

Aswin Sangpikul

The influences of destination quality on tourists' destination loyalty: An investigation of an island destination

Abstract

Destination quality is an important element of tourist perception towards the destination, and it may affect tourists' decision to revisit the destination. In an island destination, the quality of beach attraction (scenery and cleanliness) has been argued to contribute to tourists' satisfaction and their likelihood to revisit the destination. However, little effort has been made to find out if there are other additional dimensions of destination quality (besides beach attraction) contributing to tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the island destinations. This study, therefore, aims to examine the influences of destination quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the context of island destinations. Data were collected from 438 international tourist visiting Phuket through a convenience sampling method, using self-administered questionnaires. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach by AMOS was used to test the effects. The results indicated that destination loyalty dimensions related to beach attraction, people, and safety are the antecedents of tourist loyalty but these relationships are mediated by tourist satisfaction. This research shows that, in the case of island destinations, beach attraction is not the only factor contributing to tourist loyalty but people and safety are also the essential components to retain loyal tourists. Important implications are discussed for promoting island tourism's loyalty.

Key words: destination quality; tourist satisfaction; destination loyalty; islands; Phuket, Thailand

Introduction

Currently, tourism has become a popular global leisure activity due to the high revenues generating to the country's economy. For Thailand, the tourism industry is one of the largest and important sectors for the nation's economy because of the significant impacts to employment, business growth and revenue circulating throughout the country. Although the tourism industry in Thailand has been growing during the past decades, the market competition within the region is likely to be intensified and more competitive within the region. Today, all ASEAN countries are intensively competing each other to promote their tourism activities with the aim to increase the number of in-bound tourists. Each country has allocated large amount of budgets to promote and develop marketing campaigns to attract more tourists to the destination. In order to stay competitive in the region, it is essential for Thai tourism marketers and authorities to develop effective marketing strategies to attract more international tourists to Thailand. One of the most effective marketing strategies which has been widely used in most businesses (including tourism industry) is building customer loyalty to increase repeat customers (Oppermann, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Today, customer loyalty has been implemented as one of the marketing tools in the competitive market for both tourism and non-tourism industries.

Aswin Sangpikul, Associate Prof., Dhurakij Pundit University, Faculty of Hotel & Tourism, Bangkok, Thailand;
E-mail: aswin.sal@dpu.ac.th

In the tourism context, the concept of customer loyalty may be referred as "destination loyalty". In particular, tourism can be perceived as a product (or destination) which can be resold (revisited) and recommended to other people (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The issue of destination loyalty (or post-purchase behavior/behavioral intention) has contributions to generating revenues to the tourism industry. The more the number of tourist revisit the destination, the greater the revenue the businesses can earn. In order to examine the concept of destination loyalty, it is important to explore what makes loyal tourists (repeat visitors). A review of literature indicates that one of the most important factors contributing to loyal tourists is "tourist satisfaction" (Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis, 2006; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chi & Qu, 2008). Many studies reveal a close relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Several scholars argue that satisfied tourists are more likely to return or revisit the same destination, and are more willing to share their positive travel experience with their friends and relatives (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chi & Qu, 2008). Today, it is not surprisingly that there is an abundance of tourist satisfaction studies in relation to other factors such as tourist behavior, travel motivation, and destination loyalty. Although there are several prior studies investigating the relationships between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty, there could be more factors affecting those two variables. A review of literature indicates that product quality has a relationship with customer satisfaction and loyalty (Alexandris et al., 2006; Oppermann, 2000). Product quality is a critical factor affecting customer satisfaction as well as being a predictor of repurchase intention. Yet, most past tourism research examined such relationships in terms of services of tourism businesses (e.g. hotels, restaurants, airlines). And little effort has investigated the product quality in terms of a tourist destination or a place (Lopez-Toro, Diaz-Munoz & Perez-Moreno, 2010).

In the tourism context, it is important for destination managers to concentrate on the quality of tourist destinations. With this regard, quality development is one of the important strategies that many tourist destinations are currently using to increase their competitiveness in international tourist markets (Lopez-Toro et al., 2010). In the international context, although past research has examined the relationships between destination quality, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty in different areas of investigation (e.g. festivals, theme parks, and rural areas), scholars have not specifically examined such relationships in the island destinations. In case of island destinations, it can argue that tourists visit islands mainly because of beach tourism attraction (sea, sand, sun), and they are more likely to revisit that destination due to such attributes. As the isolated island, tourists may perceive the quality and development of the infrastructure, tourist facilities, tourism resources and natural surrounding differently from the other beach-based destinations on the mainland. In particular, the tourism resources and natural surroundings of the island-based destinations are physically different from the mainland, and these may affect the relationships between the above three constructs (variables). Furthermore, researchers have not found out what dimensions of destination quality influencing tourists' re-visit in the case of island destinations. In this study, it is assumed that there might be other factors (dimensions) of the destination quality affecting tourist loyalty to the island destinations. Importantly, since quality of the destination varies from place to place due to different factors (e.g. level of development, infrastructure and facilities), the relationships of the above three variables may be different, and are worth further investigation for a particular tourist destination. Therefore, this study aims to examine the influences (effects) of destination quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty by using Phuket as the case study. Examining which particular dimensions of destination quality affecting tourist loyalty will contribute to a better understanding of the determinants of destination loyalty and expand related literature, particularly in the island-based settings. The findings are expected to assist destination managers to carefully refine or determine appropriate tourism development and strategies to retain loyal tourists, and to promote island tourism.

Literature review

Overview of tourism in Phuket as an island destination

Phuket is the Thailand's largest island, and one of the most famous beach destinations for international tourists. As the island destination, Phuket has many beautiful natural attractions, particularly the beaches and small nearby islands. Phuket is not only well known for the island tourism but it is also recognized for the charming local cultures (Thai, Chinese and Muslim) as well as the historical attractions of the old town. According to Marzuki (2012), Phuket has experienced tremendous development since 1980s. Many construction projects have been carried out on the islands with the main purpose to accommodate tourism development. Rapid investments by the government and private sector have significantly turned Phuket into a popular tourist destination and a shopping paradise for local and foreign tourists. According to the Tourism Authorities of Thailand (2015), Phuket was ranked the 2nd place for the top tourist destinations in Thailand with approximately 8-9 million international tourist arrivals to Phuket each year, generating revenue more than 200,000 million Baht. Most international visitors to Phuket are mainly from Asia, Europe and Australia. Since Phuket is rich in natural resources, particular the image of beach tourism, and becomes the top tourist destinations in Thailand, it, therefore, was chosen as the area of investigation for the destination loyalty due to its high potentiality to attract loyal/repeat tourists.

Tourist satisfaction

In relation to tourism, the concept of customer satisfaction has been long used in the tourism literature. According to tourism literature, tourist satisfaction refers to an overall evaluation of the level of fulfillment or emotion with the destination through the outcome of pleasant or unpleasant (Zabkar, Brenck & Dmitrovic, 2010). Tourist satisfaction is important to destination marketing because it influences the choice of destination, the consumption of goods and services, repeat visits, word-of-mouth publicity, and destination loyalty (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Kozak, Bigne & Andreu, 2004). Tourist satisfaction may be determined by tourists' perceived comparison between the preferred expectation about a destination and the perceived evaluative experience in the destination (Kim & Brown, 2012; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). An understanding of tourist satisfaction is a basic tool used to evaluate the performance of destination products and services (Schofield, 2000 cited in Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Monitoring tourist satisfaction is, therefore, an important task for destination authorities/planners to get feedback and detect problems that cause tourist dissatisfaction which may have a negative impact on future visitation (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). Therefore, an assessment of tourist satisfaction towards island destinations can help destination managers adjust their efforts on enhancing tourists' travel experience, improving the quality of products/services, and developing effective destination marketing strategy (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2008).

Destination loyalty

Loyalty is generally defined as customers' intentions or behaviors to re-buy or re-patronize certain product/service; thereby causing repetitive same-brand purchasing (Hawkins, Best & Coney, 1995; Oliver, 1999). In marketing literature, loyalty measures a consumer's strength of affection towards a brand (Backman & Crompton, 1991). It is based on a consumer brand preference or intention to buy the brand. Customer satisfaction, customer experience, value, service quality, performance, price, and brand name may contribute to loyalty (Backman & Crompton, 1991; Oliver, 1999). In relation to tourism literature, destination loyalty refers to tourists' intention to revisit the same destination, and

their intention to recommend the destination to their friends/relatives (Toyama & Yamada, 2012). The concept of destination loyalty has been widely examined among tourism scholars to develop effective ways to attract more tourists to the destinations (Kim & Brown, 2012; Toyama & Yamada, 2012; Mechinda, Serirat & Gulid, 2009; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Destination loyalty is, thus, an important indicator used to develop competitive advantages of the destination and effective marketing strategy (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). It may be measured through tourist's intention to revisit the same destination, and their intention to recommend the destination to others (Toyama & Yamada, 2012). Of these two measures, repeat visitation is considered as a very strong indicator of future behavior (Mechinda et al., 2009).

Destination quality

According to the literature, a destination refers to the location of a group of attractions, tourist facilities and services (Kim & Brown, 2012). The combination of these features makes up the tourism products at the destination (Zabkar et al., 2010). In relation to destination quality (or perceived destination quality), it may be defined as a visitor's perception or evaluation on the standard of tourism products at the destination (a group of attractions, tourist facilities, and services) that meet the requirement or expectation of tourists (Cong, 2016; Rajaratnam & Nair, 2015). Destination quality, therefore, may be related to tourist perception on the overall performance of the tourist attractions, tourism services/facilities and infrastructure offered by the destination. In this study, we assume that tourists perceive the quality of destination attributes when that attribute performs similarly or better than their expectation. However, they may perceive less quality when that attribute performs lower or worse than their expectation.

A review of related literature indicates that there are some studies examining tourist perception on destination quality in different aspects. For example, Baker and Crompton (2000) explored the relationship between quality, satisfaction and behavioral intentions in a festival setting. The study revealed that performance quality influenced on satisfaction, meanwhile, the satisfaction did not fully mediate the effect of quality on behavioral intentions. In particular, the performance quality had a stronger effect on behavioral intentions than satisfaction; suggesting that high performance quality encouraged participants to be more loyal (e.g. returning or spreading positive word-of-mouth about the festival). Cronin, Brady and Hult (2010) examined the effects of quality, value and customer satisfaction on consumer behavioral intentions in service industries (i.e. healthcare and sports). They found that the three variables directly influenced behavioral intentions. In particular, the variable like quality had a greater direct effect on behavioral intentions than the other two variables, meanwhile, quality also directly affected value and customer satisfaction. Kim, Holland and Han (2013) investigated how the service quality and perceived value affected tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in a case of theme park areas in Orlando, USA. The study found that service quality and perceived value affected tourist satisfaction, at the same time, both variables also had direct paths influencing destination loyalty. The study suggested that service quality measurement and improvement are essential aspects for enhancing destination loyalty, particularly the tourism services. Rajaratnam and Nair (2015) examined the direct effect of destination quality on tourist behavioral intentions in rural tourist destination in Malaysia. It was revealed that destination quality of rural tourism destinations had a significant positive influence on tourist satisfaction. Moreover, the study revealed that tourist satisfaction was an important variable mediating the effect of rural destination quality on behavioral intentions. The study suggested that the quality of destination attributes (e.g. nature, tourist attractions, local culture, amenities, security) should be maintained to sustain the competitiveness of the destination.

In summary, although there are prior studies examining the relationships between destination quality, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty in different areas of investigation (e.g. festival, theme parks, service industries, rural areas). Researchers have not deeply examined what other factors (dimensions) of destination quality may influence tourist loyalty in the case of island destinations in the international context. In particular, the relationship among the three variables can be varied from one destination to another due to several factors (e.g. level of tourism development, type of destinations, and tourism resources). Generally, it is assumed that tourists visit islands due to the attractiveness of beach tourism (sea, sand, sun), and they are more likely to revisit that destination due to this attribute. In other words, it may be argued that the quality of beaches at the destination may have a close linkage to tourist loyalty. However, there are limited studies to confirm the above assumption in the case of island destinations in international context. This study, therefore, aims to fulfill such knowledge gap and to expand related literature on the determinants of island-destination loyalty.

Given the past research, it is argued that destination quality (independent variable) may directly affect destination loyalty (dependent variable), meanwhile, it may indirectly affect destination loyalty through tourist satisfaction as a mediating variable. Based on these assumptions, the conceptual framework for this study has been established as shown in Figure 1. In particular, this study aims to find out which dimensions of destination quality may affect tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the island destinations by using Phuket island as the case study.

Figure 1
Conceptual framework



Methodology

The samples in this study were independent international tourists (age 20 years and above) who stayed at Phuket or nearby islands for at least 2 nights. The independent travelers were chosen because they intentionally selected Phuket as their destination when compared to the group tours. The latter group might visit Phuket as a part of tour programs influenced by tour operators, and was not included in this study. Given the criterion of 2-night stay, this was an assumption that tourists might have certain exposure to the quality of island features than short-stay tourists. A convenience sampling was employed to collect the data. Data were collected during June 2016 by a self-administered questionnaire method at Phuket island as well as the other two nearby islands (Yao Noi and Yao Yai islands). These two islands are the big islands near Phuket (about 20 kilometers away from Phuket). A total of 438 questionnaires were usable for data analysis. The questionnaire consisted of 4 sections: a) tourists' demographic information b) tourists' perception on quality of island destination features c) tourist satisfaction and d) destination loyalty.

Destination quality: The measurement of destination quality was modified from a concept of "six A's" (i.e. attractions, access, amenities, available packages, activities, and ancillary services) developed by Buhalis (2000 cited in Sangpikul, 2008) as well as a review of related studies (Cong, 2016; Rajaratnam & Nair 2015; Zabkar et al., 2010) to create destination quality items. All destination quality items were adapted to be suitable for island destination features. Through the literature review and academic discussions, there were 22 destination items developed for measuring island destination quality. Respondents were asked to rate their perception on these items on a 5-point rating scale (1=very poor and 5=very good). These rating scales were employed from related studies as they are argued to be more appropriate as a quality indicator of the destination rather than a scale of "agree" or "disagree" (Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000). Sample questions were, for instance, "How do you perceive the cleanliness of beaches?", or "How do you perceive the service of local transportation?"

Tourist satisfaction: In this study, tourist satisfaction was not measured based on traditional method by asking tourists about their satisfaction on individual destination attributes/items (e.g. beaches, people, services) because the satisfaction items may be too similar to those of destination quality items, and may produce unreliable findings through the SEM analysis. Therefore, this study has employed another approach, the cumulative tourist satisfaction experience, to measure tourist satisfaction of their trips to island destination. The cumulative tourist satisfaction experience aims to measure tourist satisfaction based on destination experience (not individual destination items). International scholars argue that tourist satisfaction is concerned with the affective outcome (emotion) of tourists' experience with a bundle of tourism supplies at the destination (Rajaratnam & Nair, 2015; Zabkar et al., 2010). It is, therefore, more appropriate to measure tourist satisfaction through the overall destination experience or trip experience rather an individual attribute. With this regard, prior studies measured tourist satisfaction in terms of emotional state with the overall destination performance (Rajaratnam & Nair, 2015; Zabkar et al., 2010). In this study, there were five statements to measure tourist satisfaction (trip experience) which were developed from previous research (Rajaratnam & Nair, 2015; Zabkar et al., 2010). Sample statements were "I really enjoy my visit to Phuket", "I have positive feeling with this destination", and "My visit to this destination exceeds my expectation". Respondents were asked to rate their trip satisfaction on a 5-point Likert scale (5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree).

Destination loyalty: Most prior studies have measured destination loyalty on two items: (1) the intention to revisit the destination in the future and (2) the likelihood to recommend the destination to other people (Chi & Qu, 2008; Kim & Brown, 2012; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Following the literature, this study asked the respondents to rate their intention to revisit Phuket in the near future and their likelihood to recommend Phuket to their relatives/friends by using a 5-point Likert scale (1=most unlikely and 5=most likely).

A pilot test was undertaken to evaluate the reliability and validity of the research instrument before gathering data. The first draft of questionnaire was distributed to 50 randomly selected foreign tourists in Phuket. A reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was performed for all questionnaire items with a result of 0.83, well above a value of 0.70, indicating an acceptable reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Meanwhile, the validity test (pre-test) was also undertaken with the same samples of pilot test to obtain feedback and comments on the clarity and appropriateness of the research questions. Based on the validity test, some modifications (e.g. wording, revision of some sentences) were revised, and the final version of the questionnaire was developed. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the measurement model. Path analysis was employed to test the effects between destination quality, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. The proposed structural model was tested by using a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis by AMOS software.

Findings

Profile of respondents

According to respondents' socio-demographic information, most of them (54%) were males and 46% were females. Major group of the respondents was in the age range of 31 – 45 years old (39%). More than half of them were married (51%), and the majority (58%) had education at the college level (bachelor degree). The respondents came from different occupations, for example, 31% were company employees, 18% were government officers, 14% were independent/self-employed, and 10% were business owner. Approximately 40% of the respondents had monthly income in the range of US\$ 2,501 – 3,500 while 27% had income in the range of US\$ 1,001 – 2,500. Among 438 respondents, 66% were first time visitors, while 34% visited these islands before. There were approximately 54% Asian tourists (e.g. China, Korea, Japan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan) and 46% European tourists (e.g. Germany, France, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK as well as Australia and New Zealand).

Measurement model

Before developing the structural equation model, the measurement model was tested first before the evaluation of the structural equation model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1982). Measurement model explained the relationship between latent constructs (destination quality, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty) and indicators (observed variables). In the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to examine the reliability and validity of the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1998). Table 1 presents the results of CFA for the measurement model. Meanwhile, the fit indices indicated an acceptable fit with the data: chi-square = 445.41, $df = 209$, $chi-square/df = 2.13$, $NFI = 0.93$, $CFI = 0.91$, and $RMSEA = 0.07$. According to the literature, the value of $chi-square/df$ less than 3.0 was acceptable (Kline, 1998; Paswan, 2009), NFI and CFI values exceeding 0.90 demonstrated a good fit model (Byrne, 2001), and $RMSEA$ value in the range of 0.05 – 0.10 indicated an adequate fit (Byrne, 2001; Garson, 2011; Steiger, 2007).

According to Table 1 (CFA results), it presents the results of the measurement model with 3 latent constructs and 22 indicators (observed variables). The internal fit indices composed of factor loading and individual item reliability of all items used in each construct including Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All factor loadings were greater than a criterion value of 0.4; indicating a good correlation between the items (Kaiser, 1974), meanwhile Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.6, and indicator reliabilities were higher than 0.4; indicating acceptable threshold reliability (Hulland, 1999). The indicator reliabilities indicate the percent of the variation in the variable explained by the construct that it is supposed to measure (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 2006; Hulland, 1999). At the same time, composite reliabilities of the three constructs were higher than the recommended level of 0.60, indicating high internal consistency (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Both indicator reliabilities and composite reliabilities are the important measurement to assess the reliability of the construct (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hulland, 1999). Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs were greater than the threshold value of 0.50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Therefore, all of the constructs and indicators in this study were acceptable; suggesting the measurement model fit the empirical data.

Table 1
Results of CFA for measurement model

Constructs & indicators	Standardized loading	Indicator reliability	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
(1) Destination quality: Beach attraction			0.76	0.81	0.59
Cleanliness of beaches	0.73	0.68			
Climate	0.82	0.78			
(1) Destination quality: People			0.77	0.78	0.54
Friendliness of local people	0.79	0.63			
Honesty of vendors	0.69	0.51			
Helpfulness of staff	0.65	0.52			
Hotel services	0.75	0.66			
Restaurant services	0.71	0.58			
(1) Destination quality: Tourist facilities			0.69	0.7	0.64
Shopping facilities	0.77	0.59			
Tour services	0.78	0.61			
Tourist information	0.61	0.67			
Prices of products/services	0.78	0.61			
Food hygiene	0.79	0.63			
Cultural attractions	0.78	0.61			
Nightlife & entertainment	0.79	0.63			
(1) Destination quality: Tourist safety			0.7	0.72	0.51
Tourist safety	0.85	0.73			
Police availability	0.76	0.58			
(1) Destination quality: Infrastructure facilities			0.8	0.82	0.54
Quality of road	0.69	0.57			
Safety of transport	0.84	0.71			
Price of transport	0.78	0.61			
Transport services	0.62	0.55			
Convenience of travel	0.61	0.56			
Cleanliness	0.78	0.61			
(2) Tourist satisfaction			0.92	0.93	0.73
Positive feeling	0.81	0.66			
Better than expectation	0.83	0.69			
Enjoy a visit	0.90	0.81			
Satisfied trip	0.92	0.85			
Worth for money	0.79	0.62			
(3) Destination loyalty			0.83	0.8	0.71
Likelihood to revisit	0.76	0.89			
Recommendation to others	0.64	0.58			

(1) = first construct (destination quality), (2) = second construct (tourist experience), (3) = third construct (destination loyalty)

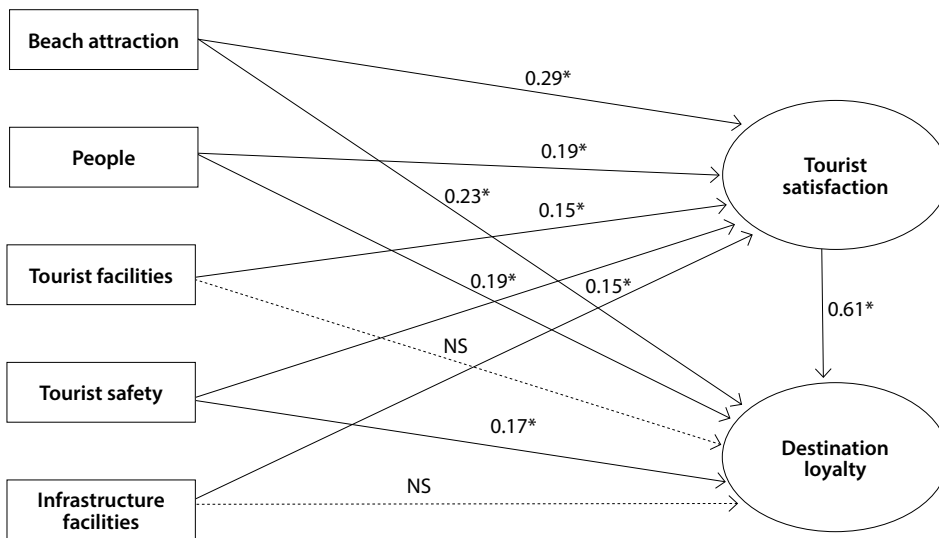
Structural model

Following the fit indices and the results of CFA, the measurement model was adequate and acceptable fit. The final measurement model composing of all items and constructs from table 1 was later built into the structural model as shown in figure 2. The overall fit indices were assessed to check the model fit. The calculated indices were chi-square = 448.44, df = 209, chi-square/df = 2.14, CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.91, and RMSEA = 0.07 as shown in figure 2. The value of chi-square/df less than a threshold

value of 3.0 was acceptable (Paswan, 2009). Moreover, CFI value comparing the hypothesized model against an independent baseline model (Arbuckle, 2005) was higher than the required values of 0.90, demonstrating good fit model (Byrne, 2001). NFI value exceeding 0.90 demonstrated a good fit model (Byrne, 2001), and RMSEA value was 0.07, indicating a moderate fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Based on all fit measurement values, the proposed structural model had adequate fit between the model and data. Therefore, all path coefficients from this structural model can be interpreted with the causal effects of the three variables (constructs).

Dimensions of destination quality

Figure 2
Structural model



Fit indices: Chi-square = 448.44, df = 209, Chi-square/df = 2.14, CFI = 0.92, NFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07

Remarks:

NS = no significant relationship

* p-value is significant at 0.05

According to figure 2, we tested the standardized parameter estimate that links the three variables in terms of sign and statistical significance. The standardized path coefficients can be used for examining one latent construct in relation to another (Tojari, Heris & Zarei, 2011). Based on the results, only three direct paths of destination quality dimensions to destination loyalty were statistically significant in positive directions. This indicated that destination quality dimensions related to "beach attraction" (coefficient=0.23), "people" (coefficient=0.19), and safety (coefficient=0.17) had the positive direct effects on destination loyalty. This finding implied that beach attraction, people, and safety had an important impact on tourists' decision to revisit the islands. Meanwhile, the rests of destination quality dimensions (tourism facilities and infrastructure facilities) did not have the significant paths to destination loyalty. However, all paths between destination quality dimensions and tourist satisfaction were statistically significant in positive directions; implying that all destination quality dimensions affect tourist satisfaction. This finding indicated that destination quality dimensions were the antecedent of tourist satisfaction. Also, a path of tourist satisfaction to destination loyalty was statistically significant in a positive direction with relatively high coefficient (0.61), which was higher than those

of destination quality dimensions. This suggests that tourist satisfaction remains an important and powerful determinant of destination loyalty. Importantly, based on the findings, tourist satisfaction seemed to be an essential variable mediating the effects of destination quality on destination loyalty. This implied that the connection between destination quality and destination loyalty was mediated by tourist satisfaction. These findings may provide the important implications for tourism development of island destinations.

Discussion

According to SEM findings, it was found that destination quality dimension related to beach attraction was found to have the significant influence on destination loyalty in a positive direction. The result is similar to Kim and Brown (2012) indicating that the natural components of a nature-based destination will play an important role in satisfying tourists in visiting the destination as well as may influence tourists' re-visit. In particular, in the study of Polnyotee and Thadaniti (2014) reported that tourist attraction of island destinations (i.e. beaches, natural scenery) was the most important factor attracting tourists to the destination. This may help justify that Phuket island and nearby islands on the Andaman Sea are well known for the beauty of beaches and 3-S tourism (sea, sand, sun). It is not a surprising finding revealing that the quality of beaches is the most important factor (highest coefficient value) affecting tourist loyalty. This finding may provide an important implication for related parties to manage tourism in Phuket and nearby islands. In addition, the destination quality dimension associated with people was found to have the positive direct effect on destination loyalty. This finding is similar to previous research (Chi & Qu, 2008; Mehmetoglu & Normann, 2013; Thongkudam, 2012) revealing that people is an essential component that may affect tourist satisfaction and their decision to revisit the destination. For example, Thongkudam (2012) indicated that friendliness of people was the top strength of Phuket island. Likewise, Chi and Qu (2008) found that tourists' travel experience with tourism services (including local people) at the destination could result in repeat visit. Furthermore, Mehmetoglu and Normann (2013) disclosed that people (service/business employees) had a significant influence on tourists' overall holiday experience. Based on these past studies, this suggests that people component plays an important role contributing to destination loyalty.

Another interesting finding indicated that tourist safety was another important factor affecting tourist loyalty. This finding has reconfirmed Phuket island's tourism as well as Thai tourism industry that tourist safety has become the essential component for international tourists in visiting Thailand. The current finding corresponds to several prior studies both in Thai and international contexts. For example, prior research (Sangpikul, 2008; Thongkudam, 2012) indicated that tourist safety is the top concern among international tourists when visiting overseas destinations, particularly Thailand. This may be because, in recent years, the image of Thailand has been negatively affected by several incidents such as bombs in Bangkok, terrorism in the southern Thailand, and several tourist crimes in Thailand. Based on these situations, it may be possible that international tourists may place tourist safety as a priority concern if they wish to return to Phuket island (as well as Thailand).

However, the SEM findings also revealed that the other two destination quality dimensions (i.e. tourist facilities and infrastructure facilities) did not have the direct effects on destination loyalty but all of the five destination quality dimensions had direct impacts on tourist satisfaction. This could be justified that destination loyalty may not only occur due to tourist perception on destination quality but it may occur through a combination of positive perception on destination quality and tourist satisfaction together (suggesting that several factors may contribute to loyalty). In other words, when tourists

have positive perception on destination quality attributes at the destination, this may lead to their overall satisfaction. With high satisfaction, they are more likely to revisit the destination. This finding may imply that destination quality alone may not be adequate to the formation of destination loyalty but it would be involved with overall tourist satisfaction with the destination. Since the value of path coefficient of tourist satisfaction (0.61) was higher than those of destination quality, this suggests that tourist satisfaction plays an essential role in building tourists' destination loyalty to Phuket. And it may be considered as an important moderating variable between destination quality and destination loyalty.

Implications

Theoretical implications

Little research has investigated the effects of destination quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the case of island destinations. Generally, in the setting of island destinations, destination quality dimension associated with beach attraction was argued to influence tourists' re-visit. However, this study has found that, in addition to beach attraction, destination quality dimensions related to *people* and *tourist safety* also had the significant impacts on tourists' re-visit in the case of Phuket island (Thailand). In other words, the quality of beach attraction was not the only factor affecting tourists' decision to return to Phuket and nearby islands but having good experience with local people and high confidence of tourist safety also contributed to their likelihood to revisit these destinations. This study, therefore, has disclosed the three important determinants of destination loyalty in the case of island destinations which were 1) beaches, 2) people, and 3) tourist safety. This indicated that there were three direct significant paths between destination quality and destination loyalty. The finding helps to expand the existing literature and provides a better understanding of the relationship between destination quality and destination loyalty in the case of island destinations. In relation to path coefficients and size of effect, this study found that the path coefficient of tourist satisfaction (0.61) was higher (greater) than those of destination quality dimensions. This suggests that tourist satisfaction is still the essential variable contributing to tourist loyalty in case of island destinations. However, it should be noted that the effect (path coefficient) of tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty was the result (outcome) of destination quality dimensions. This suggests that the high value of path coefficient of tourist satisfaction occurs due to the overall results of tourists' experience or perception on the destination quality dimensions, not the tourist satisfaction alone. Furthermore, the study has revealed what tourists experienced at the destination (all destination quality dimensions) also directly contributed to tourist satisfaction. Meanwhile, all of them also indirectly influenced tourist loyalty. Based on these finding, it highlights the essence and existence of tourist satisfaction as the important mediating variable (full mediation role) between destination quality and destination loyalty in the island destinations. Therefore, the current findings help to expand the existing tourism literature and provide a deeper understanding of the causal relationships between the two important variables (i.e. destination quality and tourist satisfaction) and the destination loyalty in the case of island destinations.

Managerial implications

This study has specifically examined the effects of destination quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty by using Phuket as the main area of investigation. The findings of this study have significant managerial implications for Phuket's tourism industry. Firstly, among the three destination quality dimensions, beach attraction was found to have the highest path coefficient on destination loyalty. Based on this finding, beach attraction may be regard as the most important element contributing to

tourist loyalty to Phuket and nearby islands. Therefore, the government and local authorities seem to be the key players in managing this important attribute in order to enhance international tourists' re-visit to Phuket and nearby islands. They may work together to develop/improve beach attribute through appropriate strategies or plans. In relation to beach management (i.e. scenery, cleanliness), protection policy, conservation plan, and legal action should be seriously taken into consideration. Local authorities should pay more attention to the cleanliness of beach areas by preparing sufficient staff and garbage bins throughout the areas. Also, the city administrators/tourism officials may launch the campaign such as "Keep Phuket Clean" like other countries. This campaign has been undertaken in several tourism destinations such as Bali, Indonesia and Penang, Malaysia (Sangpikul, 2008).

Secondly, besides beach attraction, destination quality dimension related to people was also found to have the direct effect on destination loyalty. This suggests that people (i.e. local residents, vendors, and service staff) play a crucial role in building loyal tourists to island destinations. In other words, the favorable perception of local people may contribute to the tourists' re-visit to the destination. This finding may provide an important implication for local authorities and tourism organization to concern about the "people" as an essential component contributing to Phuket's tourism industry. For instance, they may work together to create a public awareness for local people (including residents, vendors, service staff) for being kind and friendly hosts to welcome and assist tourists. In particular, the educational institutes (schools and colleges) are an essential part to enhance and foster this important value within their institutes. The government and private sectors may also create awareness and train their employees on this issue as well.

Thirdly, tourist safety was another factor to have the direct impact on destination loyalty. Today, tourist safety in Thailand seems to be one of the major reasons for tourists' decision to visit or not to visit Thailand due to the recent negative images of Thailand (e.g. southern terrorism, booms, crime). With this attribute, there are three important issues to be addressed to improve the quality of tourist safety in Phuket. The first issue should be about the provision of the sufficient budget for managing tourist safety in Phuket. Since tourism has generated huge revenues for Phuket's tourism, the central government should allocate appropriate budgets for local police department and related safety/security administration. The second issue should be related to the human resources for local police and safety/security staff. In case of a sufficient budget, there should be more numbers of local police, safety/security staff or volunteers recruited to be in charge of tourist safety in Phuket and nearby islands. The local authorities and tourism police forces should closely work together by providing more channels/information for emergency contacts (at airport, hotels, restaurants, and other public areas) and having officials regularly visit the tourism sites throughout the city. Police volunteers or safety guards may be recruited from locals and foreign residents. The final issue will be about the cooperative work between government and business sectors to build the awareness and campaigns among local people (vendors, merchants, serviced staff) to be the good hosts in welcoming and assisting foreign tourists at the destinations. The campaigns should be focused on different approaches to make tourists feel safe while visiting the islands. These may be undertaken through various approaches, for example, media, travel documents, Internet, and social events.

Finally, the SEM findings indicated that all destination quality dimensions (five dimensions) had the positive direct effects on tourist satisfaction. Moreover, it should be noted that tourist satisfaction had the strongest direct effect on destination loyalty (with high path coefficient = 0.61). This effect may result from the outcome of destination quality dimensions; implying that any destination attributes tourists perceive during their trips at the destinations would directly affect their satisfaction. This finding,

therefore, provides an important implication for local authorities and tourism sector to keep in mind about building tourist satisfaction through the delivery of high quality of destination attributes (e.g. beaches, services, food, tours, transportation). When tourists have high satisfaction with the destination attributes, they are more likely to revisit the destinations. Therefore, the government and tourism sector should be the key players in managing and planning destination attributes in order to promote higher level of tourist satisfaction and re-visitation (Chi & Qu, 2008). Meanwhile, both sectors may work together to manage destination attributes through appropriate strategy, plan or project. This may involve 1) infrastructure development (accessibility, price and services), 2) the standard of business services (accommodation, restaurants, tour operators, entertainment), and 3) the conservation of tourism resources (natural and cultural attractions).

Limitations and future research studies

There are some limitations associated with this study that need to be addressed for future research opportunities. This study examined the effects of destination quality dimensions on tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty through the convenience sampling in a specific island location – Phuket and nearby islands on the Andaman Sea in the southern part of Thailand. Future research may be conducted in other major islands or overseas island destinations to enhance the generalizability and compare what this study has found. Given the convenience sampling method, the outcome of the study may have certain limitation of the generalizability. Furthermore, this study examined only one construct (i.e. destination quality) affecting tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. It may not provide a comprehensive understanding on the determinants of destination loyalty. Future research may incorporate important variables into destination loyalty studies such as perceived value and destination image.

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