

Building Sustainable Relationships: Service Innovation at the Pinnacle of Touristic Achievement

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Abstract

Asia Pacific is renowned as a travelling hot spot amongst both domestic and international tourists. With Malaysia as the focal point, and based on the foundation of Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR), this study aims to explore different routes undertaken by tourists towards both satisfaction and loyalty concerning the Malaysian tourism industry, following the impacts of service innovation and destination image. A self-administrated survey was conducted across 322 tourists. The significance of the hypothesized relationships was further tested by employing the AMOS's structural modelling approach. Obtained results demonstrate that service innovation as a direct antecedent to destination loyalty, destination image and tourist satisfaction. Destination image also has a direct influence on destination loyalty. The mediating roles of destination image and tourist satisfaction between service innovation and destination loyalty were also established. The findings determined service delivery and innovation as more effective marketing tools to tourism practitioners for building brand reputation and tourists' loyalty. Service innovation remains absolutely crucial in the competitive tourism marketplace to build and sustain tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

Keywords: Service Innovation, Tourist Satisfaction, Destination Image, Destination Loyalty, Tourism Industry.

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Introduction

The tourism industry has emerged as an expanding sector with notable economic and social implications across various destinations. The sector has contributed a portion of no less than 9.3% and 2.9% in total and direct GDP between the year 2000 to 2019 internationally (Statista Research Department, 2021a). Statista Research Department (2021b) further extrapolated a colossal leap in the number of inbound tourists ensuing subsidence of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Asia Pacific region leading the recovery trend at a rise of 207.3% in the year 2021. With China and Japan achieved the second and third highest contributors in industrial GDP before European countries like Germany and the United Kingdom, tourism has been eminently embedded within the economies of multiple Asia Pacific countries (Statista Research Department, 2021c). Statured the seventh tourism destination behind Australia, Thailand, Philippines and Hong Kong, a total regional GDP of USD49.29 billion in the year 2019 has sufficiently positioned Malaysia on common prominence to other destinations (Moore, 2020). With this being said, actual implementation remains uncertain due to the instability of international safety and security regulations relating to COVID-19.

Successful tourist destinations often depend over product and service diversity (Cham et al., 2021). As such, components like attractions, facilities and services, accessibility, image and pricing, are important considerations on consumers' impressions regarding a tourism package and visited location (Cham et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2018). Highlighted by Cheng, Mansori, Abu and Yap (2020), service innovation, from the aspects of product, process, organisation and marketing, has indisputably prevailed as a formative component of destination image and tourist satisfaction. The predisposition as proposed by Suhartanto et al. (2020) on the significance of experiential factors and value perceptions, besides satisfaction and driving factors in generating loyalty among tourists then offered closure on the possibility of an experience-loyalty correlation. The direct association between momentous tourism planning that aims to invoke a positive travelling experience and destination branding would ultimately lead to destination loyalty (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015).

While destination image was argued to influence the consumers' decision-making process, it lacks direct implication on future revisits. Little evidence is also presented on the association between destination-based impression and loyalty, despite initial visits being shown to precede positive buzzes. As Styliadis et al. (2020) proclaimed travelling clusters (e.g. emotional temperament) in forming dissimilar unanimity towards a destination, the concept was vaguely operationalised. This ambiguity complicates the view as to what operational aspects require most attention for tour operators, hoteliers etc. Based on the foundation of Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR), this study examines the impact of service innovation and destination image in the direct and indirect development of tourist satisfaction and loyalty (i.e. the reference point being service-oriented or image oriented) within the Malaysian tourism industry.

Literature Review

Theory of Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)

The Stimulus-Organism-Response theory proposes a reciprocating synergy between external stimuli. The theory was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). The paradigm is split into three main sections, namely 1) stimulus (S) as received by the individual, 2) interpretation (O) including apprehension, and 3) subsequent reaction (R) to the situation. The model has, thus, gained wide adoption within social science in capturing one's deliberate and underlying impressions concerning a particular situation (Cham, Cheng, & Ng, 2020; Cheah et al., 2019; Low et al., 2021). S-O-R was adopted in the case of innovative servicing approaches, as the groundwork that explains consumers' perceptions concerning unique technological adaptation, physical environment, marketplace engagement, and internal planning.

Two schools of thought can be used in explaining S-O-R facing the tourism industry. On one hand, the main response is yielded by tourists through having physical experiences regarding attributes of a specific destination or occurrence as the stimuli (Tan et al., 2020). On the other hand, potential travellers are stimulated by virtual notions like image and promotional messages in generating initial perceptions of a destination (Li, 2019). Upon examining the role of service innovation, study by Wu and Li (2018) show the marketing mix within the context of social commerce, as the essential inputs that prompt brand loyalty through the generation of consumer value. This is also true within the hospitality industry, driven by the correlations between service transfers, sense of fulfilment and direct encounters, followed by retention and resulting purchase amongst experienced individuals (Suess & Mody, 2017). Hence the "cause and effect" nature of the paradigm, highlights the psychological mechanism within service-based consumption, S-O-R is thus employed in explaining the relevance of service innovation upon destination loyalty.

Service Innovation

Innovation is argued by Schumpeter (1939) as the consequent triggered by severe competition and declining profits. It represents a business's initiative in light of competitive survival, growth and organisational development. Such can be achieved through advancements in the aspects of contemporary products, manufacturing approach, supply chain, the exploitation of new markets, and alternative business organisations (Thomas & Wood, 2014). Specifically, the Community Innovation Survey (CIS) undertaken by national statistical offices across the European Union has proposed measurable definitions between product innovation, process innovation, organisational innovation and market innovation. Although these categories are widely adopted in the manufacturing industry, their applicability remains questionable in the service sector.

Understood from Divisekera and Nguyen (2018), service innovation consists of transformations in service or product design and delivery. Service innovation, thus, denotes an amalgamation between "significant qualitative change in existing product or services" and the "introduction of a new process for delivering goods and services" (Randhawa & Scerri, 2015). As such, minimalistic improvements from complimentary refreshments for inbound guests, full coverage of Wi-Fi networking, reward programs,

to advanced settings like automated hotel operations and robotic cleaning services emerged as an essential within the current hospitality front (Hepoğlu, 2011). Service innovativeness would encompass process-oriented improvement to novel approaches in presenting an existing service (Sako, 2010). With the increased market competitiveness, service customizability is acknowledged by tourism organisations in meeting the expectations of savvy, well-travelled clients (Chen et al., 2017). The evolution of customers' expectations then compelled matched endeavours by service providers through distinctive and customised service delivery. In fact, organisations should go beyond traditional products, practices and services to explore new avenues that improve existing product and service ideas, while introducing and experimenting alternative conceptions (Chen et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2019). Likewise, innovations in services provided have a potential effect on customer loyalty in various services setting (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018). Hence, the first hypothesis is postulated:

H1 Service innovation has a positive influence on destination loyalty.

Destination Image

The concept of destination image is understood as an individual's perception towards a destination based on the availability of related information (Coban, 2012). Segregated between organic and induced images, the former is explained by Rajesh (2013) as images formed through past experiences concerning unbiased sources of destination-related information, with the latter depicting perception as influenced by external sources such as destination-based advertising and promotion. Herewith, Al-Kwafi (2015) clarified the formation of an overall image among tourists' to be the direct consequence of attractions and activities offered by a destination. The contention, thus, cogitated evaluation of experienced service as possible antecedents to the perceived destination-related image. Beyond cognitive image generated through requisites of belief, impression, idea, perception and knowledge, Kani et al. (2017) then confirmed the involvement of affective component among tourists on a particular location. The choice of travelling location would highly depend on personalised perception and favourability towards the destination (Al-Kwafi, 2015; Rajesh, 2013).

Additionally, touristy attractiveness is also impacted by the tourists' cognitive, affective and conative aspects. This further recognised the importance of unique marketing approaches, service experiences, and branding towards positive market impression (Lusch & Nabisan, 2015). Discussed scenario, thus, indicates service-oriented innovativeness as a critical determinant in forming destination image (Cheng et al., 2020). In the context of sustainability, Do et al. (2020) then proposed administrative efforts undertaken towards the supply chain in achieving virtues of the extraneous domain and location-specified perception. While Kislali et al. (2019) viewed destination-related image as the product of efficacious information transfer and communication, the current research hereby recognised experiential practicality. Similarly, scholar within the tourism sector has assumed destination image as the antecedent of satisfaction and loyalty (Cheng et al., 2020); which, overlooked the variable's potential determinants. The extent of service innovation in influencing tourists' destination perception remains fairly uncertain, which prompted the hypothesis:

H2 Service innovation has a positive influence on destination image.

Tourist Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as an “emotional response to the experiences provided by, associated with particular products and services purchased, retail outlets, or even molar patterns of behaviours such as shopping and buying behaviour, as well as the whole marketplace” (Yi, 1990). The concept is being regarded as the consumers’ judgmental reaction on perceived disparity between the expectations and outcomes of a particular product or service (Rajesh, 2013). According to Sangpikul (2018), satisfaction among tourists performs as an instrument that appraises the effectiveness of destination marketing (Lacap et al., 2021; Sangpikul, 2018). Understanding and measuring customer satisfaction is, therefore, crucial in assisting business execution within the ever-changing economic landscape (Cham et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2019). Striving for a positive counterbalance between expectation and realised outcome, Rajesh (2013) further argued (1) confirmation upon fulfilled expectations, (2) negative disconfirmation upon unmet expectations, and (3) positive disconfirmation upon surpassed expectations.

Specifically, Al-Kwafi (2015) attributed attitude, destination image, motivation, service and recreational equipment towards the formation of tourist satisfaction. This was expanded by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019) to include components of comfortability, cultural attractions, shopping facilities, ambience, engagement, security and available infrastructure as significant influencers. In entirety, satisfaction has received immersed attention among consumer behaviour academics; all the more so for the development of servicing models (Rajesh, 2013). With the study by Tajeddini et al. (2020) factoring in-house proficiencies via efficacious service innovativeness, information transfer and operational ingenuity as founding prerequisites to superior business execution, Akbari et al. (2020) further proposed tourist satisfaction as a crucial representation of such excellence. Innovative approaches from the context of interpersonal, operation and practical perspectives would inspire consumers’ satisfaction offsetting his or her monetary investment (Ngan et al., 2020). With this in mind, it can be hypothesised that:

H3 Service innovation has a positive influence on tourist satisfaction.

Destination Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as “a commitment by an existing customer to a particular store, brand or service provider when he or she has other comparative options” (Chi, 2012). Segregated between attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty, Rajesh (2013) refers attitudinal loyalty as the positive emotional attachment one has to another and behavioural loyalty as subsequent actions undertaken for the similar attachment. With both components independently contributing to the increased revenue and monetary sustainability through reduced switching propensity, Rajesh (2013) developed a new business model based on the sequential association between value creation and loyalty among the customers, as well as executional satisfaction and loyalty among the employees. Customer loyalty has, thus, become increasingly recognisable as an important factor in building competitive sustainability (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Its determinants which comprised customer satisfaction, experience, value, social bonding, brand name, demographical and routine, service quality, social value and destination image were further explored (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

Owing to the benefits of customer fulfilment in clientele retention, multiple past research assumed the extent of positive association between satisfaction and loyalty (Chen et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2019; Cheng et al., 2014). Specifically, the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty is proposed (Chi, 2012). Circumstance is further narrowed upon the potency of customers' fulfilment in promoting successive word-of-mouth, instantaneous consumption, and potential future revisit (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). As both tangibility and receptiveness are intrinsic components tourism, developing loyalty through satisfaction-driven incentives are very effective (Thi et al., 2020). Cumulatively, both destination image and satisfaction have demonstrated potential in the preceding roles to tourists' retention. Such associations are, therefore, rectified through proposed hypotheses:

H4 Destination image has a positive influence on destination loyalty.

H5 Tourist satisfaction has a positive influence on destination loyalty.

Mediating Effects of Destination Image and Tourist Satisfaction

Attention is further relocated to the studies by Chi (2012); Sangpikul (2018) with highlighting the cognitive element of destination image, encompassing natural resources, service quality, entertainment; and the affective aspects, covering comfort from available facilities, safety and infrastructure, cultural attractions and ambience, as several locational attributes that affect tourist loyalty. In particular, prior discussion has uncovered service innovation as the indirect antecedent to destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction and destination image. On similar ground, destination image as instigated through both aspects of experienced competencies and travel encounters is shown to be the direct antecedents of repeated visitation (Chi, 2012). This is further identified through the findings by Sudigdo et al. (2019) with having destination image as a mediating component between cultural elements and locational surveillance, and tourists' travelling decision.

With the study by Ristawati et al. (2019) demonstrating a positive correlation between innovativeness and tourist satisfaction through the formation of favourable locational image, constructive consumption is, therefore, expected. Proposition is further voiced on the necessity of positive brand image in bridging travelling incitement and attitudinal change (Pereira et al., 2019). Yet, question remains whether such association would sufficiently induce actual behavioural endeavours. Destination image is also shown to play a crucial role in commuting country-based perception to revisiting intention (Soonsan & Sukahbot, 2019). While previous research by Sandrio et al. (2020) confirmed the significance of location-based image, alongside its amenities, in influencing destination loyalty through the development of satisfaction; Kani et al. (2017) then proposed destination image for holding similar ground to satisfaction in mediating cultural appraisal and believability of marketed information to consequential loyalty. Transcending the conventional path between destination image, satisfaction and loyalty, hypothesis is, thus, postulated:

H6 Destination image mediates the relationship between service innovation and destination loyalty.

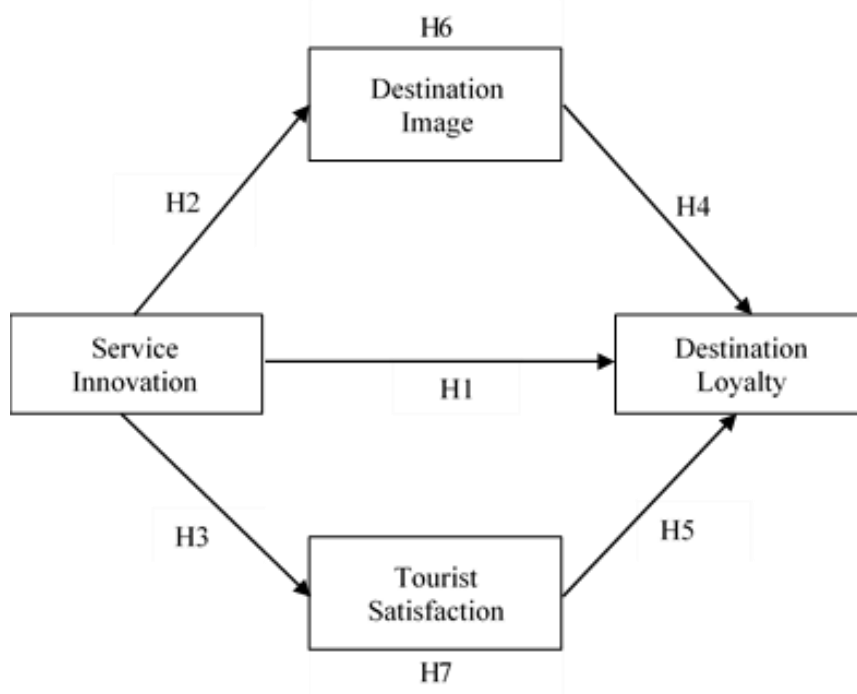
Notably, satisfaction has prevailed as a regulatory conscious discerning service

excellence with tendency for generous reciprocity (Haji et al., 2021). Upon deliberating the trade-off between value perception and the sense of fulfilment, prevalence of the latter has further been validated; in turn, cohered the influence of experiential ideal on behavioural pursuits (Haji et al., 2021). In the case where locational appeal does not pose direct implication on loyalty, satisfaction has shown to be a decisive component in bridging both variables (Nasir et al., 2020). Whereas, argument was offered by Mohamad et al. (2019) for denoting tourist satisfaction as a complementary factor which elevates an otherwise feeble correlation between servicing standard and constructive loyalty.

Accounting for individual sentiments, personalised satisfaction remains an essential factor that indirectly associates destination’s features to tourists’ allegiance (Jiang et al., 2018). Previous results have correspondingly reported satisfaction as an active mediator between destination-specified image, perception, and loyalty (Vinh & Thuong, 2017). Locational value being generated via service-based supremacy, thus, entails behavioural committal, provided tourists’ expectations are met and surpassed (He et al., 2018). As such, the role of satisfaction is imprinted as fundamental intermediary between image, perceived value, and servicing standard to potential retention. Seeing the indirect influence of service innovation as a missed opportunity, the mediating impact of satisfaction is assessed upon postulated hypothesis:

- H7 Tourist satisfaction mediates the relationship between service innovation and destination loyalty.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Study



Research Method

The developed questionnaire comprised of measurement scales adapted from previous hospitality and tourism literature. The variable of service innovation was operationalised through measurement scale as developed by Cheng et al. (2019) from the perspectives of product, process, organisational and marketing innovations. Destination image and tourist satisfaction were assessed through the measurement scale as proposed by Veasna et al. (2013) concerning tourists' overall perception and satisfaction towards their visits to Malaysia. The measurement scale for destination loyalty was adopted from Mohamad et al. (2011). The designed questionnaire was segregated into two main sections, with the first section gauging perceptions towards variables of the research framework, and the second section capturing the respondents' demographic information (e.g. gender, age group, nationality and level of education). All items were measured using a 7-point Likert-scale, whereby 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree.

Data was collected among voluntary personnel at diverse hotels and tourism hot-spots across the Klang Valley. While intersected values concurred both domestic and international cohorts, disparities in travelling preferences then indicate cultural segregations (Muñoz et al., 2019). With Stone and Nyaupane (2018) proposed a universally compassed outlook within tourism operation, cluster sampling method was hereby employed across 400 respondents of equal distributions between both local and international tourists to topple potential biasedness of the obtained data. Distribution of the questionnaires was performed at NU Sentral and KL Sentral in Kuala Lumpur as both locations were considered the points of transits in Kuala Lumpur. A screening question that necessitated the respondent to spend at least one night at a hotel in Malaysia in justifying reliability of the obtained response. As such, 322 of the collected responses were deemed usable. In accordance to Hair et al. (2010), 78 incomplete responses were excluded to ensure reliability and validity of the results. Statistical analysis for the current study was then conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) version 24.

Data Analysis

Respondents' Profile

Demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. Obtained data shows that 53.1 per cent of the respondents were females, while the remaining were males. Most of the respondents fall within the age group of 31 to 35 years old. Moreover, majority of the respondents were international tourists (68.3 per cent) and hold a Bachelor's Degree (35.1 per cent).

Table 1: Respondent Demographic Profiles (N= 322)

Variables	Descriptions	Percentage
Gender	Male	46.9
	Female	53.1
Age	25 years old and below	7.5
	26 – 30 years old	23.3
	31 – 35 years old	26.7
	36 – 40 years old	27.6
	40 years old and Above	14.9
Nationality	Malaysian	31.7
	Non-Malaysian	68.3
Education	High School	14.3
	Diploma	24.8
	Bachelor's Degree	35.1
	Master's Degree	15.8
	Doctoral Degree	2.2
	Professional Certificate	5.9
	Others	1.9

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The present study with conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to address the reliability and validity of the measurements. CFA is commonly used in social science studies to assess the consistency between adopted constructs and theory (Hair et al., 2010). Herewith, the tests of reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity were conducted for the adopted measurements (e.g. service innovation, destination image, tourist satisfaction, and customer loyalty). Assessments were then based on the model fit, convergent validity, and discriminant validity as suggested within prior studies (Hair et al., 2010). Specifically, Hair et al. (2010) argued that model fit could be determined based on the indices like Chi-square, degree of freedom, normed chi-square, goodness-of-fit (GFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and parsimony comparative fit index (PCFI). Recognized that a model is considered fit shall the recommended threshold value for normed chi-square is within the range of 1.0 to 5.0, GFI should be above 0.90, RMSEA must be lesser than 0.08, CFI should be above 0.90, and PCFI should be above 0.50; determined values where Chi-square= 420.091, df= 126, normed chi-square= 3.334, GFI = 0.881, RMSEA = 0.081, CFI =0.911, PCFI= 0.750, thus, indicated that the measurement model was reasonably fit.

Additionally, convergent validity is established based on the fulfilment of three main criteria, such that: (1) composite reliability (preferably more than 0.70), (2) average variance extracted (should exceed 0.50), and (3) factor loading (should exceed 0.60) (Hair et al., 2010). Referring to Table 2, all the composite reliability for the constructs are above 0.70, factor loadings for the measurement items are above 0.60, and the average variance extracted for the constructs is above 0.50, which suggested that convergent validity were well established. Discriminant validity was also established with the correlation value (off-diagonal) being smaller than the squared AVE (bold and in bracket) of its own (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Having satisfied all the requirements for CFA, hypotheses were tested in the following section.

Table 2: Test Results on Discriminant and Convergent Validity

	F.L	C.R	AVE	1	2	3	4
Service Innovation	0.782-0.892	0.889	0.677	(0.823)			
Tourist Satisfaction	0.756-0.856	0.883	0.655	0.320	(0.810)		
Destination Loyalty	0.620-0.825	0.832	0.534	0.278	0.355	(0.731)	
Destination Image	0.651-0.813	0.794	0.516	0.233	0.294	0.312	(0.718)

Testing Structural Model

Structural model for the present study was tested with the use of AMOS. The model fit indices for the structural model were such as Chi-square= 459.634, df= 128, normed chi-square= 3.591, GFI = 0.874, RMSEA = 0.082, TLI =0.901, and CFI =0.899, indicated that the structural model was reasonably fit. The results in Table 3 indicated that all the relationships hypothesized for this study were supported. Service innovation was revealed to have a direct positive impact on destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.485$, $p < 0.05$), destination image ($\beta = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$), and tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.359$, $p < 0.001$). The destination image ($\beta = 0.076$, $p < 0.05$) and tourist satisfaction ($\beta = 0.079$, $p < 0.05$) were also found to have a significant direct positive influence on destination loyalty among tourists.

Table 3: Path Analysis

Hypothesised Paths	S.E (β)	C.R	P-Value
H1: Service Innovation → Destination Loyalty	0.485	2.200	0.020
H2: Service Innovation → Destination Image	0.502	3.930	0.000
H3: Service Innovation → Tourist Satisfaction	0.359	3.757	0.000
H4: Destination Image → Destination Loyalty	0.076	1.977	0.028
H5: Tourists Satisfaction → Destination Loyalty	0.079	2.331	0.048

Note: S.E (β) = Standardized Estimate, C.R = Critical Ratio

As for hypothesis 6 and hypothesis 7, the mediation effects of destination image and tourist's satisfaction on the relationship between service innovation and destination loyalty were addressed using PROCESS macro as suggested by Hayes (2013). Highlighted in Table 4, the mediating effects of destination image and tourist's satisfaction was confirmed with the use of a bias-corrected bootstrapping technique based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. In particular, the 95 per cent bias-corrected confidence interval does not straddle a zero in between for both hypothesis 6 and hypothesis 7 indicated that destination image ($\beta = 0.211$, 95%CI = [0.070, 0.398]) and tourists' satisfaction ($\beta = 0.154$, 95%CI = [0.033, 0.316]) mediated the relationship between service innovation and destination loyalty. As such, it can be confirmed that hypothesis 6 and hypothesis 7 are supported.

Table 4: Results for Mediation Analysis

Indirect effect	S.E (β)	Confidence intervals at 95%	
		Lower	Upper
H6: S.I. \rightarrow D.I \rightarrow D.L	0.211	0.070	0.398
H7: S.I. \rightarrow T.S \rightarrow D.L	0.154	0.033	0.316

Note: S.E (β)= Standardized Estimate, S.I= Service Innovation, D.I= Destination Image, T.S= Tourist Satisfaction, D.L= Destination Loyalty

Discussion and Implications

Obtained findings revealed apparent tenacity for direct and indirect correlations between service innovation and destination loyalty. Reflected upon the findings from Kong and Ibrahim (2019), internal innovation within the servicing sector would undeniably generate loyalty among tourists through experiential-based consumption. Such is further exemplified by Leckie et al. (2018) with highlighting the importance of touchpoints in conveying customer value, uniqueness and a sense of novelty. Reviewing and implicating contemporary tourism marketing strategies are crucial to instil tourist loyalty and a sense of destination image devotion; thereby, creating tourism sustainability. As such, relational significance further suggested the mediating significance of destination image and satisfaction. Noted by Hameed et al. (2021) on the role of service innovation as the direct antecedent of performance excellence, the latter depicts both collective perceptions towards a visited location, and personalised impression concerning the encountered services. Revisiting intention as generated through tourist satisfaction would also signify the possibility for favourable word-of-mouth. Whereas, destination image, resembling the findings by Prayag and Ryan (2012); Thomas and Wood (2014) in their studies, has exerted compelling impact on tourists' allegiance to a destination.

The significance of service innovation in predicting tourists' locational-based loyalty has conscientiously established reciprocated nature of the proposed S-O-R paradigm through the emanation of experiential tourism (Wu & Li, 2018); dissimilar circumstances that hindered direct service encounters further demand efficacies of destination image and buzzes as determinants of possible retention (Zhu et al., 2020). This case defers from Goi et al. (2018) who examined experience and sentimental attachment, in the position of an organism. However, the concept of stimulus-based retentions has been vastly supported within the contemporary hospitality front (Arora et al., 2020). Recognised that obtained findings demonstrated apparent correlation having experience, image and satisfaction, and loyalty in the respective roles of stimulus (S), organism (O) and response (R); proven framework lacks substantial evidence following changes in initiating stimulus. Disparity between experienced consumers and potential travellers has, therefore, aspired environmental excellence in retaining existing tourists (i.e. service-oriented superiority), whilst motivating constructive reaction among potential visitors (i.e. destination-based perception) (Su et al., 2020). The latter would tremendously undermine service innovativeness to prefer effective information transfer; thereby, propelled a shift in the stimulating factor. With loyalty being determined by Godovykh and Tasci (2020) as the reciprocated response to actual encounters, the role of perception remain utmost relevant. Where predetermined notions concerning a destination being an independent stimulus (S), and locational-based loyalty as the dependent response (R), potential variables, such as

generated value, sense of fulfilment, and relatability, would seem to prevail as organism factors (O) beyond the direct relationship as posited in this study.

Having service innovation and quality parallel each other in affecting consumer loyalty through the formation of image and satisfaction (Motasham et al., 2017); practicality embraces the need for tourism operators to modernise well-targeted facilities (e.g. non-contacting elevators following the Covid-19 outbreak), without forgoing service excellence. Transcending short-term monetary gratification to ensure long-term profitability, innovativeness is viewed from a collective perspective across multiple parties in achieving persistent impact on destination image and tourists' fulfilments (e.g. Wau Festival in Malaysia coupled with discounted accommodation packages). Mahmoud et al. (2018) then acknowledged the effectiveness of service innovation through value creation that guarantees consumers' satisfaction. With this, counterproductive endeavours should be minimised to emphasise customer-oriented features. Collaborative efforts which elevate the overall travelling experience of a location, in addition to basic fulfilments, complimentary facilities and profound convenience, would act as the bedrock to superior experience. Satisfaction is ultimately associated to service customisability (Ristawati et al., 2019). Revisiting the concept of positive disconfirmation, the realisation in which individual tourists assume dissimilar predilection would demand in-depth specification of offered services. Equalising efficiency for superior value delivery and capability for outstanding fulfilment proves to be a challenge; yet, remains highly essential for business recovery and reintroduction, extended vacations, repeated visitations, and positive recommendations.

Conclusions

The current study offers in-depth investigations into tourists' perceptions of service innovation practiced by tourism organisations in Malaysia towards affecting the country's destination image, tourist satisfaction and loyalty. The direct and indirect influences of service innovation towards tourist loyalty are well-established. Fundamentally, strategic marketing execution by tour operators would transcend subsequent emotionally-based efforts in building a sustainable clientele. In addition, tourists can form strong emotional attachments following experiential tourism upon service encounter. The importance of sustainable attitudinal formation is highlighted following a direct correlation between destination image and loyalty. Nonetheless, the impact of third-party individuals as a form of peripheral cue (i.e. informed destination image) would emerge as a double-edged sword in balancing both actual experience and previous expectations. Inability to develop a constructive destination image would fail to generate positive perception and visiting intention among travellers. This highlights the importance of the initial touchpoint in building confidence and a lasting impression.

Travelling standstill following the Covid-19 outbreak would require contemporary approaches to attract new travellers. Many other countries in Asia Pacific could indeed excel by adopting the techniques of service-oriented branding. Our results support the contention that innovation by tourism organisations, ranging from entertainment, accommodation, and transport, can cumulatively boost tourists' perceptions, experience and probability of returning. This study, therefore, demonstrates operational effectiveness as an essential aspect applicable by regional tourism operators. Overshadowing influence of traditional marketing, extensive interpersonal interactions

within the tourism industry has emphasised the intangible concept of 'Quality' in guiding both experience and opinion-based perceptions. Industrial practitioners should not overlook the value of delivering 'beyond expectations' to generate positive buzz and tourists' endorsement.

Limitation and Future Studies

This research has uncovered several limitations that command further re-evaluation and improvement. Attention is primarily brought towards failure of the researched framework to conclusively incorporate the regulatory potential of moderating factors. While the central and peripheral routes in travelling decisions were unveiled through the navigations of mediating components, future studies can anticipate moderating variables on both cognitive directions. Besides, concern is allocated towards the travelling nature of participated respondents, with majority assuming brief transits around the Kuala Lumpur area. Being a cultural melting pot, tourists visiting different locations (states) in Malaysia would potentially generate dissimilar travelling specifications. Alongside the comparatively small sample size, a larger sample size constituting more discrete geographical clusters is, therefore, recommended to yield results of enhanced representation. Additionally, descriptive statistic which presented considerable proportion of Asian participants has fallen short of internationally-generalisable discovery. Such biasedness then demands the employment of probability sampling methods within both domestic and international clusters to ensure systematic inclusion. Moreover, the questionnaire as conveyed solely in the English language might entail misapprehension among unfamiliar respondents that resulted inconsequential systematic error. The limitation, nonetheless, recognised difference in cultural backgrounds besides the English language.

Implications for Asian Business

The findings of this study have testified the direct and indirect influence of service innovation towards tourist loyalty. Obviously, tourist retention (i.e. repeat purchase) can be built through different paths of cognitive investment. Fundamentally, strategic marketing execution by Asian tour operators can transcend subsequent emotionally based efforts in building a sustainable client base. Reflectively, service innovativeness among tourism operators towards market's foothold within the Asia Pacific region should, nonetheless, coordinate internal strategies to customers' requirements. Besides cultural richness and unique landmarks, satisfaction among travellers is directly dependent over conveyed messages, customer-oriented interactions personalised travelling preferences, as well as servicing technicalities and practices. Where service innovation constituted direct offerings, delivery process, internal professionalism and market positioning, the current study revealed little reserves in aspects of customer servicing through both unconventional service offerings and sincerity upon each contact point, followed by idiosyncratic marketing messages that leave profound perceptions. On the other hand, if the attraction in a country is perceived to be less attractive; tourists will likely switch to alternative destinations. This highlights the importance of the initial touchpoint in building confidence, thus cementing a lasting impression. Seeing Asia as a cultural melting pot, destination retention would require an attractive locational image as a primary initiative, followed by tourist satisfaction through superior servicing experience upon actual visitations. Following Yeoman et al.

(2019) emphasised continuous urbanisation and technological progress, historical and cultural aspects of diverse communities, with heavy attention being allocated towards marketing-induced street food engraving the culture and image of specific destinations in Asia, current findings further offered forms of cultural embedment through superior servicing (e.g. a sincere “terima kasih” upon every purchase).

In addition, satisfaction is ultimately associated to the customizability of the services provided (Ristawati et al., 2019). As noted in the concept of disconfirmation, favourable perceptions of tourism attractions and/or products can be achieved if tourists’ expectation can be clearly identified, fulfilled and surpassed their tourism expectations). However, the notion that an individual tourist assumes dissimilar preferences and predilections would demand an in-depth specification of the offered services. Furthermore, the challenge of equalizing efficiency for superior value delivery and the capability for outstanding fulfilment should not be overlooked in era of business recovery and reintroduction. Attention should once again be diverted to conforming to tourists’ service-focused cognitive elaboration. Such effort can, in turn, result in securing enduring appeals by ways of extended vacations, revisit intentions, and positive recommendations. The Covid-19 outbreak has enforced a halt to various tourism campaigns certain new approaches are required to attract travellers to visit Asian region after the pandemic period ends. In this case, service innovation in the tourism industry should include: (i) developing new tourism products – offering new tourism destinations, attractions, facilities and consumable goods related to tourism; (ii) creating (at the same time, fulling) new tourism experience among tourists during their visit to this region. Our results support the proposition that innovation by tourism organizations ranging from entertainment, accommodation and transport are equally important in tourism innovation. Cumulatively, they are able to boost tourists’ perceptions, experience and the probability of returning.

Following the proclamations by Brunn (2004) on the extended eminence of Asian religions across European nations, and the proliferation of cultural opinions in globalised affairs, tangibility has merely constituted a segment of tourism offerings in entirety. Instances where inbound visitors prioritise experiential value (e.g. participation in the Annual Asia Golf Tourism Convention (AGTC)) over souvenirs have become more apparent, which elevated the need for superior services that offer competitive and benevolent destination-specific impression. Beyond Malaysian border, alternative studies have then highlighted exclusive memoir, heritage, and natural allurements of other countries within the Asian region, such that of the Central Asian States (CAS) (Baxtishodovich et al., 2017) and Southeast Asia (Brahmasrene & Lee, 2017). Ensuing aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, Orishev (2020) voiced tourism recovery in Asia following the momentum of domestic restoration due to cultural proximity, prior inbound touristy growth ensuing intercultural publicity. Current discovery, thus, verified the importance of service differentiations upon cultural ingenuity among the diversity of Asian countries towards building and rebuilding the locational competitiveness of each destination.

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