The industry is under fast growing now, the customers have more expectation towards the tourism operators, however, the pace of the traditional tourism operators' self-development cannot meet the new market demands and customer desires. Therefore, there won't be any challenges from the new online travel agencies if the traditional tourism operators could fulfill their own responsible. Such as, nowadays, all airlines and most hotels have developed their own online booking and payment system. This is a good practice that all the traditional tourism operators should be considered.
Online travel websites offer the same services that traditional tourism operators use to provide. However, the customers could acquire all the services by merely clicking a link with the online travel websites. This surely help the customers to saves their time and is much more convenient. (26) discovered that most of the online travel agencies do not have enough experiences with the tourism industry but are proficient users of internet technology. Hence, they have stronger financial and human resources background, their 24-hour customer service and online payment systems attract more customers.
On the other hand, (27) states it is costly for traditional tourism operators to build online booking systems which provide 24 hours online customer services. It is not practicable for most small tourism operators due to the financial issue. It also declares that traditional tourism operators still have their advantages and most of the time, customers look for basic information online, but contact traditional tourism operators and purchase. In other words, traditional tourism operators could have more customers through online travel agencies. Therefore, tourism operators can collaborate with online travel agencies and use them as channels to obtain more customers.
(28) figure out the other more competitive advantages that owned by those online travel agencies. The tourism packages that they offered to the customers usually have more affordable price than the other market players. That is because there are special links, relationships and beneficial deals in between these online travel agencies and their suppliers. As a result, these suppliers usually only provide their best offers to their preferable online travel agencies rather than the traditional one. Therefore, the online travel agencies can provide more attractive rates to the customers. It also states that these online travel agencies are willing and able to spend more to take the market share that used to belong to the traditional tourism operators.

5. Conclusions

Based on the literature review, the research framework is developed as Figure 5.1. The independent variables are divided into two groups including internal issues and external issues. The internal issues in this study include cash flow management, human resource management, brand and reputation building. The external issues include online social media and online travel agencies. All the factors in the independent variables may have impact towards the mediator variable which is the performances of tourism operators. According to the framework, these influences directly impact the only dependent variable: Tour operation success in Sabah Malaysia.

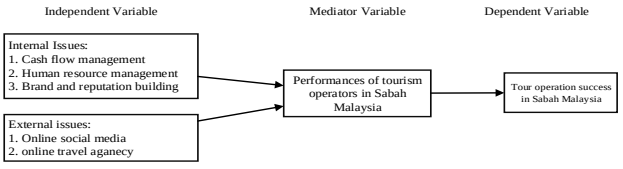

Fig. 5.1: Conceptual Framework

According to the study, it is important for the tourism operators in Sabah to recognize that the secrets that affect tourism operation success are the internal and external issues within the company. That is the reason that in the same location, with the similar facilities and services, under the equivalent circumstance, there are successful tourism operators and not so successful one. The results of the study also indicate that the importance of management in running a business.

The findings will benefit the improvement and development for the entire tourism industry, by raising the awareness of branding power in the industry. Tourism operators should have their famous brands instead of famous destinations only. Besides, the findings of this study could potentially inspire the traditional tourism operators in Sabah to generate new ideas on how to utilize the online social media to attract the more customers, engage with the customers and build a famous brand; and how to collaborate with the new online travel agencies in their business developing process. Although this study is only focus on Sabah in Malaysia, the study covered the five major tourism cities including all the costal tourism destinations in Sabah. The situation in most of the coastal states in Malaysia is the same, there are decent facilities and services, but the tourism operators themselves should face and settle and internal and external issues to catch up the fast-growing speed in today's tourism industry. Furthermore, the findings of the study should be suitable for the rest of the regional countries to improve their development of tourism operations as well, especially to Malaysia's neighboring countries where there are similar environment and situation in tourism industry, such as Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

There are some other external issues that can affect the performance of the tourism operators have not been examined in this research such as economic, society and government issues. For future research work, researchers could also expand on the study to include factors like world economic situation, international relationships, regional affairs, immigration laws and policies, tax issues, culture, and language issues for better results.

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