



The girlfriend getaway market: Segmenting accommodation and service preferences



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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to segment the accommodation and service preferences of females who participate in girlfriend getaways (GGA). A sample of 540 female travelers revealed five distinct clusters of preferences based on the importance scores assigned to hotel attributes. The clusters are then profiled on their performance scores on hotel attributes and demographic characteristics. The results indicate that the GGA market is heterogeneous in its accommodation and service preferences but homogeneous in its demographic characteristics. Accommodation suppliers and marketers must recognize the growing importance and profitability of this segment of the female traveler market. Implications for product development, targeting and positioning strategies, and service enhancements for this market are suggested.

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1. Introduction

Female travelers constitute a significant segment of the leisure travel and tourism industry (Ćurčić et al., 2009). The female market is significant both in terms of its present and projected size. Fifty-one percent of American travelers, for example, are females, with a staggering prevalence for leisure (72%). The 2012 Female Travel and Lifestyle Report reveals that nearly two out of three people in their survey of 5000 women in Australia (not necessarily Australians) have traveled overseas (Gentle, 2012). Female travelers also possess formidable financial strength (Silverstein and Sayre, 2009) by controlling over \$20 trillion in world-wide spending (Kent, 2010) and making 80% of the decisions on travel and tourism (Bond, 2011). Unsurprisingly, much of the existing tourism research attempts to better understand women as travelers by segmenting the market. Specifically, scholars have investigated niche markets such as solo woman travelers (Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006; Jordan and Gibson, 2005; McNamara and Prideaux, 2010; Wilson and Little, 2008), senior women travelers (Stone and Nichol, 1999), educated women travelers (Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter, 2001), women

cruisers (Jennings, 2005), and more extensively, businesswomen travelers (Alamdari and Burrell, 2000; Foster and Botterill, 1995; Lutz and Ryan, 1993; McCleary et al., 1994; Newth, 2011; Sammons et al., 1999; Smith and Carmichael, 2007). These studies presuppose that the female travel market is heterogeneous and segmentation allows the identification of unique characteristics, attitudes and behaviors.

A growing segment in women's travel that has received scant attention is the 'all female' leisure-travel groups, or what is commonly known as girlfriend getaways (GGAs). The GGA market generally refers to female travelers who are holidaying with other females including friends, family members, colleagues, sporting team members, and fellow members from organizations they belong to (Gibson et al., 2012). These getaways are generally short, between 2 and 5 days. At present, limited academic research has been devoted to the accommodation needs and preferences of women on GGAs. More specifically, this segment's desired and expected attributes of the accommodation offer that contribute to a satisfactory experience remain unknown, despite the well-recognized importance of satisfying hotel guests (Chen and Chen, 2014). Earlier studies have mainly delineated the accommodation preferences of female business travelers (Lutz and Ryan, 1993; McCleary et al., 1994; Phadungyath, 2008; Sammons et al., 1999) and found that compared to men, women generally place higher importance on safety and security provisions.

The main objectives of this study are to: (1) segment the accommodation and service preferences of women in the GGA market

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and (2) identify 'niche' segments within the GGA market based on preferences and demographic characteristics. By doing so, the study contributes to the hospitality literature in two main ways. First, it identifies the most salient accommodation attributes for the GGA market, thereby providing both scholars and practitioners an insight into the preferences of this female travel segment. Beyond the solo women and business women traveler, the study confirms that GGA is an emerging market that is based on group orientation rather than individual orientation in travel. Second, by segmenting the GGA market, this study is the first to identify profiles of 'niches' within the GGA market that may be of interest to both large and small accommodation providers thereby extending academic knowledge on the female-only travel groups. The identified attributes may be of relevance to hotels attempting to differentiate and position their accommodation offer.

2. Literature review

2.1. Segmentation theory

Segmentation is ubiquitous in the hospitality and tourism literature (Frochot and Morrison, 2001; Prayag and Hosany, 2014). It consists of dividing a market into smaller and homogeneous groups based on the assumption that customers are heterogeneous and that a differentiated market offering can satisfy them (Kruger et al., 2011). Identifying new and/or under-represented market segments is a managerial priority to grow the potential customer base and develop relevant marketing strategies in a cost-effective way while continuing to focus on existing customers (Morrison, 1996; Vellas and Becherel, 1999; Weaver and Oppermann, 2000). No absolutely "correct" segmentation method exists (Tkaczynski and Rundle-Thiele, 2010) and the researcher must find the best segmentation method to capture the hidden structure in the data set (Prayag and Hosany, 2014). Several studies segment the female consumer market to understand decision-making styles (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2003), shopping orientation (Shim and Kotsiopoulos, 1993), and women's lifestyles and consumption behavior (Tai and Tam, 1997). In the tourism and hospitality literature, priority has been given to segmentation of markets that depicts individual orientation such as independent (McNamara and Prideaux, 2010) and business travel (Smith and Carmichael, 2007) rather than travel based on group orientation such as those of the senior travel and GGA markets.

2.2. Segmenting the female traveler market

With respect to female travelers, Smith and Carmichael (2007) segmented the domestic female business travelers in Canada and found three distinct types of women. The three groups differed in terms of demographics, travel patterns and travel activities. More specifically, the segment which mixes business travel with pleasure tend to be highly educated women who take infrequent but longer trips and spend more than \$500 per trip. These women, who are mostly self-employed, tend to visit friends or relatives and undertake tourism-related activities, particularly those in rural settings. Meanwhile, Newth (2011) also found three segments of American female business travelers based on psychographic characteristics – the connective, the productive and the empowered. She found that the most important psychographic variables which differentiated the three groups are the need to connect with others, the feeling of empowerment and the feeling of being industrious.

More closely aligned with the purpose of this study, Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001) segmented educated female travelers according to the benefits they sought from their travel and reported three possible types of educated women – those who travel for

relaxation, those who seek family and social interaction in their travels, and those who thrive on action and adventure. Industry reports on the GGA market suggest that such travelers tend to participate in specific activities such as eating and dining out, shopping, spa visits and going to the beach/pool (AAA, 2007; Bond, 2009). Grout (2005) lists dining, shopping, road trips, sports, and indulgence in spa and luxury as typical girlfriend getaway undertakings. Kasanicky (2009) suggests that culinary lessons, art classes, volunteering vacations and attending festivals or events are other possible activities relevant to the GGA market. These preferences for specific activities and services suggest the need to understand the behavior of GGA market in more depth to allow for product development and service customization. Yet, without an understanding of the accommodation preferences of female travelers, including the GGA market, it is difficult for hoteliers to develop customized holiday packages, improve targeting and positioning strategies.

2.3. Accommodation preferences of female travelers

Studies on the accommodation preferences of female leisure travelers are limited but insights can be gained from existing research on the female business travel market (Lutz and Ryan, 1993; Sammons et al., 1999; Phadungyat, 2008). Lutz and Ryan (1993), in studying the differences between male and female preferences toward hotel services, found that businesswomen placed higher priorities than men on safe and secure car parks and the ability to feel comfortable when dining in hotel restaurants. Surprisingly, females in their study were indifferent to hotels' offerings of women-only floors, female toiletries and feminine décor. McCleary et al. (1994) pointed out marked distinctions between male and female business travelers in the ways hotel products are consumed. They noted that while men placed importance on business facilities such as office space and fax machine, women were more concerned with the hotel's safety and security features such as dead bolt door locks, peep hole, surveillance camera, chain lock, bright hallway and parking area lighting. Sammons et al. (1999) study of female business travelers' preferences for accommodation revealed that women-only floor, feminine décor (such as pastel-colored rooms) and female toiletries (bubble bath and nail polish remover) were unimportant. Instead, they placed high importance on hotel cleanliness and security provisions. Phadungyat (2008) confirmed that "safety and security facilities, especially 'electrical keycard', 'bright hallway', 'sprinkler system', and 'closed circuit television' are important factors for businesswomen in their selection of serviced apartments"(p. 45). The importance of safety and security as a choice criterion is consistent across several studies on women travelers.

Interestingly, of the limited studies on women accommodation preferences, the majority focuses on Western women. An exception is the study of Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) that compared Malaysian and non-Malaysian tourists on the influences of gender on expectation level of hospitality in four and five star hotel services. Their study revealed that male customers were more concerned with the behavior of employees compared to their female counterparts. In a Muslim tourists context, Eid and El-Gohary (2015) showed the influence of religiosity on male and female tourism choices, including its impact on the physical attributes and services offered by accommodation providers. In the broader services marketing literature, gender differences on service evaluations are noted for product assessment (McDaniel and Kinney, 1998) and satisfaction judgments (Dubé and Morgan, 1998). Yet, in evaluating hotel and restaurant settings, Mattila (2000) failed to demonstrate the impact of gender on service encounter evaluations. Hence, contradictory evidence exists on whether females evaluate services differently

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