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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ECO-FRIENDLY CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: INSIGHTS FROM TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY SECTOR OF CENTRAL KAZAKHSTAN

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Current trends in product customization and service personalization leads to detailed analysis of consumer needs, this in turn is very important for creating unique and suitable offerings by targeting right consumer segments. The scope of the research covers Central Kazakhstan and Ulytau region in particular. This empirical research is based on the quantitative research method and applies a survey data collection technique. The self-administered questionnaires were distributed among potential consumers relying on a stratified random sample technique. The gender specific differences in consumer behavior have been tested by the application of a T-test analysis using the SPSS.22 analytical software. The findings show that there is a significant difference between male and female consumers depending on gender in their preferences regarding eco-friendly tourism and hospitality services, and each segment requires an individual marketing approach.

Key words: *consumer behavior, gender differences, eco-friendly tourism, hospitality services, Central Kazakhstan.*

Introduction

This multidisciplinary research paper investigates gender-specific consumer behavior in Tourism and Hospitality Industry. Since the eco-friendly tourism and hospitality services require a more focused marketing approach the study aims to determine whether the preferences of male and female consumer segments differ depending on gender. Gender is defined as an essential socio-demographic variable affecting tourist behavior.

Gender is widely accepted as a functional parameter in market segmentation and used as a main criterion describing consumer identity [1; 2]. Prior research proved the existence of gender differences in hospitality and tourism behavior [3; 4]. For instance, women have an ethical consumer behavior and they are more interested in eco-friendly products or services than men [5]. Additionally, there is a tendency showing an increased importance of female consumers in consumption process, especially in travel and recreation sectors [6; 7]. Consequently, gender marketing tends to respond to the demand of women segments, since they demonstrate higher loyalty to products or services while being satisfied [8]. Current trends in product customization and service personalization leads to detailed analysis of consumer needs, this in turn is very important for creating unique and suitable offerings by targeting right consumer segments. In particular, tourism and hospitality marketers need to deeply understand behavioral patterns and individual preferences of existing customers as well as potential consumers.

Within the last decades the popularity and importance of eco-friendly tourism forms has been significantly increased in Kazakhstan. Central Kazakhstan and Ulytau region in particular has been defined as a priority destination in ecotourism development [9]. Tourism experts and practitioners indicate that it happened due to the strategic measures on unleashing the potential of domestic tourism resources. Especially, rural and countryside areas are becoming the leader in attracting foreign and domestic tourists or visitors. The number of guesthouses and eco-accommodations, mainly targeting short-term holiday visitors, has been also increased in countryside zones. Since the eco-friendly tourism is considered as a specific form of alternative tourism opposite to mass tourism, it is characterized by small-sized categories of consumers (for instance, families, group of friends or couples with special interests) from the demand side and small-scale nature-based accommodations from the supply side. Additionally, eco-friendly tourism requires specific and complex marketing strategies, since it targets consumers with individual needs exposed by more ethical and responsible behavior, which is usually effected by gender.

In this regard, the current study explores gender specific consumer behavior by investigating the ecotourism market of Central Kazakhstan on an example of the Ulytau region, which has been recently

started to be developed and promoted as the national historical, cultural and eco-tourism destination. On the other hand, a considerable part of gender related tourism and hospitality research has predominantly focused on feminine aspects [10] and comprehensive comparative studies on gender differences remained insufficient. Consequently, this research addresses a practical as well as contextual gap and generates empirical marketing data. This empirical research is based on the quantitative research method and applies a survey data collection technique. The gender specific differences in consumer behavior have been tested by the application of a T-test analysis.

Literature Review

Consumer behavior is considered as an indicator of economic well-being of individuals. Being an efficient form of marketing investigations it is widely used by marketers as an instrument of forecasting consumer preferences, attitudes and choices. Studying and understanding consumer behavior is significantly important in developing new products and services, modifying its characteristics and adopting customer-oriented strategies according to the individual needs and preferences of consumers. Consumer behavior is usually interpreted by gender differences owing to its practical importance and accuracy in describing specific features of individuals [11]. Understanding the role of tourism product or service involvement in the consumption process by gender characteristics is theoretically and practically important to know whether male and female consumers are inherently different in their individual preferences and behaviors [12], which is strategically important in finding right selling approaches. Gender specific behavioral traits usually show consumers' predispositions towards certain products and services, and therefore are used as an integral part of a targeting strategy of hospitality and tourism companies [13].

Gender perspectives due to its practical and theoretical importance have received an increasing attention in a range of different disciplines [14] including "natural resources management" [15], "education" [16], "management" [17], "marketing" [18], "entrepreneurship" [19], hospitality and tourism. Despite the practical importance of gender based segmentation in marketing and a growing number of studies on environmentally friendly vacation and travels in the international literature, there has been little research on gender specific consumer behavior in the field of ecotourism [20; 21; 22], especially in the Kazakhstani context. Central Kazakhstan in general and Ulytau region in particular has been gaining a strategic importance as an attractive tourism destination represented mainly by rich historical and nature resources. A community based ecotourism in Ulytau has recently been promoted as a one of the priority tourism products, which in turn requires extensive knowledge about the domestic consumer market.

According to Junric, Cornwell and Mather [23] the process of creating an accurate profile of a potential eco-tourist requires an understanding of unique consumer interests and preferences. In this regard, gender is widely used as one of the most representative and precise indicators, since the gender differences affect decision making and destination choice [24]. Prior research indicates that male and female tourists have different expectations and attitudes towards tourism products [25]. The majority of previous studies indicate that female consumers have higher levels of eco-friendly consumption intention [26], while male consumers are more willing to pay premium prices for ecotourism products [27]. Moreover, women are considered to be more ecologically conscious, socially responsible [28] and more frequently engaged in eco-friendly consumption [29]. Female consumers usually have higher expectations and perceptions regarding tourism services as compared to male [10]. Women tend to demonstrate higher level of loyalty to an individual service provider than men. In contrast, male consumers are more concerned about collective service provision and tend to be more loyal to companies rather than to individual service providers [30]. Marketing studies indicate that female consumers are more prone to impulse buying [31], which means that women travelers being affected by different experiential tourism products tend to consume extra services and supplementary offerings. Nevertheless, the recent research conducted on Millennials reflects on more pronounced price consciousness of women consumers [32].

Studies previously conducted in the field of nature-based tourism show that female travelers prefer passive recreational activities opposite to male counterparts valuing active and extreme nature-based activities [33]. Number of studies on eco-friendly accommodation preferences conducted from gender perspectives is relatively limited; however existing studies indicate that women and men have different preferences regarding accommodation and comfort conditions [6]. Finding of prior research conducted in

the field of tourism and hospitality additionally indicate that consumers differ in their preferences towards rural tourism products and services depending on demographic segmentation parameters such as gender, age and living area [34]. For instance, findings of prior research showed that female travelers had been more active in consumption of adventure tours than male counterparts [35]. Prior research have examined and observed gender differences in a number of different multidisciplinary domains and it is generally explained as a result of different gender-specific preferences [36]. Consequently we have hypothesized that there are differences in individual eco-tourism related preferences between men and women segments. Based on the literature review the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant difference in preferences between male and female consumers towards eco-friendly accommodations and lodgings.

H2: There is a significant difference in preferences between male and female consumers towards eco-friendly tourism activities.

There is the lack of gender related studies in the field of hospitality and tourism in the setting of Central Kazakhstan, and Ulytau region in particular. As a response to the existing theoretical and practical gap this research attempts to provide empirical evidences and fresh data on eco-friendly consumer behavior on an example of a domestic travel market.

Methodology

The study has been designed as an empirical quantitative survey-based research with the application of the territorial stratified random sampling technique. The survey enables gathering extensive and comprehensive data from potential target audiences. The data has been collected from settlements (Zhezkazgan, Satpaev, Zhezdi) closely located to Ulytau region. The self-administered questionnaires have been randomly distributed among potential consumers. In total 280 correctly completed questionnaires have been used for further analysis out of 350 distributed with an overall response rate of 80 %. Questions indicating consumer preferences have been measured by 5-points Likert scale ranged from 1 – “strongly disagree” to 5 – “strongly agree”. The data have been analyzed by the SPSS.22 analytical software and tested for reliability. The results of the test showed $\alpha = 0.7$ Cronbach alpha the internal consistency coefficient, which justified the reliability of data. Differences between groups have been examined by Independent Samples T-test.

Results and Discussion

Nowadays the global eco-tourism market is represented by a wide variety of accommodations and lodgings. Environmentally friendly accommodations are differentiated by the scale, location and unique architectural characteristics. In this study we selected the most popular forms of eco-friendly accommodations by analyzing current trends in tourism and hospitality industry. We examined individual preferences of male and female consumers regarding 5 types of eco-accommodations including eco hotels, tree houses, ethnic yurta lodgings, bungalows and eco bubble lodgings. An Independent Samples T-test was used to explore the differences between male and female segments.

Results of the T-test indicate that differences are founded in variables representing eco-friendly accommodations such as Eco Hotel ($p=0,016^*$), Tree House ($p=0,000^*$), Yurta ($p=0,006^*$) and Bungalow ($p=0,043^*$). Findings indicate that there is a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ between male and female segments in their preferences towards 4 types of eco-accommodations. According to the results male travelers more prefer unusual and exotic types of eco-friendly accommodations such as tree house (Mean=1,92*) or bungalow (Mean=1,99*) as compared to females (Mean=1,67; Mean=1,93), which can be explained by relatively higher levels of risk taking among men. On the other hand, male consumers tend to prefer classical eco hotels (Mean_(male) = 1,80*; Mean_(female) = 1,65), while female (Mean_(male) = 1,65*; Mean_(female) = 1,81) consumers are more willing to stay at ethnic eco-lodgings such as yurta houses (See Table 1). These findings are in line with the prior research indicating strong cultural motivations of women [37]. Mieczkowski [38] also found that female travelers are more concerned about cultural attributes of tourism destinations. In this case it can be concluded that the first research hypothesis has been confirmed and the current study advances existing literature in the realm of tourism consumer behavior.

Table 1 – T-test on preferences of males and females towards different types of eco-accommodations

Independent Samples T-test										
Types of Eco-Accommodations		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Eco Hotel	Equal variances assumed	30,954	,000	2,428	278	,016*	,145	,060	,027	,262
	Not Equal variances			2,594	183,865	,010	,145	,056	,035	,255
Tree House	Equal variances assumed	147,060	,000	4,496	278	,000*	,248	,055	,140	,357
	Not Equal variances			5,475	251,401	,000	,248	,045	,159	,338
Yurta House	Equal variances assumed	23,921	,000	-2,747	278	,006*	-,151	,055	-,260	-,043
	Not Equal variances			-2,549	134,097	,012	-,151	,059	-,269	-,034
Bungalow	Equal variances assumed	18,552	,000	2,035	278	,043*	,060	,029	,002	,117
	Not Equal variances			2,712	277,974	,007	,060	,022	,016	,103
Eco Bubble Lodging	Equal variances assumed	,336	,563	,289	278	,773	,009	,029	-,050	,067
	Not Equal variances			,297	168,335	,767	,009	,029	-,048	,065
Group Statistics										
Types of Eco-Accommodations		Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean			
Eco Hotel		male		117	1,80*	,404	,044			
		female		163	1,65	,477	,034			
Tree House		male		117	1,92*	,278	,030			
		female		163	1,67	,472	,034			
Yurta House		male		117	1,65	,478	,052			
		female		163	1,81*	,396	,028			
Bungalow		male		117	1,99*	,109	,012			
		female		163	1,93	,258	,018			
Eco Bubble Lodging		male		117	1,95	,214	,023			
		female		163	1,94	,231	,016			

Additionally, the results showed that the second research hypothesis was also supported indicating the differences in preferences between male and female consumers. Findings suggest that men are more interested in active ecotourism forms than women, for instance, male prefer horse riding (Mean_(male) = 3,85*; Mean_(female) = 3,19) and snorkeling (Mean_(male) = 3,33*; Mean_(female) = 2,32) activities, while female travelers tend to participate in pick-your-own activities (Mean_(male) = 1,89*; Mean_(female) = 2,34*). These findings support and complement research evidences provided in the literature review [33]. For instance, Omar et al. previously revealed that male travelers are tend to consume sport and adventure related tourism experiences during their vacations[37]. Surprisingly, research findings show that male travelers (Mean=3,91*) are more willing to be involved in sustainable cooking activities (See Table 2) in contrast to female tourists (Mean=3,63).

As it has been showed by the research results gender-specific market segments could be effectively targeted and served with focused customer-oriented strategies, which in turns requires comprehensive and detailed knowledge about individual needs and wants of clients. Companies and individual tourism service providers initiating eco-friendly business practices are recommended to implement a more gender-specific approach to marketing their offerings and products. Especially, it would be very important for emerging domestic tourism destinations such as Ulytau.

Table 2 - T-test on preferences of males and females towards different types of eco-friendly tourism activities

Independent Samples T-test		
Types of Eco-Friendly Tourism Activities	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pick-your-own activities	Equal variances assumed	,007	,931	-3,296	278	,001*	-,455	,138	-,726	-,183
	Equal variances not assumed			-3,268	242,060	,001	-,455	,139	-,729	-,181
Horse riding	Equal variances assumed	,052	,820	4,795	278	,000*	,665	,139	,392	,937
	Equal variances not assumed			4,819	254,332	,000	,665	,138	,393	,936
Snorkeling	Equal variances assumed	7,006	,009	6,309	278	,000*	1,014	,161	,698	1,331
	Equal variances not assumed			6,134	222,738	,000	1,014	,165	,688	1,340
Biking	Equal variances assumed	1,241	,266	-,545	278	,587	-,086	,157	-,396	,224
	Equal variances not assumed			-,538	239,453	,591	-,086	,159	-,399	,228
Hiking	Equal variances assumed	,000	,991	1,258	278	,209	,191	,152	-,108	,490
	Equal variances not assumed			1,250	244,083	,212	,191	,153	-,110	,493
Sustainable cooking	Equal variances assumed	,029	,865	2,004	278	,046*	,280	,140	,005	,555
	Equal variances not assumed			1,994	245,426	,047	,280	,141	,003	,557

Group Statistics

Types of Eco-Accommodations	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pick-your-own activities	male	117	1,89	1,173	,108
	female	163	2,34*	1,113	,087
Horse riding	male	117	3,85*	1,124	,104
	female	163	3,19	1,158	,091
Snorkeling	male	117	3,33*	1,456	,135
	female	163	2,32	1,226	,096
Biking	male	117	2,72	1,351	,125
	female	163	2,80	1,261	,099
Hiking	male	117	3,03	1,283	,119
	female	163	2,83	1,234	,097
Sustainable cooking	male	117	3,91*	1,174	,109
	female	163	3,63	1,139	,089

Conclusion

Gender differentiation is an integral part of marketing strategies broadly used in almost all sectors of consumer-focused industries. Since female and male segments have strongly pronounced differences in their preferences and buying behavior, customer-oriented eco-tourism products and services should be clearly designed according to the specific nature and identity of individuals. Investigating tourism behavior through the prism of gender will help better design customer-oriented eco-friendly tourism products and efficient marketing policies targeting international visitors. In this respect, the finding of this study may help domestic tourism service providers, destination planners and service marketing managers to develop efficient strategies adapted to male and female visitors and consequently increase guest satisfaction rates. Marketing each gender groups individually through a personalization approach helps to increase not only overall sales, but also the volume of supplementary products and services sold, which is very important for tourism and hospitality sectors. At the same time, by understanding the preferences and buying behaviour of male and female segments domestic tourism service providers and hotel owners would be able to gain a competitive advantage by maximizing consumer value which in turn will lead to positive corporate image and increased business performance.

Nowadays the state government is actively working on the way of developing tourism infrastructure in the Ulytau region, especially focusing on ethnic, cultural and ecological tourism as priority directions. Developing the eco-tourism in the region especially in remote zones is significantly

important in terms of socio-economic development of rural areas. Eco-tourism contributes to rural development by improving the well-being of rural communities, since it is considered as an alternative source of income. Owing to the reach natural resources and historical significance the Ulytau region is going to be promoted as an attractive tourism destination of Central Asia. According to local experts the Ulytau ethno-cultural complex has becoming a major center of cultural and educational, historical-geographical, ethnic and ecological tourism, which is able to attract both local and international travelers. The search for novelty is defined by international travel experts as the most influential factors when choosing foreign tourism destinations. In this respect the Ulytau region has a strong potential in terms of attracting international tourists seeking for a novelty and new tourism experiences, and therefore it can be promoted as an unexplored Central Asian nomadic destination with different historical and cultural background and unique leisure resources. This in turn, requires strategic measures on creating and promoting positive international image of the destination and efficient marketing campaign supported by government and tourism policy makers.

In this regard, the current study addresses relevant and timely topic and generates empirical data that facilitates the decision making process in marketing eco-friendly tourism products of the Ulytau region. Additionally, research findings suggest industrial recommendations addressed to tourism, hospitality and marketing practitioners operating in the domestic tourism sector and provide detailed information about potential consumer segments presented form a gender perspective. Through its interdisciplinary focus initiating theoretical and practical implications from gender, marketing, consumer behavior, tourism and hospitality perspectives the study addresses research gaps both in Kazakhstani and Central Asian contexts.

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Экологиялық жауапкершілікке негізделген тұтынушы мінез-құлқындағы гендерлік айырмашылықтар: Орталық Қазақстанның туризм және қонақжайлылық қызметтері саласындағы зерттеу

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Өнімдерді жеке тұтынушыға бейімдеу және қызметтерді жеке клиенттер талғамына сай түрлендірудің қазіргі тенденциялары тұтынушылар қажеттіліктерін егжей-тегжейлі талдау қажеттілігін туғызды. Бұл өз кезегінде тұтынушылардың дұрыс іріктелген сегменттеріне бағытталған бірегей ұсыныстар жасау үшін өте маңызды. Зерттеу ауқымы Орталық Қазақстанды, атап айтқанда Ұлытау өңірін қамтиды. Бұл эмпирикалық зерттеу сауалнамаға негізделген сандық зерттеу әдісі бойынша жүзеге асырылды. Сауалнамалар страталық кездейсоқ іріктеу әдісімен әлеуетті клиенттер арасында таратылды. Тұтынушылардың мінез-құлқындағы гендерлік айырмашылықтар SPSS.22 бағдарламасын қолдана отырып, T-test сараптамалық талдау әдісін қолдану арқылы тексерілді. Нәтижелер экотуризм мен экологиялық жауапкершілікке негізделген қонақжайлылық қызметтерге қатысты ерлер мен әйелдердің тұтынушылық сегменттері арасында айтарлықтай артықшылықтардың бар екенін және әр сегмент жеке маркетингтік тәсілді қажет ететіндігін көрсетті.

Түйін сөздер: тұтынушылардың мінез-құлқы, гендерлік айырмашылықтар, экологиялық туризм, қонақ үй қызметтері, Орталық Қазақстан.

Гендерные различия в экологически ответственном поведении потребителей: исследование в секторе туризма и гостеприимства Центрального Казахстана

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Текущие тенденции в адаптации продуктов под индивидуального клиента и персонализации услуг приводят к детальному анализу потребностей потребителей, что, в свою очередь, очень важно для создания уникальных предложений, нацеленных на правильные сегменты потребителей. Масштаб исследования охватывает Центральный Казахстан, в частности, Улытауский регион. Данное эмпирическое исследование основано на методе количественного исследования, в котором в качестве инструмента сбора данных был использован опрос. Анкеты были распределены среди потенциальных потребителей по методу стратифицированной случайной выборки. Гендерные различия в поведении потребителей были протестированы с помощью анализа T-test с использованием аналитического программного обеспечения SPSS.22. Результаты показывают, что существует существенная разница в предпочтениях между мужским и женским потребительскими сегментами в отношении экологического туризма и экологически ответственных форм гостиничных услуг, и что каждый сегмент требует индивидуального маркетингового подхода.

Ключевые слова: потребительское поведение, гендерные различия, экологический туризм, гостиничные услуги, Центральный Казахстан.

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5 - бөлім
ПЕДАГОГИКА ЖӘНЕ
ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

Раздел 5
ПЕДАГОГИКА И
ПСИХОЛОГИЯ

Section 5
PEDAGOGY
AND PSYCHOLOGY