

The Effect of Servicescape on eWOM Intention for Sustainable Community-Based Tourism Development: A Case Study of Homestay in Thailand

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Abstracts

Homestay tourism is an appealing form of tourism today and will likely continue to grow in popularity since it delivers experiences that tourists cannot have in everyday living. It is still required to research the aspects that influence customer behavior. It is critical, especially in the hospitality and tourism industries, to find what attracts clients' attention and generates a psychological and emotional experience that will impress and affect behavior. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to uncover the aspects of servicescape's influence on customers' behavioral intentions in Thai homestay enterprises using the Mehrabian-Russell Model (M-R model). The 535 data points were gathered from Thai consumers who visited homestay services in Thailand. Structured equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the proposed model. According to the findings, social and cultural attractiveness is the most crucial servicescape dimension. It influences client experiences and, in turn, indirectly influences customer satisfaction and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, followed by space and function, and aesthetic appeal. The findings highlight the importance of all three dimensions of servicescape when investing in the development or improvement of the homestay business. They can provide clients with positive experiences that lead to contentment and a desire to share positive experiences via online media, which supports sustainable community-based tourism growth.

Keywords: The Effect of Servicescape; eWOM Intention for Sustainable; Community-Based Tourism Development; Homestay in Thailand

Introduction

Homestay tourism, a form of community-based tourism (CBT), was developed with the goal of improving the socioeconomic standing of the primarily rural area and allowing tourists to experience local everyday life by residing with a host family (Ismail & Syed Jaafar, 2022 : 114-125). Thai homestay is an alternative tourism form focused on community participation in economic management, culture, and local wisdom in the traditional way of life as well as the natural resources and environment of the community in a sustainable manner under the promotion and support in the creation of tourism service standards of the Department of Tourism, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (Department of Tourism, 2015 : 1). In 2023, the Homestay industry will continue to increase in terms of both the number of lodgings and the number of rooms. This is primarily supported by the tourism sector's good recovery in 2023, but there are still risk factors that may impede the growth of the homestay business, such as the

¹Received: June 28 2023; Revised: August 2 2023; Accepted: August 4 2023

global economic slowdown, which will affect the number and revenue of tourists, or competition for the customer base from illegal rental and alternative accommodation sharing platforms such as Airbnb, guesthouses, bungalows, and low-cost converted accommodation (GSB Research, 2022). As a result, it should identify stimuli that will entice tourists to stay in homestays and ensure the sustainability of community-based tourism.

Physical evidence is a key component of the service marketing mix for service organizations (Booms & Bitner, 1982 : 35-40). Servicescape is crucial physical evidence that assists customers in evaluating their experience through tangible and visible items (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Lin, 2004 : 163–178). It is particularly effective at influencing and motivating clients, hence it remains a research topic of interest. It is now known that the components of service marketing have changed significantly, both in terms of reducing the number of service persons and service processes focusing on self-service for consumers, such as the use of robots, artificial intelligence (AI), and service automation (SA) in the tourism and hospitality industries (Ivanov & Webster, 2017). Servicescape, on the other hand, remains significant and is becoming increasingly relevant for consumers today. Many research topics in the hospitality industry, such as short-term accommodation rental (SAR) and coffee franchises, stated that servicescape received the highest score for both importance and performance, which influences customer experience and influences their behaviors (Kim et al., 2016: 761–774; Xu & Gursoy, 2020 : 429-446). Despite the fact that some CBT studies do not directly target the servicescape, communities can improve revenue by participating and improving their facilities (Nurvianti & Hastuti, 2021 : 263–287).

When examining the growth and discussing tourism trends beyond 2030, research in servicescape remains appealing in the tourism and hospitality business, indicating the remarkableness of South-East Asia's alternative tourism (United Nations World Tourist Organization, 2016 : Online). Furthermore, given the current circumstances and the harsh economic climate, travelers are looking for the best value and traveling closer to home (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2023). Consequently, Thai homestays are appropriate research targets because they are an affordable alternative tourism option in Thailand that focuses on community participation in economic management, culture, and local wisdom, the traditional way of life, as well as the community's natural resources and environment in a sustainable manner (Department of Tourism, 2015 : 1). And when considering the impact of the servicescape on tourist electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, which leads to community sustainability, Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) model, or M-R model, was proposed in this study to demonstrate the effect. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), emotional responses to physical stimuli might act as a bridge between the environment and behavior.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the impact of servicescape on eWOM intention utilizing the M-R model.
2. To investigate a servicescape, which is an essential variable for the eWOM Intention of homestay tourists in Thailand, to advocate the sustainability of community-based tourism.

Research Methodology

This is a quantitative study that employs the survey research technique as well as descriptive and inferential statistics as primary research approaches. The specifications are as follows:

Population and Sample

The samples in this study were drawn from an unknown population of Thai tourists who had visited homestays in Thailand that were accredited to Thai homestay standards for the year 2019 by the Department of Tourism, which had 175 homestays in total in six regions (Department of Tourism, 2019). The sample size was selected using a rule of thumb based on Kline (2011), who stated that the sample size required for a statistical estimate for the Structural Equation Model (SEM) must be at least 10 cases per item. Thus, with six latent variables and 20 observed variables (see Table 1), this study should have the smallest sample size of 200 respondents.

Research Instruments

The research tool was a questionnaire written in Thai with a Likert five-point interval scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagreed with and 5 being strongly agreed with (Likert, 1961). The questionnaire was divided into six main parts: Part 1: general information about the respondents; Part 2: opinions about the homestay servicescape; Part 3: opinions about the customer experience gained from the homestay servicescape; Part 4: opinions about the customer satisfaction with the homestay servicescape; Part 5: opinions about the customer's eWOM intention after staying in a homestay; and Part 6: an open-ended questionnaire for customers to express themselves. The questionnaire was given to 5 experts who evaluated its content validity by assessing the consistency and suitability of each question item with the operational definition (Index of Item-Objective Congruence: IOC). By picking questions with a consistency index of 0.50 or higher, the IOC value is between 0.60 and 1.00. There were two methods for collecting data: mailing and manual collection. First, 1,000 postal surveys were issued to the hosts of each homestay in Thailand, asking for their assistance in gathering information from their customers who are currently staying. Second, the data was gathered directly by delivering 292 online questionnaires to individual homestay customers via Facebook Messenger. According to the guidelines of Kline (2011), 579 replies were received from 1,292 surveys, and only 535 were usable; the response rate was 41.41%, which was considered a good representation.

Research Statistics and Analysis

A statistical package was utilized to test the descriptive, validity, and reliability analyses, as well as the data analysis for the study model. The model was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM), as recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988 : 411–423). The maximum likelihood method was used to estimate all parameters (Iacobucci, 2010 : 90-98). An evaluation index criterion was utilized to verify the model's fit with empirical data based on research assumptions (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, the assessment of the index according to the criteria of Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2000) and Schumacker and Lomax (2010) was used as follows: The Relative Chi-Square value (χ^2/df) must be less than 5.000, the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) must be 0.900 or higher, the Root of Mean Square Residual (RMR) must be less than 0.05, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) must be less than 0.080. The Relative Fit Index group (Normed Fit Index: NFI, Comparative Fit Index: CFI, and Incremental Fit Index: IFI) must be at least 0.900.

Research Conceptual framework

The servicescape is associated with environmental psychology, which describes all components of stimuli that assign their responses to the environment (Holahan, 1982). Bitner (1992) postulated servicescape aspects as stimuli that influence consumer attitudes and actions based on the Mehrabian-Russell model (M-R model), which was developed in an environmental psychology context by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) to explain the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm. The S-O-R paradigm manifested correlative forms of the environment (stimulus) to behaviors (response) in which the individual's emotional states (organism), stimulated by the environment, mediated the relationship.

In terms of homestay tourism, three dimensions of servicescape were considered—namely, space and function, aesthetic appeal, and social and cultural appeal—based on Bitner (1992) and servicescapes in the context of a hotel, hospitality, leisure services (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994), and businesses related to culture and ethnicity (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011), which correspond to Thai homestay standards. Pine and Gilmore's (1998 : 97–105) four realms of customer experiences (i.e., entertainment, education, esthetic, and escapism) are interpreted as an organism that influences customers' emotions and levels of satisfaction (Ali, Hussain, & Omar, 2016 : 25-40). Items of space and function, as well as aesthetic appeal, that positively impact the level of excitement in customer experiences, have been studied in the leisure services context (Dong & Sui, 2013; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). The last servicescape, social and cultural appeal, through the creation of artifacts and an atmosphere of contact with local communities, will give travelers a more authentic customer experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017 : 619-628). As for the relationship between response and organism, it was found that the most prevalent activity among travelers is posting photographs of holiday places on social media (Setsri, 2017: 29-32; Tang et al., 2022). This tourist behavior is strongly associated with the pleasure generated by their good appraisal of tourism products (Tang et al., 2022).

The M-R model has previously been used in marketing literature to explain servicescapes as a stimulus that affects consumer behavior through pleasure and arousal in different business types, such as retail (Donovan et al., 1994 : 283–294) and cruises (Risitano, Sorrentino, & Quintano, 2017 : 289-308). Therefore, this study operationalized a framework based on the M-R model to hypothesize the relationships between servicescape, emotions (i.e., customer experience and satisfaction), and behavioral intentions (i.e., electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)) in a particular segment of Thailand's homestay business, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

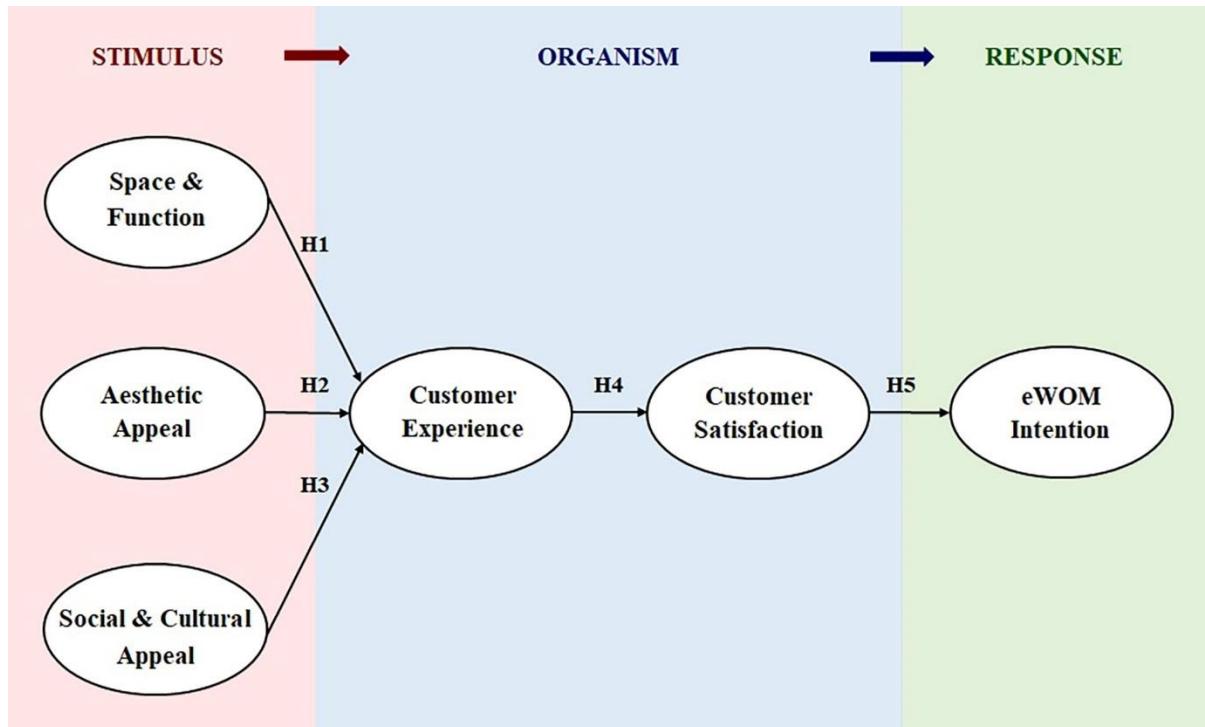


Figure 1. Shows the research conceptual framework under the M-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) adaptation.

Results

The majority of the sample (56.6%) is female, (40.2%) belongs to generation Y (20–37 years), is single (59.4%), has a bachelor's degree (59.6%), and has had homestay experience (59.1%). Finally, the most popular online media among respondents is Facebook (40.22%), followed by Line (31.94%), and Instagram (17.34%).

Descriptive Statistics

Preliminary statistical analysis of all 20 observational variables revealed that the data were normally distributed at the 95% confidence level, with the mean (\bar{X}) ranging between 3.770 and 4.284, the standard deviation (S.D.) less than 1.000, and both kurtosis and skewness not exceeding ± 2.000 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011: 139–152), as shown in Table 1. As a result, it is appropriate to examine the structural equation. Because there are enough samples in the test, multiple variables, and normal data distribution, the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method is used.

Table 1. Shows mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of all variables.

Construct	\bar{X}	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Space and function (SF)	3.978	0.612	-0.397	-0.106
SF1	3.976	0.730	-0.107	-0.739
SF2	4.045	0.707	-0.415	0.097
SF3	3.901	0.769	-0.325	-0.248
SF4	3.989	0.749	-0.357	-0.230
Aesthetic appeal (AA)	3.994	0.705	-0.550	0.274
AA1	4.275	0.740	-0.738	0.165
AA2	3.936	0.891	-0.402	-0.404
AA3	3.770	0.835	-0.379	0.036
Social and cultural appeal (SC)	4.137	0.670	-0.886	1.532
SC1	4.043	0.863	-0.819	0.538
SC2	4.224	0.736	-0.833	1.182
SC3	4.144	0.742	-0.707	0.788
Customer experience (CE)	4.087	0.614	-0.716	0.748
CE1	4.204	0.680	-0.600	0.711
CE2	4.148	0.734	-0.467	-0.302
CE3	3.998	0.761	-0.356	-0.323
CE4	3.998	0.820	-0.590	0.141
Customer satisfaction (CS)	4.095	0.605	-0.454	-0.284
CS1	4.118	0.724	-0.331	-0.564
CS2	4.140	0.717	-0.275	-0.819
CS3	4.007	0.727	-0.217	-0.523
CS4	4.114	0.706	-0.325	-0.424
eWOM intention (EW)	4.243	0.614	-0.838	1.305
EW1	4.284	0.712	-0.755	0.490
EW2	4.202	0.673	-0.450	0.177

Measurement model

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to determine the measurement model's acceptable fit. Reliability, validity, and model fit indices should be utilized to assess how well a measurement model matches our data (Hair et al., 2010). The measurement model's reliability and convergent validity are shown in Table 2. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951 : 297-334) and composite reliability (CR) (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012 : 8-34), which confirmed the internal consistency of the variables, were utilized to assess the measurement model's dependability. According to the findings, all latent constructs have a Cronbach's alpha (α) value and a CR greater than 0.7, showing the constructs' reliability (Hair et al., 2010; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Convergent validity was measured using factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and CR. The findings revealed that all factor loadings exceeded 0.4, and AVE values were more than 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010), indicating that the measuring model attained convergent validity. The square root of AVE (\sqrt{AVE}) was assessed for discriminant validity, with values exceeding the correlations between each

component (Fornell & Larcker, 1981 : 39-50). Inter-construct correlations are shown in Table 3, pointing out that latent constructs have discriminant validity.

Alternative fit indices were used to assess model fit (Hair et al., 2010). The fit indices' results value of the measurement model consisted of Relative Chi-Square (χ^2/df) = 3.786 (criteria: < 5.00), Goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.901 (criteria: > 0.90), Root mean square residual (RMR) = 0.031 (criteria: < 0.05), Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.072 (criteria: < 0.08), Incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.931 (criteria: > 0.90), Normed fit index (NFI) = 0.908 (criteria: > 0.90), and Comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.930 (criteria: > 0.90), which found to be fall in the acceptable range (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2000; Schumacker & Lomax, 2010).

Table 2. Reliability and validity of measurement model.

Constructs/Measurement items	Related Study	Factor loading	α	CR	AVE
Space and function (SF) SF1: The area is well-designed and easy to navigate. SF2: It provides clients with private space. SF3: Appropriate furniture is present. SF4: The equipment and facilities are in good condition.	Bitner (1992), Dedeoglu et al. (2018)	0.733 0.756 0.834 0.735	0.847	0.850	0.586
Aesthetic appeal (AA) AA1: There is natural or beautiful scenery around. AA2: It features a unique exterior architectural design. AA3: The interior design is unique.	Lyu et al. (2017)	0.593 0.840 0.895	0.815	0.826	0.619
Social and cultural appeal (SC) SC1: There are ethnic symbols that express the local identity, such as signs in the local language or clothes. SC2: The surrounding area offers a local lifestyle atmosphere. SC3: While staying, there is a cultural atmosphere from the decorations or encountering local traditional activities.	Alegre and Garau (2010), Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011)	0.754 0.728 0.864	0.819	0.827	0.615
Customer experience (CE) CE1: The atmosphere of experience has increased my knowledge. CE2: The atmosphere of the activities at the homestay was fascinating to observe and participate in. CE3: The atmosphere's setting was an intriguing design feature. CE4: The atmosphere of the homestay made me entirely forget about my everyday routine.	Güzel (2014)	0.712 0.728 0.720 0.793	0.836	0.828	0.546
Customer satisfaction (CS) CS1: The homestay atmosphere met my expectations.	Oliver (1980)	0.763	0.864	0.847	0.581

CS2: My decision to remain at the homestay was correct.		0.781			
CS3: The physical environments offered by homestay were just what I required and sought.		0.747			
CS4: My visit to this homestay was satisfactory.		0.757			
eWOM intention (EW)			0.726	0.727	0.571
EW1: I intend to share my stay experience with others through the internet or online media.	Yang (2017)	0.758			
EW2: I intend to promote the homestay through the internet or online media.		0.753			

Table 3. Discriminant validity testing by Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Latent Construct	SF	AA	SC	CE	CS	EW
Space and function (SF)	0.766					
Aesthetic appeal (AA)	0.680	0.787				
Social and cultural appeal (SC)	0.636	0.596	0.784			
Customer experience (CE)	0.691	0.619	0.732	0.739		
Customer satisfaction (CS)	0.698	0.620	0.750	0.726	0.762	
eWOM intention (EW)	0.588	0.486	0.638	0.709	0.722	0.756

Note: Values shown in main diagonal represent the \sqrt{AVE} .

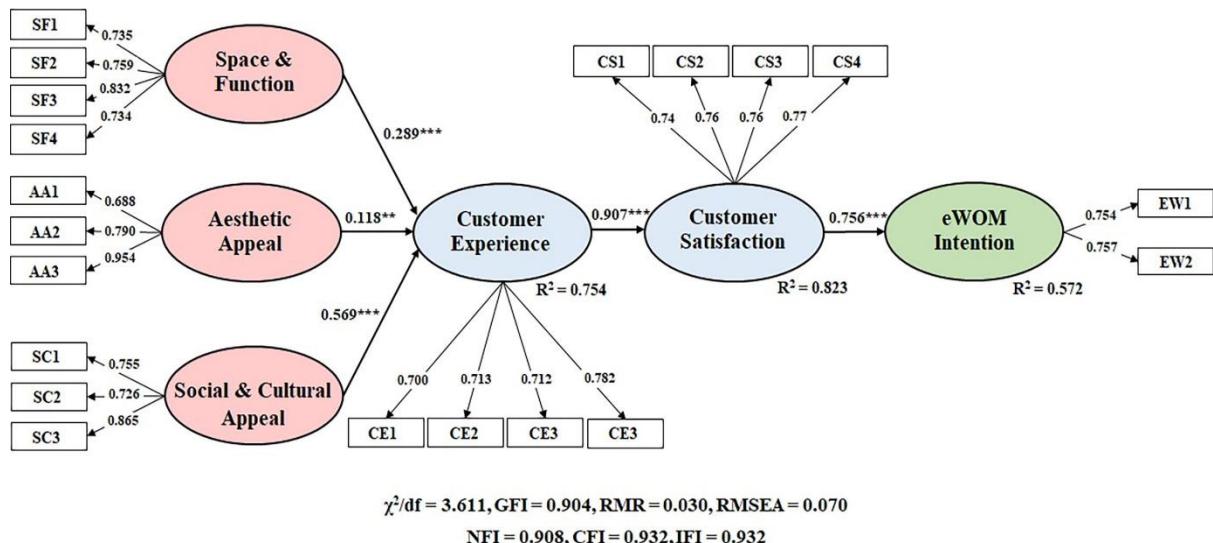
Structural model and hypotheses testing

The hypotheses that sought to study the relationship along phases of the M-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) were proven using structural equation modeling (SEM). The hypotheses tested and SEM results are summarized in Table 4 and Figure 2. First, the analysis of the relationships between stimuli and organisms reveals that the direct effects of space and function (SF) ($\gamma = 0.289$, $p = 0.000$), aesthetic appeal (AA) ($\gamma = 0.118$, $p = 0.009$), and social and cultural appeal (SC) ($\gamma = 0.569$, $p = 0.000$) on customer experience (CE) are significant and positive. As a result, H1, H2, and H3 are supported. Second, the connections between endogenous constructs, an understanding of the M-R model in the organism (i.e., customer experience and satisfaction), and response stages (i.e., eWOM intention) in the context of Thai homestay. The association between the two organisms demonstrates that the direct effect of customer experience on customer satisfaction (CS) ($\beta = 0.907$, $p = 0.000$) is considerable and beneficial. Finally, the result shows that the significant part coefficients for the structural model indicated a positive direct effect of customer satisfaction on eWOM intention (EW) ($\beta = 0.756$, $p = 0.000$). As a result, the test supported both causal parts, H4 and H5.

Table 4. Results of hypotheses testing.

Hypotheses	Parts	Estimate	S.E.	t-value	p-value	Results
H1	SF \rightarrow CE	0.289	0.064	5.371	0.000	Supported
H2	AA \rightarrow CE	0.118	0.036	2.597	0.009	Supported
H3	SC \rightarrow CE	0.569	0.053	10.601	0.000	Supported
H4	CE \rightarrow CS	0.907	0.046	16.875	0.000	Supported
H5	CS \rightarrow EW	0.756	0.049	14.846	0.000	Supported

The result shows the paths analysis with standardized parameter estimates and represents that this study was achieved because the structural model has fit, that is, $\chi^2/df = 3.611$, GFI = 0.904, RMR = 0.030, RMSEA = 0.070, IFI = 0.932, NFI = 0.908, and CFI = 0.932, which met the criteria (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2000; Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). Finally, the squared multiple correlations (R^2), which is the rate of ability to use endogenous variables to explain the variations of indicators, should not be lower than 0.25 (Hair et al., 2019), which were summarized as 0.572 to 0.823, showing moderate to high explanation. All the results are shown in Figure 2.



Note: ** is $p < 0.05$, *** is $p < 0.01$

Figure 2. The model of three servicescape dimensions, customer experience, customer satisfaction, and eWOM intention, is represented structurally in the relationship along the stages of the M-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Discussion

This study has two aims: to confirm the association of outcomes according to the M-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974); and to demonstrate which dimensions of the servicescape are the most influential on the eWOM Intention of homestay tourists for sustainable community-based tourism development. First, the study discovered a relationship between the servicescape representing the stimulus (i.e., space and function, aesthetic appeal, and social and cultural appeal), the customer experience and customer satisfaction representing the organism, and the eWOM intention representing the response in the context of Thailand's homestay business. The results of the study verifying the concept of the M-R model were confirmed by the results of the structural equation model's consistency. The model with index values is as follows: the relative chi-square (χ^2/df) values are less than 5.000; the GFI, NFI, CFI, and IFI values are 0.90 higher; the RMR is less than 0.050; and the RMSEA is less than 0.080, which meet the specified criteria (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2000; Schumacker & Lomax, 2010).

Second, the results showed that social and cultural appeal has the most direct impact on customer experience, equal to having the most indirect effect on customer satisfaction and eWOM intention, compared to the other two servicescape dimensions. The findings are consistent with Marketeer Online (Marketeer Team, 2022: online), which revealed that a survey of travelers by Booking.com to predict travel trends in 2023 showed that 80% of Thai travelers appreciate things unfamiliar and want to experience cultural differences entirely. Furthermore, Thai research on CBT management highlighted the significance of developing a local identity that represents the community's surrounding environmental and cultural heritage, like historic districts, buildings, mountains, beaches, groups of trees, and caves, as well as cultural landscapes such as rice fields and offshore fisheries, in order to broaden viewpoints on how the boundaries of tourism are interpreted (Yodsurang et al., 2022). However, according to the study, space and function were second in importance, followed by aesthetic appeal, which beneficially affected the customer experience and led to customer satisfaction and eWOM intention. It should therefore be important because tourism research has shown that facilities and scenery are factors of destination appeal that influence travelers' attachment to a place (Xu & Zhang, 2016 : 86–96).

Finally, because of the prevalence of digital online platforms with online reviews as well as eWOM's growing influence on consumer behavior, eWOM can assist entrepreneurs in keeping competitive and sustainably managing the tourism sector (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020). Consequently, the study reveals the significance of the three servicescapes that contribute to the emotional well-being of tourists, leading to eWOM intention behavior that can contribute to the sustainability of community-based tourism in the form of Thai homestay.

Recommendation

Academic and future research recommendations

This research hypothesis was predicted from prior servicescape literature evaluations in a variety of service businesses other than homestays, and the majority of that research was based on foreign perspectives. Accordingly, this study shows three servicescapes (i.e., space and function, aesthetic appeal, and social and cultural appeal) influence emotions (i.e., customer experience and customer satisfaction) and behavioral intentions (i.e., eWOM intention) follow the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework of the M-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) in the context of a Thai homestay.

Moreover, social and cultural appeal was a rather rare servicescape in previous studies to prove to be a stimulus in the M-R model; this result is therefore intriguing to investigate further in depth. Furthermore, it is interesting to study the comparative results of studies in different periods, such as high and low seasons in Thailand or between diverse population groups.

Policy and operational recommendations

This study benefits the homestay tourism business in investment decisions for servicescape development. The findings revealed that the customer's staying experiences could create all three servicescape dimensions—space and function, aesthetic appeal, and social and cultural appeal—with the social and cultural appeal having the most influence on the customer experience. Furthermore, the findings revealed that customer experience has a favorable impact on customer satisfaction and a significant positive eWOM intention, which is helpful to the business in attracting future consumers and could sustain community-based tourism. As a result, when it comes to homestay management, both owners and government agencies should prioritize customer experience management to develop and maintain customer satisfaction through the creation of social and cultural appeal, such as signs, symbols, attire, and an atmosphere of local lifestyle and culture through decorations or real-life displays that communicate the local identity.

Nonetheless, considerations should keep both space and function and aesthetic appeal in Thai homestay development. In particular, the natural or beautiful surroundings are part of the aesthetic appeal; the homestay owners cannot manage or develop themselves alone, necessitating the involvement of local people and the backing of government agencies.

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