

Exploring the essence of the spa service experience and experience dimensions

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Accepted for presentation -World Research Summit for Tourism and Hospitality (WRSTH)-10-13 December;
Co-hosted and co-organised by Elsevier and Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Hotel and Tourism Management.

Abstract

The paper explores key themes that constitute the essence of the spa service experience. The spa experience, just like any tourism experience, is regarded as an individual/subjective evaluation involving affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects of an individual before, during and after the service. Increasingly, tourism suppliers become "experience staggers"; they engage customers in a personal and memorable way. Delivery of memorable spa experiences requires an insightful understanding of the key dimensions of the spa service experience consumption. This implies that providing spa experiences require new service experience management perspectives; however there is currently limited understanding in this area. The paper aims to address the gap by exploring the meaning of spa experience, spa service attributes and the experiential dimensions from the users' perspectives within five star resort hotels in Sabah, Malaysia. As the nature of experiences is subjective and involves emotional, physical, spiritual, intellectual and highly personal responses to various aspects of the service experience and delivery, the research is underpinned by the socio-psychology perspective. The construct domains for service experiences by Otto and Ritchie (1996), the four realms of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and key dimensions of Tung and Ritchie (2011) form the basis to direct and guide data collection and analysis. The findings reveal that spa experiences are multidimensional and are attributed to personal and influential realms. Four key spa experience dimensions emerged from the responses, which can be categorised as: perceived feelings/senses/relaxation, treatment, spa natural resources and decoration/environment. These can be further categorised into tangible elements: physical appearance of the spa establishment, the marketing image conveyed via advertisement and brochures and the professional and competent service staff; whilst the intangible elements include the "wholeness" of the establishment – the atmosphere and the emotive aspect of the consumers. The spa experience in resort hotels can be viewed as an "escapist" activity requiring the immersion and active participation of consumers, and also one having aesthetic value (entertainment and passive participation). Spa experience consumption behaviour can be linked to the four realms of experience by Pine and Gilmore (1999), namely entertainment, educational, escapist and aesthetic, or a combination of all four. This finding benefits the health/spa service providers in terms of developing appropriate marketing strategies and enhanced spa experiences. The study also appears to confirm that the individual emotive aspects (affect, expectations, consequential and reflection) are significant in memorable experiences, which form prevalent dimensions for a memorable spa experience, and in turn influence revisits and positive word of mouth. The identified dimensions offer a better understanding of consumer behaviour in the spa consumption experience context within the resort hotels. It points out the importance of individual emotive aspects in creating spa memorable experiences; and benefits the spa service providers in term of "staging" their spa experiences and developing differentiation marketing strategies. A major limitation of the paper is due to the nature of the exploratory study, the type of respondent (foreign tourists), the small sample size and the nature of qualitative data which is contextual, limiting the generalisability of the research findings as compared to quantitative research. A comparative research work of resort hotels in different locations and use of the mixed method would prove beneficial for the possible validation of the findings.

Keywords: meaning of spa experience, spa attributes, spa experience dimensions, service experience consumption, spa consumption behaviour

Introduction

As we are moving away from services to an experience economy, the consumer emotive aspect has become more evident; it is pertinent in the service experience consumption and influences the way tourism suppliers operate and manage their products and services. The value or attractiveness of a tourism product or service is increasingly based on a specific experience; and creating memorable experiences is essential. Tourism suppliers increasingly become "experience staggers" and offer an experience that engages the customers in a personal and memorable way (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p.3-4). Accordingly, the experience is something deeply personal, at different levels - physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual and "creating memorable experience is the essence and the raison d'être of the hospitality industry." (Pizam, 2010, p 343.); these are felt by consumers during the consumption of the service experience or event (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). The concept of the tourism experience has gained extensive attention in current tourism research (Chan and Baum, 2007a). Some of these are in the area of development of service experience constructs (Otto and Ritchie, 1996), the experience management via the four realms of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and the essence of the memorable tourism experience (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Spa service is a subsector of the health and wellness tourism product/service (Smith and Puczko, 2009) and has been seen as an emerging part of the health and wellness tourism product/service in the leisure and tourism industry. Spa service as a tourism component has been interpreted as part of personal well-being and lifestyle - as a way to release work stress for working people in urban areas, a new form of leisure/tourism activity for foreign tourists, a body treatment for personal well-being (stress release) and cosmetic surgery for an individual. To some extent, spa service is deemed as multi-services that include medical, personal beauty/surgery and leisure-related activities (Chan, 2007). Spa services are part of the generation, staging and consumption of experiences through the manipulation of a range of service dimensions and an individual as well as other related elements associated within the context. Increasingly, the spa has become an important economic and marketing strategy for hoteliers, resorts and tourist destinations to attract tourists (Madanoglu and Breznina, 2008).

Like any other tourism experience, the spa experience is regarded as an individual and subjective evaluation, involving the affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects of an individual, of an activity related to spa service which begins before, during and after the spa service. As such, it is a journey of experiences that is highly individual and subjective; it is something deeply personal experienced at physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels. The quality of spa experiences is likely to be influenced by the quality and experience of the spa staff, training methodology, product selection and display, promotion and marketing, maintenance, financial and inventory controls, and the consistency of customer service. Thus, it is postulated that spa service experiences are derived from the physical environment, service employees and service delivery process; they are "experience-driven". In other words, the perception of the value of the spa experience is not linked to the quantity of the treatments experienced, rather, it is linked to the creation of experiences that touch and change people's lives. Pine and Gilmore (1999) strongly argued that experiences are a distinct offering from services; they create "memorable" offerings that will remain with one for a long time. Thus, in this sense, the consumer must be part of the process and his/her senses are utilised to feel and to actively participate in the said process in order to appreciate the entire spa experience. This implies that providing spa experiences require new service experience and management perspectives. The customisation and personalisation for a "true experience", based on personal needs, interests, time and budget, is vital to create a memorable experience. Arguably, spa service suppliers are unlikely to deliver memorable experiences to its guests without an insightful understanding of what the spa service experience means and its key experiential dimensions. Simply, a spa experience is not only highly personal and subjective; individuals recall experiences subjectively and uniquely despite consistent services rendered at the same location. For a competitive and sustainable delivery spa service experience, the essence of spa service experiences must be properly understood by the spa providers. Tung and Ritchie (2011, p. 2) stressed the importance of

memorable experiences and identified the key emotive aspects – “affect, expectations, consequential and reflections” - which may be deemed significant in the spa experience. The authors proposed that more research was needed to understand tourism experience, in particular to “uncover the specific elements – that is, the essence of what exactly makes certain experiences special, spectacular, and fittingly, memorable.”

Thus, the paper is built based upon the need to understand what constitutes memorable experiences, which allows spa providers to deliver experiences that are special and memorable; this paper uncovers the key experiential dimensions of the spa service experience consumption - the essence of what makes a spa experience special and memorable - that are vital to spa service providers for them to stage and deliver such experiences. This implies that the importance of understanding the key elements facilitates the delivery of a memorable experience, and the underpinnings of formation and retention of those experiences, especially in the context of spa service experiences. Specifically, the paper pursues such understanding by exploring the meaning of spa experience, spa attributes and the experiential dimensions from the spa users’ perspectives within five star resort hotels in Sabah, Malaysia.

The research addresses the key question of: what are the underlying experiential dimensions leading to a memorable spa experience?

Understanding tourist experiences and key service experience dimensions

Experiences have been documented in literature as a complicated dynamic psychological process (Chan and Baum, 2007b), which fluctuate over the course of service delivery and individual engagement, and are interpreted differently by every visitor; they are a subjective, intangible, continuous and highly personal phenomena (O’Dell, 2007). They involve a “transaction among environmental context, mood states, focus of attention and perceptions of risk and competence which shapes the character and quality of the experiences “ (McIntyre and Roggenbuck, 1998, p. 417). Accordingly, experiences can be referred to as two different states, namely “the moment-by-moment lived experience and the evaluated experience which consists of reflection and prescribed meaning (Highmore, 2002). Larsen (2007) states that tourist experience is a past-travel-related event which was significant enough to be stored in long term memory. Predominantly, experiences can be studied through looking at a series of stages or events (Clawson and Knetsch, 1966) and through considering the influences and personal outcomes before the trip and after the tourist returns; from the understanding individual tourist perspectives (emotional states are integral) (Botterill and Crompton (1996); or in relation to character, or context of the interaction, or related to modes of lived emotions –such as sensible feelings, loved body feelings, intentional value feelings, moral feelings (Lee et al., 1994). Cohen (1979) took a phenomenology perspective and explained that experience-seeking behaviour between people and their total world-view was dependent on the location of their centre with respect to the society to which they belonged. Wang (1999) posited that existential authenticity as tourist experiences is not based on objects, but rather on the personal feelings involved in the activities; thus the roles of authenticity and serendipitous moments should be considered (Cary, 2004). Pine and Gilmore (1998) focused on the emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual impressions felt by individuals during an event.

There are four approaches to understand visitor experiences: satisfaction approach, benefit –based approach, experience-based approach and meanings based approach. This implies that experience is not only dynamic but can be documented at a multitude of levels and through different methodological approaches. It is therefore argued that the tourism experience comprises a strong, emotional and experiential reaction by tourists, and thus a visitor’s interpretations of his/her experiences are vital to maintain quality experiences in any tourism environment. In the same vein, tourism experiences gained are likely to be derived from the service performance and the quality of

experience within that particular service experience context. The quality of the experience refers to the tourists' affective responses to their desired social-psychological benefits (Chan and Baum, 2007a). This implies that an array of experiences from a series of specific service transactions, such as contact with people, the physical environment or wildlife, contribute to the actual experience. The affective component of the service experience has been shown to comprise subjective, emotional and highly personal responses to various aspects of the service delivery. Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed six construct domains for the service experience, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Construct Domains of the Service Experience

Dimension	Examples
Hedonic	Excitement, Enjoyment, Memorability
Interactive	Meeting people, Being part of the process, Having choice
Novelty	Escape, Doing something new
Comfort	Physical comfort, Relaxation
Safety	Personal safety, Security of belongings
Stimulation	Educational and informative, Challenging

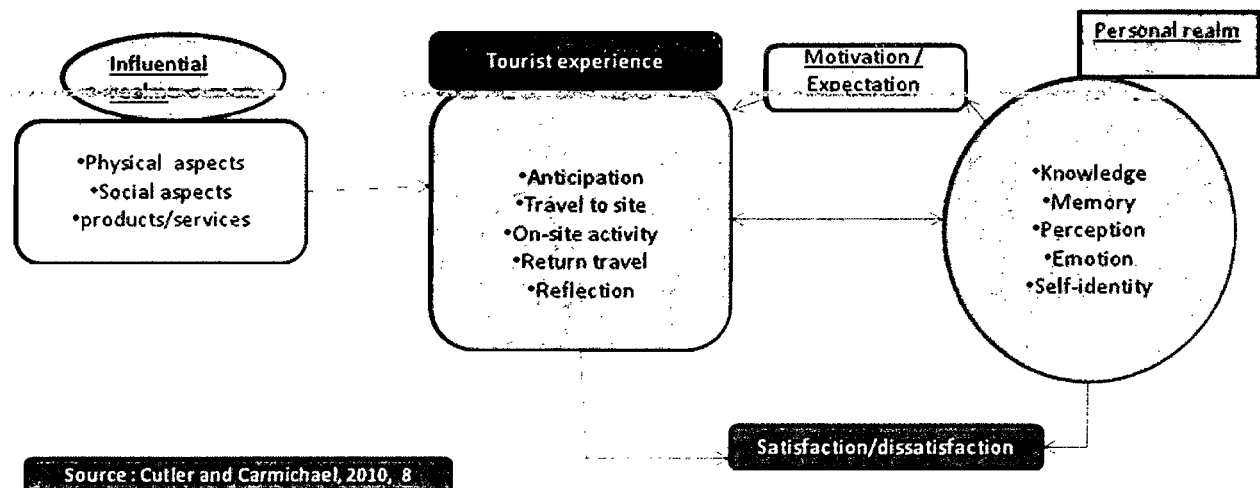
(Source: Otto and Ritchie, 1996, p. 169)

Elsewhere, Tung and Ritchie (2011) argue the importance of memorable experiences for service providers to deliver those experiences that are special and cherished; they also advocate the understanding of the essence of what constitutes an experience that is memorable, and confirm that memorable experiences comprises the elements of affect, expectation, consequentiality and reflection. Nevertheless, it is not certain as to what extent these emotive aspects are applicable to spa providers to deliver memorable spa service experience.

Understanding the tourist experience conceptual model

Predominantly, tourists tend to articulate their meaning of experiences in relation to three dimensions : social/human aspects of the experiences (meeting the same individuals or social group of similar interest or they can interact at different destinations); the environmental aspects of the experience (feelings about the need to protect and preserve fragile resources); and activity aspects within those environments (intense feelings of being part and parcel of the said activities). This is consistent with the tourist experience conceptual model of influences and outcomes (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010) where elements which shape the experience comprise: a) influential realm (outside of individual) which consists of physical, social and product/services aspects; and b) personal realm which consists of elements within an individual – knowledge, memory, perception, emotion and self-identify, as shown in Figure 1 below. The personal realm tends to impact the memorable experiences and form part of the motivation/expectation, unique experience and outcomes. Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) argue that tourist experiences are seen as commodities that are related to the various products/ services which enable the occurrence of experiences, whilst the core tourism product is the experience itself (Prentice et al., 1998). Motivations and expectations related to the overall evaluation of the experience have been documented as vital in tourist experiences.

Figure 1: The tourist experience conceptual model of influences and outcomes



Qualitative research method

The research focuses on the spa experience which is based on the feelings of an individual in his/her consumption of the spa service. It aims to provide an understanding of the essence and experience dimensions of the spa service experience, which involve the influential and personal realms as presented in Figure 1 above. The understanding of spa experience dimensions needs to be grounded in the realities that tourists themselves describe. Thus, an inductive qualitative approach is deemed suitable. Likewise, qualitative research is suited for situations where little is known about the subject matter (Weaver and Lawton, 2002). The qualitative approach was used to provide an insightful understanding of the underlying meaning, key attributes and experience dimensions of spa-goers consuming spa services at resort hotels in Sabah.

In-depth interviews were conducted based on a series of semi-structured questions aimed at capturing the meaning, key moment of memorable experiences and the experience dimensions of the spa experience. Respondents consisted of 15 international tourists from the Western countries (America and Europe regions), Australia and New Zealand, who had stayed and used health and spa facilities in five-star spa resort hotels located in the Kota Kinabalu area; this was also the data saturation point. The said respondents were interviewed at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA) from January to February 2010. A written permission was granted by the Malaysia Airports Berhad (Kota Kinabalu) to enter the departure lounge to reach the respective respondents. The international tourists were identified by asking several screening questions before the interview, as a way to verify whether the sample was appropriate, which incrementally contributed to ensuring the reliability and validity of the research data. In-depth interviews were conducted using recordings and lasted an average of 40 minutes. They were conducted with the consent of the health and spa tourists on the day they were leaving the city (Kota Kinabalu). The in-depth interviews were conducted using the interview guide approach with a semi-structured format to enable the researcher to identify the topic/issues in advance, and therefore to sequence and word the questions accordingly during the course of the interview. The respondents were asked to describe the meaning of spa experiences, followed by a detailed account of their memorable experiences and to identify the key attributes which they felt contributed to their said experiences. Finally they were asked to describe their own definition of what they thought a memorable experience entailed.

In order to explore the meaning of spa experiences and to identify the attributes and experiential dimensions of a spa, an inductive qualitative research method which is both data and concept driven

is used in data analysis. The recorded interviews were transcribed into a written format and read and re-read several times. The responses and statements were identified, and meanings were derived for further analysis and interpretation. The data was then reviewed repeatedly, revised and analysed to identify and develop appropriate themes based on the category of themes service domain constructs, influential realms and personal realm constructs of spa service experience by Smith and Puczko (2009) and elements of memorable experiences by Tung and Ritchie (2011). The interview transcripts were coded using a data reduction process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), where a phenomenological approach that is based on word or phrase was deemed to indicate a single concept if it contained similar reference, for example the meaning of spa service and spa experiences as a concept of "escape, relaxation, enjoyment, rejuvenation". These factors were then linked to the concept of domains of service experience and an analytical approach was used. The meaning of spa experiences were then linked to tourists' experience constructs and spa service attributes from the previous studies. The final data analysis was based on key experiential dimensions of memorable experiences as suggested in literature (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982; Pina and Gilmore, 1998; Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Then, the descriptive codes were reduced to interpretative themes according to whether they were qualitatively similar or different in character (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The authors were aware and vigilant of the need to remain open to the data in order to allow for theoretical concepts to emerge rather than through preconceived hypotheses from the literature (Hsu, Cai and Wong, 2007).

Finding and discussions

Respondent profile

A total of 15 international respondents from Australasia, Europe and America were interviewed at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport. They were guests who had stayed and used the health and spa facilities at the four resort hotels in Sabah, which provide the said facilities to their guests. Most of the respondents were employed as professionals and executives; and few were employed in non-professional occupations – skilled or unskilled vocations and housewives. The majority of them possessed university degrees and earned annual incomes of more than USD50,000.

Meaning of spa experiences

Predominantly, "spa" is generally recognised as a place for relaxation with features such as sauna, steam rooms, mineral or thermal springs and treatment. The meaning of spa experiences which emerged from the empirical evidence reflected four major themes: (i) perceived feelings/senses (relaxation, enjoyment, escape and something new), (ii) treatments, (iii) natural resources, and (iv) decoration/environment of the spa. This implies that spa service experiences are derived from the emotional/psychological aspects of the respondents and the spa service performance. Generally, the respondents regard the spa service experience as a form of relaxation or a feeling of affect and regeneration, tranquillity and enjoyment, for example in the following quotes: "*feeling of relaxation, pampering, indulgence...*" (Interview informant 1); "*Relaxation and regeneration...*" (Interview informant 2) and "*something that involves pampering and enjoyment, taking time for yourself...*" (Interview informant 7), "*Relaxation, tranquility, peaceful...*" (Interview informant 11, 15); and "*it is all about being healthy and happy when you're travelling and seeing new things*" (Interview informant 12). This seems to suggest that spa experiences are part of relaxation during a holiday (for time out, to release stress and unwind), or as part of the whole holiday experience itself (holiday and relaxation). It is dependent on the individual tourist as to how highly/important the spa is considered in their holiday. These can be evidenced in the quote;

"I always do it when I am on holiday. It's nice to relax more, to pamper ourselves. It's just part of being on holiday. It's just what we do when we go on holiday..."
(Interview informant 3)

Thus, it can be suggested that spa is generally served as "relaxation" during a holiday. It also seems to suggest that "relaxation" has been the most important value to tourists holidaying in Sabah, Malaysia. This is in line with their travel motive - "holiday and relaxation".

Many respondents expressed their spa service experience in relation to the variety of treatments and massages provided as indicated by one of the respondents: "*spa experience largely means the different types of treatments and massage, the professional looking after our needs, a variety of different treatments from different countries... massages like Thai or Swedish massage, or oil massage, but also the whole facility just being a relaxation place. Place just to go, and sit, and relax and enjoy the quiet time...*" (Interview informant 4); and "*Possibly going to relax and get some... manicure, pedicure, massage... facial... just to go and get relaxation remedies...*" (Interview informant 13); or "*Just to relax and have the opportunity that we don't normally have...*" (Interview informant 10). Interestingly, it was found that many relate their spa service experiences with hot tubs, mineral baths or hot springs as pointed by one of the respondents: "*besides relaxation, where you get massage, pedicure and other treatments....and typically the service experience has some sort of pools, special type of mineral baths, or hot spring, or something like that...*" (Interview informant 9). The findings also show that spa service experiences form a common basis and source for building spas; they form a traditional definition of a spa (Smith and Puczko, 2009). Likewise, a few of the respondents relate their spa service experience to the decorative/environment of the spa, as highlighted by a respondent: "*the spa experience means it should be somewhere that is clean, because usually it smells nice, and has a nice atmosphere too... well-decorated, good services, friendly services...*" (Interview informant 14). In short, this implies that the spa service experience is regarded as a "personal feeling" and perceived as a form of relaxation, health and well-being, health-living lifestyle or as a leisure activity. The four themes which emerged are commonly found in spa and health literature (Smith and Puczko, 2009) and also in domains of service experience (enjoyment, escape, something new, physical comfort) by Otto and Ritchie (1996). This shows that spa service experiences are emotional, physical and intellectual impressions (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and that the four realms of experiences of Pine and Gilmore (1998) are useful in understanding the essence and management of spa service experiences. Simply, the spa experience tends to be influenced by the place/environment of the spa and the relationship between the consumer and the respective spa provider. Spa experiences are seen to be multidimensional and have been described as part of

holiday relaxation and experience. The spa experience represents leisure/relaxation for tourists who are less health-conscious. For the health-conscious tourist, it is a healthy/well-being related activity during a holiday. The perception of the value of the experience is not linked to the quantity of the treatments experienced, rather, it is linked to the creation of experiences that touch and affect people's lives. This implies that spa providers should not just focus on the types and quantity of the treatments but on providing a memorable experience, via the senses, for the consumers.

Spa Service Attributes and Experiential Dimensions of memorable experiences

Accordingly, the empirical findings reveal four key spa attributes which influence the attraction to spa services. The four key attributes can be categorised as: physical spa establishment (decoration and environment/atmosphere), marketing image (informative brochures/pamphlets brochures), staff and products/services and price. These are reflected in Table 2 below:

Table 2: The Spa Services Attributes

Key attributes	Categories	Interview Responses
The Physical Spa Establishment (Yoon and Uysal, 2005)	<p>Nice decoration and environment/ atmosphere</p> <p>Cleanliness and Hygiene</p>	<p><i>"It's just the right set up. It's on the little platform with curtains, with the pool bags, it looks relaxing. Very therapeutic. I think that's a good idea..." (Interview informant 1)</i></p> <p><i>"Well, they have laid it out very well. It's very relaxing. It's kind of away from the hitch and it brings all the tranquillity in... If the environment is wrong or the spa is badly,. I think no one would want to go there. It needs to be relaxed; it needs to have an experimental feel of luxury..." (Interview informant 15)</i></p> <p><i>"It looks like a relaxing atmosphere. It gives easier access than going to the city. And what you're going to get, the atmosphere seems correct for me..." (Interview informant 17)</i></p> <p><i>"The environment is very calming, everything was perfect. Everything was natural and perfect. The way they designed the spa was very calming. From the moment you walked in, there was running water and stones, and beautiful sand... the whole design was designed to make you feel completely at ease and calm..." (Interview informant 18)</i></p> <p><i>"The atmosphere. It looked very stylish. The service is excellent. It was easy to get. It was at the same accommodation we were staying at. The atmosphere is the main thing. It looks nice, so you want to go there..." (Interview informant 21)</i></p> <p><i>"Because of its cleanliness... The product they use is also important..." (Interview informant 6)</i></p>
The Marketing Image (Yoon and Uysal, 2005)	<p>Professionalism</p> <p>Brochures / Information</p>	<p><i>They had a very nice brochure which presented all their treatments, which is also made it very attractive. The brochure was self-explanatory on what you would receive..." (Interview informant 7)</i></p> <p><i>"There was information in our hotel room, about the different features of the hotel. As well as the spa, specifically. It explains, you know... different services, different packages that you can have. Maybe this treatment and this treatment together..." (Interview informant 10)</i></p>
Staff and Products / Services	Well-trained staff	<i>"...when we first entered, they were very good in making us feel comfortable and they were very attentive to our needs. The staff was really knowledgeable. And also the whole ambience.</i>

(Chan, 2009)	Variety of treatments	<p><i>Atmosphere of the place was very relaxation-oriented..." (Interview informant 4)</i></p> <p><i>"I think the staff is very important - having somebody who is very knowledgeable in what they do and can explain to somebody who does not yet have the treatments..... Just having a person to kind of guide you along is important. Having her doing it correctly and safely is very important..." (Interview informant 9)</i></p> <p><i>"I think the staff were very important. Because, it is the first interaction you have with them. When you first inquire about the spa, you either like it, or you don't. So, it's about the first impression. And I think that's very important. And how they make you feel during the treatment... when you need to increase the pressure, or decrease the pressure, and whether you are enjoying it, right until you say goodbye to them. I think it's all about the customer contact from the first impression. It's obvious how good they are at what they do... the treatment as well..." (Interview informant 12)</i></p> <p><i>"It's very important that you have somebody who's well-trained. If you have somebody with a bad attitude, that really doesn't work. That's probably the most important feature related to the person doing it..." (Interview informant 14)</i></p> <p><i>"The type of treatments, the massage. They had a great variety of treatments and I picked several during the six days we were there. I tried a different treatment, which was the traditional one..." (Interview informant 7)</i></p>
Price	Cheaper and affordable	<p><i>"They are a lot cheaper - we used the spa facility in Malaysia, in Kota Kinabalu - than they are at home. And even Nexus which is on the expensive side for spas, is still cheaper than spas at home. So it's a treat for us." (Interview informant 15)</i></p> <p><i>"For us, it is more affordable in Asia than at home, so you can afford a range of treatments. I think it's like a relaxation package, it is well-presented to help you to address health opportunity for spiritual and physical..." (Interview informant 2)</i></p>

The above suggests that the spa attributes include: (i) the physical appearance of the spa establishment (tangible characteristics) in terms of creating/generating a "relaxing" environment/atmosphere, like running water, incense burning, music playing, nice spa decorations and cleanliness, (ii) the marketing image the spa conveys through advertisement or brochures, the location in terms of accessibility and availability, and also the affordability in terms of reasonable pricing of the spa treatments, and (iii) the staff and services provided to the guests which include the professionalism of well-trained and knowledgeable staff and the variety of treatments on offer.

Apart from the affordability, accessibility and availability of the spa, the informants stated that they were likely attracted to the spa's physical attributes and the marketing image (advertisement) of the spa.

Interestingly, the key spa attributes are from the marketing image (e.g. brochures and price are regarded as more important than the physical spa establishment factors in "encouraging" health and spa visitations, as evidenced in the following quote:

"Because the spa is in a corner, you don't see it before you go. So, you just look at the brochure... because you don't really see it before you go, it doesn't really make any difference in your decision..." (Interview Informant 14)

Apart from the above mentioned, it is interesting to note that "culture/learning" seems to exist and influence the decisions/preferences in choosing types of spa treatments, such as the traditional/local types of massages, as evidenced from the following quote:

"They offered treatments that I haven't seen elsewhere which I wanted to try... I don't want to go far away from UK, to go to Borneo and go to a spa in which I can have the same treatments at home. I think when you come to Borneo, you want to see a spa that incorporates the local culture, methods and traditions - which I was very pleased to see that they do..." (Interview informant 18)

"As I said, incorporating the traditional methods into their spas, or treatments. So, you know it's a spa in Sabah, not a spa in New York. Something that is different from other treatments that you had in other countries..." (Interview informant 18)

The empirical findings have shown that the spa attributes are relatively important in motivating the tourists to visit spas at the destination area. This directly indicates that the spa establishment itself is critical in delivering the perceived relaxation of the spa experience. Generally speaking, the informants thought highly of the professionalism of the well-trained staff who performed the treatments, and also the relaxing atmosphere/environment at the spa. These aspects would appear pertinent to health and spa providers. Apart from that, tourists are considerably concerned over the availability of the variety of treatments, with reasonable prices, and the location and accessibility of the spa, which is very similar to as previously discussed. Indeed, the spa attributes are regarded as the key elements in a spa experience. These key elements cannot be individually considered but are combined to generate "relaxing" senses/feelings in the whole spa experience. It is suggested that the "wholeness" of a spa property is very critical in delivering the spa experience. This is best described in the following quote:

"Just to feel relaxed. Someone, they know what they're doing. If they don't, it's not going to be a good experience. Being able to float.. if you haven't got that feeling, the person doesn't know what they're doing. It's like they're taking you on a journey. If they're not succeeding, then it's a waste of time and money" (Interview informant 17)

The empirical data reveals that the spa service experience is influenced by the personal realm and tangible elements or influential realm. The experiential dimensions that emerged from responses are related to the informants' socio-psychological and physiological factors (goal satisfaction/fulfilment), and also the spa attributes (professionalism, spa setting/atmosphere, available treatments, affordability, and availability). Thus, these two realms are regarded as key spa attributes. In addition, it seems that the personal realm plays a greater significant role in the spa service experience, as it is likely to act as an experiential dimension that contributes to memorable experiences, since the spa service experience is perceived from personal feelings (or from the emotive aspects). These key attributes influence the motivation of tourists to experience spa services at their holiday destinations.

The evidence from the interview responses with regards to the experiential dimensions of memorable experiences can be categorized as "escape", "relax and pamper", "enjoyment", "de-stress and time-out" and "unwind and rejuvenation", presented in Table 3 below. The responses seem to suggest that the spa service experience is largely attributed to the individual's social

psychological aspects, including a variety of reasons related to the perceived relaxation during a holiday, but also to physiological (bodily processes) aspects which resulted in needs and wants for resting, relaxation and rejuvenation at the destination area. The majority of the respondents stressed the importance of relaxation, pampering, de-stressing, to unwind, rejuvenation and enjoyment, which are all related to one's health and well-being in the context of the spa service experience. The key attributes to the spas are related to the accessibility, affordability and the physical environment of the establishments.

Table 3: Experiential dimensions associated with memorable experiences

Experiential dimensions	Essence of tourist experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011)	Interview Responses
Escape (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982)	<i>Affect</i>	<i>"To relax, that's the biggest thing. When we go on holiday, because you want to get away from it all (8-10 hours per day working, high pressure, come home, cook, clean)... so you want to have that spa experience, as I said, to just relax, before you can go back and face it again..." (Interview informant 12)</i>
Relax and Pamper (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982)	<i>Expectation</i>	<i>"Just to relax and have the opportunity that we don't normally have..." (Interview informant 10) "Just because we're on honeymoon and we want to relax..." (Interview informant 11) "Because I feel good afterwards, I just like it... You've got time to do it... I mean when you're working, you don't have time to do it. So, during holiday you have more time to do it..." (Interview informant 14) "Because we're on holiday and I want something to treat myself..." (Interview informant 21)</i>
Enjoyment (Steinbach, 2000)	<i>Consequential</i>	<i>"We love massage and we think it's healthy to our body and mind and sense of happiness... that's just what we personally enjoy..." (Interview informant 19) "It's part of the enjoyment of my holiday. It also adds to the relaxation of my holiday and the experience of my holiday..." (Interview informant 7)</i>
De-stress / Time out (Mak et al., 2009)	<i>Expectation</i>	<i>"Just to have a time-out and just to pamper myself, to take time away from the sunshine as well. And because my husband is at the golf course and it is something nice for me to do..." (Interview informant 3) "We wanted some time-out just to relax, rather than just sitting on the beach all day or just eating. We wanted something else to do. And we enjoy just coming to get a relaxation massage to get rid of the stress and tiredness. A down time on our own and for our muscles..." (Interview informant 4)</i>
Unwind / Rejuvenate / Regeneration (Pearce, 1991; Beard and Ragheb, 1983)	<i>Reflection</i>	<i>"To de-stress, and to relax. After playing sport activities, it helps my muscles to rejuvenate..." (Interview informant 13) "We were sore after climbing..." (Interview informant 16) "I came from Sri Lanka, from the Safari, and needed to... Had a long flight, it's good to unwind..." (Interview informant 17)</i>

In short, four key spa experience dimensions emerged from the responses, which can be categorised as: perceived feelings/senses/relaxation, treatment, spa natural resources and decoration/environment; they can be furthered categorised into tangible elements - physical appearance of the spa establishment, the marketing image the spa conveys through advertisement and brochures and the professional and competent service staff; whilst the intangible elements

include the "wholeness" of the spa establishment – the atmosphere and the emotive aspect of the consumers. The findings show that "escape, relaxation, enjoyment, rejuvenation" are the key to one's self and that spa consumption involves the sensory perception of consumers. Thus, the spa experience in resort hotels can be termed as "escapist", which requires the immersion and active participation of consumers, followed by aesthetic value (entertainment and passive participation). These form prevalent dimensions to achieve a memorable spa experience, which in turn influence revisits and spreads positive word of mouth. Evidently, spa service experiences consist of the tangible/physical facilities and intangible elements; and these elements form the service experiences of the spa users. For value innovation to take place within the spa business context, one has to recognise that the spa is a form of service provision as well as experience consumption. More importantly, spa providers need to understand fundamental needs and what constitutes memorable experiences for long term competitiveness and sustainability. It is suggested that spa firms use memorable customer experiences to promote differentiation and increase customer loyalty. Health conscious consumers predominantly seek well-being, find ways to look and feel better, to release stress and improve their health through their travelling experiences. In building the fundamentals for competitiveness and sustainable growth of the spa business, it is suggested that the four realms of experience of Pine and Gilmore (1999) can be applied to the management of spa experiences.

The finding suggests that the provision of memorable spa experiences requires new service experience perspectives since the essence of spa service experiences are "affect, expectations, consequential and reflection". It is recommended that companies take into consideration the influential and personal realms in staging memorable service experiences; spa providers can stage their spa experiences based on the four realms of an experience by Pine and Gilmore (1999), namely absorption, immersion, passive participation and active participation or a combination of all realms

Likewise, it is clear that different spa-goers look for different experiences and the depth of required experiences may be different as it depends on the personal characteristics of the consumers. Generally, the experiences tend to affect both influential and personal realms.

Conclusions, implications and limitations

The paper offers an insightful understanding of the spa experience and the key experience dimensions, and adds to existing literature on tourism experience. The identified key experience dimensions offer better understanding of consumer behaviour in the spa consumption experience context within resort hotels. Spa experience consumption behaviour can be linked to the four realms of experience by Pine and Gilmore (1999), namely entertainment, educational, escapist and aesthetic, or a combination of all realms. For creating memorable spa experiences, this study points out the importance of the emotive aspects of the spa users, namely, the affects, expectations, consequential and reflection. These findings benefit the health and spa service providers in terms of enhancing spa experiences and developing appropriate marketing strategies to attract the users. Spa providers need to see themselves as stages of spa experiences and enhance their quality of service and create memorable experiences for repeat visits via the identified experience dimensions and attributes. A major limitation of this paper is due to the nature of the exploratory study, type of respondent (foreign tourists), the small sample size and the nature of qualitative data which is contextual, which limits the generalisability of the research findings as compared to quantitative research. A comparative research work of resort hotels in different locations and the use of mixed method would prove beneficial for the possible validation of the findings.

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