

ABSTRACT

Homestay tourism is essentially an assortment of rural tourism that attempts to attract tourists to immaculate destinations to share the customs, cultural legacy of the local people. In fact, rural tourism is a multifaceted concept that may consist of resort-based holiday plans, adventure tourism, health tourism, and leisure tourism. The basic idea of homestay is to provide a home away from home to the tourists, to enjoy the pleasure of home and family while visiting various destinations. The homestay operators provide neat, relaxing rooms in a traditional atmosphere, with authentic food and pleasing hospitality which are the basic components of a homestay initiative. The term homestay tourism was first coined in the US where the students who went pursuing education in the US were given an opportunity to share rooms made available by the neighborhood for common benefits. The idea of homestay tourism has changed with the passage of time and it has become a livelihood opportunity for the people living in pristine areas away from the muddling crowded place where visitors get the personal touch and flavor of fresh air and serene beauty of nature.

An in-depth review of the literature reveals that not much work has been done in this area in India though the homestays are predominantly found in the underdeveloped and developing countries for generating alternative livelihood opportunities in a sustainable manner. The most important issue to run a homestay venture successfully depends on various factors but the satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth are the two most crucial variables that determine the long-term sustainability of the homestay business. A conjectural framework has been developed after reviewing the prior literature in this area considering a few perceptual constructs that might impact upon overall satisfaction and behavioral intention. The primary objective of the study is to relate these perceptual with the overall satisfaction of the visitors visiting various destinations in Darjeeling hills.

Since the study is based on primary data, it is imperative to establish that the measurements are scientific so far as reliability and various types of validities are concerned. The composite

reliability, content validity, construct the validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, nomological validity are reported using the methods that are followed in psychometric literature and are found to be satisfactory to employ Structural Equation Modeling(SEM) technique to discern the relationships among various constructs.

The study reveals that there is a direct positive influence of service quality on the overall satisfaction for the sample of tourists visiting Darjeeling homestays as such; quality of service rendered is an important predictor of tourists' satisfaction. On the other hand, it has been observed that satisfied customers are likely to spread positive word of mouth as explained by their behavioral intentions. The study also reports that accessibility is an important variable that affects the level of satisfaction of the tourists. The safety & security of tourists is found to be a decisive factor to enhance visitors' satisfaction. The perceived image of the destination is a very significant construct that leads to higher level of satisfaction.

The strengths and weaknesses of homestays operating in the hills of Darjeeling have also been incorporated in this study after considering the relevant factors. Among the strengths, it is found that the natural exquisiteness of the destination, the cultural diversity, pleasing the climatic situation, organic agricultural produce, and reachable wildlife sanctuary are very much responsible for the sustainable functioning of the homestays. On the other hand, the major weakness of homestays is the marketing problem since the homestay operators alone are not in a position to promote their business due to the heavy cost of promotion and they depend on the local tour operators for sending guests to their destination.

From the analysis of TOWS, four distinct strategies are suggested in the study. It has been observed that visitors like to explore the pristine place to enjoy the beauty, serenity, and tranquillity surrounding the destination. It is also observed that the local folks get themselves involved in various activities associated with homestay services.

The discussions with the homestay operators reveal that most of the visitors like to enjoy the serene beauty surrounding the homestays where the stay which can be considered as an opportunity. The homestay operators need to be agile to take advantage of these strengths and ensure that the environment is not degraded due to footfalls of huge tourists' during the peak season. It is also evident from the study that the most important issue in homestay business is to enhance the satisfaction level of the visitors' by reducing the gap between the perceived service and expected service which would go a long way to improve the sustainability of the homestay venture. It has also been observed that the homestay operators find it difficult to handle the foreign tourists due to language barrier and they need the support of tour guides to understand the expectation of foreign tourists.

The guests are, in general, found to be inquisitive to understand the cultural heritage and traditions of people. They also expressed their willingness to recommend the homestay to their peer group that may generate huge opportunities to provide jobs to a large section of the community living beside the homestays. In many cases, it has been observed that the tourists' have no vivid idea regarding the attractive spots in the vicinity of the homestays operating in a particular region. The major threat that is faced by the homestay operator is the lack of distribution channel to market their business and they depend mostly on the tour operators who act as intermediaries. The other major hindrance that has been disclosed by the homestay owners is the uncertain political condition due to long agitation for a separate state.

In this study, different perceptual variables have been incorporated with the objective of relating these variables with the tourist satisfaction which is the dependent variable. Overall, tourist satisfaction is associated with the quality of service provided, the destination image, the accessibility factor, and safety & security issues.

Keywords: Homestay, Rural tourism, Tourists satisfaction, Behavioral Intention, SEM, SWOT analysis