

A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF TOURIST PERCEPTION TOWARDS HOMESTAYS IN UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

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Abstract

The homestays have been gaining popularity in recent times because of the authentic experience provided to the tourists. The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of tourists regarding homestay experience. The study was conducted about the homestays in the Uttarakhand state of India. A qualitative method was adopted for the study as it helps to understand the feelings and emotions of people in a better way. The technique of Netnography was applied for the study. The data was collected through Trip Advisor and analysed by NVIVO. The investigation resulted in four themes that explained the perceptions of tourists with reference to their feelings, host, aesthetics, and settings of a homestay. Implications and limitations are presented towards the end of the study.

Introduction

Homestay is a tourism product that has the potential to attract tourists because of its ability to enhance knowledge and provide a holistic experience, observe, experience and learn about the way of life of the local residents of their destinations. (Anand et al., 2012; Shukor et al., 2014). Homestay is a kind of alternative accommodation that is generally run by the local community. In recent years, the concept of homestay has gained popularity because of the benefits it brings to the locals, along with providing an authentic experience to the tourists. It gives a relaxed and comfortable stay to the tourists and gives them a feeling of a home away from home. The locals benefit from homestay as it increases income and employment opportunities, encourages women empowerment, preserves local nature and culture, and enhances social sustainability (Based et al., 2018; Kannegieser, 2015). Looking at these benefits, various State Governments in India are encouraging homestays in the rural and remote areas by providing land, subsidies, relaxation in taxes etc.

Considering the exponential growth in the popularity of homestays, especially amongst the urban population, a study on tourists' perceptions regarding their homestays

experience becomes essential. In this light, the purpose of this study was to analyse tourists' perceptions towards the service quality, infrastructure and experience of the services they consumed in a homestay. This study is important for destination managers and homestay owners because they can understand the customers' needs and yield more benefits by improving the services which are not perceived positively by the tourists.

Review of Literature

Community-based tourism (CBT) allows local communities to efficiently manage tourism resources, allowing communities to maintain their living environment without having a long-term harmful impact on the environment (Hussin & Kunjuraman, 2014). Additionally, CBT development allows local communities to highlight and develop tourism's economic, social, and cultural components. CBT promotes a "balanced and harmonious" development style between tourism and other aspects of the local economy; cultural and environmental development quality; and catering to local populations' diverse needs, welfare, and potentials (Baiquni & Dzulkifli, 2020; Binnui & Iamsa-ard, 2016).

In tourism marketing literature, the topic of destination image has gotten a lot of attention. Destination image has been characterised in a variety of ways by researchers, but it is widely regarded as a complex construct (Chahal & Devi, 2015; Zhou, 2014). The definitions of destination image concentrate on a person's overall impression of a location. A destination image is a collection of impressions, ideas, expectations, and emotional feelings about a location. It also shows the associations and bits of data associated with a location. In several conceptual frameworks clarifying tourists' decision-making process, the destination image is regarded as a critical influencing aspect.

Tourists make purchasing judgments based on mental impressions of specific locations (Mohamed & Mensah, 2011). Three elements are regarded to make up the

qualities of a goal image: cognitive, affective, and conative. Tourists' evaluations of the destination's perceived features are reflected in cognitive appraisals of the place, including beliefs and associated information. The emotive picture component represents tourists' emotional responses or assessments of the destination (Joppe et al., 2001). Visitors' active consideration of a place as a potential trip destination is described by the conative image component, which depicts a desirable future state that tourists aspire to experience for themselves.

Any statements, discussions, or opinions regarding a product, service, company, or object that may be found on the internet are referred to as EWOM (Abubakar et al., 2017; Yacoub & Hamouda, 2018). This notion heavily influences customers' behaviours concerning social networking sites. It's difficult to assess the quality of services before they're used because of their intangible character (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). As a result, buyers frequently use eWOM on the internet to gather information before making purchasing selections. A positive word of mouth increases the likelihood of purchasing, while a negative word of mouth decreases it (González-Rodríguez et al., 2016).

Methodology

Uttarakhand is a state in India known for its alpine peaks, meadows, rivers, flora and fauna. The state is dotted with numerous homestays run by the local community. The tourist demand for homestay accommodation is high because of the authentic experience provided by the locals. To better understand the perceptions of the tourists regarding their experience in a homestay, a qualitative research method was considered appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2016; Caldas, 2009). The qualitative method is convenient and apt when the objective of the study is to analyse the perceptions, experiences or behaviour of the people. To operationalise the study, the netnographic method of research was chosen as a research technique (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is a form of online ethnography where the detailed information regarding perceptions and experiences of consumers is collected through online resources like blogs, reviews and other internet sources. Netnography is faster, less expensive and cheaper than traditional ethnography and provides unobstructed and naturalistic data.

Kozinets's (2002) procedure of netnography was adopted for this study. Firstly, the online communities were identified that provided the most relevant information about homestay tourist perception. In this case, TripAdvisor was selected as the most suitable platform for data collection. Only those reviews were chosen that provided a detailed description regarding experience at a homestay. Reviews less than 50 words were excluded. A total of 183 reviews posted between September 2019 to December 2019 were selected for analysis. Reviews written in the English language were selected for increasing the reliability as the authors are not aware of

other foreign languages. The final data after cleaning consisted of 141 reviews. The spelling and grammar mistakes in the reviews were not corrected in the presentation of the analysis so as to maintain the essence of the narratives.

The final reviews were carefully examined by the authors. NVIVO was used to generate word cloud and word trees. The narratives and word clouds were then analysed to arrive at final themes for the purpose of presenting the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Starting with the procedure of word cloud, an overall perception of tourists regarding homestays was assessed. The most frequent words extracted through NVIVO word frequent query are presented in Figure-1. The words are further matched to a common dimension for the purpose of presentation. "Family", "home", "homely", "stay", "host" are associated with *Theme-1 Social interactions with the host family*. "Village", "nature", "river", "trail", "view" are associated with the *Theme-2 Naturalistic location of the homestay*. "Amazing", "friendly", "wonderful", "good", "comfortable", "enjoy" etc. are associated with *Theme-3 Feelings of the tourists*. Lastly, words like "food", "cottage", "property", "rooms" are associated with *Theme-4 Aesthetic features of homestay*. A detailed discussion of each theme as per the above analysis is presented as under.



Figure-1 Word Cloud associated with tourist perceptions of homestay

Theme1-Social interactions with the host family

The interaction with the host family was one of the most important dimensions that emerged out of the narratives. The warm and hospitable experience provided by the host family was perceived very positively by the tourists. The host family acted as a bridge between the destination and the guest and helped the tourist in experiencing the real authentic side of the destination. The homestay owners were also friendly with the pets of the guests that exceeded the guest expectations. This is a feature that is generally not found in most hotels. The caring attitude, wonderful and exceptional behaviour of the hosts had an impact on the loyalty and recommendation parameters of the tourist behaviour. The same can be seen in the following narratives:

“The host Sumit and leena were like family. The staff were courteous, helpful all time. the ambience and fireplace gave a feeling of the true homestay.”

“The host, Prashant is super helping. I was feeling just like it's my home. He took care of every single thing.”

“Naveen and Kamala define what Indian hospitality is all about. They are great hosts. The weather was around 3 degrees. I explained over phone that we were not used to that temperature. Naveen offered to provide heaters. When I was there I realised that he had pulled out the heater he had for his small daughters and given it to us.”

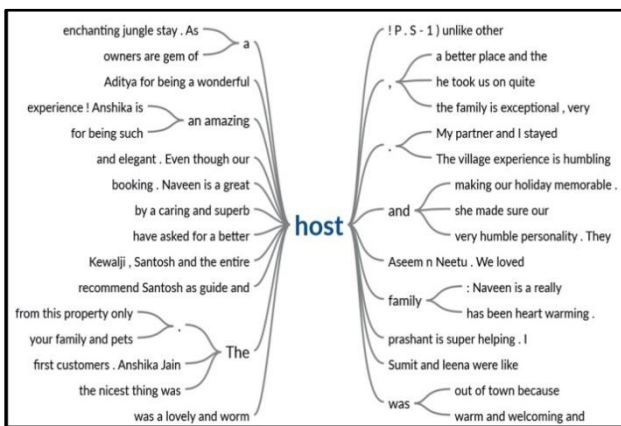


Figure-2 Word Tree: Host

Theme 2- Naturalistic location of the homestay

The next dimension that emerged out of the analysis of reviews was the naturalistic location of the homestay. Words like open area, lawn, river, valley, mountains, forest, panorama, hills and Himalayas frequently appeared in the selected reviews. This indicated that the tourists felt that the location of the homestay in a scenic location like a nearby river, with a view of mountains or amidst the forest, gave them a better experience. The guests also talked about the large windows and the views from the homestay that increased their overall experience. The tourist reported that the busy urban life had dented their well-being and mental state, and they could rediscover self while staying in the homestays amidst natural settings and with the company of friendly hosts. Some of the statements expressing tourist perceptions regarding the location of the homestay are as below:

“We were treated with rhododendron n sebachthron juice for refreshments. They arranged for our treks in the region.. This is a true Himalayan homestay that will give you a close look at the life in the mountains and the colorful culture of people living at high altitudes. The family itself is very welcoming and friendly.”

“A home away from home. The location of this cottage is in between the mountains, but it's near to the shops so don't worry if you forget some essentials. The view

from from this house is really awestruck, early morning you get to see the trishul ranges and nanda hills.”

“Rolling hills, fresh water spring and river in front , a forrest across. Prefect recipes, almost too good to be true. That goes for the location. The property itself is beautifully imagined and executed. Passionately run by the owner himself , it is a homestay at its best. Something that cannot be matched by star hotels.If long walks, birds, trees, gurgling streams , relaxation are your buzzword for a holiday, don't miss it.”

“The location of the cottage was surreal, being situated on the edge of the hill, one could enjoy the panoramic view of surrounding forest and the valleys below, nothing like the enchanting sunsets that I got to witness there just from outside of my cottage.”

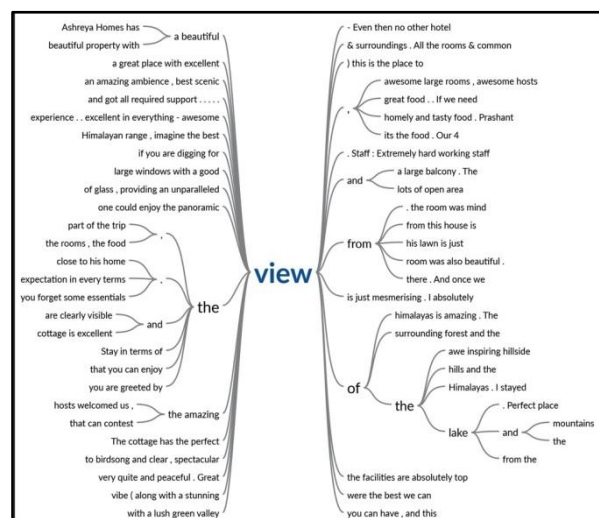


Figure-2 Word Tree: Location and View of Homestay

Theme-3 Feelings of the tourists regarding experience

This dimension that emerged out of narratives was the feelings of tourists regarding what they experienced in a homestay. A large number of reviews mentioned the affective dimension of their feelings regarding the homestay accommodation experience. Words like wonderful, memorable, amazing, excellent, awesome, great, comfortable, humbling, awe-inspiring and safe were some of the emotions mentioned by the guests in the reviews. These depict the perceptions of tourists regarding the positive emotions they felt while staying in the homestay. The following narratives illustrate these aspects:

“I also did not stay in this home stay guest house, but did stay in the village of Dalar and it was just a wonderful location and experience. The village is small, quiet and it has really such lovely views.”

“Every thing from comfort to hygiene is all well maintained, the property is far away from city husle and surrounded with lush green forest. It was an memorable

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experience with Mr Aseem and his wonderful wife, very warm couple and great company.”

“All my wishes came true. The warmth with which the hosts welcomed us, the amazing view of the lake from the property, the beautiful property itself, Aunt's amazing hospitality, and cooking, all these made our stay memorable. Rain was the icing on the cake.”

“With spectacular views and service, it was one of the most comfortable “home away from home” stays we’ve had in a long time! Definitely visiting again!”

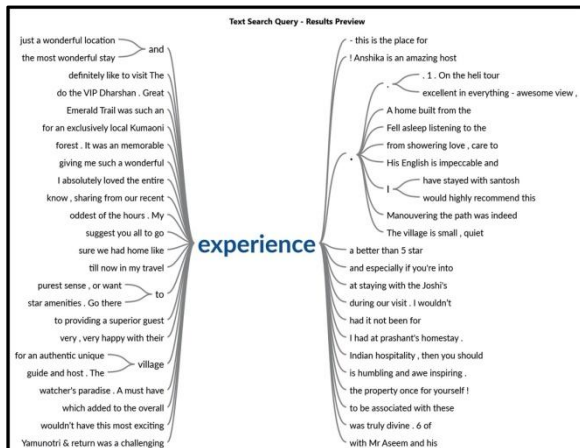


Figure-2 Word Tree: Tourist feelings and experience in a homestay

1.1 Theme-4 Aesthetic features of homestay

The sights, surroundings and tangible dimensions always have an effect on guests perceptions and satisfaction. Several features of homestay like vernacular architecture, authentic food, comfortable rooms, view from balconies, local handicrafts and décor, and peacefulness were mentioned by the travellers in reference to their positive experiences. In addition to this cleanliness of the house, traditional settings and welcoming families were also considered important for enhancing the overall experience. Some of the narratives mentioning this dimension are:

“The place, serenity, food, staff, ambience, pets and mother nature all took me by surprise. The photos on the website do not capture the true beauty and the pristine look of Emerald Trail. One has to visit to see. From the intricate care that the staff took for my smallest needs which included less oil and masala in the dinner and lunch, to escorting me around the large property time and again - it was truly appreciative.”

“The trip is still fresh in my mind- from the time we landed in Kathgodam to the scenic drive to Jungaliagaon...to the beautiful biological built of ET, the Hospitable welcome by the staff... our wooden ceiling naturally lit up room...the mountain bike on which we went cycling and felt back like back to school and the

nature walk in the morning was like icing on the cake (chocolate cake)!”

“The house we stayed had all the modern amenities including geyser and yet maintained the tradition settings of wooden doors and windows, fireplace, stone walls and tables to sit outside. The house is very neat and simply but beautifully decorated. Food is purely homemade, clean, tasty and quantity enough for anyone. As for the jungle around, you can see plenty of birds, hear night-jars and barking deers, and, if lucky, can spot a leopard.”

Relation between positive tourist perceptions and loyalty

The success of any product or service depends on a loyal consumer. Several studies have studied the impact of tourist perceptions on behavioural intentions. It has been observed that positive perception is the result of satisfaction derived from the consumption of the product or service. A positive experience leads to higher satisfaction and a loyal customer who would be willing to return and recommend the tourism product. The same has been observed in this study. The analysis of the narratives resulted into various themes that explained the positive tourist perception associated with several dimensions of homestay accommodation. The narratives also mentioned reviews that stated that the tourists would return and recommend the homestay to others. Some of the narratives illustrating the same are as under:

“If you want a nice, cozy little holiday, then I would definitely recommend Emerald Trail. I intend to return there again.”

“It's not a question of if I will return to their homestay, it's a question of when.”

“The village homestay is one of the best homestays I have stayed at. Been here three times already, and sure to return!”

“It was really nice staying at your place. i had a very pleasing moment with your family and can't wait to come back to your place for my future next vacation.”

“We would really recommend Syat House by the riverside to everyone! We will be back soon.”

“It's a divine abode up in the hills, and I'd definitely recommend it to anyone who's visiting.”

Conclusions, Implications and Limitations

The tourist experience is a combination of affective, cognitive and behavioural aspects. This study aimed to study the affective aspect of tourist experience and analysed their feelings, beliefs and emotions by analysing tourist reviews on the TripAdvisor platform through the method of Netnography. The study revealed four distinct themes that were linked to setting, feelings, aesthetics and people associated with the homestay. The

effect of tourist perceptions on the loyalty aspect was also discussed. The study has several implications. The destination managers could benefit from the study by understanding the most powerful experience dimension while planning future strategies. Other than this. The present study enhances the literature on the guest-host relationship phenomenon and iterates the importance of personalised services in increasing guest satisfaction. The study also helps in explaining the role of homestays in enhancing the image and brand identity of the destinations because of the authentic experience provided through them.

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