ANALYSIS OF VISITORS' EXPERIENCES AT THE OLD MELBOURNE GAOL

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ABSTRACT

Visitation to the dark past of history is growing where more tourist is confronting concepts of mortality. Still, it appears to have minimal research on dark tourist experiences in the context of prison museums, particularly the Old Melbourne Gaol. The aim of the research is to analyse visitors' experiences and provide recommendation for improvement. The relevance of the research is understanding dark tourist experiences will give insight into how service offerings can be improved in prison museums. The researcher conducted a qualitative study using thematic analysis to understand visitor experiences better and provide recommendation for future visitation. Purposive sampling was used to explore mixed reviews from the widely used platform called TripAdvisor. One of the key findings is that most visitors are international tourists accompanied by family or friends visiting towards the end of the year, which means that service offerings should be geared towards this group. Furthermore, the overall visitor experience is positive, and emerging themes narrates the authenticity of carceral life, interactive experience and exciting re-enactments at the Old Melbourne Gaol. Lastly, the findings reveal the need to reconsider the role of customer service as it influences the overall satisfaction of visitors and strengthen substantial aspects of service offerings to increase visitation and enhance the visitor experience.

KEYWORDS: Dark tourism, online review, visitor experience, TripAdvisor

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The popularity of prison tourism in Australia in the postmodernity world is said to be emerging. With millions of visitations every year, many are including prison tours in their bucket list to experience history's infamous deaths and tragedies that is more academically referred to as dark tourism (Sampson, 2019; Cakar 2018). The term dark tourism is a form of tourism that involves death, suffering, violence or tragedy presented in a commodified and a commercialised way to increase public awareness of the site's dark past (Light, 2017). A compelling example is the Old Melbourne Gaol as Victoria's best heritage and cultural attraction (Welch, 2012).

Despite growing attendance at the Old Melbourne Gaol, there have been mixed customer reviews about their experiences during and post visitation (TripAdvisor, 2021; National Trust, 2019). The purpose of this research is to identify the factors influencing the visitors' experiences during visitation and analyse the relationship between the online rating system and recommendation intention after visitation.

METHODOLOGY

The secondary data that was used for this research was from the commonly used online platform called TripAdvisor which was used to examine the visitors' reviews and comments on their experiences at the

Old Melbourne Gaol. Currently, there are over 3,000 reviews on TripAdvisor, and this research paper examined the average of those user-generated content.

Moreover, the study used qualitative content analysis by categorising themes of the common keywords found in the user comments to examine influencing factors during visitation. This researcher also attempted to understand the relationship between post-visit satisfaction and the intention of the visitor to recommend a trip to the Old Melbourne Gaol using correlation analysis by exploring customer's rating reviews to improve customer experience.

FINDINGS

One of the key findings is that most visitors to the Old Melbourne Gaol are international tourists accompanied by family or friends visiting towards the end of the year, which means that service offerings should be more geared towards this group.

Furthermore, the overall visitor experience is positive, and emerging themes narrates the authenticity of carceral life, interactive experiences and exciting re-enactments at the Old Melbourne Gaol. Lastly, the findings reveal the need to reconsider the role of customer service as it influences the overall satisfaction of visitors and strengthen substantial aspects of the service offerings to increase visitation and enhance the visitor experience.

CONCLUSION

In general, the results reveal positive visitor experiences at the Old Melbourne Gaol. The current demographics tell us that majority are international tourists visiting towards the end of the year and are likely to engage in "dark tourism" Tourism involving travel to sites associated with death and tragedy, which is usually accompanied by family or friends.

It is safe to conclude that future visitation should be geared towards this market segment to increase visitation and improve customer experience. Even though the emerging themes are dependent on how visitors perceived them, the analysis of the comments mostly reflects the authenticity of carceral life, interactive experience and thrilling re-enactments at the Old Melbourne Gaol.

As a result, these factors shape the visitors' experiences during visitation. Although the results are overall positive, one cannot neglect the aspects about customer service, accessibility of the building designs and visibility of information that influences the visitors' satisfaction and the likelihood of revisitation or recommendation.

Lastly, the findings suggest the need to re-evaluate areas of weakness, especially customer service and strengthen strong points to increase visitation and enhance the customer experience in the Old Melbourne Gaol.

CONTRIBUTION/PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Since the study explored the influencing factors during visitation, it is encouraged to do further investigation on the motivating factors in the pre-visit stage. By understanding the pre-visit motivating factors, it will give insight on how to manage the expectations of visitors and appropriately cater to the organisation's services not only operationally but also the aspect of Customer Relationship Management (CRM).

Being a niche tourism, further study on the relationship between online rating system and recommendation intention could help identify areas during visitation that needs improvement. Lastly, collecting other data such as age, level of income and educational attainment can help in the promotion of the prison museum to the different demographics which will optimise the resource use and provide offerings or special promotions to that target market.

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