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**Experiencing Buddhism in Chinese Hotels:
Toward the Construction of Religious Lodging Experience**

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing number of religious people and the increasing mobility of human beings, traveling to religious attractions or for religious needs has become common. Although some discussions on religious tourism have been initiated, no discussions exist regarding the lodging needs of religiously motivated travelers. Derived from the concept of service quality, predictive customer expectation is considered effective in past literature but is deemed out-of-date because of the changing customer profile in the marketplace. This study aims to develop a measurement scale for the normative expectations of religiously motivated travelers. By integrating interviews, panel experts, and survey, this study derives a reliable and valid measure for normative expectations toward Buddhism-themed hotels.

Keywords: Normative expectation; Theming; Religion; Hotels; Measurement scale development

INTRODUCTION

Theming has been widely applied in various business settings to enhance the attractiveness of products/services and to provide customers a coherent theming experience. The application of theming is now commonly seen in tourism and hospitality spheres, such as theme restaurants (e.g., Hard Rock Cafe, Rainforest Cafe, Planet Hollywood), theme cruises (e.g., music cruises, gay and lesbian cruises, health and wellbeing cruises), theme shopping malls (e.g., Mall of America), theme parks (e.g., Disneyland, Universal Studio, Lord of the Rings Theme Park), and theme hotels (e.g., Hello Kitty House, casino hotels, air flight theme hotels). However, the tourism and hospitality settings with religious themes are relatively scarce. Considering that China has as many as 736 temples (Mu et al., 2007) and has abundant religious resources (e.g., the four most famous Buddhist mounts, namely, Mount Putuo, Mount Wutai, Mount Jiuhua, and Mount Emei), the country has much potential in developing unique Buddhism-themed tourism/hospitality experiences. On major Buddhist holidays, including the birthday and enlightenment day of Buddha, a large number of travelers from all over the world travel to monasteries or other sacred places to worship Buddha and to experience the Buddhism culture. Therefore, the incorporation of Buddhism in the totality of the tourist experience is likely to appeal to religiously motivated travelers.

The large demand of travelers visiting religious sites in Mainland China has inspired the idea of providing lodging experience coherent with a particular religion to accommodate the needs of travelers. Several Buddhism-themed hotels, such as Rushi Hotel in Xiamen, Landison Putoshan Resort in Zhoushan, Huaxingsi Puti Hotel in Shenzhen, and Xizhao Temple Hotel in Beijing, have been established in response to this endeavor. Despite the emerging trend of providing Buddhism-themed lodging experience for interested travelers, investigations are still

lacking on how the theme can be integrated into the different dimensions of hotels to create an immersive religiously themed experience for hotel guests. In this customer orientation era, understanding the customers' mindset is necessary to excel in the market. Religious believers have a mindset different from that of others (Sherratt and Hawkins, 1972); thus, the expectations of religiously motivated travelers on the hotel products and services of religiously themed hotels may differ from that of regular hotels. This study aims 1) to determine the products/services that religiously motivated travelers look for in Buddhism-themed hotels and 2) to develop a measurement scale for the normative expectations of travelers toward Buddhism-themed hotels in Mainland China. The main objective of the study is to help hotel managers create a unique religious hotel experience for hotel guests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theming

Theming, which is a generic term for distinct features being reflected by a product/service, is a common practice applied in the business arena nowadays. Scholars have noted a number of benefits for applying this tactic. For instance, Bryman (1999) suggested that theming is a strategy to differentiate products in a competitive market. Weaver (2010) noted that theming helps attract customer attention and increases the perceived value of products. Habnit (2010) commented that theming could be comparable to the aesthetic attributes of a product/service that has a positive influence on customer satisfaction and perceived quality. Various definitions have been outlined for theming (Weaver, 2010; Habnit, 2010). Coherence is a key feature of theming that enables association among different elements of products/services and enables products/services to have a storyline and a unique image. To achieve coherence, all dimensions of a business setting,

including the design, architecture, and staff, should exert effort to create an immersive theming experience.

Research rarely focuses on tourism and hospitality research. Relevant literature on theming can be categorized into two streams: 1) studies related to topics in a themed environment and 2) studies related to theming in a themed environment. Although the research topic in the first category may not be relevant to the concept of theming, the second category pertains to the discussion of theming in a chosen context. Bigné, Andreu, and Gnoth's work (2005) focused on the first category. They investigate the influence of the emotions of visitors on their satisfaction and behavioral intentions regarding a theme park. In their research, attention has been mainly directed to understanding the investigated topic rather than the theme per se. The study of Lai, Yu, and Kuo (2010) also fall into the first category. In their study, they tested the relation between perception of service recovery and revisit intention in a theme park. However, they also failed to focus on theming. Specifically, they regarded the theme park wherein they conducted their study only as a study context rather than as an investigated subject. In another study, Moscardo and Pearce (1986) analyzed the advertising materials of six major historic theme parks in Australia and concluded that authenticity is an important element of visitor experience. However, their discussion on authenticity in connection to the theme is also minimal.

The emphasis of the second stream of research is on understanding the theming experience in various settings including tourism and hospitality. More discussion on theming has been observed in this camp of thinking. For instance, Habnit (2010) investigated the effect of theming on the willingness to pay for amusement parks. They found that willingness to pay is positively influenced by the theming preference of visitors. Bryman (1999) investigated the Disneyization of the society and suggested that the concept of the Disney theme park has penetrated into

various sectors of the society and is mainly reflected in four aspects, namely, theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor. In their study of the role of authenticity in ethnic-themed restaurants, Ebster and Guist (2005) examined the effectiveness of theming by comparing authentic restaurants with themed restaurants and found that culture familiarity influences the restaurant preference of customers. Moreover, both culturally experienced and inexperienced customers prefer authentic restaurants than themed restaurants. Other examples of this stream of research include the following: Wong and Cheung's (1999) study of strategic theming in theme park marketing in which the relationship between visitors' motivation for visiting theme parks and their preferences was examined; Weaver's (2011) search for the reasons for the popularity of themed cruises in which the fragmentation of markets, neo-tribes, nostalgia, and celebrity culture were identified as the main factors leading to the popularity of themed cruises; and Dale and Robinson's (2001) discussion on theming of tourism education in which the costs and benefits of theming tourism education were analyzed.

In summary, theming has been identified as an effective strategy for operating a business. However, research on theming is incomprehensive because of the lack of understanding on how theming can be incorporated into businesses and what customers look for in a themed environment. The lack of understanding on customer expectation means higher risk in the themed lodging business. This study focuses on understanding the desired features and services of customers toward religiously themed hotels to help hotels formulate a corresponding theming strategy. Specifically, this study intends to examine how religion can be incorporated into different dimensions of religion-themed hotels to meet the nominative expectations of religiously motivated travelers. In their analysis of theme types, Wong and Cheung (1999) identified a wide range of themes being applied in various theme parks, and religion was not on the list. This

finding may reflect a lack of scholarly attention in exploring this market. Given the large number of people who are interested in traveling to sacred sites, religion as a theme for tourism and hospitality products/services seems a reasonable business opportunity. However, the approach used to provide a themed experience for religiously themed hotels remains unknown.

Religious hospitality experience

Travel is part of the leisure experience that affects and is influenced by many facets of life, including culture, economy, environment, technology, and politics (Page and Connell, 2006; Mathieson and Wall, 1982). Religion, which is deeply rooted in human nature and is widely shared among all walks of people around the world, is among these factors. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (cited in Mu et al., 2007), about 60% of the world population is religious, and the four most popular religions are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These religious groups, together with nonreligious travelers who are interested in learning culture by visiting religious sites, attractions, and activities, form a large customer base for religious tourism. Each religion has designated places in which people can practice their religion and conduct worshipping activities. Churches, shrines, and monasteries are built from the ancient times for this purpose and for conducting religious celebrations and events. With the development of tourism, many of these places and events have become popular tourism attractions for religious or nonreligious visitors.

In the discussion of religion and tourism, scholars differentiated religious tourism from pilgrimage. According to them, tourism is located at one end, pilgrimage is at the other, and religious tourism is in the middle of the continuum (Smith, 1992; Cohen, 2003; Rinschede, 1988). The classification is structured fundamentally based on travel purposes. *Pilgrimage* involves

traveling for healing, piety, worshiping, and other spiritual reasons. By comparison, *religious tourism* refers to traveling to religious attractions for personal pleasure. Studies related to religion and tourism are divided into two: studies of pilgrimage as a spiritual journey, which is mainly for religious accomplishments, and studies of religious tourism as a leisure journey, which is mainly for personal pleasure. Despite these differentiations, the dividing line between these two groups is blurry because both pilgrimage and religious tourism are a mixture of spiritual and touristic activities.

Although religions are often strictly abided by their followers, religions are mysterious and fascinating to outsiders. Religious tourism opens a gate for tourists to the religious world, thus enabling tourists to develop a better understanding of a particular religion. However, developing religious tourism presents the risk of introducing adverse effects of tourism to the religion (Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010). Each religion consists of norms and rules that are commonly shared among religious communities and may not be understood by outsiders. Tourists who do not share the same religion may engage in inappropriate behavior that contradicts the underlying values of the religion. International tourism has never been the priority task of some highly religious sensitive societies, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, because of the anticipated incompatibility of the lifestyle of non-Islamic tourists and that of the locals (Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010). Despite the reluctance of some Islamic societies in developing international tourism, other countries (e.g., Malaysia and Thailand) are eager to develop religious tourism for its large economic gain. Religious sites, festivals, and events are deemed valuable resources to attract tourists to visit these countries. The key to developing sustainable religious tourism in these destinations involves the careful planning and designing of tourism/hospitality services to cater customers with religious needs and to ensure that the service

provided to customers will not jeopardize the underpinning values of the religion. However, practitioners will face difficulty in striving balance in such endeavor if the customer expectations are not understood.

Despite the vast amount of interest in religious tourism, research on understanding religious hospitality experience has been scarce in the literature. Nevertheless, some efforts have been initiated toward this direction. For instance, Dugan (1994) discussed various dietary restrictions of customers with different religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Mormonism, and urged food service sectors to employ a more sensitive and sympathetic approach for customers with religious needs. Weidenfeld (2005) surveyed 179 Christian tourists in Israel to understand their religious needs in the hospitality industry. Respondents evaluated the importance of a number of service items for their religious needs. None of the listed service items was reported to be important. However, the results of the survey should be interpreted with caution because the service items were derived from the general tourism literature rather than from a measurement scale specifically developed for the study context. This study intends to mend this gap by developing a measurement scale for customer expectations toward religiously themed hotels to create a unique religious experience for travelers engaging in religious tourism. Such a work is hoped to be a stepping stone to more systematic understanding of religious tourist experience.

Customer expectation toward religious hospitality experience

Prior to achieving the research goal, a review of past literature on customer expectation is necessary to help us understand this concept. Customer expectation has been traditionally developed and studied in the marketing discipline and is deeply rooted in the marketing

philosophy promoted in the current business. To develop products/services desired by customers, the marketing paradigm has shifted from a selling orientation in the past to a customer orientation that emphasizes on customer needs (Kotler and Keller, 2006). This business approach is deemed effective because adverse deviation from customers' expectations may result in waste of resources. Scholars have shown much interest in understanding customer psychology and applying such knowledge in designing products. This orientation is important in tourism and hospitality businesses with high customer–employee contact (Ghobadian, 1994). Knowing what customers want from service providers is the first step in creating a unique traveling experience.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) proposed a service quality model, in which understanding customer expectation is the first step in achieving service quality. In their model, they identified five gaps influencing the attainment of quality service: Gap 1, which is the gap between the expected service of customers and the management perceptions of consumer expectations; Gap 2, which is the gap between translation of perceptions into service quality specification and management perceptions of consumer expectations; Gap 3, which is the gap between service delivery and translation of perceptions into service quality specification; Gap 4, which is the gap between external communications to consumers and service delivery; and Gap 5, which is the gap between customers' expected service and their perceived service. This model suggests that customer expectation influences service quality mainly in two gaps, i.e., Gap 1 and Gap 5, with the latter being the most discussed in literature. Traditionally, service quality measurement focuses on measuring the difference between customers' expected and perceived service. The resultant gap between the two aspects is synonymous to the extent of perceived service quality. Therefore, if a service is perceived to outperform customers' expectation, then the service quality is sustained and vice versa.

Two types of customer expectation, namely, normative and predictive expectations, can be identified in this literature. The former refers to the desired features of a product/service, and the latter refers to the expected attributes of the product/service that customers will receive (Lee, Lee and Yoo, 2000). Although both types of expectation are vital to perceived service quality, scholars often either do not specify which type of expectation they are measuring or use only predictive expectation to gauge the magnitude of service quality. This approach is incomprehensive in capturing the customers' mindset and may not present well the targeted measuring construct. When creating a high quality perception in the current business arena, meeting the normative expectation of customers is more important than meeting the predictive expectations because customers have good understanding of the common practices in various business sectors. As a result, customers are more likely to take these common practices for granted and are less likely to be impressed by them (Ghobadian, 1994).

Therefore, understanding the normative expectation of religiously motivated travelers is a prerequisite in developing a successful religiously themed hotel. A unique theme reflected in all dimension of a religiously themed hotel could be an effective strategy to differentiate a hotel from other ordinary hotels. The first purpose of this study is to enhance our understanding of the normative expectations of religiously motivated travelers toward religiously themed hotels. This study also aims to develop a measurement scale for the normative expectation of religiously motivated travelers toward religiously themed hotels. This normative expectation measure not only provides a benchmark to help managers design their hotel and improve their service but also acts as a reference for further investigation of the needs of travelers in religious tourism/hospitality environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Measurement scales are designed to reflect the true meanings of constructs of interest. Validity and reliability are two of the major concerns in scale development. *Validity* refers to the extent to which measurement scales measure the constructs of interest (Nunnally, 1967), whereas *reliability* means the repeatability of a result with the same measurement (Aneshensel, 2002). Both reliability and validity of measurement were testified in this study. A modified procedure of developing measures recommended by Churchill (1979) was adopted to derive normative expectation measures for Buddhism-themed hotels. Three steps were taken: 1) generation of measurement items in which interviews are conducted to derive the measurement items; 2) expert panel and pilot test in which measurement items are further refined and revised; 3) final survey in which reliability and validity of the measure are examined.

Generate measurement items

To generate measurement items, the author interviewed travelers who are interested in Buddhism in Mainland China and practitioners who are currently working in the hospitality/tourism industry in Mainland China. Both groups of participants were included to obtain a broader understanding of the topic of interest. A total of 25 interviews were conducted, in which 14 were with travelers and 11 were with industry people. All traveler participants were required to have travel experience to ensure that the participants have reasonable expectations toward Buddhism-themed hotels. Convenience sample was applied considering that the qualitative nature and purpose of the interview is to understand Buddhism-motivated travelers in terms of normative expectations instead of generalizing the results to the larger population. Potential participants were approached through personal network.

An interview protocol suggested by Creswell (1997), which is termed as *interview guide* by

Bernard (2002), was used. This interview protocol contains a list of predetermined questions and topics to be asked in the interview. According to Creswell (1997), this interview protocol 1) helps researchers organize thoughts and 2) enables a person to take notes regarding the responses of the interviewees during the interview. Open-ended questions were asked in the interview to generate insightful information from respondents. Participants were probed to share their desired features of Buddhism-themed hotels. For traveler participants, questions such as “What characteristics do you think a desirable Buddhism-theme hotel should possess?” “How should the Buddhism-theme hotel create desirable experience for guests?” and “Assume you are checking in to a Buddhism-themed hotel, what do you expect from the hotel in order to have a desirable accommodation experience?” were asked to gauge their normative expectations. For practitioner participants, questions such as “What kind of expectations do you think tourists have toward Buddhism-themed hotels in order to have a desirable accommodation experience?” were asked to gauge the answers from the service providers’ point of view.

Expert panel and pilot test

A questionnaire was designed based on the list to generate the travelers’ normative expectations toward Buddhism-themed hotels. On the survey, participants were asked to evaluate the importance of each item to their desirable accommodating experience in a Buddhism-themed hotel. A five-point Likert-type scale, with “1” as “not very important” and “5” as “very important,” was used. Given that a large number of measurement items (98) were derived from the first research step, the number of items needs to be reduced to a manageable size for later survey implementation. A panel of experts, comprising six hospitality/tourism scholars, was formed to examine the face validity of the measurement. The list of measurement items was

compiled with defined categories for easier interpretation. The panel judged the applicability of the measurement items to the study, the design of the questionnaire, and other aspects of the survey to improve the quality of the survey. A total of 62 items were retained from the panel review. The retained items were re-categorized based on the resulting composition and experts' opinions.

A small sample of the pilot test was conducted prior to the distribution of the real sample. The pilot test sample is a convenience sample comprising of 33 hospitality/tourism graduate students who are native in Mandarin. The purpose of the pilot test is not to test the measurement scale but to improve the design of the questionnaire. The pilot test refines the items to assure that they reflect the study purpose and enables respondents to understand easily the final sample. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each item to their desirable hotel staying experience in a Buddhism-themed hotel. The completion time, as well as the clarity, duplicability, and representativeness of each item, was reported. Although no duplications were reported, the respondents made constructive suggestions regarding revising some item wordings to facilitate respondent understanding. The average completion time of the survey was approximately 10 min.

Final survey

The measurement scale was further validated with the data collected from an online panel study. A survey panel consists of "individuals who are pre-recruited to participate on a more or less predictable basis in surveys over a period of time" (Dennis, 2001, pp. 34). Currently, panel surveys are commonly practiced in a wide range of research areas, such as consumer behavior (Lohse, Bellman, and Johnson, 2000; Kosa, Gates, Karns, Godwin, and Chambers, 2007), health

(e.g., Contoyannis, Jones, and Rice, 2004; Kessler, Borges, Sampson, Miller and Nock, 2009)), communication (e.g., Beaudoin, 2007; Nobis and Lenz, 2009), leisure (e.g., Kuentzel and Heberlein, 2006; Schaub, Gmel, Annatheim, Mueller and Schwappach, 2010)), and travel (e.g., Hung and Petrick, 2012). The online panel survey was deployed by a reputable survey company based in Mainland China. Two million registered members were recruited from search engines, portals, vertical sites, and social networks/microblogs. An online survey webpage was first built by the survey company by using the questionnaire provided by the researcher. The survey was tested by the researcher prior to implementation, and modifications were made on the design according to the author's instructions. The link for this online questionnaire was randomly distributed to 21,000 qualified online panel members of the survey company. A total of 800 members responded to the survey.

To qualify for the study, the panel members need to fulfill all of the following criteria: 1) must be a citizen of China; 2) must be 21 or above; 3) must possess domestic or international travelling experience; 4) must have an experience in staying in hotels; 5) must be interested in/enthusiastic about Buddhism. The first two sampling criteria can be imposed by the survey company, whereas the other three criteria can be extracted by using screening questions at the beginning of the survey. Interested members who failed to fulfill all these criteria were prevented from answering any further questions.

The questionnaire was present in simplified Chinese to match the background of research population. The survey questions were grouped into three sections for easier comprehension of respondents: 1) screening questions; 2) normative expectations toward Buddhism-themed hotels; and 3) demographic information. In the screening section, those who do not meet the sampling criteria were prevented from answering survey questions. Then, qualified respondents were

asked to evaluate the importance of each of the 62 expectation items to their desirable Buddhism lodging experience. Based on the suggestion of expert panel, the expectation items were grouped into seven categories to facilitate the reading of respondents: 1) hotel facilities and amenities; 2) guestrooms; 3) hotel environment and atmosphere; 4) Buddhism activities; 5) hotel service; 6) employee's Buddhism knowledge; and 7) hotel branding and management. The basic information of respondents including age, gender, marital status and education were obtained at the last section.

Descriptive analyses and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were first conducted with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 20) to understand the sample profile and the factor structure of measurement scale. Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted in the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Analysis of MOment Structures (AMOS 20) to determine the overall fit of the proposed measurement model with the data as well as the reliability and validity of the measurement scale.

FINDINGS

Generate measurement items

Twenty-five people were recruited in interviews to form an item pool for measurement scale refinement. Their basic demographic information was first obtained to understand the participants' backgrounds, including their age, education, and religion (Table 1). Sixteen females and nine males, with an average age of 33 years, participated in the interviews. Among the participants, 10 were non-Buddhists and 14 were Buddhists. The participants have relatively high education levels on average, in which eight hold master's degrees, six completed bachelor courses, and the remaining participants have diploma or similar.

Table 1

Many analysis strategies can be used in qualitative studies. No single definite form of analysis is used with qualitative data (Creswell, 1997). This study adopted four principles of analysis suggested by Giorgi (1997): 1) reading of the data; 2) dividing the data into parts; 3) organizing and transforming the data into disciplinary language; 4) expressing the structure of the phenomenon. Creswell (1997) suggested that reading through all the collected information could help a researcher obtain an overall sense of the data. Skuza (2003) adopted this strategy in her study. She reported the advantage of adopting this method: "I read the entire text several times to get a sense for the whole....This enabled me to become familiar with the text and helped me to develop openness to the meanings in it" (p. 73). The interview transcripts were first read multiple times before data analysis. Note-taking was performed while the investigator read the transcripts. These notes and memos were short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that help organize the data (Agar, 1980).

The researcher broke down cumbersome text into small parts to improve data organization and presentation. Categories were developed to sort the data. Given that the author does not intend to present every single word generated from the interviews, the author used data categorization to retain the most meaningful data and to discard unwanted data. This stage is what Skuza (2003, p. 73) referred to as "highlighting the parts and revealing constituents of meaning." Readings of the text are necessary at this stage. Each small part or category generated from the process can be called "meaning units" (Giorgi, 1997). Skuza (2003, p. 74) offered the following explanation of "meaning units": "The meaning units are smaller parts of the whole text

found in the early stages of text analysis. In comparison to emerging meanings found later in the analysis, the meaning units are less refined and do not necessarily refer to essential meaning.”

Investigators can identify meaning units in the text by answering the question “What features did the participant desire from the Buddhism themed hotels in order to construct a desirable experience?” The meaning units identified are useful to further organize and understand the data.

In the third step of data analysis, data are further organized and transformed into a disciplinary language that can be understood by other researchers. According to Skuza (2003), imaginative variation is a key approach to be used for this purpose. She reviewed imaginative variation as a process of seeking for possible meanings through cross-checking different meaning units by using divergent perspectives, varying frames of references, and so on. Self-raised questions were utilized during the process (Skuza, 2003). The following are examples of those questions: “Are those meaning units similar or different?”; “If I cluster this unit with other units, can they become a cluster?”; “Will the meaning be the same if I remove or add a phrase into this meaning unit?” Units with similar meanings can be clustered by applying imaginative variation techniques; thus, the meaning of all the units can be identified (Skuza, 2003). The fourth step of data analysis is expressing the structure of the phenomenon. In this step, results were narratively presented in the Findings section before discussing them.

A large number of measurement items (i.e., 98) were derived from interviews. These measurement items represent travelers’ normative expectations toward various aspects of desirable religious hospitality experience in a Buddhism-themed hotel, including “hotel design, facilities, and amenities,” “hotel environment and atmosphere,” “hotel activities,” “hotel services,” “hotel personnel,” and “hotel branding and management”. These items form an initial basis for the further development of the measurement scale.

Expert panel and pilot test

The measurement items were further refined in the expert panel review and pilot test to ensure their face validity before finalizing and distributing the survey. Redundant items were deleted and revisions on item wording were made in these exercises. In total, 62 items were retained in the final set of survey. To facilitate the understanding of the respondents on the questionnaire, the items were rearranged into seven categories according to the suggestions of the panel members. In the survey, 10 items fall in the “hotel facilities and amenities” category, 13 in “guestrooms,” 10 in “hotel environment and atmosphere,” 7 in “hotel activities,” 9 in “hotel services,” 5 in “hotel personnel,” and 8 in “hotel branding and management” (Table 2). These categories were used to help respondents comprehend the measurement items. These categories do not represent the final classifications of the survey data.

Table 2

Final survey

A total of 800 respondents with an average age of 31.9 years participated in the final survey. The gender distribution is about the same, in which 52% are males and 48% are females. Majority of the participants were married (72.1%), in which about one-third of the participants were single, and a small number of participants were divorced or separated (1.5%). More than 70% of the participants were highly educated (72.8% hold a college degree or higher). Most participants (67.9%) were Buddhists (63.8%). About one-third of the participants (31.3%) had

previous accommodation experience in a Buddhism-themed hotel, but majority (68.8%) did not have such experience (Table 3).

Table 3

The sample was randomly split into half prior to testing data reliability and validity, in which 404 participants were included in the first batch, and 396 were included in the second batch of samples. An exploratory factor analysis was performed on the first batch of samples to determine the dimensions of the scales. To ensure that each attribute loaded only on one factor, items that have factor loadings lower than .4 or cross-load on more than one factor were eliminated (Gursoy and Cavcar, 2003; Chen and Hsu, 2001). The internal reliability of each factor was then measured by using Cronbach's alpha. A low alpha coefficient suggests that the item has low contribution to the measurement of construct of interest (Churchill, 1979). All retained constructs have a Cronbach's alpha of approximately .7 or above. The four remaining factors are "reflecting Buddhism culture in hotel environment and staffing" ($\alpha=.811$), "ties with Buddhism community" ($\alpha=.783$), "Buddhismness of hotel design" ($\alpha=.813$), and "worship/meditation considerations" ($\alpha=.695$). The factor loadings of all measurement items were .5 or above (Table 4).

Table 4

The EFA results form a good basis for the further evaluation of the measurement scale. To validate further the measurement scale, confirmation factor analysis was performed on the

second batch of randomly split data in AMOS 20, in which reliability of the measurement scale was further tested and validity tests were conducted. The reliability test suggests that the Cronbach's alpha of all factors were .7 or above, which meets the thresholds of reliability (Table 5). Construct validity was assessed by both convergent and discriminant (also termed as *divergence*) validity. Convergent validity refers to the extent of correlation between the intended measure and other measures used to measure the same construct (Clark-Carter, 1997). Convergent validity can be examined with the predictive power of each item on its assigned factor by using t-tests (Bollen, 1989). A statistically significant contribution of an item to its posited underlying construct suggests adequate convergent validity of the measurement (Marsh and Grayson, 1995; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The relationships among all items and their underlying construct were statistically significant at .001 levels. Discriminant validity refers to the extent of dissimilarity between the intended measure and the measures used to indicate different constructs (Clark-Carter, 1997). Discriminant validity can be investigated by examining the inter-correlations of the variables. Problematic discriminant validity is evident in .85 or above correlations between variables (Kline, 2005). Results show that all correlations among the constructs were below .85 (Table 6). The fit indices (χ^2 (df) =339.1(131); RMSEA=.063; CFI=.917) derived from the AMOS outputs also suggest that the measurement model has an acceptable fit to the data.

Table 5

Table 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study derived a measure for normative expectations of travelers toward Buddhism-themed hotels. Although this study represents an initial step toward more systematic investigations of religious lodging experience, more effort is needed to advance further our understanding of the accommodation needs of religiously motivated travelers. Some studies (e.g., Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000; Fleischer, 2000; Belhassen, Caton, and Stewart, 2008) have been conducted to understand pilgrimage; however, limited studies focus on the religious tourism experience in a themed hospitality context. No evidence exists on how theming, which has been identified as an effective marketing strategy (Habnit, 2010), can be integrated into religious hospitality environments to enhance customer lodging experience. The vast interest of travelers (both religious and nonreligious) in religious sites and their potential demand for lodging service imply a business opportunity for the lodging sector. This sector can attract this market by offering an immersive religiously themed experience. An effective application of theming in a hospitality setting may contribute to the totality of the religious travel experience of customers.

The Chinese hotel industry in recent years has been experiencing an expedited growth, and such growth is anticipated to continue with more Chinese people traveling domestically and abroad as well as with more international travelers visiting China (Hung, 2013). The number of hotels in China is now record high, with as many as 300,000 hotels available in the market (CNTA, 2010) and with more than 1,500 new hotels expected to open each year from 2010 through 2015 (Yang, 2011). Therefore, the competition among hotels in China is anticipated to be even fiercer than already is. Standing out in the crowded hotel industry to attract and retain

customers will be the key to the survival of hotels. Chinese hotels have been criticized to lack uniqueness in their products and services because of the “me too” approach being widely adopted by many hotels (Cai, 2004). Theming could potentially develop the unique image and market position of hotels and could act as a winning strategy for hotels.

With the increasing mobility of people nowadays, most people know what to expect when they check in to a hotel. Therefore, understanding predictive expectations, which includes the regular practices of lodging services, may be insufficient to attract customer attention. Normative expectation, which is concerned on the product features and services most desired by customers, may be a better measure for service quality. This approach is deeply rooted in customer orientation (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Normative expectation is a prevailing philosophy in marketing arena and is deemed more effective in addressing customers’ needs compared with predictive expectations. In this marketing philosophy, meeting and exceeding customer normative expectations will most likely lead to a satisfying experience (Heung, Wong, and Qu, 2000). Previous studies on service quality either used predictive expectation in their measure or were vague in their description of measure. The approach used by these studies may cause fruitless investment in aspects that are irrelevant to customers. The current study advocates the use of normative expectations over predictive expectations in developing religious hospitality experience in accordance to customers’ needs.

This study developed a measurement scale for the normative expectation of religiously motivated travelers toward Buddhism-themed hotels. Four dimensions of the measurement scale, each containing 18 items, were derived. Creating an immersive theming experience involves collective efforts from multiple parties. Thus, imposing a theme in the hotel does not necessary make the hotel successful. Instead, the relevant theme should be penetrated into all dimensions of

the hotel. Hotels may reflect the Buddhism culture in their choice of location, staffing, facilities, and design. Hotels may also reflect the Buddhism culture by demonstrating genuine care to customers' religious needs and by reaching out to the Buddhism community. Although theming can be a competitive strategy to differentiate a hotel from others (Bryman, 1999), the effectiveness of theming will depend on how well the theme is carried out in the hotel and whether an immersive themed experience can be successfully created. Collective efforts from all hotel departments are essential to achieve such goal. Nevertheless, understanding customer expectation is the first step in reaching this goal. Similar to any other business sectors, theming has been incorporated into some hotels in Mainland China, including the Earthly Paradise Bird Nest's Resort in Sanya (bird nest theme), Crowne Plaza in Suzhou (cruising theme), Shenzhen Air International Hotel in Shenzhen (aviation theme), New Century Hotel in Hangzhou (chess theme), Circle Art Hotel in Shenzhen (art theme), and many others. Despite the incorporation of the religious theme in several hotels, a systematic understanding of incorporating theming in religious hotels and addressing the lodging needs of religious motivated travelers remains unavailable. This study represents an initial step toward this direction.

Four dimensions of normative expectation of travelers toward Buddhism-themed hotels have been derived from the study, namely "reflection of Buddhism culture in the hotel environment and among the staff," "ties with the Buddhism community," "extent of Buddhism in the hotel design," and "worship/meditation considerations." These four dimensions suggest that theming should be reflected in not only the hotel's hardware, such as its environment and design, but also its software, such as employees' knowledge toward the theme, connection with the Buddhism community, and accommodating travelers' worship/meditation needs. This suggestion coincides with past studies in which needs of religious hotel guests were exerted in different

aspects of hotel including food, building style materials, furniture, fittings and furnishings structures, and operating systems (Buttle, 1986). Religious characteristics, customs, and traditions often influence the needs of religious travelers. For instance, Weidenfeld (2006) found that the needs of Christian hotel guests in Israel include (1) providing a Bible in the hotel room, (2) providing information on religious activities and institutions in the tourist area, (3) employment of Christian workers to create a religious atmosphere within the hotel, (4) religious activities organized by the hotel, (5) a place of worship within the hotel itself, (6) hotel proximity to a church, (7) Christian ornaments within the hotel, and (8) a cross and other ornaments as décors in the hotel room. Despite the different cultural contexts, both similarities and differences may exist among religiously motivated travelers across different countries. Cross-cultural studies are needed to generalize the study results to larger contexts.

Theming is an innovative marketing strategy that is widely applied in tourism and hospitality businesses (Gottdiener, 2001). However, a theoretical understanding of theming is still lacking, particularly in the context of religiously themed hotels. The four dimensions with 18 expectation items vividly convey a coherent theme of the hotel, Buddhism, in all aspects. According to Olson (2004), the core of a theme is built on the totality and overwhelming experience of a customer toward the brand. Through the four dimensions of hotel theming, an immersive theming experience can be created for customers, and a clear brand identity can be established for the themed hotel to compete in the market.

This study also promotes the use of normative expectations instead of predictive expectations. Although the latter has been traditionally used to measure customer expectation and service quality, this approach is deemed out-of-date given the accumulated traveling experience of the public. Customer expectations change because customers are now more

experienced in tourism. The regular practices commonly found in most hotels are no longer sufficient to satisfy customers. Customers want to experience something unique that they cannot find elsewhere. Therefore, meeting or exceeding customer normative expectations should be the aim of hotel operations. By understanding the normative expectation of travelers, we can incorporate the desired features/services into the design of religiously themed hotels to produce an immersive religious hospitality experience.

This study voiced the expectations of Buddhism-motivated travelers regarding their most desired features and services in Buddhism-themed hotels in China. The management of Buddhism-themed hotels in China should focus on the listed expectations and incorporate these expectations into practice. The Buddhism theme should be reflected in every dimension of the hotel operation. Ideally, a Buddhism-themed hotel should be located in a tranquil environment to be in line with the traditional image of Buddhism. The design of the hotel should also reflect the Buddhism philosophy, in which a simple, low key, elegant, and solemn environment is desired. As the key contact persons of lodging customers, employees should demonstrate their understanding of Buddhism and be sensitive to the needs of guests. The hotel should also be sympathetic to customers with religious needs by making worshipping and meditation space conveniently available in the hotel. The Buddhist culture can also be reflected in Buddhism art galleries/exhibitions as well as in the interior and exterior design of the hotel. To reinforce the Buddhism theme and image, Buddhism-themed hotels can also develop a closer association with Buddhism communities by developing affiliations/partnership with monasteries, by inviting reputable Buddhism masters to stay in the hotel, and by arranging meetings with masters. These suggested practices are useful to develop a distinctive Buddhism image for the hotel and to create an immersive religious lodging experience for customers.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the features and services that religiously motivated travelers desire most from religiously themed hotels. This study aims to stimulate some thinking on how to incorporate theming in hotel products/services to create a unique lodging experience for hotel guests. A mixed-method approach, integrating interviews, expert panel, and survey, was adopted to develop a measurement scale for normative expectations. The scale was tested to be both reliable and valid. Given that the measurement scale is specifically developed in the Buddhism context, the application of this scale to other religions should be examined with caution. Nevertheless, the developed measurement scale represents an initial effort toward understanding the needs of religiously motivated travelers and forms a good base for further investigation of relevant topics.

Although this study represents an initial effort in understanding the normative expectation of religiously motivated travelers toward religiously themed hotels, further test of the measurement scale should be conducted in other religious contexts. This study used Buddhism as a showcase of exploring customer normative expectation for creating a themed religious lodging experience. The transferable value of this study to other themed hotels should be further investigated. Sensitivity should be maintained when investigating relevant topics with other religions because the norms and rules abided in each religion vary. In addition, future studies may compare the expectations of religious and nonreligious travelers. In her study of travelers in Israel, Fleischer (2000) found different expectations of pilgrims and tourists with the former being more certain on what to expect on their trips because of the specific needs associated with pilgrimages. Further investigation is needed to determine the difference in the expectations of religiously motivated tourists with that of other travelers and to learn whether the expectations of

religious and nonreligious travelers on religious hospitality services differ. Understanding the similarities and differences of religious and nonreligious travelers can help in the creation of different marketing strategies to attract and retain each market segment.

Few limitations of study should be noted here. First, the sample selection is based on the assumption that the mindset of religiously motivated travelers may differ from that of regular travelers. However, no data are readily available to test such a difference. Future studies may include both religiously motivated and regular travelers to verify the assumption. Second, although the measurement scale developed in this study has acceptable discriminant validity based on Kline's (2005) rule of thumb, the scale fails to meet the more stringent discriminant validity test, average extract variance (AVE). The measurement scale should be further tested in different religious and cultural settings to improve its validity.

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TABLE 1
Profile of the participants

#	Nature	Gender	Education	Age	Buddhist History
1	Traveler	Female	Diploma Course	26	Non-Buddhist
2	Traveler	Female	Bachelor's degree	31	Non-Buddhist
3	Traveler	Female	Bachelor's degree	27	Non-Buddhist
4	Traveler	Female	N/A	N/A	Non-Buddhist
5	Traveler	Female	Diploma Course	35	2 years
6	Traveler	Female	Diploma Course	30	1 year
7	Traveler	Female	Master's degree	38	10 years
8	Traveler	Male	Vocational certificate	41	15 years
9	Traveler	Male	Bachelor's degree	29	5 years
10	Traveler	Male	Master's degree	33	10 years
11	Traveler	Male	Master's degree	30	1 year
12	Traveler	Female	Diploma Course	32	10 years
13	Traveler	Female	Diploma Course	35	5 years
14	Traveler	Male	Diploma Course	28	2 years
15	Practitioner	Female	Diploma Course	35	2 years
16	Practitioner	Male	Master's degree	38	Non-Buddhist

17	Practitioner	Female	Master's degree	41	N/A
18	Practitioner	Female	Master's degree	27	Non-Buddhist
19	Practitioner	Male	Bachelor's degree	42	5 years
20	Practitioner	Female	Bachelor's degree	31	4 years
21	Practitioner	Female	Master's degree	38	>10 years
22	Practitioner	Female	Bachelor's degree	29	Non-Buddhist
23	Practitioner	Female	Master's degree	40	Non-Buddhist
24	Practitioner	Male	Diploma Course	33	Non-Buddhist
25	Practitioner	Male	Diploma Course	31	Non-Buddhist

Note: "N/A" refers to missing information.

TABLE 2
Expectation items mentioned during the expert panel review and the pilot test

Hotel Facilities and Amenities

1. The exterior design of the hotel building should have Buddhism-inspired characteristics.
2. Have a designated room for meditation
3. Have a designated room for worshipping Buddha
4. Have a reading room
5. The hotel's facilities should reflect the Buddhist culture.
6. Simple amenities
7. Have a subtle display of Buddha statues
8. Have a Buddhism art gallery
9. Hotel furniture should reflect the Buddhist culture
10. Have a room displaying historical and cultural relics of Buddhism

Guestrooms

11. Have Buddhism-themed rooms such as a simulation of living spaces of monks
12. Decorations and colors of guest rooms conform to the Buddhist culture
13. Guest rooms should reflect the Buddhist culture without excessive decorations
14. Meditation space in each guest room
15. Supply statue of the Buddha upon guest request for worship in guest rooms
16. Provide traditional Chinese stationary in guest rooms
17. Provide sutra and Buddhism-related readings in each guest room
18. Antique furniture in guest rooms
19. Have an incense burner in each guest room
20. Replace modern bathtub with wooden barrel
21. Have closed and non-distinguishable washrooms
22. Have access to a television channel for Buddhism-related shows

23. Guest room should be equipped with stereo and Buddhism-inspired music CDs

Hotel Environment and Atmosphere

- 24. Located in a tranquil environment
- 25. The hotel location should be close to the temple.
- 26. Simple hotel environment
- 27. Elegant and calming hotel environment
- 28. Overall hotel environment should depict the Buddhism culture
- 29. Hotel is filled with light sandalwood scent
- 30. Buddhism-inspired music serves as the hotel's background music
- 31. Have Chinese calligraphy display
- 32. Have displays that demonstrate proper worship procedures
- 33. Low-key lodging style depicting the Buddhist culture

Hotel activities

- 34. Organize seminars for discussions on Buddhism
- 35. Offer course on proper worship procedure
- 36. Organize free Buddhism-related activities or shows such as Shaolin Kung Fu demonstrations, or both
- 37. Arrange meeting with Buddhism masters
- 38. Offer free meditation courses
- 39. Provide consultation services
- 40. Provide worship escort services

Hotel Services

- 41. Offer vegetarian meals in the restaurant
- 42. Name menu items based on Buddhism terms
- 43. Continuously develop new Buddhism-inspired dishes
- 44. Promote Buddhism tea culture
- 45. Have a gift shop selling Buddhism-inspired souvenirs
- 46. Cultivate healthy lifestyle by offering hotel entertainment activities such as yoga, meditation, and spa services
- 47. Free small gifts for hotel guests, such as protective talismans
- 48. Free transportation service for tour/visit to local Buddhism attractions
- 49. Create a unique Buddhism service culture

Hotel Personnel

- 50. Employees are preferably Buddhists
- 51. Employee uniforms should be Buddhism-inspired or similar
- 52. Employees should have certain knowledge of Buddhism and respect for the Buddhist lifestyle
- 53. Employees are aware of Buddhism-related matters
- 54. Employee behavior reflects Buddhism manners

Hotel Branding and Management

- 55. The hotel should have its own original story.
 - 56. The hotel has the support of the local Buddhist culture.
 - 57. The hotel should be well recognized by the Buddhism community.
 - 58. The hotel should have the expertise in interpreting, cultivating, and promoting the Buddhist culture.
 - 59. Have reputable Buddhism masters staying in the hotel
 - 60. Avoid massive promotions and utilizing rumors to promote the hotel
 - 61. Establish Buddhism-related brand image by engaging in more good deeds and by sponsoring Buddhism activities
 - 62. Establish affiliations with temples
-

TABLE 3
Demographic characteristics of respondents

	Count	Percentage	Average
Age			31.9
Gender			
Male	416	52%	
Female	384	48%	
Marital status			
Married	577	72.1%	
Single	211	26.4%	
Divorced/Separated	12	1.5%	
Educational background			
Post-graduate	79	9.9%	
College graduate	503	62.9%	
Diploma	174	21.8%	
Other	44	5.5%	
Religion			
No religion	269	33.6%	
Buddhism	510	63.8%	
Christian	26	3.3%	
Islam	3	0.4%	
Other	3	0.4%	
Have Stayed in a Buddhism-Themed Hotel			
Yes	250	31.3%	
No	550	68.8%	

TABLE 4
EFA Outputs

Measures	Coefficient α	Factor loading	Mean	Standard deviation
Reflection of Buddhism Culture in the Hotel Environment and among the Staff:	.811			
• Located in a tranquil environment		.679	4.28	.770
• Simple hotel environment		.663	4.03	.802
• Low-key lodging style depicting substantial Buddhism culture		.575	4.10	.786
• Elegant and calming hotel environment		.549	4.13	.773
• Employees should have certain knowledge on Buddhism and respect the Buddhist lifestyle		.540	4.21	.788
• Employees are aware of Buddhism-related matters		.512	4.11	.776
Ties with the Buddhism Community:	.783			
• Have reputable Buddhism masters staying in the hotel		.728	3.53	.974
• The hotel should be well-recognized by the Buddhism community		.638	3.67	.880
• Establish affiliations with temples		.593	3.94	.836
• Arrange meetings with Buddhism masters		.544	3.75	.870
Extent of Buddhism in the Hotel Design:	.813			
• Have a Buddhism art gallery		.662	4.01	.857
• The exterior design of the hotel building has Buddhist characteristics		.659	3.99	.878
• Have a room displaying historical and cultural relics of Buddhism		.640	3.82	.897
• Hotel's facilities should reflect the Buddhist culture		.613	3.85	.854
• Hotel furniture should reflect the Buddhist culture		.550	4.01	.827
Worship/Meditation Considerations:	.695			
• Have a designated room for worshipping Buddha		.559	3.96	.873
• Meditation space in each guest room		.556	3.88	.837
• Have a designated room for meditation		.551	3.92	.878

TABLE 5
CFA Outputs

Measures	Mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient α (composite reliability)	Factor loading	Critical Ratio (t-value)	p
Reflection of Buddhism Culture in the Hotel Environment and among the Staff:			.796 (.876)			
• Located in a tranquil environment	4.28	.786		.681	—	***
• Simple hotel environment	4.07	.748		.691	11.703	***
• Low-key lodging style depicting substantial Buddhism culture	4.09	.711		.685	11.615	***
• Elegant and calming hotel environment	4.09	.779		.648	11.079	***
• Employees should have certain knowledge on Buddhism and respect the Buddhist lifestyle	4.25	.716		.522	9.139	***
• Employees are aware of Buddhism-related matters	4.14	.769		.550	9.579	***
Ties with the Buddhism Community:			.746 (.791)			
• Have reputable Buddhism masters staying in the hotel	3.60	.951		.661	10.351	***
• The hotel should be well-recognized by the Buddhism community	3.69	.890		.639	10.103	***
• Establish affiliations with temples	3.97	.800		.637	10.082	***
• Arrange meetings with Buddhism masters	3.77	.895		.671	—	***
Extent of Buddhism in the Hotel Design:			.805 (.859)			
• Have a Buddhism art gallery	4.06	.765		.708	12.174	***
• The exterior design of the hotel building has Buddhist characteristics	4.03	.822		.658	11.429	***
• Have a room displaying historical and cultural relics of Buddhism	3.97	.892		.695	11.976	***
• Hotel's facilities should reflect the Buddhist culture	3.86	.873		.643	11.203	***
• Hotel furniture should reflect the Buddhist culture	4.03	.803		.676	—	***
Worship/Meditation Considerations:			.750 (.799)			
• Have a designated room for worshipping Buddha	3.92	.886		.732	—	***
• Meditation space in each guest room	3.83	.896		.670	11.817	***
• Have a designated room for meditation	3.98	.843		.728	12.699	***

***Significant at .001 level

TABLE 6
Correlations of final measurement scale

	Correlations			
	Reflection of the Buddhism Culture in the Hotel Environment and among the Staff	Ties with the Buddhism Community	Extent of Buddhism in the Hotel Design	Worship/Meditation Considerations
Reflection of the Buddhism Culture in the Hotel Environment and among the Staff	1			
Ties with the Buddhism Community	.573	1		
Extent of Buddhism in the Hotel Design	.779	.640	1	
Worship/Meditation Considerations	.654	.696	.836	1

