

Accessibility of People with Disabilities on Hospitality Braille Products

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing number of People with disabilities (PwD), hospitality industry faced several challenges in furnishing suitable products and accessible for them. In this study, researchers investigated the perceptions of PwD specifically the Visual Impaired Peoples (VIPs) in Malaysian Association of Blinds (MAB) towards researcher's product innovation. Two hospitality Braille products have been developed which consists of Braille menu and Braille directory guest book. Semi-structured in-depth interviews have been executed among VIPs in MAB to investigate the effectiveness of the product. The interview sessions were coded and summarized by using audio visual tapes and manual transcripts. This paper concludes that restaurateurs, hotel operators and community must understand the nature of VIPs experience if quality accessible products and experiences are to be available for VIPs. Future research may focus on the bigger scale as well as the different needs among disabled group. This study provides the needs analysis of disabled people's for hotel and restaurant operators in providing sufficient and excellent facilities for this group. They can refine and upgrade their existing facilities.

KEYWORDS: Braille Menu, Braille Directory Guest Book, People with Disabilities (PwD), Malaysian Association of Blinds.

INTRODUCTION

Over a billion people about 15% of the world's population have some form of disability [1]. In recent years, tourism industry has focused more on the needs for tourists with disabilities and this growing attention expressed that the concerns and interests came from various part of the world [2]. Furthermore, it is highlighted that PwD is indeed a remunerative new niche tourism market [3]. Several researchers have investigated issues on disabled people in the context of travel-decision making process and experiences and satisfaction [4-8]. However, these studies focused on samples of western regions. While local study emphasized more on public buildings [9], limited studies of hotel scenario which specifically on PwD's opinions that pertaining to hospitality braille products. Hence, by exploring the perceptions of PwD's on two hospitality products for people with vision impairment, it is sought to fill the gap as literatures have heavily focused on mobility impairment in disability and tourism. Hopefully, such knowledge will assist hotel operators and restaurateurs to replicate the products for those with vision impairment, so that they can enjoy and fully utilize the benefits of guest/ patron experiences. Hence, the finding of the study is worth in assisting hotel managers to upgrade and enhance their services for disabled people.

In this study, researchers would like to contribute by utilizing the Asian samples. This study explored the perceptions of 9 PwD participants' that attached with Malaysian Associations of Blinds (MAB) on two researcher's products creation. The paper begins by performing review of studies on PwD in tourism and hospitality industries. Researchers then designated the methodology used for the study, as well as findings and discussion in next section. Suggestions for future research were also indicated in conclusions part.

In a study conducted by [10], it highlighted that PwD would travel more regularly if they feel more welcome in accommodation establishments. Additionally, improving accessibility for PwDs among hotels have been identified by [11] in their study conducted among hotels in Cairo, Egypt. They identified the needs for consultation with architects who specialize in design for PwDs, emergency two-call system connected to the reception desk as well as ongoing disability training programs. It is therefore crucial for hoteliers to cater for and offering the right products that will assist this niche market. In addition, majority of people did not cite their impairment as a reason for lower participation rates in tourism as recognized by [12]. Instead, they identified environmental and attitudes encountered as part of the constraints for their nonparticipation. Hence, having these two hospitality Braille products probably can assist PwD with their dining and travel experiences.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section II discusses the methodology used in the study, while section III reports the empirical results followed by conclusion in the last section.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers chose semi-structured in-depth interviews for Visual Impaired Peoples (VIPs). This study was conducted by 2013-2014 in collaboration with MAB in Kuala Lumpur. The organization was selected based on few criterions as followed:

regarded as the main provider of blindness and low-vision services, assisted researchers in developing the two hospitality products as well as strategically located in Klang Valley area. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 9 VIPs participants and guided by a semi-structured interview based on literatures. All 30 participants were approached via phone calls to participate in the study. However, most of them turn down the offer due to health problems, fear of being interviewed, unable to converse well in English and having different types of disability. There were no responses from 6 participants, while the other 4 participants were on leave during the study duration. Though various efforts have been done by the researchers to increase the response rate for the study such as calling the six participants again, but still researchers unable to reach them. Nevertheless, it is highlighted that 30% response rate was an adequate percentage for participants in the study [13].

Researchers adopted qualitative in-depth interviews as the main method for the study. It is due to qualitative in-depth interviews “offer a means for discovery” [14]. Additionally, in-depth interviews can serve as a platform to understand respondent’s experiences and situations better in their own perspectives [13]. Hence, considering the complexity of VIPs needs, therefore it is more appropriate if they evaluated the products. Purposive sampling was being utilized in selecting the interview participants for the study. The interviewees were comprised of 33% females (3 out of 9 VIPs) and 67% males (6 out of 9 VIPs). Before the interview process takes place, all respondents signed consent and agreed that the interview sessions are being recorded. Researchers spent approximately 1-2 hours for each interview sessions. Some of the questions were being translated into Malay language to assist respondents in delivering their opinions. The interview session consists of series of questions which adapted from the literatures and categorized as semi-structured interviews. The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim and summarized into categories. Themes, concepts and categories were established after a thorough and detail review process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings were divided according to the 2 main products that consist of Braille Menu and Braille Guest directory book. Interestingly, respondents were very supportive and expressed their interests with the researcher’s product. The Braille Guest Directory book has won Gold Medal in Invention, Innovation and Design (IID) Competition which held in UiTM Perak, Malaysia in year 2012. While the Braille Menu has won Bronze Medal in Research Invention, Innovation and Design (RIID) Competition in UiTM Melaka in year 2013.

Braille Menu

Findings indicated that all VIPs expressed admiration on researcher’s Braille Menu product. Information on types of foods and beverages in the menu were detailed and interesting. They were able to feel the pictures of each item compiled in the menu. Unfortunately, none restaurants that they went have such menu. Due to fear of inaccessibility, all VIPs agreed that they preferred not to dine out. Additionally, their past experiences and prior knowledge of the restaurant inaccessibility influenced their behaviour too. One VIP mentioned that probably a larger and upscale restaurant might have such menu. Another VIP participant highlighted that normal people will accompany most of the blinds when they go to any restaurants or hotels. Thus, they will rely solely on the assistance of the normal people. Several VIPs highlighted that normally the waiter/waitress will assist them in reading the menu when they dine out. Nevertheless, VIPs will be delighted and will dine out if restaurants do provide Braille Menu. A study explored restaurant owner’s perception on “Disabled people usually do not go out to eat in a restaurant” was conducted and findings are mixed [15]. Therefore, researchers believed that restaurant operators need to be educated as to why changes are needed in their business as well as the cost of changes. Though the demand received from this market segmentation is very low, but it is essential to both VIPs and restaurant operators [16].

Braille Guest Directory Book

Findings also exhibited that all VIPs expressed concerns and interests pertaining to researcher’s Braille Guest Directory book. According to Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), in order to be granted star rating, hotels must have facilities for disabled guests though the demand from this group is very minimal. All four and five star hotels must provide rooms for disabled guests as part of their hotel policy, though the number of rooms is limited. The disabled room will be equipped with telecommunication device for the deaf (TDD), closed-caption televisions which allow individuals to read the audio portion of a television program off the TV screen, vibrating alarm to assist guests in the event of emergency, alarm clocks with large display faces, telephone covers with enlarged numbers, door knocker flashers to alert when someone knocks the door, lower peepholes at the door as well handrails in the bathtub. All VIPs expressed that they never experienced checking in the hotel that have Braille Guest Directory book. It is interesting to have such book in the hotel. Similar to Braille Menu, most of the VIPs will be accompanied by normal people when they stay at any hotel. Uniquely, one of the respondents disclosed that due to the limited number of hotel rooms available for disabled people, hence the VIPs was offered a non-disabled room while the hotel that they check in do actually have disabled room facilities.

Improvements on the Braille products

Five respondents suggested that researchers could put exact measurement of the design and layout for the room in the Braille guest directory book. It will be valuable to know the distance for all furniture that available in the room. All respondents aware this two researcher’s products were primarily based on Hotel Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Dungun Terengganu

facilities and restaurant as the sample. Different hotels might have different facilities and menu offered. In conjunction with that, 4 respondents mentioned that the Braille Menu could be done in dual languages featuring both English and Malay. The available Braille Menu was only available in English. All comments and suggestions were helpful in guiding researchers to improve both products and market it to industry representatives. This paper concludes that restaurateurs, hotel operators and community must understand the nature of VIPs experience if quality accessible products and experiences are to be available for VIPs.

CONCLUSION

This study is crucial for industry practitioners who are adhere to pull the disabled market segmentation. It is argued that many tourist attractions were failed to cater the disabled market's needs [17]. Hence, an investigation such as the one provided here may serve as a starting point. By reviewing the perceptions of VIPS on the products, researchers may and should refine the products to cope with VIPs needs and wants. Additionally, this data set does not support the full-scale evaluation of VIPs preferences over time or comparison of people with different levels of disabilities needs on the products. This is due to a small number of participants in the study. Nevertheless, future studies may look into addressing the different needs of differences among PwD groups. Additionally, future research could also focus more on the intangible components of the service experience [5]. For instance, researchers could explore the communication between PwD's and hotel employees in using the hotel products.

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