

Entrepreneurial Characteristics of Small and Medium Hotel Owner-Managers

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Abstract: This study seeks to identify the demographic profile and entrepreneurial characteristics of small and medium hotel (SMH) owner-managers in East Peninsular Malaysia. Literature reveals that there is very limited empirical evidence on entrepreneurship studies in the tourism industry. This study attempts to document the demographic profile and entrepreneurial characteristics of small and medium hotel entrepreneurs (SMHEs) in Malaysia. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from 145 SMHEs, with 137 questionnaires deemed useable. The results convey that majority of SMHEs are middle-aged or older males, with secondary and upper levels of formal education and whose prior specialization or knowledge are unrelated to tourism. However, the low entry barrier in the industry has given them an opportunity to be part of the industry. Majority of these SMHEs started operations after the 1997 financial crisis. Their demographic profile does not serve a significant factor in their involvement in the business; however, their self-confidence and highly independent personalities could have stimulated their business interest and aided their survival in the industry.

Key words: Tourism industry • Small and medium hotel entrepreneurs (SMHEs) • Demographic profile
• entrepreneurial characteristics

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian government started to become seriously involved in tourism with the establishment of the Tourism Development Corporation (TDC) under a Parliament Act that was promulgated on 10 August 1972. Since then, the tourism industry has contributed significantly to the income of the country. In East Peninsular Malaysia, three popular states serve as tourism hubs. Kelantan is a popular shopping location for items such as gold and silver *songket*, *batik*, *sarong* and fine silverware. It also has duty-free zones in Pangkalan Kubur and Rantau Panjang. Another tourist destination, Terengganu, has many historical and recreational attractions, such as the Islamic Civilization Park and interesting islands such as Redang, Perhentian and Kapas. Pahang, the third state, has diverse tourism products and offers many interesting destinations that promote its natural beauty, such as breathtaking beaches, lakes, national parks and hillsides. Tioman Island, which is located in Pahang, is among the ten most beautiful islands in the world.

In line with the growth of the tourism industry, the hotel sector has been identified as a very important segment contributing to this growth. Based on tourist arrivals from 2006 to 2009, the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang have been receiving a large number of foreign and local visitors compared to previous years. The increment for the three-year period is 45.3%. This has influenced the increasing number of tourism-related players in the industry. As of 2009, the registered number of hotels was 81 for Kelantan, 157 in Terengganu and 285 in Pahang [1].

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have been acknowledged as important contributors to the development of the tourism industry. Similar to other developing countries, the proportion of small and medium hotels (SMHs) in this industry is believed to be approximately 70% of the total number of hotels in Malaysia. SMHs can be defined as hotels with a 3-star and below rating, with a 50-room and below accommodation. These include budget hotels, motels, backpacker inns and home-stay businesses. Saaid [2] anticipates that there will be growth in the hospitality business for one- to two-star

and budget hotels because more tourists are expected to demand lower-star accommodations and budget hotels.

Many studies have been conducted on different segments of SMEs in the tourism industry, including constrained growth of the tourism sector [3], environmental goals of rural family-owned/-operated tourism [4], small business performance [5], financial performance [6], leadership and motivation behavior [7] and family businesses [8]. An intensive literature review reveals that there have been very few studies on tourism entrepreneurship and small businesses in the tourism industry [9, 10]. One of the significant results from Dewhurst and Horobin [9] indicates that entrepreneurs are not motivated by the desire to maximize economic gain. They often operate businesses with low levels of employment and their managerial decisions are often based on highly personalized criteria. As such, entrepreneurs in SMH industries might possess lower levels of entrepreneurial characteristics compared to other industries. Thus, the few authors in the industry who have attempted to identify the entrepreneur (as being different from “small business owner” or “ordinary manager”) are influenced predominantly by an economic conceptualization of entrepreneurship as characterized by innovation, creativity, risk taking, leadership and vision.

The above scenario also is not exceptional for tourism research and development in Malaysia. A majority of studies on entrepreneurship and SMEs have been conducted in different sectors; however, the figure is negligible for SMEs in the hotel sector. To fill this knowledge gap, this study seeks to identify the demographic profile and entrepreneurial characteristics of SMHES in East Peninsular Malaysia. This paper discusses previous studies on the demographic profile of tourism entrepreneurs and their characteristics, after which the methodology, analysis, discussion and conclusions are presented.

Literature Review: Tourism is traditionally an industry of small- and medium-sized enterprises. Clearly, the great majority of tourist facilities are run by small- and medium-sized businesses [11-14]. A similar pattern is expected to appear in European countries [14], where most of small tourism and hospitality businesses are run by owner-operators and their families [15].

Along with studies on SMEs, many researchers are looking into the demographic profile of SME owners/managers. The most popular components of the profile of owners/managers are age and sex [15, 16, 17, 6], education [18, 19, 6], work experience [15, 16] and marital status [20]. The dominant age of small business owners/managers is middle age and older (i.e., 25 to 50 [19], 30 to 45 [17] and 45 and older [16, 20]). Most of these managers are reported to be married [20].

Generally, small firms are owned and managed by men [21, 19], except in the findings of Getz and Carlsen [20]. According to Ahmad [17], male owners/managers dominate the small tourism industry (81.1%). This reflects the influence of traditional culture, where males enjoy more privileges than females and the male normally acts as the head of the family and as the decision maker.

Findings on the formal educational level of the owners/managers are inconsistent. In Australia, respondents with university education comprise only 34% [20] or 31.8% [6] of the total. However, Glancey and Pettigrew [18] find that there is an equal balance between respondents with secondary education and those with university-level education in Scotland. In the United Kingdom (UK) and Turkey, the percentage of respondents with tertiary education is higher: 70% [16] and more than 50% [19], respectively. In Turkey, only 30% of the respondents have received formal tourism and hotel-management education [19].

Due to the ease of entry to this industry, many owners/managers are reported to have various types of occupation and experience prior to their venture into the sector [15, 16]. In New Zealand, previous job experience in tourism and hospitality is not particularly represented; the most common experiences are related to farming, teaching, marketing and construction [15]. In the UK, approximately one-third of owners/managers have prior working experience in the tourism and hospitality industry, whereas others are from agriculture, retail, education and other sectors [16].

According to Dewhurst *et al.* [22], there are two contradicting ideas on the need for training in the hotel sector. One camp suggests that owners/managers do not need training because they know their business better than anyone else. In contrast, the other camp recognizes the existence of very specific gaps in knowledge. A study by Schroeder [23] reports low levels of involvement in training or development programs related to the tourism business. Most of the respondents agree that they have the required knowledge level with their ability to handle their current operations.

According to Glancey and Pettigrew [18], motivations for founding the business fall into two broad groups: 1) those that reflect the “push” factors, such as redundancy and job insecurity and the need for supplementary income; and 2) those that reflect the “pull” factors, such as the desire to be his/her own boss, high levels of profit, spotting a business opportunity, or retirement. In Australia, Bransgrove and King [24] find that the top goals of owners of small tourism businesses, in both urban and rural settings, are challenge or stimulus, business opportunity, lifestyle and long-term financial gain. According to Getz and Carlsen [20], 34% of the respondents suggest that an appealing lifestyle is the major reason for entering into the business, followed by business opportunities and investments. Glancey and Pettigrew [18] find that the behavior of majority of the samples (65%) adheres to the “pull” factors. This provides evidence categorizing them as opportunistic entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship has been described by Bygrave [25, pp: 257] as “someone who perceives an opportunity and creates an organization to pursue it.” Literature on entrepreneurship and small business argues over the overlap between entrepreneurs and small business owners. Scholars define entrepreneurs in relation to various characteristics [26] that reflect business growth orientation [27]. In a study by Gilmore [28], small firm owners/managers show their reluctance to take further risks after the business has grown to the ideal size. They identify risky situations to avoid as being related to business growth factors such as cash flow, company size, uncertainty in a new market and confidence in the capacity of the staff in relation to responsibilities. Many researchers agree that small business owners do not view organizational growth as one of their principal objectives [29, 30]. Reijonan [31] finds that small business owners are not oriented towards growth in terms of the increase in turnover and employment; rather, they prefer to keep their business from developing [32, 33] and stay within the fence [34].

Many studies have been conducted on specific entrepreneurial traits and personality characteristics conducted in different industries. These traits include the need for achievement [35-38], risk taking [35, 39, 40], independence [41], innovation [42], self-confidence [43, 44] and the ability to learn from failure [45]. In general, few researchers find entrepreneurs in the tourism industry to be innovative and willing to engage in risk-laden activities [46], have high internal locus of control, high achievement motivation and autonomy [47], independence and self-reliance [23].

Methodology

Data Collection: This section discusses in detail the data collection, questionnaire development and type of analysis employed in this study. This study is a descriptive study using quantitative approach for data collection. The list of SMHEs was gathered from various sources, such as the Internet, the 2007 Travel Guide Book published by the Ministry of Tourism of Malaysia and pamphlets, as well as by observations by the researcher during the conduction of the field survey. A complete list of SMHEs operating in urban, coastal and island settings was compiled. The pilot study was carried out before the questionnaires were distributed to the respondents. Six respondents were selected for the pilot tests, which were conducted on owner-managers who have been involved extensively in the tourism industry.

Participants were selected using a set of criteria wherein no sampling was conducted. The criteria were as follows: 1) respondents must be small and medium hotel owner-managers; 2) their small and medium hotels must be categorized as SMEs (i.e., 3-star category); and 3) the hotels must be owned and managed by individuals and operated independently.

For the purpose of this research, the quantitative method, using a personally administered questionnaire, was chosen. The respondents were required to complete the questionnaire themselves [48]. The personally administered questionnaire was attached to an introduction letter and was complemented with face-to-face interviews using a set of questionnaires in the form of a booklet. The self-administered questionnaire approach was adopted because of several advantages. The main advantage is having the researcher or a member of the research team collect all completed responses within a short period. Any doubt that the respondents might have on any questions could be clarified on the spot.

Questionnaire Development: The questionnaire dealt with the profile and entrepreneurial characteristics of the respondent. Questions on entrepreneurial characteristics were based on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). A total of 145 questionnaires were distributed; however, only 137 were completed and used for further analysis. This gave a total response rate of 94%.

Data Analysis: Data obtained from the personally administered questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 12)

Table 1: Profile of Respondents in Peninsular Malaysia

Description	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Position of respondent	- Owner/general manager	54	39.4
	- Manager/hotel executive	61	44.6
	- Assistant manager	11	8.0
	- Others	11	8.0
Gender	- Male	83	60.6
	- Female	54	39.4
Ethnicity	- Malay	113	82.5
	- Chinese	19	13.8
	- India	3	2.2
	-Others	2	1.5
Age	- <29	30	21.9
	- 30–39	22	16.1
	- 40–49	47	34.3
	- 50–59	16	11.7
	- >60	22	16.0
Level of education	- First degree	24	17.5
	- Diploma	22	16.2
	- Certificate	4	2.9
	- Secondary school	68	49.6
	- Primary school	15	10.9
	- Others	4	2.9
Area of specialization	- Management/Administration/ Finance/Accounting/Business	17	12.4
	- Hotel/Tourism/Hospitality	14	10.2
	- Others/Not related	106	77.4
Working experience	- Hotel management	15	10.9
	- Restaurant management	6	4.5
	- Management/Administration/ Marketing	33	24.1
	- Craftsmanship/construction	6	4.4
	- Others	77	56.1
Years of managing the business	- 1976–1986	9	6.6
	- 1987–1997	24	17.5
	- 1998–2008	104	75.9
Other sources of income	- Having different businesses	66	48.2
	-Working with the government	18	13.1
	-Pensioner	53	38.7
	-Not related		
Attended any course before starting business	- Yes	45	32.8
	- No	92	67.2
Attended any course after starting business	- Yes	44	32.1
	- No	93	67.9
Important goal for starting the business	- To be my own boss	27	19.7
	- To keep my family together	28	20.4
	- To keep this property in the family	49	35.8
	- To live in the right environment	31	22.6
	- To support my/our leisure interest	31	22.6
	- To enjoy a good lifestyle	32	23.4
	- To make a lot of money	39	28.5
	- To gain prestige by operating a business	33	24.1
	- To meet interesting people	29	21.2
	- To provide a retirement income	30	21.9
	- To provide me with challenge	43	31.4
	- To allow me to become financially independent	49	35.8

because it is the most essential package for conducting analysis, manipulating data, generating tables and graphs and summarizing data. The analysis of the data used the frequency and non-parametric test.

Analysis: This section discusses the result of the analysis. The summary profile summary of respondents is presented in Table 1. The majority of the respondents are managers or hotel executives (61 or 44.6%) and owners or general managers (54 or 39.4%). This industry is monopolized by males; 83 (60.6%) of the respondents were male and 54 (39.4%) were female. Many of the respondents were Malay (113, or 82.5%), 19 (13.8%) were Chinese and only 5 (3.7%) were from other ethnic groups. In terms of age, most of the hotel operators in this sector (47, or 34.3%) were in the age category of 40–49 years old and below 29 years old (30, or 21.9%).

In terms of level of formal education, majority (68, or 49.6%) had completed secondary level of education, approximately 24 (17.5%) hold first degrees and 22 (16.2%) have a diploma. Interestingly, 92 (67.2%) of the respondents did not have any specialization related to tourism and only 14 (10.2%) had specialization in hotel, tourism, or hospitality management. In terms of work experience, 77 (56.1%) did not have any related experience when they started the business, whereas another 54 (39.5%) had work experience in management, administration, or marketing and hotel management.

Majority (104, or 75.9%) started their business after the economic crises (i.e., during the period of 1998–2008), 24 (17.5%) started their business between 1987 and 1997 and only 9 (6.6%) started their business during 1976–1986. Many (84, or 61.3%) had more than one source of income, such as engaging in different businesses. Nearly none had attended any course before or after starting the business; 92 (67.2%) did not attend any courses before starting the business and 93 (67.9%) did not attend any courses after starting the business. For those who attended any courses, the frequency of attendance was zero to three times per year.

When asked their motivations for in getting started in this business, respondents had varied answers. Many of the respondents (49, or 35.8%) indicated that their primary reasons were to keep the property in the family and to become financially independent. Other important reasons were the challenge the task provided, to make a lot of money, to gain prestige by operating a business, to enjoy a good lifestyle and to live in the right environment and to support the leisure interest of the respondents.

Table 2: Non-Parametric Test on the Entrepreneurial Characteristics of SMHEs

Entrepreneurial Characteristic	Mean Rank	Rank
Self-confident	3.9	1
Independent	3.8	2
Ability to learn from failure	3.7	3
Need to achieve as motivation	3.4	4
Risk-taking propensity	3.2	5
Innovativeness	3.2	6

Chi square: 74.94; Assymp Sig: 0.000

Table 2 shows the ranking of entrepreneurial characteristics of the respondents. Based on the test conducted, the most important characteristics were self-confidence, independence, the ability to learn from failure and the need to achieve as motivation. The mean ranks for the top four variables were 3.9, 3.8, 3.7 and 3.4, respectively.

DISCUSSION

Based on the result of quantitative research, this study provides a useful exploration on SMHEs in the Malaysian tourism industry. From the demographic background, the majority of the SMHEs in East Peninsular Malaysia are male, Malays and have various levels of education.

From the analysis, most of the respondents are from top management level. Several of the respondents are managers or hotel executives (44.6%), whereas 39.4% are owners or general managers. This result contrasts with the study of Getz and Carlsen [20], which finds that more than 96% of their respondents are owners of tourism businesses and the remaining respondents are managers. In another example in Malaysia, according to Ahmad [17], 59.5% of small hotels are owned and managed by the same person, with the remainder operated by managers.

According to Getz and Carlsen, [20] and Szivas, [16], the dominant age of owner-managers of small businesses in the tourism business was middle-aged. This situation is similar in Malaysia, where majority of the respondents involved in this business are in the age category of 40–49 years old. However, this result contrasts with Ahmad [17]. Most studies, albeit not all, agree that age has an influence on the survival of the business. Middle age is a suitable age to carry out a hotel business because owners-managers have sufficient capital and are more mature to deal with the business.

As for the education level, most of the respondents agreed that education is not an important issue to enter this business. Majority of the owners-managers who run their businesses had completed only secondary level education (49.6%). This finding supports the view of Sharma and Upneja [6] who find that, in Tanzania, 36.4% of owner-managers did not have industry training or education beyond basic schooling. Different results can be expected from developed countries; for example, in the UK, most owner-managers (70%) have a high level of education. This finding contrasts with past literature [16]. Notably, 86% of the respondents did not have any specialization related to the tourism industry. In addition, many of them gained their knowledge through their interactions with tourists who stayed in their hotels.

Due to the ease of entry to this industry, many owner-managers are reported to have had various types of occupation and experience prior to venturing into this sector [15, 16]. According to Szivas [16], approximately one-third of owner-managers in the UK have had working experience in the tourism and hospitality industry, whereas others are from agriculture, retail, education and other sectors. This contrasts with the present study where 98.1% did not have any hotel-related experience when they started the business and 35% had working experience in management, administration, or marketing and hotel management. Education, specialization and working experience are neither important nor compulsory. This findings support studies of Quinn *et al.* [49], Lerner and Haber [35] and Szivas [16], who mention that specific qualifications and professional requirements related to the sector are necessary but not compulsory.

Majority of hotel operators started to manage their operations after the 1997/1998 economic recession. This could be due to the opportunities and extensive promotion given by the government to promote the involvement of the private sector in this industry [50]. As previous occupation and experience are not compulsory requirements to enter the tourism and hospitality businesses, owners-managers learn the needed skills through on-the-job training [16]. This research found that 67.2% of owner-managers did not attend any course before entering the business and 67.9% attended courses only after entering the business. Most of the respondents agreed on the importance of on-the-job training. These findings support the study of Dewhurst *et al.* [22], which suggests that entrepreneurs do not need training as a small business and that they know their business better than anyone else. Even though

on-the-job training is widely practiced in hotels and restaurants, there is inconclusive evidence to suggest that such efforts yield successful results [51, 52].

The most important reason for these owner-managers to start a business was to keep their property within the family and to become financially independent. The involvement of the owner-managers in the tourism industry may be based on the chances that they had. Possibly, their early involvement in the industry might have stimulated their interest to seriously delve into the tourism industry. Their interest may have followed after they had been involved actively in the industry. Other reasons were to the challenge and to make a lot of money. These results are in contrast with the study of Getz and Carlsen [20], which finds the first goal for owners/managers to become involved in this business is to have challenges and meet people. The second goal is the opportunity to make money.

Intensive literature review reveals that there have been very few studies on tourism entrepreneurship and small businesses in the tourism industry [9, 10]. This present study shows that the most important entrepreneurial characteristics are self-confidence, independence and having the ability to learn from failure. Self-confidence and independence can be considered as push factors for entrepreneurs to a start business. Entrepreneurs need to believe in their capabilities and resources before venturing into business. Being independent is related to the desire to implement new ideas or proposals. In this industry, all respondents depend on their own creativity to develop their businesses and to make their own mark in the industry.

This study also provides support for previous studies on the existence of a high number of small business owners as compared with the number of real entrepreneurs in the tourism sector [53]. Based on their answers on their motivation in starting the business, majority of respondents did not target profit and growth as their main motivations, which supports the study by Dewhurst and Horobin [9]. As small business owners, they opened and managed small-sized businesses due to their limited resources. They tended to keep their business to a size that is controllable and manageable. However, a small number of these owners-managers, who could be referred to as “entrepreneurs,” are very determined, independent, have higher locus of control and exhibit moderate risk-taking behavior. Many target business growth, which is subject to their capabilities, especially in terms of finance.

CONCLUSIONS

The above results document the entrepreneurial characteristics of SMHEs in East Peninsular Malaysia. The focus of this study is only on the demographic profile and entrepreneurial characteristics of SMHEs. In terms of demographic profile, most of the small and medium hotels are operated by the male owner-managers with the average age of 40–49 years old and with very low levels of formal education. They started joining the industry after the 1997/1998 economic recession with limited knowledge and training related to the industry. They had various types of occupation and experience prior to joining the industry and were motivated by keeping their property and to provide an income for the family. The insignificance of certain important demographic factors of owner-managers, such as knowledge, experience and training, can explain the dominance of SMEs in the industry. The low entry barrier provides a minimal obstacle for individuals to enter the industry.

Even education and knowledge have been proven unimportant for SMHEs in the tourism sector; however, the SMHEs could have gained their maturity from cumulative years of working experience in the industry. For some respondents, their previous working experience in managerial or supervisory level could have enhanced their leadership and management skills. However, this study also highlights the most important positive characteristics of self-confidence, independence and the ability to learn from failure as significant factors for their business ventures and success. These characteristics could have strengthened their interests despite their very minimal knowledge about the industry.

Notably, most of the respondents started managing the businesses between 1998 and 2008. Perhaps, some of the premises had already been established for quite some time before the industry became popular, after gaining attention from the government after 1980s. Today, most of these SMHEs have survived for more than 10 years in the industry with less than 50 rooms. However, due to their limited resources, majority of owners/managers have tended to remain small to suit their capabilities. Since their survival is very much dependent on destination competitiveness, this research calls for the government to continuously promote and upgrade our tourist attractions to ensure the sustainability of these small and medium accommodation businesses.

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