

CRUISE TOURIST EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS FROM TRIPADVISOR REVIEWS

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Abstract: Cruise tourism has grown in popularity, making it essential to understand the experiences of tourists who choose this unique mode of travel. This study examines the cruise tourist experience through the analysis of TripAdvisor reviews, focusing on key factors that shape customer satisfaction and overall travel experience. Utilizing content analysis, a comprehensive dataset of cruise reviews was analyzed to identify recurring themes such as service quality, onboard activity, and perceived value. The results indicate that positive cruise experiences are heavily influenced by personalized service, high-quality food, and diverse entertainment offerings, while negative experiences often stem from overcrowding, service delays, and itinerary changes. This research provides valuable insights into the aspects of cruise tourism that enhance or diminish customer satisfaction. These findings offer practical implications for cruise operators looking to improve service quality and enhance the overall travel experience for cruise passengers. Further research recommendations are provided to explore variations in experience across different demographics and cruise types.

Keywords: Cruise tourism, Travel experience, Tripadvisor, User-generated content, Phuket

1. Introduction

The cruise industry has been continuously growing for a long time, with companies such as P&O and Cunard pioneering the market targeting high-income older American tourists who enjoy cruising on various routes, emphasizing service quality, safety, as well as onboard and onshore activities. In the early stages of fully expanding their business, cruise lines used small but luxurious ships to operate on a variety of routes, primarily focusing on the Caribbean Sea and offering long world cruises (Cruise Lines International Association, 2008b) that stop at various interesting ports of call in multiple regions such as Europe, South America, and Asia (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2019). The cruise tourism business is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the tourism industry compared to other forms of tourism, based on the volume of international cruise passengers and the number of new cruise ships built each year (Sun, Jiao, and Tian, 2011, pp. 746- 755). When comparing growth rates, the demand for cruise travel increased significantly between 2011 and 2016, with an increase of up to 20.5% (Cruise Lines International Association, 2008b, p. 14). Additionally, the volume of cruise ships has been steadily increasing, with a total of 449 cruise ships currently in operation worldwide (Cruise Lines International Association, 2008b, p. 9). Statistics on cruise passenger numbers from 1990 to the present indicate ongoing growth in all regions, with over half of the cruise tourists coming from America, followed by Europe. Future trends suggest continued growth (PATA, 2010; CLIA, 2014). The popularity of cruise tourism has expanded to other areas, such as Asia.

The cruise industry in Asia is experiencing double-digit growth in terms of capacity utilization in the region and is considered a significant emerging market (CLIA, 2016). The number of

passengers increased from 775,000 to nearly 2.1 million people between 2012 and 2015, equating to an annual growth rate of 39% (CLIA, 2016). According to CLIA (2018), the United States continues to have the highest demand for cruise travel (11.5%), followed by China (2.1%). The Caribbean remains the primary region for cruise line usage (35.4%), followed by the Mediterranean Sea (15.8%), non-Mediterranean Europe (11.3%), and China (6%) (CLIA, 2018). China is the main driver of passenger growth in Asia, accounting for nearly half of the passenger volume in the region in 2015 (CLIA, 2016).

Thailand has emerged as one of Southeast Asia's most popular ports because it provides a wide range of top-notch tourism goods and services. Serving multiple cruise lines, Phuket has undoubtedly been Thailand's most well-liked cruise port for more than thirty years. In addition to Phuket Deep Sea Port, which cannot accept large cruise ships due to its limited capacity, two temporary pontoons have been erected near Patong Beach to serve huge and mega cruise ships during the summer season, in response to the port of Phuket experiencing high demand since 2010. (Monpanthong & Choibamroong, 2015). Phuket is ranked 13th in top 20 scheduled port of calls in the Asian regions (Cruise Lines International Association (2017b, 2018). Frequent cruisers have a preference for appealing cruise destinations with great geographic settings, diverse oriental cultures, abundant wildlife, abundant tourism resources, and unique experiences in Asia for visitors from the west. Asiatic cruises are thought to present a growth opportunity for the transportation and tourist sectors (Lau & Yip, 2020). As such, understanding the cruise experience is crucial for cruise business including ports of call because it helps business, travel agents, port authorities and local tourism businesses cater effectively to the needs and expectations of cruisers. This study seeks to provide a greater understanding of cruise passengers' experience while cruising in the Asian route.

2. Literature Review

Cruise tourism is a "...socio-economic system generated by the interaction between human, organizational and geographical entities, aimed at producing maritime-transportation-enabled leisure experiences" (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011, p. 166). In other word, cruise tourism refers to travel experiences centered around journeying on a cruise ship, where the ship itself is a destination as well as a mode of transportation. Passengers embark on voyages that typically include stops at multiple ports of call, where they can disembark to explore various destinations, participate in excursions, or engage in cultural experiences. Cruise tourism blends the allure of travel with the comfort and convenience of resort-style living, making it a popular vacation choice worldwide.

With this popularity, the literature suggests at least three key areas of cruise related examinations, which are passenger segmentation, cruise travel motivation, and cruise travel experience. For example, recently, Jiao et al. (2021) focuses on segmenting cruise consumers in China based on their travel motivations. While Psychocentric tourist segment prefers participation in cruise travel mainly to meet the family's needs of entertainment and travel shopping, Traditional tourist segment choose to cruise for family relationships enhancement and entertainment.

In addition, travel motivation is another focal point of research. Cruise travel motivations are diverse and multifaceted, reflecting the complex nature of tourist decision-making. Research has identified several key factors driving cruise tourism demand. Hung and Petrick (2011) highlight escape, relaxation, and social interaction as primary motivators. Han and Hyun (2019) investigated the factors influencing repeat cruising behavior, focusing on the role of

relationship investment by cruise lines. The study proposes a conceptual framework that includes motivations, values, image, desire, and relationship investment as key triggers for repeat cruising intentions. The study identified both hedonic (pleasure-seeking) and utilitarian (practical) values as significant motivators for cruise travel. The overall image of the cruise company plays a crucial role in shaping passengers' intentions to cruise again. Recently, Jiao et al. (2021) identified several key motivations for Chinese cruise tourists, including family leisure/relaxation, natural and cultural exploration, bond/communication, social respect, shopping, and cruise promotion. The present study highlighted that the strongest motivations for Chinese cruise tourists were found to be family leisure/relaxation and natural/cultural exploration.

Cruise travel experiences have also gained significant attention in tourism research. Cruise travel experiences are multifaceted, encompassing various stages and dimensions that significantly influence passenger satisfaction and behavior. Several studies have identified multiple stages of travel experience, such as the five stages of recreational experience proposed by Clawson and Knetsch (1966): anticipation, outbound, on-site experience, return, and recall stages. Park and Santos (2016) discussed tourist experience using the three stages of before, during, and after travel, and Radic (2019) used the three stages of pre-travel planning and decision making, cruise participation, and reinterpretation and evaluation to study children's experience with cruises. Research highlights the importance of understanding these experiences to enhance the overall appeal of cruise tourism. For example, from Chen et al. (2023) study, during the anticipation stage, passengers are motivated by the desire for new experiences, convenience, and social engagement, particularly regarding the cruise itinerary and ports of call. Key factors include cabin quality, entertainment options, and family-friendly amenities, which are crucial for family-oriented travelers, during the trip. Lastly, the memories formed during the cruise, influenced by dining options and social interactions, play a vital role in shaping future travel decisions (Chen et al., 2023)(Ali et al., 2022).

Furthermore, studies have explored various dimensions of cruisers' experiences, including education, entertainment, esthetics, and escapism, which influence satisfaction and intention to recommend (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Hwang & Hyun, 2016). Study from Hosany & Witham (2010) suggested entertainment and esthetics aspect of cruise experience played important role for recommendation intention and cruise passenger satisfaction. In their study, Hosany & Witham (2010) referred entertainment to onboard activities and esthetics to attractiveness of the ship setting and sense of harmony. In addition, perceived firm innovativeness plays a vital role in shaping cruise travelers' experiences and perceived luxury value, with advertising effectiveness moderating this relationship (Hwang & Hyun, 2016). The cruise experience is conceptualized as a holistic and long-lasting personal experience, encompassing affective memories, sensations, and symbolism (Mendes & Guerreiro, 2017).

Understanding the cruise experience is crucial for the industry's success and sustainable growth. It enables cruise lines to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by tailoring services to passenger preferences (Hwang & Han, 2014). This knowledge drives industry growth and helps companies differentiate in a competitive market (Papathanassis & Beckmann, 2011). For destinations, it informs economic strategies to maximize benefits from cruise tourism while managing impacts (Brida & Zapata, 2010). Understanding the cruise experience also shapes effective marketing strategies, attracts new demographics, and improves operational efficiency (Sun et al., 2018). Ultimately, comprehending what makes a cruise memorable is key to the industry's responsible growth and adaptation to changing consumer demands and global challenges.

User-generated content (UGC) has become a valuable resource for understanding cruise travel experiences. Online reviews provide insights into various aspects of cruises, including ship quality, staff performance, food, entertainment, and embarkation/disembarkation processes (Arasli et al., 2020). Furthermore, based on UGC, a study from Manolitzas et al. (2022) reveal the importance of value for money, cabin quality, and dining experiences. These approaches demonstrate the potential of UGC in enhancing customer experiences and informing decision-making processes in the cruise industry. To the best of our knowledge, no known study has investigated the attributes of cruise travel experience during cruising within Asian regions, after health crisis situation. The current study aims to seek a greater understanding of cruise ship passenger experience. Key themes of travel experience are highlighted. Practical implications are evident from this research finding.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine cruise passenger experiences through TripAdvisor reviews. Content analysis is particularly suitable for systematically analyzing large volumes of text data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). Data were collected from TripAdvisor (www.tripadvisor.com), one of the world's largest travel platforms. The criteria were used for data selection included English language only reviews. We also adopted reviews with a minimum length of 50 words to ensure sufficient content for analysis.

As stated earlier, the current research aims to seek a greater understanding of cruise passenger experience on-site, in particular after COVID-19. As such, the first cruiseship sailing in Phuket was of this research context. According to the literature, the first cruise ship to visit Phuket after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made a short stop. The Spectrum of The Seas, carrying nearly 4,600 passengers, anchored off Patong Beach before returning to Singapore. This marked the first cruise visit to Phuket since the pandemic began in 2020. In the previous year, 154 ships had brought 485,000 passengers to the island. The Spectrum of The Seas embarked on a four-day journey from Singapore, making stops in Klang and Penang, Malaysia, with Phuket as its final destination.

Reviews of cruise experiences on Spectrum of The Seas posted between October 24, 2020, to the present date. Total of 94 reviews meeting these criteria were collected. A subset of 94 reviews was manually exported to the document application and coded by two independent researchers to validate and refine the themes identified through topic modeling. Based on the results of topic modeling and manual coding, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify overarching themes in cruise passenger experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Result and Discussion

It was found that most of the reviews were written by those who were from Asian countries including Singapore, Vietnam, and The Philippines. Some of them were from Western countries, for example, the US and the UK. Many of them mentioned as being vegetarians. Nearly all of them were cruising with family with kids, in addition, some of them sailing with couples.

Based on an analysis of 94 reviews, three primary dimensions have been evident. These dimensions are service quality, onboard activity, and perceived value. The aspect of service, in

particular staff, was highly mentioned. The following review aspect went to onboard activity, and value. Minority of the reviews were about the cabin of the ship.

The results indicate that positive cruise experiences are heavily influenced by personalized service, high-quality food, and diverse entertainment offerings, while negative experiences often stem from overcrowding, service delays, and itinerary changes. The analysis of the current research aligned with findings from Yi et al. (2014) that Asian cruise passengers looked more on facility, food, entertainment and professional service from staff. Therefore, unlike Western cruisers, top cruise holiday stimulating factors such as discovery, exploration, and adventure were not highlighted in the case of Asian cruise passengers. As a result, the core competitive advantages of cruise tourism in the booming Asian markets focus on offering group-specific and simplified activities that satisfy the need to relax, entertain, and spend time together with top notch service quality and cuisine (Wondirad et al., 2023).

Details of each particular themes are as follow:

Service quality

Based on the reviews included in this study, this highlights the quality of service and how it positively impacts the overall experience. The word, “excellent” was highly written. In particular, friendly and professional staff were highly and positively spoken of in terms of service quality. For example,

We had a pleasant trip on the Spectrum of the Seas to Penang. It was an awesome trip and the staff were great. Special mentioned to Bobby (Navinder) and Liliyana who were always smiling and attentive despite the full capacity during meal times. They took time to chat with us and made us feel special.” (Review, 18)

Indeed, some reviews were indicated to address an important of service quality, especially providing of sufficient staff on board. For example, as mentioned by review xx, “*This points to issues in service quality due to understaffing, which affects customer satisfaction.*”

It was found cultural background would affect satisfaction of the cruise trip. Within Asian itinerary, perhaps, at least from the review, it was not that suitable for those from different cultural society. For instance, “*If you are from [western country] and are used to the cruises out of [the country], do NOT go on this ship. The ship is not the issue. It’s the people. Definitely different culture.* (Review, 2)”. With this regard, those from Asian country, they seem appreciate with the cruise service, for example,

October 26–30, 2023, was our sailing date on Spectrum of the Seas. Everything was excellent! The food selections and restaurants are plenty, and the rooms are kept in a tidy manner. The ship is filled with activities, so you will never get bored. Ms. Sherbet, Mr. KingV, and Mr. Carmelo from the Philippines deserve special recognition for their exceptional work. I’m grateful for this wonderful experience, RCCL. (Review, 4)

However, there is evidence that food culture is an issue. Some of those who found to have food preference reported some obstacle during on the cruise, in particular to those are a vegetarian “... *but as vegetarians the food being laid out surrounded by the non-veg was off-putting.* (Review, 5).”

Many reviews cover on the obvious for travel considerations such as room, beds, cleanliness, food and entertainments. A medical team on the cruise is also of satisfied to cruise passengers.

All the medical staffs were calm, professional and assuring that everything will be ok. They did what they can to stabilize my dad, watched him overnight every 2 hours and arranged for emergency disembarkment to Phuket hospital 1st thing the next morning when we docked. The coordination from the medical team to immigration team to the ambulance were all smoothly and well arranged. My dad received the necessary treatment at the Phuket Hospital and he is ready to go home. (Review, 14)

In regard to cruise cabin, it was found that customers reviewed both positive and less positive opinion. For instance,

"We had a balcony room which was clean and bright, we had lovely views of the surroundings. (Review, 7)"

"The ship is beautiful however there is not enough amenities for the amount of passengers they cram on, could not have breakfast twice as there were no seating left and struggled to find a table for dinner most nights. (Review, 8)"

Onboard activity

Overall, reviewers on Trip Advisors describes a variety of onboard activities, contributing to the overall enjoyment of the cruise. The findings are consistent with Ail et al. (2022) that various activities available on the cruise, such as entertainment options, excursions, and onboard facilities enhance the overall experience. The reviews suggested various types of activities, for example, *"I'm still amazed at the live musical show. Entire cast was fabulous! (Review, 31)"*, *"All the facilities inside the cruise were very satisfying - the food, the bar drinks, the pools, and the entertainment were all comprehensive. (Review, 25)"*, *"Activities are first class with the North Star being a highlight. I traveled with my adult daughter and we both had a fantastic time enjoying the food, entertainment, activities, casino and multiple bars. (Review, 70)"*

The review leads to some conclusion that RCL, perhaps, a good option for family vacation. Onboard activity seems at a satisfactory level to passengers. This is similar to Hosany & Witham (2010) who suggested entertainment and esthetics aspect of cruise experience played important role for recommendation intention and cruise passenger satisfaction. For instance, *"This is a really good choice to go with if you want to spend time with family and friends. (Review, 13)"*. *"Plenty to do on board and the evening entertainment was good. (Review, 20)"* Onboard activities mentioned include casino for adults, swimming pools for all, and rock climbing for kids.

Nevertheless, *"For a family friendly cruise, personally I find the pools insufficient (altho our kids are teenagers and don't really need them). I see younger parents searching for spots in the pools to dip their toddlers' in. (Review, 50)"*. It was found that some reviews mentioned that activity reservation management should have been offered in order to satisfy cruise passengers waiting for activity engagement. It was found that despite the variety of activities provided, complimentary onboard attractions were crowded. It was also suggested that more 'free of charge' activities should be provided. *"Almost everything else are additionally charged in USD. (Review, 15)"*

Perceived value

Overall, the reviews highlighted a positive perception of value, where the amenities exceeded expectations for the price. *"Whole trip was our money's worth. Every penny of it. (Review, 31)"*

While some showed a negative perception of value, where the price did not align with the activities offered.

The current analysis is aligned with Yi et al. (2014) that Asian cruise travelers have four sub-dimensions of cognitive perceived value consisting of facility, food & beverage, entertainment, and staff.

Those from western countries are likely less happy with cruising in Asia. *“In summary, itinerary didn't meet expectations,. ...Don't think I'll cruise with RC again. (Review, 21)”*. *“Nothing special. (Review, 22)”*, *“Expensive tours, not much to see. (Review, 40)”*

While Asian cruise passengers deem to appreciate with the route within Asia. *“I am writing to express my utmost satisfaction and appreciation for the incredible cruise experience I had recently in Singapore... Thank you for providing us with an extraordinary cruise experience, and I look forward to the possibility of sailing with Royal Caribbean again in the future.(Review,26)”*, *“a must try cruise to sail Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand cruises. (Review, 43)”*

5. Conclusions

Analysis of 94 reviews of cruise passengers, primarily aboard the Spectrum of the Seas, reveals a predominantly Asian passenger base with some Western travelers, mostly comprising families and couples. The cruise experience hinges on three key dimensions: service quality, onboard activities, and perceived value. Positive experiences stem from personalized service, high-quality food, and diverse entertainment, while negative aspects include overcrowding and service delays. Cultural differences significantly impact satisfaction, with Asian passengers prioritizing facilities, food, entertainment, and service quality over the adventure-seeking preferences of Western cruisers. To succeed in the booming Asian market, cruise lines should focus on offering group-specific, simplified activities that cater to relaxation, entertainment, and family time, while maintaining high service standards and diverse cuisine options. The findings underscore the importance of tailoring experiences to specific cultural groups and efficiently managing onboard activities and crowding to enhance overall passenger satisfaction.

This research provides practical implications for cruise related business. To better cater to the Asian cruise market, cruise lines should prioritize cultural sensitivity and customization. This includes implementing comprehensive cultural training for staff, designing itineraries that balance relaxation with family-friendly entertainment, and expanding Asian cuisine offerings with a focus on authenticity and dietary diversity. Additionally, cruise lines should increase the number of family-oriented facilities and activities, ensuring they are suitable for multi-generational groups. Enhancing multilingual services across all aspects of the cruise experience, from signage to entertainment, is crucial for improving communication and guest satisfaction.

Furthermore, cruise lines should leverage technology to enhance the guest experience and manage operational challenges. Implementing a digital reservation system for popular activities can help manage crowds and reduce wait times. Developing a user-friendly mobile app for onboard services, activity bookings, and real-time updates can streamline the guest experience and provide valuable data for continuous improvement. Cruise lines should also focus on increasing staff diversity, particularly by hiring multilingual Asian staff members to improve cultural understanding and communication. Lastly, integrating wellness offerings that

include traditional Asian practices like tai chi and meditation can cater to the holistic health interests of many Asian travelers, further enhancing the appeal of the cruise experience. It's important to note potential limitations of this research. The study is limited to English-language reviews, which may not represent the full spectrum of international cruise passengers. Furthermore, TripAdvisor users may not be representative of all cruise passengers, potentially introducing selection bias. The authenticity of reviews cannot be fully verified, although TripAdvisor has measures in place to detect fraudulent reviews. Only the Spectrum of the Sea passengers are captured in this review. This suggests further research should be conducted for broader area of cruise travel experience.

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