Chapter 10

A Comparative Study of Japanese and Taiwanese Perceptions of Hot Springs

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ABSTRACT

Taiwan and Japan has an abundance of hot springs; therefore, many people living there believe that hot springs are effective for healing numerous diseases although contemporary medicine failed to prove their medical efficacy. Researchers have expended considerable effort examining the medical aspect of these tourist destinations, but few have investigated the tourists’ perceptions of hot spring destinations. Researchers are increasingly recognizing culture as a source of variation in numerous phenomena of central importance to consumer research. Culture has a strong impact on customers’ perceptions of hot springs. This paper provides a review of several studies that have compared Japanese and Taiwanese perceptions of hot springs with a focus on balneology and consumer research, the characteristics of hot springs in Japan and Taiwan, and relevant empirical findings. Finally, this paper addresses several theoretical issues, suggests directions for future research, and discusses managerial implications.

INTRODUCTION

A recent hot spring fitness trend has increased the competition for customers among hot spring resorts and hotels. Hot springs are known for their abundant psychological and physical benefits. Bathing in a hot spring is beneficial for people to relieve stress and physical and mental fatigue. The success of a hot spring resort can be measured by (1) the number of customers using the services of the resort, (2) the frequency of customers returning to the resort, and (3) the frequency of customers recommending the resort to others (Muhtaseb, Lakiotaki, & Matsatsinis, 2012). In this paper, the authors examine whether consumers who perceive hot spring tourism as a method for improving their health and focus on its medi-
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cal efficacy rather than on the leisure aspects visit hot springs more often. Because the service economy has transitioned to an experience economy, a good user experience is one where users achieve their goals and are highly satisfied with the process (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This study therefore examined the user experience of hot springs by employing a consumer research method that addresses cultural factors.

BACKGROUND

As a volcanically active country, Japan boasts some of the best natural hot springs in the world. Japan’s famous hot spring resorts are also fuelling the interests of leisure seekers and entrepreneurs. The therapeutic benefits surrounding hot springs have been used in more recent history to incentivize hot spring visitation, and potential patrons are starting to use the scientifically-validated curative properties of specific hot spring waters as a factor in determining which springs to frequent.

As another famous place with hot springs in Asia that is located next to an oceanic trench and volcanic system in a tectonic collision zone, Taiwan has a unique environment that produces high-temperature springs with crystal-clear water that is usually both clean and safe to drink. Taiwan is highly rich in precious hot spring resources and is in fifteenth place in the world for the number of hot springs it has. In Taiwan, hot spring culture is more than a century old. Its development dates back to 1893 when a German businessperson discovered hot springs there and set up a spa (Her, 2005). The culture of hot springs started to spread across the island during the 50-year Japanese occupation. To relieve stress in life, people engaged in outdoor activities such as going to hot springs, which had the potential to become a star tourist attraction because of its power to encourage physical and mental recuperation.

Taiwan and Japan has an abundance of hot springs; therefore, many people living there believe that hot springs are effective for healing numerous diseases although contemporary medicine failed to prove their medical efficacy. Because soaking in a hot spring is said to offer multiple health benefits, hot springs attract both regular vacationers and those with physical complaints. Researchers have expended considerable effort examining the medical aspect of these tourist destinations, but few have investigated the tourists’ perceptions of hot spring destinations. This paper provides a review of several studies that have compared Japanese and Taiwanese consumer perceptions of hot springs to understand different perceptions of hot springs and their effects.

Taiwan and Japan share one common factor: both are located in East Asia on shifting tectonic plate boundaries. Hot spring tourism is one of the most popular tourism activities of foreign tourists in both these countries. Japanese tourists are chosen as the research targets not only because they have been the largest number of foreign tourists visiting Taiwan over the years, but particularly because they love hot spring tourism. Despite their geographic similarities, Taiwan’s hot spring culture is somewhat different from that of Japan, as Taiwan enjoys a wide variety of hot spring facilities, such as pools, spas, and saunas. In addition to hot springs, local restaurants also serve an array of hot spring-related cuisine and indigenous food, which brings comfort to locals and provides customers with the best travel experience. Compared to Taiwan, hot springs in Japan seem to be more professional and medicine-oriented. Hot springs in Japanese culture are very important in the daily lives of the people. Japanese scientists have been documenting the positive impact that hot springs can have on human health since the early eighteenth century. The research analyzes the differences between two countries. In tourism, there are cultural factors that appeal greatly to tourists, which include art, industry, business, agriculture, education, language, science, government, religion, food and drink, and history. With the support of the