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Making Newlyweds' Dreams Come True

For many couples, a romantic honeymoon is an important element of the perfect wedding. How do destination marketers and tourism service providers ensure that their offerings live up to honeymooners' holiday fantasies? In an important recent study, Professor Jin-Soo Lee of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and his co-researchers explored the quality dimensions that contribute to honeymooners' satisfaction and relationship with the destination, providing useful information and advice for destination marketers seeking to capture this market segment.

Enjoying the perfect vacation is an important part of the romantic fantasy for newlywed couples. A honeymoon is a "once in a lifetime moment", say the researchers. It is often the first chance for couples to "spend intimate time" in an exclusive and exotic place, where they can begin to create their first shared memories.

A honeymoon is something to fantasise about during the long process of planning the wedding, but the details of this fantasy may differ. Honeymooners look for "a variety of tourist attractions", write the researchers, such as beautiful scenery, luxury accommodation and spa treatments. Convenient transport and a safe and pleasant environment are also indispensable.

However, turning such fantasies into reality is an expensive business. Honeymooning couples spend three times more than they would on a typical holiday. Unsurprisingly, say the researchers, destinations have "devoted aggressive efforts" to attracting this market segment, which has great potential to boost tourism income for accommodation providers, restaurants, entertainment venues and tour companies. Honeymoon tourists visiting Thailand, for instance, contribute approximately US\$1.5 billion in tourism revenue per year.

How can honeymoon destinations stand out in this increasingly competitive market? According to the researchers, destination managers need to understand what "influences the experience and fantasy of honeymooners" before they can "develop strategic plans and design products" that meet their clients' expectations. The perception of quality is a particularly important element in fulfilling honeymooners' fantasies. Surprisingly, however, the relationship between quality and fantasy has rarely been the focus of research.

Furthermore, while many studies measure tourists' satisfaction based on their intention to return, there is a serious problem with this approach. No matter how much tourists like a destination, they may still not choose to return, because there are so many alternatives. "Relational value", the researchers argue, is a better measure of tourists' satisfaction with a destination, as it captures supportive behaviour such as recommending the destination to others. Developing relationships with customers is vital, because it helps to build lifelong support and maintain the destination's success over the long term. The researchers set out to explore "what triggers honeymoon fantasies" and whether fulfilling these fantasies affects a destination's relational value.

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Phuket, a province in southern Thailand, was the perfect setting for the study. Famous for its “beautiful natural resources, exciting tourist activities, and rich local heritage”, note the researchers, Phuket attracts nearly a third of Thailand’s international tourist arrivals, including many newlyweds. In autumn 2017, the researchers collected data from honeymooners arriving at Phuket’s international airport.

Filling an important gap in hospitality and tourism studies, the researchers developed the first ever scale to measure quality attributes of honeymoon tourism. Their scale measured seven distinct aspects of honeymoon quality: honeymoon service provider, honeymooner privileges, hospitality of local residents, accessibility, dining experience, and local tour products.

The survey also included a measure of fantasy, with items such as “this honeymoon trip was the fulfilment of all my romantic fantasies”. To measure relational value, tourists answered questions about their willingness to recommend the destination, give feedback, share useful information, and provide suggestions for improvement, and also the degree to which they remained “supportive of a firm despite negative publicity or better deals from competitors”.

Honeymooner privileges such as in-room romantic breakfasts, a complimentary night’s stay and surprise gifts played the biggest part in fulfilling newlyweds’ romantic fantasies. One of the most important tasks for service providers, therefore, is to “design special treatments for honeymooners”. Hotels could offer premium airport passes, champagne breakfasts, or complimentary honeymoon activities such as a couple’s massage or Thai cooking class. Destination managers could “go the extra mile”, the researchers suggest, by hosting a honeymooners’ party at “an iconic venue, such as a private beach, a luxury yacht, or a scenic rooftop restaurant”.

Honeymoon accommodation and local tour products were also found to be important quality dimensions. By “attempting to convey a sense of luxury, embrace symbols of romance, and respect honeymooner privacy” in their accommodation and activity offerings, say the researchers, honeymoon service providers can develop the “pleasurable and intimate fantasies of newlywed couples”. The researchers advise tourism service providers to offer regular staff training in customer service etiquette and service delivery to ensure they meet honeymooners’ high expectations. They also propose the interesting idea of organising “familiarisation trips” during off-peak seasons, during which honeymoon specialists and wedding planners can experience the destination and its unique tourism products for themselves. This would not only make good use of tourism resources in the off-peak season but also help tourism managers and staff to understand the desires of honeymooners from the perspective of “honeymoon elites”.

Good accessibility is also important, because honeymooners spend “considerable time and money on their dream trip” and expect a smooth trip and exceptional service. Although honeymooners might choose an “exotic, remote place” for their romantic getaway, infrequent and unreliable transport hardly contributes to a romantic fantasy vacation. Providing a limousine service would be a welcome option for many honeymooners. However, destinations should also ensure that

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reliable public transport options are readily available so that couples can easily travel around to “explore romantic experiences”.

An important finding of the study is that fulfilment of honeymooners’ fantasies was strongly associated with the destination’s relational value. When honeymooners’ fantasies are realised, they become emotionally attached to the destination and willing to recommend it to others. They are also likely to provide suggestions for improvement, the researchers find, and they show a “strong resistance to supporting other honeymoon destinations that offer better deals”. In other words, even if couples do not intend to revisit their honeymooner destination, if it fulfils their fantasies, they will become advocates for the destination and contribute to its long-term success.

The study enhances our understanding of the honeymoon tourism market by identifying the specific quality attributes that help to fulfil the fantasy element of this once-in-a-lifetime romantic vacation. Although the researchers acknowledge that the particular quality attributes they identified might not be relevant to other honeymoon settings, such as “winter honeymoon, old world romance honeymoon and theme park honeymoon” experiences, they will certainly be useful for exotic, tropical destinations similar to Phuket. Finally, an important contribution of the study is the development of a novel honeymoon quality measurement scale, which provides a useful set of attributes for honeymoon service providers to focus on when designing and improving their products and services.

Pipatpong Fakfare, Jin-Soo Lee and Kisang Ryu (2020). Examining Honeymoon Tourist Behavior: Multidimensional Quality, Fantasy, and Destination Relational Value. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 37, Issue 7, pp. 836-853.

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