TOURISM TRAINING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVITY OF ONLINE TRAININGS BY THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

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The Philippine tourism industry was held to a halt as the whole world experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. So did the face-to-face training activities conducted by the Office of Industry Manpower Development under the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT) in 2020. Similar to various initiatives conducted by National Tourism Organizations across the ASEAN region, in order to adapt to the situation, the DOT Philippines has launched an online training program, dubbed DOT Online Courses which is done via video-conferencing, which main purpose is to upskill tourism stakeholders and facilitate transition to recovery. This thesis proposal aims to set-up the conceptual framework in order to know and understand the impacts of e-Learning in the New Normal by reviewing the effectivity of online trainings conducted by the DOT.

With the onset of the impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in 2020, the DOT launched its DOT Online Courses as an alternative action. According to OIMD's Official Facebook Page (DOT Trains), "The Department of Tourism (DOT) has launched an online training program for the country's tourism stakeholders to stay relevant, learn to cope with the difficulties arising from the global pandemic novel coronavirus or COVID-19, and to facilitate transition to recovery." With these online training programs facilitated by the Department of Tourism, key tourism stakeholders might inquire: 1) How does the DOT assess the effectivity of these online programs? 2) What is the basis or metrics the DOT can use to improve these online programs?

The objective of the study is to assess the effectivity of DOT Online Courses by evaluating the various metrics recommended and provide recommendation as to how the said agency can improve as far as organization and facilitation of online trainings programs is concerned. The significance of this study is to contribute to the improvement of human resource development in tourism, specifically on e-Learning training modules by the Department of Tourism as alternative modes of learning. Furthermore, tourism training providers and facilitators can also use the findings of the study to improve their service offerings for the development of tourism professionals. Lastly, the findings may also be adapted as recommendations on how to improve flexible learning and development for tourism education and training institutions across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region.

The study shall assess the two webinars conducted by the Department of Tourism National Capital Region and Eastern Visayas facilitated through The Filipino Hospitality as its training provider and facilitator. The study shall analyze these trainings based on elements of training design based on EU's Lifelong Learning Program - Webinar Methodology. The study shall also review based on best practices in e-learning/flexible learning but considering New Normal conditions.

Human Capital Theory (HCT) has been used as a conceptual framework for the study of human capital development in the tourism and hospitality industries (Alamu, 2016). Proponents of HCT suggest that the society benefits economically from investing in people (Gurgu & Savu, 2014; Sweetland, 1996). In addition, HCT theorists believe that formal and informal education increases the capability and productivity of people, is quantifiable in monetary terms, and is the utmost investment in a human being. The effects of education, training, skills, and knowledge on people's productivity and earnings are the fundamental arguments of HCT (Alamu, 2016, p. 19). This theory supports and complements the Tourism Industry Skills Program (TISP) of the Department of Tourism.

In UNWTO's briefing note about Tourism and COVID-19: How are countries supporting tourism recovery? (2020), out of the 220 countries and territories analyzed, 167 countries have reported specific measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis and accelerate recovery. Among them, more than 144 countries have adopted fiscal and monetary policies, followed by policies to support jobs and training which have been implemented by 100 countries. (p. 6) Cambodia, an ASEAN Member State, provided retraining and upskilling programs for laid-off workers and announced to pay 20% of the workers' minimum wages employed in hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and travel agencies. Workers were required to attend a short course delivered by the Ministry of Tourism. (p. 11)

Similarly, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) facilitated a series of webinars such as Travel and Tourism during COVID-19 times (June 2020), What's Next for Travel and Tourism in the New Normal (July 2020, Unlocking Growth Possibilities During Adversity (November 2020) and Charting Growth with Customer Centricity (December 2020). Furthermore, Singapore developed the STB Learning Portal, a platform for interactive digital learning. The STB Marketing College housed on this platform includes resources illustrating marketing concepts with case studies and offers frameworks and work tools. STB Marketing is a "learning and development program tailored for marketing professionals from the travel and tourism industry, addressing 20 marketing capabilities in six modules." The access to these content are provided for all tourism stakeholders at no cost.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand also created a webinar project that "prepares travel industry professionals for post COVID-19 reality". (TATNews.org, 2020). Some of the top TAT webinar topics include Market Situation Updates, Tourism Trends after COVID-19, Luxury Travelers and Millennials Tourist Behavior, etc. A specific example of a TAT Webinar is "Enhancing Effective Communication in Post-COVID-19 era" (June 2020); which helps prepare tourism professionals for the eventual recovery we all are hoping for.

The DOT's Tourism Industry Skills Program and now, the DOT Online Learning Series is an equally important initiative because it is a good opportunity for our tourism professionals to be able to be more competitive by upskilling themselves through the free training provided and better prepare for tourism recovery. But why webinars? For obvious reasons due to the pandemic where travel was restricted, gatherings prevented and so on, why are webinars effective as mediums for learning?

Gegenfurtner and Ebner's (2019) educational research review noted that webinars are effective, and may be as effective as face-to-face instruction. They compared how strongly participants in webinars and participants in other environments developed their knowledge and skills, and when they considered their prior knowledge before the intervention, they observed outputs, although trivial in size, were better. One key advantage of webinars is accessibility where webinars offer digital learning environments that students can access ubiquitously from anywhere with computer (and/or mobile) devices (Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Gegenfurtner, Zitt, & Ebner, in press; Tseng, Cheng, & Yeh, 2019).

According to Mr. Ryan Sebastian, the Division Chief of the Manpower Training Division of the OIMD, as the host of the first webinar hosted by the DOT: MAXIMIZE: *Utilizing GCQ for Tourism Enterprises*, registrations exceeded the 500 slots, and participants were represented from various municipalities and provinces all over the Philippines. One thing is accessibility, but what about effectivity?

How does one assess the effectivity of online training such as webinars? What are key metrics to consider in order to ensure the impact of such programs? How does one consider if such a webinar conducted is "high performing and high impact"?
Harris' (2012) discussed on tool to benchmark webinars from WebAttract called the High Performance-High Impact (HP-HI). In this table (see below), one is able to review commercial outcomes as well as potential value to the target audience. Harris then highlighted (as suggested by WebAttract) that there are six key metrics that are most effective in helping one gauge the success of webinars. 1) Click-through Rate 2) Attendee Ratio 3) Online Polls 4) Exit Surveys 5) Audience Retention 6) On-demand Viewing. From experience in facilitating webinars for the Department of Tourism through the Filipino Hospitality, a Hospitality and Tourism Management Consulting company that focuses on training, out of the six metrics, only one (exit surveys) are required by the DOT.

In Webinar Methology (2012), a key feature of a good webinar are its interactive elements - the ability to give, receive and discuss information. The advantages and disadvantages of a webinar was determined. Key advantages include cost-efficiency, convenience, post-training availability of content, orientation function as well as increased openness and less personal communication barriers. On the other hand, challenges underlined in webinars include attentiveness, technical issues, limitations of non-verbal communication and limited time.

Furthermore, discussed are webinar technological considerations such as webinar software, hardware requirements, bandwidth/network requirements as well as webinar technicalities. The organization of the live webinar is also highlighted; particularly the aim of the webinar, the announcement and enrollment (marketing and conversion), as well as the roles of key players such as trainers, moderator (if applicable), expert, technical support and types of trainees were thoroughly discussed. With regards to planning and preparation, session planning, getting the materials ready, communication with trainees, the overall timing plan as well the presentation were underlined. In the actual facilitation of a webinar, the authors also discussed the importance of building social interaction, the modulation of the voice of the trainer as well as incorporating engaging activities. Upon closing the webinar, evaluating learning progress and training delivery was highlighted. After the event, follow up and the provision of after-event materials are also recommended in order to ensure the effectivity of the webinar. (Zielenski, et al.) These methodologies prove to be very useful as the framework for this paper and shall be utilized in reviewing the webinars of the DOT.

In a nutshell, we acknowledge the importance of human capital development in tourism. The quality of tourism destinations is, to an extent, reflective of the quality of its human capital. Based on the Human Capital Theory, there are economic benefits in the facilitation of training and development for our tourism professionals and prove to be a good investment for the Department of Tourism. In order to ensure that taxpayers money allocated for training is optimized, it is imperative that all trainings, including webinars, are monitored and evaluated using key metrics to ensure the quality of the webinars facilitated and shall be the basis for continuous improvement for the DOT Regional Offices and training providers alike.

Kwywords: Tourism Training, Department of Tourism Webinars

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON GUEST CONVENIENCE AND SERVICE QUALITY OF HOTELS

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The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted several businesses, including hospitality, more specifically, the lodging or the hotel businesses. The outbreak has hampered routine sector activities. The hospitality industry's consumer experience has been damaged, and most hospitality firms balance company efforts and customer expectations to improve customer experience. The hospitality industry struggles to gain consumer confidence due to health issues, and the contactless nature of coronavirus requires modern hospitality technology. The pandemic has hastened the adoption of innovative hotel technologies and applications. Trends and new technologies that were once luxuries are now necessities.

In addition, this study is expected to assess the human interaction between technology further and investigate the mediation between the service quality provided by the hotel employees to bring guest convenience at the same time during this pandemic and in the light of post-pandemic scenarios in the hotel industry. Applying technology as mediation or a moderation perspective to the service quality and guest convenience formation, the researcher theorizes that customer service thru image levels are significant elements in enhancing satisfaction. The planned connection cannot be made without these two crucial variables: service quality and convenience. To further understand how the COVID-19 epidemic impacts visitor happiness, this study examines the relationship between service quality and guest convenience, focusing on process and outcome quality.

Lastly, this study will be a catalyst in building a comprehensive model based on the use of CB-SEM in the hotel industry, which will be better equipped to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic by adopting a paradigm of autonomous, intelligent, and self-regulating business accommodations.

This study assesses the Role of Technology Use During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Guest Convenience and Service Quality of Hotels. Specifically, it seeks to; 1) exhibit the hotel guest's psychographic and demographic profile in terms of types of devices (frequently used), Payment Methods (frequently used), and lifestyle. 2) assess the applied technology being used by hotels during the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of perceived ease of use, usefulness, trust, comfort, and security; 3) assess the hotel service quality to its guests in terms of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy; 4) determine the service convenience dimension of guests in terms of decision convenience, access convenience, benefit and post benefit convenience, and transaction convenience; 5) identify the significant difference between applied technology, hotel service quality and guest service convenience when grouped according to psychographic profile. 6) determine the significant relationship between guest service convenience and service quality; 7) determine whether the assessment of technology mediates the relationship between guest service convenience and service quality.

The researcher used a predictive-causal method because this study is designed to determine whether one or more variables-technology use mediates or moderates one or more outcome variables which are the service quality and service convenience, as the prediction perspective is present with this complex model. This approach is also known as structural equation modelling (SEM), which can be used for exploratory and predictive analyses of the causal links and influence of variables suggested in theoretical models.

The researcher chose the only 4-5-star DOT accredited hotels or the twenty-seven accommodation establishments which classified under hotel operation as multiple-use hotels with staycation accreditation known as the Accommodation Establishments that have been inspected by a team composed of personnel from the Philippines' DOT and BOQ that are determined to be suitable for both quarantine and non-quarantine guests because of compliance with standards for physical separation of guests from different key areas in the National Capital Region (DOT Administrative Order No. 2021-007).

The study used a sample size of 325 based on the G-power software, which has a fixed effect, special, main effects, and interaction, alpha of 0.10, power of 0.90, and effect size of 0.25.

The study used the questionnaire as the main instrument for data gathering and adapted different instruments from different related works of literature and authors. After a thorough validation by the said experts, the researcher performed a pilot testing further to validate the instrument's internal consistency to 30 respondents and was tested using a Cronbach Alpha to measure the reliability and internal consistency of the instrument.

In addition, the researcher used a Confirmatory Factor Analysis or CFA alongside the use of CB-SEM in constructing the model using latent variables- Applied Technology, Service Quality (ServQual), and Service Convivence (ServCon). In addition, results will most likely give good fit indices because the same data will tend to conform to the structure(s) of the scale discovered with EFA.

Frequency and percentage were used to describe the psychographic profile, which reveals that most hotel guests are using their smartphones in everyday communications and using a different kind of technology not only in personal aspects but how they deal with payment methods. The study also revealed that the guests preferred cashless transactions such as cards, online or bank transfers thru QR codes, and NFC such as Samsung Pay, Google Pay, and or Apple pay. Lastly, most guests were considered adventurous and wanted to try new experiences. It is likely congruent to the other psychographic profile, such as using communication devices and how they use cashless transactions.

The vast majority of guests at the hotel agreed that there is at least an application of technology in the establishments, such as in the front office up to the room and in the restaurants. They also agreed in their assessment that the hotel where they had stayed made it simple to use technological amenities such as QR codes, contactless payment, and other available technology in the rooms and public areas.

The hotel may continue cashless payment transactions such as card transactions; however, the hotel may want to explore other types of cashless transactions, such as the exploration of NFS payments. In addition, the hotel may create additional promotions and different hotel experience to capture more adventurous guest or travellers as the hotels in the region is starting to bounce back from the surge of economic impact brought by the pandemic.

In addition, the weighted mean and composite mean revealed that most of the guests were satisfied with the services provided. Most of the guests claimed they were satisfied with the service quality at the hotel where they most recently stayed. The positive responses to the survey have proven that the service quality in the lodging industry in the NCR during the Covid-19 pandemic is positive and well taken care of in terms of providing customers with the best possible services to ensure their satisfaction. This has been demonstrated by the fact that the industry has received positive responses.

The hotel may continue improving its guest service programs through different training for front-of-the-house departments, specifically those in direct contact with the guests during the pandemic and the transition of the community to the post-pandemic era. Additional programs and training may be given from time to time to keep them updated and abreast of the various standards by their respective hotel brands of parent companies set by local and global standards in the hotel industry. However, this should have a TNA or Training Needs Analysis through the help of the department heads and the HRD. An assessment tool like the Balanced Scorecard or BSC may be used to assess this.

The ANOVA and post hoc tests were used to determine the significant difference between the assessment of the technology use, service quality, and service convenience when grouped according to psychographic profile. It shows that the responses vary significantly. Based on the post hoc test conducted, it was found that those who have the lifestyle of Promethean have a better assessment of the applied technology that they used in their hotel. In addition, there was a significant difference for service quality when grouped according to lifestyle except on assurance. More specifically, there were significant differences in those lifestyles are Promethean as supported by the post hoc conducted. Lastly, there was a significant difference between service convenience, and those with a Promethean lifestyle have better assessment than others.

The hotel may not only focus on the guest whose lifestyles are adventurous. Instead, they must put a high value on others, such as the Promethean ones, because they are the one who is very meticulous based on the result. They are after the luxurious, extravagant, and risk-taker guests. They know how to use updated technology as part of ease of use and in terms of service quality and convenience. Training on butler service may also be a good step as these butlers must know how to assist them with using new and fancy technology features that the hotel property is introducing to its guests.

To further strengthen and keep the standards of being a multi-use hotel and continuing its accreditation from the local and national agencies in the country, the hotel may review its training and development that will focus on the applied guest service quality and convenience. The management committee, thru the help of department heads, and the HRD, should coordinate to give different training and micro-credentials. In addition, the hotel should continue its accreditation with the DOT and other IATF agencies to further strengthen its image and credibility from the end of each guest.

Pearson Correlation was used to determine the significant relationship between service quality and service convenience. It revealed a strong direct relationship between hotel service convenience and the service convenience dimension of guests. This means that a significant relationship exists and implies that the better the quality of services, the better the assessment of service convenience.

The CB-SEM or the Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling using SMART PLS was used to assess the relationships between service quality and convenience and the possible mediating role of technology use. It confirmed that the applied technology plays a vital role as a mediator in attaining high service quality and service convenience from the end of the hotel guests and a two-way outline also from the end of the service provided by the hotel staff during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: technology, service quality, service convenience, structural equation modelling, hotels

BENEFITS AND CONCERNS ARISING FROM VIRTUAL REALITY IN TOURISM

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Technologies continued to develop since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic as observed in contactless transactions and operations, especially in businesses under the tourism sector. Tourism activities were disrupted and limited to tourists due to the pandemic but opportunities for technological advancements in the tourism sector grew. Some businesses utilized VRs to encourage tourists to visit and experience a destination through a virtual setting. COVID-19 had paved way for the use of VR technology in learning, entertainment, tourist destinations, among others. This study aimed to determine the participants' perceptions about VR technology, identify the benefits absorbed in using VR, surfaced encountered problems in using it, and enumerated recommendations for its utilization. This was a qualitative study wherein experiential type of research was employed. Focus-group discussions were utilized in determining the perspectives and experiences of the student-participants regarding VR. The researchers utilized the purposive/selective sampling technique in choosing the participants. The results revealed that the participants perceived virtual reality as a technology used to provide an immersive virtual experience of different destinations, particularly in the tourism context. Whereas, the participants' most mentioned benefit of VR was its utilization as a promotional tool for tourism products like destinations. While the surfaced concerns on the use of VR were low data connectivity that caused lags; health problems like dizziness, headaches, eye problems and addiction/obsession - the most serious disadvantage, were mentioned by the participants. Based on the results, the participants mostly recommended to improve the quality of VR videos to encourage more people to use it.

Keywords: Actual tourism, non-immersive VR, technology, virtual environment, virtual experience, virtual tourism, VR 360-degrees videos, VR promotions

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAVEL VLOGGERS ON THE DECISION-MAKING OF TOURIST IN VISITING NUEVA VIZCAYA, PHILIPPINES

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The impact of digital technology paved the way for new platforms in marketing, one of which is the vlog or blog featuring tourist spots. The effectiveness of travel vloggers on tourist decision-making in visiting Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines is the highlight of this study. The study determined the level of effectiveness of the two vloggers chosen and their vlogs in terms of public relations, sense of humor, relativeness, optimism, content, quality perception, language and references and information. Respondents were also asked on the other key elements that they can recommend towards developing an effective tourism vlog format. Data were collected from 64 purposively chosen respondents through a researcher-developed survey questionnaire using google forms. Responses were tallied and analyzed using the quantitative-descriptive method while storyboard presentation was used in the interpretation of the written recommendations of respondents. Results show that vloggers are generally good at delivering their videos and contents. The respondents suggested that the vloggers may improve the content of their vlog by giving honest feedback and information, featuring some of the culture and beliefs of the locals, and being more knowledgeable about the places that they are featuring. Travel vlogs, to be effective, should also be well-developed and prepared in terms of content, entertainment, public relations, visual image and authenticity.

Keywords: Digital technology, decision-making,, marketing, reference destination, tourism