RESEARCH BRIEF

Which Clients Are Top Quality: A Tour Guide Perspective

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Phuket is one of many Thai provincial cities that is attractive to different types of tourists. The city is located approximately 900 kilometers south of the capital city of Thailand, Bangkok. The number of international tourist arrivals to Phuket has been increasing for many years and reached approximately 13 million in 2018 (Department of Tourism, 2019). Hence, Phuket is now ranked among the top 12 city destinations worldwide in terms of international tourist arrivals (Geerts, 2018). Furthermore, UNESCO selected Phuket in 2015 as the first creative city in gastronomy for the ASEAN region. In addition, the city of Phuket has initiated the Phuket 2020 Smart City project to sustain growth as a creative economy that includes a dominant tourism sector. Phuket is thus a key strategic destination for Thailand tourism and is in competition with Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia for the high-yield conscious tourists (Hess, 2019).

Although many tourists are now free-independent travelers who prefer to search, plan, and travel using their own resources and initiative, a local tour guide provides an important function for many tourists. Indeed, tourist satisfaction with the quality of the tour guide experience is often a major contributing factor toward overall destination satisfaction and intentions to return (e.g., Chang, 2014; Sanz-Blas & Buzova, 2016; Kuo et al., 2016). The clients of tour guide services include formal tour groups comprising tourists who are strangers to each other; family and friends; couples; or individual travelers. Most tourism research relating to tour guides has focused on tour guide quality, performance, and skills from the perspective of the tour guide clients (e.g., Al Jahwari et al., 2016; Kuo et al., 2016). However, less is known about how tour guides evaluate their clients in terms of quality (e.g., Kwek et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2016). The issue of what makes a “quality tourist” is of fundamental concern to policymakers and destination management organizations, especially for overcrowded beach destinations, such as Phuket (Hess, 2019).

The current study investigates tour guide clients and their behaviors from the perspective of a key stakeholder who works closely with a tourist to create a wonderful destination experience. How tour guides perceive their clients and destination attributes can enhance or diminish the tourist experience. Furthermore, if the views of tour guides are not aligned with tourist needs nor destination management objectives, then dysfunction in the delivery of a tourist experience may arise. In particular, will the views of tour guides enhance or diminish the management goals of a tourism destination?

The overall purpose of this descriptive paper is to examine the quality attributes of tour guide clients through the lens of tour guides themselves. Our first research question seeks information on how tour guides perceive local destination attributes and client behavior patterns to provide a context for tour guide attitudes. Next, we seek to determine the criteria tour guides use in their assessment of quality tourists. Our final research question determines how such perceptions of quality criteria vary for clients sourced from different home countries or with different expenditure patterns.

Literature Review

Travel behavior is one of the most investigated areas in social science. Much of this literature focuses on tourists themselves, their attitudes, and the destination experience. Tour guides have been an indispensable component of the destination experience for decades. In 1985, Cohen proposed four communication roles of the tour guide: selection, information, interpretation, and fabrication. Despite the transformation of travel patterns worldwide and the use of enabling technology, tour guides still play important roles within the tourism industry and for the tourists they engage. For instance, the importance of a guided tour to enhance the cruise tourist experience while visiting a port of call is evident (Sanz-Blas & Buzova, 2016). In Phuket, the number of registered tour guides is about 8,000, according to the National Statistical Office of Thailand (2017), making this component of the destination experience substantial. Therefore, the roles and travel behavior of tour guide clients, especially from the perspective of an important stakeholder—the local tour guide—who work closely with the tourist, should be investigated.

Overall, several streams of research studies can be distilled. Most of the recent studies into tour operators and tour guides have focused intensively on their performance. Such studies have investigated various types of competency to match tourist needs. An example of exploration in this area includes communication competency (e.g., Al Jahwari et al., 2016), impression management (e.g., Yan & Ho, 2017; Pabel & Pearce, 2018), and cultural competency (e.g., Tsaur &Tu, 2019). For example, Al Jahwari et al. (2016) suggested that tour guides need improvement in verbal skills such as grammar, manner of speech, and choice of words, as well as non-verbal behaviors such as approachability and the ability to remain friendly while maintaining a certain personal space. As sources of travel information, verbal and non-verbal skills are key proficiencies a tour guide should practice.

An additional stream of work has examined the role of the tour guide as a key individual factor for developing tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Several studies suggest tour guides' performance significantly affects tourist satisfaction (e.g., Chang, 2014; Sanz-Blas & Buzova, 2016; Kuo et al., 2016). Tourist satisfaction, then, influences destination loyalty. In this key area, recent literature found positive effects of tour guide performance on perceived credibility trust, perceived benevolence trust, and tourist satisfaction. In addition, interpretive skills were found to influence tourist satisfaction.

Another group of tourism scholars measured tourist characteristics when on a packaged tour. One study provided insights into negotiations between the empowerment of tourists and the disempowerment of tour guides in China (Wang et al., 2016). They found that power exchanges were applied during travel experiences. A study from Kwek et al. (2014) explored retail tours in China for overseas Chinese. Consumption motivation of group tour experience of this cohort was explored. This research suggested that tour group members were attracted by low tour costs and high-quality destination facilities, including accommodation, transport, and tourist attractions.

A review of the existing literature highlights under-researched areas of travel behavior—how tour guides perceive their clients, especially in terms of quality. One exception is the study from Látková et al. (2018), who explored tour guides' roles and perceptions of tourism development in Cuba. The authors also asked how Cuban tour guides perceived the image of Cuban destinations. They reported that Cuban tour guides were acutely aware of Cuba's limited tourism infrastructure and that Cuba's tourism industry was struggling to meet the increasing demand by U.S. tourists. Furthermore, they found that tour guides were well aware of the uniqueness of Cuba's natural and cultural assets that attract international tourists. This meant that tours could be customized based on how tour guides perceived the attractiveness of such attributes to clients. Such an approach by tour guides illustrates Cohen's (1985) interpretive function within a mediating role. However, this matching process could vary according to how tour guides perceived differences in client interests and motivation, based on their nationality (Látková et al., 2018).

Methods

This study is descriptive and seeks to determine what tour guides think about their clients and local destination attributes, especially focusing on aspects related to an ideal client. Accordingly, we follow numerous tourism researchers that seek primary information from key stakeholders (e.g., McKercher & Mak, 2019; Vu et al., 2020) and do not attempt to explore why tour guides hold such attitudes. This investigation adopted a convenience, non-probability sampling approach to reach tour guides in Phuket. Although the population of Phuket local tour guides in Phuket is substantial, there is no directory of personnel. Accordingly, the 600 attendees at a government-sponsored tour guiding workshop were recruited for the study. A self-administered face-to-face questionnaire was utilized to ensure that a target number of questionnaires were obtained in the limited time available. The data was collected in May 2019. After two weeks of distribution, 585 responses were obtained, and 526 cases were usable for statistical analysis.

The survey questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section asked respondents to provide travel patterns of their clients, including information relating to how they perceived a quality tourist. The second section involved questions about destination image for Phuket. Five-point Likert scale measurements were used in this section. Items regarding Phuket destination image were adopted from existing research (e.g., Stylidis et al., 2017). The third section was an open-ended question in relation to possible issues of serving their clients. The questionnaire was prepared in Thai. A draft of the questionnaire was pre-tested with researchers' colleagues to ensure that the items were simple and understandable.

Results

Tour Guide Perceptions of Client Travel Patterns

The results are displayed in three sections: travel patterns of tour clients, destination image, and perceptions of what a quality tourist should be. Table 1 shows, as expected, that tour guides perceived that their clients visited Phuket mainly for leisure. In addition, more than half of their clients (76%) traveled with family, and half of them (54%) traveled with friends. Interestingly, 40% of those being served by the tour guides traveled with colleagues, suggesting the aspect of a MICE tourism destination for Phuket City.

The statistics also show that the respondents see marine-related activity as the most popular activity their clients had engaged in their Phuket vacation. The next most popular activities participated by their customers are wellness, shopping, and enjoying authentic local cuisine. In addition, jewelry is the main item purchased in Phuket. Tour guides further indicated that handmade products and dried food products are also popular items to purchase for their clients.

The top three biggest tourist markets being served by the local tour guides in Phuket are from China, European countries, and Australia. It should be noted that clients from America, domestic tourists, and Japan are less likely to engage with tour guides.

Tour Guide Perceptions of Destination Attributes

The descriptive analysis, as shown in Table 2, shows the destination image of Phuket from the eyes of local tour guides. The local tour guides see Phuket as a beautiful beach destination with beautiful natural features. Phuket also provides a large range of activities to its guests. As a city of gastronomy, tour guides believe in local food tastes. It should be noted that Phuket is a place for family tourists, as suggested by Keawkrom et al. (2019). It is not surprising that tour guides do not see Phuket as a city with a low cost of living. Although the Phuket government has tried to promote Phuket as a wellness destination, tour guides seem not to agree with the local government policy. The mean score of the wellness image item is at the intermediate level.

The Tour Guide's Criteria of What Makes a Quality Tourist

Tour guides perceived "a quality tourist" in different ways. As shown in Table 3, the two most common criteria used to define quality are (a) tourists who care for the environment and (b) those clients who follow instructions from a tour leader. Concern for the environment we can interpret as an other-oriented attitude. Tour guides rate clients who respect the

Table 1

Tour Guide Perceptions of Client Travel Patterns in Phuket

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Travel purpose	Leisure	423	80.40
	Other	103	19.60
Travel companion (s)	Family	399	75.90
	Friends	282	53.60
	Colleagues	213	40.50
	Solo	117	22.20
	Other	26	4.90
Tourist activities	Marine related activities	469	89.20
	Spa / wellness	308	58.60
	Shopping	288	54.80
	Tasting local food	266	50.60
	Adventure	238	45.20
	Night markets / weekend markets	164	31.20
Purchased items	Handmade items	345	65.50
	Packaged/dried food/fruits	342	65.00
	Jewellery	220	41.80
	Clothes	163	31.00
	Local herbs	131	24.90
	Brand name items	67	12.70
	Others	16	3.00
The biggest tourist market served	Chinese	182	34.60
	European	129	24.50
	Australian	122	23.20
	Russian	23	4.40
	American	20	3.80
	Thai	20	3.80
	Indian	16	3.00
	Japanese	14	2.70

natural environment of Phuket highly. Furthermore, the aspect of complying with guide instructions often related to environmental compliance. In addition, a tourist who does not want to gain benefits from locals and treats Phuket as their second home is considered a quality tourist. This perceived respect for the host destination by tour guide clients matches the notion that tour guide advice should be followed. Hence, we can see that such views dovetail with the idea that local laws, customs, norms, and values should be respected.

Table 2

Tour Guide Ranking of Phuket Destination Attributes

Destination attribute	Mean	Std. Deviation
Beautiful beaches	4.25	0.86
Beautiful nature	4.14	0.90
Variety of activities	4.13	0.84
Appropriate types of tourism for tourists	4.01	0.79
Delicious food	3.97	0.81
Nice weather	3.90	0.87
Shopping paradise	3.87	0.86
Suitable place for family members	3.87	0.79
Local friendliness	3.86	0.89
Family destination	3.77	0.83
Short distance from home	3.68	0.93
High service quality	3.66	0.87
Health and wellness	3.64	0.81
Safe destination	3.54	0.90
Convenience of public transport	3.41	1.12
Reasonable cost	2.74	1.12

Table 3

Frequency Table of Tour Guide Criteria to Define a Quality Tourist

Definition	Frequency	Percentage
A tourist who preserve Phuket environment	345	65.60
A tourist who follow tour guide's instruction	316	60.10
A tourist who do not take advantage from locals	230	43.70
A tourist who treat Phuket as a second home	209	39.70
A tourist who spend more	114	21.70
A tourist who stay longer	48	9.10

These findings are consistent with Cohen (1985), who argued that two key facets of the instrumental leadership role of a tour guide involve access and control. The idea of access is illustrated in this study through tour guides recognizing that tourists have been granted special privileges to visit Phuket and are accountable for their behavior. Likewise, the idea of control overlaps with a key conflict faced by tour guides in providing a service to the customer while maintaining the authority of where and when clients can do things. Furthermore, we can interpret this notion of control as being a self-interested criterion of what makes for a quality tour group. Conversely, loss of control probably presents difficulties for tour guides in terms of scheduling, appropriate behavior, and organizational reputation. Clients that make life easier for the tour guide rate highly.

In contrast, tour guides do not perceive a long stay tourist as being a quality market. Similarly, not many tour guides (22%) define high spenders as quality tourists. This result contrasts with the Thai government (and many governments and national tourism agencies globally) that try to persuade tourists in Thailand to spend more and stay longer. One possible reason is that the long-stay tourists most likely are familiar with the local community and form a friendship with locals. They would integrate well with the local environment (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2019). Therefore, they are less likely to contact a tour guide, neither are they less likely to buy a packaged tour. However, the perceptions of tour guides appear to accord more closely with industry views. For instance, the president of the Phuket Hotels Association (PHA) recently stressed that budget travelers also have a key role to play in the long-term drive away from over-tourism (Somanas, 2020).

The data analysis, as shown in Table 4, indicates the quality of clients. The respondents indicate that clients from China (40%) and Europe (30%) are the most quality tourist market. Australian clients are at the third rank of the quality tourist market. Clients from Japan are less likely to buy a packaged tour, as indicated in Table 1. However, they are ranked as the 4th among tour guide clients. It should also be noted that the current findings do not imply that clients not included in the first top three are not quality. One possible reason for the results shown in Table 4 is relevant to the top three biggest groups of tour guide clients, as rated in Table 1. It appears that the top three quality tour guide clients are those who are the biggest group of the tourist markets. This result indicates tour guides are likely happy working with their clients.

Table 4

Frequency Table of Tour Guide Perception of the Quality Clients

The origin country of client	Frequency	Percentage
Chinese	195	37.10
European	143	27.20
Australian	71	13.50
Japanese	48	9.10
Thai	27	5.10
American	25	4.80
Russian	14	2.70
Indian	3	0.60

Table 5

Tour Guide Perceptions of a Quality Tourist by Major Market Served

Definition	Tourist markets served by guides			Level of sig.
	Chinese (N=195)	European (N=143)	Australian (N=71)	
tourists who spend a lot	61 (60.4%)	24 (23.8%)	16 (15.8%)	0.01
tourists who feel Phuket is a second home	61 (36.7%)	72 (43.4%)	33 (19.9%)	0.00
tourists who do not take advantage from locals	65 (36.5%)	77 (43.3%)	36 (20.2%)	0.00
tourists who protect Phuket environment	103 (39.6%)	108 (41.5%)	49 (18.8%)	0.15
tourists who long stay	14 (33.3%)	20 (47.6%)	8 (19.0%)	0.12

This research further analyses relationships between definitions of a quality tourist and tour guide clients, as shown in Table 5. In this analysis, only the top three quality tourists, namely, Chinese, European, and Australian, are considered. In general, it is perceived that European and Chinese clients are likely to concern the local environmental protection. Significant differences were found between the definition of a quality tourist and groups of tour guides. Significantly, European and Chinese tour guides believed that quality tourists are those not taking advantage of the locals and treat Phuket as their second home. The findings contradict the Thai government policy in which tourists are encouraged to spend more and stay longer. However, the most significant definition tends to be more cultural sustainability rather than economic perspective.

Table 6 shows the duration of stay and travel expenditures among a quality tour guide client. In general, their shortest duration in Phuket is one day. This excursion trip suggests that Phuket is very easily accessible. There are many ways to arrive in Phuket—by air, land, and water. Therefore, clients of tour guides are able to make a day trip to the destination. It was found that the longest length of stay, from the perspective of tour guides, is 30 days. The quality tourists who have stayed for the longest period are from China and Australia. European tourists are also another group of tour guide clients found staying longer with the maximum days of 28. The average length of stay in Phuket was 5–8 days, which is higher than the average duration of stay of tourists in Thailand (2.52 days) in 2017, as suggested by the statistics from the Department of Tourism (2019).

Regarding the expenditure, a slightly similar amount of minimum tourist expenditure was found. The minimum expenditure was 800 baht per day, as reported by a tour guide who served a Japanese tourist. The highest spending was given by those who had an American client as their guests who spent 50,000 baht. The average daily expenditure of Phuket tourists is approximately between 3,000 and 6,500 baht. Similar to the length of stay, this study found tour guide clients in Phuket to spend more than the overall picture at the country level. The tourists in Thailand had an average expenditure of 2,700 baht as of 2017 (Department of Tourism, 2019). The statistics support that tourism in Thailand has recovered after several circumstances affecting the industry, including the economic recession and the zero-dollar packaged tour eradication. In addition, it might be the case that Phuket and neighboring cities have offered more options for tourists to experience locally.

Conclusion

The results from this descriptive study extend the literature in several ways. The first contribution is gathering insights about what constitutes a quality tourist. This information is important because the tour guide industry reflects a substantial marketing arm for a tourist destination. Again, congruence between the various arms of service delivery is essential for effective delivery. The notion of high-yielding visitors has become a mantra for politicians and destination marketing organizations. However, tour guides at the frontline see a different picture of what represents a

Table 6

Expenditure Patterns by Client Market Served

The tourist market (N)	Duration of stay				Average daily expenditure			
	Min.	Max.	Mean.	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Mean.	Std. Dev.
Chinese (195)	1	30	5.73	2.56	1,000	40,000	4,345	4,011
European (143)	1	28	7.04	3.94	1,000	20,000	4,658	3,816
Australian (71)	2	30	6.23	4.19	1,000	30,000	5,479	5,340
Japanese (48)	1	14	4.92	2.44	800	25,000	4,642	4,190
Thai (27)	1	10	4.30	1.20	1,000	8,000	3,286	1,894
American (25)	2	14	6.32	2.67	1,000	50,000	6,480	9,828
Russian (14)	3	15	5.36	3.25	1,000	10,000	4,107	2,543
Indian (3)	4	10	6.67	3.06	2,500	5,000	3,667	1,258

quality tourist. We would expect such perceptions to spill over into the way that tour guides seek out and deal with prospective tour guide clients.

The second contribution is to provide information that compares tour guide perceptions of their markets and clientele that differs in substantive ways from accepted wisdom and government policy. Attributes for destination image differ between tour guides and government policy. Incongruence between notions of wellness and cost of living need to be addressed.

Limitations

Several limitations are evident in any descriptive study. We did not explicitly seek information as to how and why tour guides perceived such views. This suggests opportunities for further research, especially through in-depth interviews. The views of 500 tour guides were obtained from those attending a government-sponsored workshop. Non-attendees may have different views, although we note that some attendance at a government workshop is a prerequisite for tour guide registration. Using the subjective views of tour guides to report the behaviors of their clients is always going to be problematic. However, in this instance, we found that alternative approaches to determine travel patterns to be difficult. In addition, we welcomed the subjective views of tour guides because it is these perceptions that frame their interactions with clients.

In addition, this research was conducted before the major health crisis pandemic, the COVID-19. We lack key understandings of changes in travel patterns and tour guide clients' behavior in response to such outbreaks. Future research may address the issues and seek insights regarding who are now the tour guide's clients are and how their travel patterns change. Furthermore, a comparative study should be conducted. Tour guide clients from different areas may have unique travel patterns and behaviors. A quality client may also be defined differently depending upon specific context and local government policy. Point of view from a local tour guide in different regions and countries will be a theoretical and practical contribution to the tourism business.

Declaration of ownership:

This report is our original work.

Conflict of interest:

None.

Ethical clearance:

This study was approved by our institutions.

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