The Relationships between International Tourists' Travel Characteristics, Their Sources of Information, and Their Level of Satisfaction Based On Socio-Demographics, In Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the associations between socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and their travel characteristics, the sources of information which they use and to examine whether there are differences between international tourists' satisfaction levels based on their socio-demographics in Luang Prabang province, Northern Lao PDR. The data collection was undertaken by using a self-administered questionnaire survey, with a total of 400 respondents. The findings indicated that international tourists' socio-demographic characteristics do influence their travel characteristics; the sources of information more often used by tourists were also ranked as the most important sources; and there are statistically significant differences between tourist satisfaction levels based on their socio-demographic characteristics. The research outcomes are useful for decision makers to develop more effective strategies for sustainable development of tourism in Luang Prabang.

Key words: International tourists, demographic characteristics, travel characteristics, information sources, satisfaction, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

According to the most recent record from the World Tourism Organization, the tourism sector has experienced continuous expansion and diversification, and has become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world over the past six decades (UNWTO, 2014). The number of international tourist arrivals, worldwide, has dramatically increased from 25 million in 1950 to 808 million in 2005 (Becken & Hey 2007, cited in Phosikham 2010). By 2013, international tourist arrivals grew by 5%, reaching a record of 1087 million arrivals worldwide, up from 1035 million in 2012, when the one billion mark was exceeded for the first time ever.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic, or in short "Laos," is located in Southeast Asia. Thanks to Laos' wealth of natural and cultural heritage resources, there has been a sudden growth in international tourist arrivals (UNCTAD, 2014). According to recent figures from the Lao Authority of Tourism Development, the number of international tourist arrivals to Laos rose consistently with an average growth rate of 19% between the years 1993-2013. The number of international tourists reached 3,779,000 in 2013 and generated total revenue of $595 million (USD) (Tourism Development Department, 2013).

Luang Prabang Province is located 420 kilometres north of Vientiane, the capital city of Laos. There are 12 districts in the Luang Prabang province and the town of Luang Prabang is the capital city of this province. Luang Prabang has very unique architecture, with;

"The UNESCO report identified 34 Wats (monasteries) and 111 civic buildings for preservation, and classifies another 450 houses, making Luang Prabang the best-preserved traditional town of Southeast Asia" (Englemann, 1999; cited in Aas et al., 2005: 35). Because Luang Prabang showed evidence of its unique combination of nature and architecture, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) inscribed Luang Prabang on its World Heritage List on December 9th 1995 under criteria 2, 4 and 5. The designation plus the intrinsic value of the town has made Luang Prabang a popular tourist destination in this region. International tourist arrivals to Luang Prabang province have dramatically rocketed with an average growth rate of 2335% between the years 1995-2014. In 1995, only 16 230 international tourists visited Luang Prabang, but this figure reached 378 999 in 2014, which generating a total revenue of $193 450 545 (USD) (Provincial Department of Information, Culture and Tourism, 2014).

Because of the rapid growth of international tourists and the high competition between many attractions in tourist destination regions, tourists' travel characteristic has been fundamental in tourism studies and important for tourism development. Knowledge of tourists' travel characteristics in Luang Prabang can play a crucial role in predicting the sustainability of tourism in Luang Prabang in order to give suggestion to tourism related sectors for sustainable tourism development in Luang Prabang province.

1.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are as follows. First, to examine the association between socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and their travel characteristics. Second, to study the association between the socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and their sources of information. Finally, to examine whether there are differences between international tourists' satisfaction levels based on the socio-demographic characteristics.

The results of this study will benefit local government and tourism related authorities, tourism related business units and local communities. It should assist in understanding the relationships between international tourists' characteristics, the use of information sources, and their level of satisfaction. This can also help in formulating future strategies for sustainable development of tourism, especially in Luang Prabang Province.

2. *Literature review*

2.1 Tourist characteristics

The understanding of tourists' characteristics, including socio-demographic characteristics and travel characteristics, is significant for tourism marketing as well as tourism management in the tourist destinations. The understanding of tourists' characteristics can assist tourism managers to know how to provide the tourism activities, facilities and services to meet the needs of the tourists in order to increase tourist satisfaction. Gaffar et al., (2011) and Valek et al., (2014) stated that some characteristics of tourists that are often analyzed are gender, age, level of education, occupation, and income. Yu & Goulden (2006) included tourists' region of residence in demographic characteristics. In respect to gender, many studies have been conducted to find out if gender differences can affect the behavior of tourists. Some researchers (Gibson 1996; Shaw 1996; cited in Gaffar et al., 2011) identified that men and women have different motivations in their vacation and tourism activities. Heung et al., (2001) stated that female tourists more commonly seek benefit than male counterparts. Valek et al., (2014) tested the impact of socio-demographic variables on the choice of sport tourism destinations and found differences between genders. The test showed that men are more likely to travel within their own country for a sport-active holiday than women are. Huh (2002) indicated that female respondents were more satisfied with the Virginia Historic Triangle than were male respondents.

The age of the tourist is another important element of demographic characteristics that has been studied by tourism researchers. Huh (2002) indicated no significant differences in overall satisfaction of tourists who had different age groups. However, Valek et al., (2014) stated that younger tourists are more likely to travel abroad than older counterparts. Weaver and Lawton 2002 (cited in Gaffar et al., 2011) indicated that younger tourists and older tourists had different behavior during their vacation, such as activities that they do, attractions that they choose, and facilities that they require. The level of tourists' education background is also an important component that many researchers take into consideration because the level of education has an influence on tourism behavior, especially in motivating people to travel in order to increase knowledge and -experience.

Chaipinit 2008 (cited in Gaffar et al., 2011) stated that better educated people are more likely to travel than their less educated counterparts. Similarly, Valek et al., (2014) found that tourists with a lower level of education are more likely to travel within their own country for a sport-active holiday than people with higher education. On the other hand, Huh (2002) found no significant difference in overall satisfaction of tourists with different levels of education background. The tourists' region of residence is another aspect that tourism scholars have researched, since tourists from different regions have different behaviors and the levels of satisfaction. Kamal (2011) indicated that tourists from Europe tended to stay at destination, Penang Malaysia, longer than tourists from Asia and North America. Yu & Goulden (2006) conducted a study on tourist satisfaction in Mongolia and found significant regional differences in satisfaction with cultural and historical attractions, local employee attitudes, tourism facilities, service qualities, sanitation and nightlife. They also found that European, American and other Asia/Pacific tourists were less likely to return as compared to the Japanese tourists.

The international tourists' socio-demographic characteristics analyzed in this research were gender, age, region of residence, educational level, and religious belief.

2.2 Tourism information sources

Understanding tourists' behavior in terms of their selection of different types of tourism information sources is important for marketing and tourism management. Karim (2006) revealed that if marketers want to market their products effectively, they should know what, how and where to communicate the message that they want to convey. Tourism literature suggests that information acquisition is essential for purchase decisions after destination selection, such as choosing accommodation, transportation and activities (Jenkins, 1978, Perdue, 1985; cited in Seabra, 2007). Mathison & Wall (cited in Karim, 2006) stated that there are two types of information sources; informal and formal. While the formal information sources are related to electronic and print media, informal sources include word of mouth, particularly from friends, family or other tourists who had past experience. Demographic characteristics play a significant role in determining tourists' sources of information. For instance, senior tourists are more likely to use travel agents as their major sources of information and they are more likely to purchase pre-package tours than non-seniors (Javalagi, Edward, & Rao, 1992; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; cited in Karim 2006).

This paper attempts to find out whether socio-demographic characteristics of tourists affect their choice of information sources in Lung Prabang context.

2.3 Tourist satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction is an important factor in successful marketing of heritage and cultural tourism because it affects the selection of destination, consumption of service and decision to revisit (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000 ;cited in Singh, 2014). There are a number of reasons that make tourists satisfied with their trip or journey, including the quality of services provided, such as infrastructure, security, cleanliness, natural situation, consumer protection and ease of obtainment (Handszuh, 1995; cited in Salleh et al., 2013). Socio-demographic characteristics of tourists have been found to be associated with their satisfaction level. Weiler & Ham (2004) indicated that satisfaction levels are significantly related to type of group, country of origin and tourists' native languages. However, Mingfang (2011) argued that tourist characteristics did not have a positive effect on tourist satisfaction. Therefore, this paper attempts to find out whether there are the differences of international tourist satisfaction level based on the demographic characteristics in the Town of Luang Prabang.

2.4 Tourism in Luang Prabang

Tourism is considered a significant tool for the development of Luang Prabang province. Luang Prabang has been implementing the provincial development strategy which was released on 18 March 2003, stating that Luang Prabang would be developed as a tourism Centre for cultural, natural and historical sites, and to promote the town of Luang Prabang as a linked land and a wonderful holiday town (Luang Prabang Governor, 2007; cited in Phosikham, 2010). In the past two decades, Luang Prabang not only has welcomed an increasing number of international tourist arrivals but also has experienced a rapid development in tourism-related sectors. In 1995, there were only five travel agencies, seven hotels, four guesthouses, and eight restaurants. These numbers increased dramatically in 2008, when there were 36 travel agencies, 32 hotels, 236 guesthouses, 124 restaurants and 112 tourist sites (Heritage house, 2008 and Provincial Tourism office, 2008). The tourism related sectors have continued to expand notably; in 2014 there were 74 travel agencies, 72 hotels, 325 guesthouses, 283 restaurants and, 228 tourist sites (Provincial Department of Information, Culture and Tourism, 2014).

Because of the rapid growth of international tourists and the high competition between many attractions in tourist destination regions, the study concerning the relationships between tourists' characteristics, their use of information sources and their level of satisfaction in Luang Prabang is therefore needed.

3. Research Methodology

This study used a self-administered questionnaire survey with closed and open-ended questions. The target population of this study was international tourists with age of 18 years and over who stayed in Luang Prabang for at least one night. A systematic random sampling method was employed to ensure the representativeness of the study. The survey was conducted from October to December 2014 at three selected main points; departure areas of Luang Prabang International Airport, Wat Xieng Thong and Mount Phousy. Over the three-month period, 400 surveys were completed.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic data. Inferential statistical analysis, especially Chi-Square, t-test and one way ANOVA were used to examine the association between socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and their travel characteristics, socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and the sources of information, and to examine whether there were differences between international tourist satisfaction levels based on the socio-demographic characteristics.

4. Results of the study

4.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

The demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The total number of respondents was 400 and 56% of them were female. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 81 years old with the average of 41 years old. International tourists originating from more than 30 countries were represented. The larger proportions of participants (40.3%) were from Europe, overwhelmingly from the UK. Participants from Asia and Pacific accounted for 36.8%, and those from Americas and the Middle East were 23%. 10% of the total respondents had completed high school and college (12%). The biggest proportion of tourists (78%) said that they had a high education background and had completed university degree. The largest group (45.3%) of respondents confirmed that they had no religion; the second largest group (36.3%) reported that they were Christian, while the third largest group (12%) were Buddhist. 5.8% of the total respondents did not want to answer about their religion.

4.2 Travel characteristics of respondents

In this research, there were more independent tourists than package tourists (see Table2). 12% of the whole participants indicated they were part of a group tour and 88% stated that they were independent tourists. International tourists who travelled with their partners made up the highest proportion (44.3%), followed by tourists with friends (21.5%) and those travelling alone (16.5%). Those who travelled with others (such as siblings, colleagues, and recently met tourists) accounted for 12.5%. Tourists who travelled with partners and children were the smallest group which represented only 5.3%. A total of 76.8% of tourists revealed that they were first time visitors to Luang Prabang and only 23.2% indicated that they were repeated tourists. In terms of accommodation, the biggest group of participants stayed in the guesthouses (50.5%), the second biggest group stayed in hotels (37.3%), the third biggest group stayed in resorts (9.3%), and the smallest group (3%) stayed in individual houses. The length of stay of participants were one night (5%), two nights (14.8%), three nights (30.8%), four to six nights (34%), seven to nine nights (9.3%), and more than nine nights (6.3%). More than half (51.2%) of respondents gave suggestions for tourism management in Luang Prabang.

4.3 Sources of information used by international tourists

International tourists were asked their source of information for their trip to Luang prabang. 81.5% of them used a travel guidebook in planning their journey to Luang Prabang. 'Internet' source stood out as the second largest information source used by the international tourists (81.2%), followed by 'Friend/relative' (61.7 %), 'Travel agent/tour operator' (43.5 %), 'Book/Magazine' (39.8 %), 'Television/radio' (30 %), and 'Newspaper' (25 %). (This was a multiple-answer question; therefore percentages total more than 100 percent).

4.4 The importance of information sources

The sources of information more often used were also ranked as the most important sources. The analysis revealed that international tourists perceived that "Internet" was the most significant source of information that they used in planning their trip to Luang Prabang among others (mean= 4.12; St. Deviation= 1.186), followed by

"Travel guidebook" (mean= 3.66; St. Deviation= 1.374), "Friend/relative (mean= 3.26; St. Deviation= 1.550), "Travel agent/ tour operator" (mean= 2.58; St. Deviation= 1.585), "Book/magazine" (mean= 2.27; St. Deviation= 1.482), and "Television/ radio" (mean= 1.80; St. Deviation= 1.265). The least important source of information was "Newspaper" (mean= 1.51; St. Deviation= 1.089).

4.5 Chi-Square test on age of tourists with other demographic characteristics

Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to determine the statistical significance of the association between the age of international tourists and other demographic characteristics (sex, education, religion and the region of residence). The results of the test show that there is a significant association between age and gender of the tourists at the .01 level (X^2= 11.697; p= 0.000). There are more male tourists in the older group (41-81 years old), on the other hand, there are more female tourists in younger group (18-40 years old). There is a significant association between age and education, age and religion of the tourists at .05 level (X^2=4.709; p=0.030 and X^2=6.175; p=0.008) respectively. The younger tourists had a higher education background than the elder ones. A greater number of elder tourists believed in a religion. By contrast, there was larger proportion of younger tourists who did not believe in a religion. There was no significant association between the age of the tourists and their region of residence.

4.6 The association of tourists' gender and travel characteristics

Similarly, Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to investigate if there was a significant association between gender and travel characteristics. The results of the analysis showed that there was a significant association between gender and travel companion at the .01 level (X^2=17.846; p=0.003). The findings suggest that male tourists preferred to travel alone more than female counterparts did. In contrast, female tourists were likely to travel with their friends more than male counterparts were. There is a significant statistical association between gender and tourists' visiting experiences at the .05 level (X^2=10.126; p=0.018). This implies that more female tourists than male tourists visit Luang Prabang for the first time, whereas there are more male tourists who visit Luang Prabang for more than four times. The tests also indicated no significant association between gender and mode of travelling, time spent in Luang Prabang, accommodation, and suggestions for tourism management.

4.7 The association of tourists' age and travel characteristics

Pearson's Chi-squared test was used to investigate whether there was a significant statistical association between the age of tourists and their travel characteristics. The results of the tests (see Table 3) showed that there was a significant association between the age and travel companion at the .05 level (X^2=13.478 ; p=0.019). The finding suggested that older tourists (41-81 years) were likely to travel alone more than younger tourists, while younger tourists (18-40 years) were more likely to travel with their friends than the older group. There was a significant association between age and mode of travelling at the 0.01 level (X^2=13.478; p=0.000). The finding showed that there were larger proportion of older tourists who traveled with group tours and there were more young tourists who traveled independently. There was a significant association between age and time spent in Luang Prabang at the .05 level (X^2=12.883; p=0.025). This means that elder tourists stayed longer in Luang Prabang than younger tourists, on the other hand, younger tourists stayed in Luang Prabang for shorter times than the older ones. There was a significant association between the age of tourists and accommodation at the .01 level (X^2=25.333; p=0.000). The finding revealed that there was bigger number of younger tourists who stayed at guest houses than the elder ones. In contrast, older tourists stayed in hotels or resorts more than younger tourists did. The tests indicated no significant association between age and tourists' visiting experience and suggestions for tourism management.

4.8 The association of tourists' current region of residence and travel characteristics

The Chi-square tests were used to investigate whether there was a significant statistical association between the tourists' current region of residence and their travel characteristics. The results of the tests (see Table 4) showed that there was a significant association between the tourists' region of residence and tourists' visiting experience at the .01 level (X^2=19.914; p=0.003). The findings showed that there were more tourists from Europe who visited Luang Prabang for the first time. In contrast, there were more tourists from Asia and Pacific who visited Luang Prabang for more than three times. There was a significant association between tourist' region of residence and time spent in Luang Prabang at the .05 level (X^2=19.847; p=0.031). This means that there were more tourists from Asia and Pacific stayed in Luang Prabang for 2 nights. On the other hand, there were more tourists from Europe who stayed in Luang Prabang for 4 to 6 nights.

There was a significant association between tourists' region of residence and accommodation at the .05 level (X^2=13.301; p=0.039). The findings revealed that there were more tourists from Europe who stayed at guest houses. In contrast, there were more tourists from Asia and Pacific who stayed in the hotels. The results showed that there was a significant association between the tourists' region of residence and suggestions for tourism management in Luang Prabang at .05 level (X^2=6.736; p=0.034). The tests revealed that there were more tourists from Asia and Pacific who gave suggestions for tourism management. On the other hand, there were fewer tourists from Europe who gave suggestion for tourism management. The tests indicated no significant association between tourists' region of residence and travel companion and mode of travelling.

4.9 The association of tourists' education and travel characteristics

To investigate if there were significant associations between tourists' education and travel characteristics, the Pearson's Chi-squared test was used. The results of the tests showed that there were no statistically significant associations between education and travel characteristics, except for the mode of travelling at the .05 level (X^2=4.803; p=0.037).

4.10 The association of tourists' religion and travel characteristics

The Pearson's Chi-squared tests were used to investigate whether there was a statistically significant association between religion and their travel characteristics. The analysis showed that there was a significant association between religion and mode of travelling at the .05 level (X^2=5.300; p=0.030). The findings also showed that tourists who believe in a religion preferred to travel with organized group tours more than none religious tourists did. In addition, tourists who did not believe in a religion were likely to travel more independently compared with their religious counterparts. There was a significant association between religion and accommodation at the .05 level (X^2=9.666; p=0.022). The finding revealed that there were more tourists who did not believe in a religion who stayed at guest houses. In contrast, there were more tourists who believed in a religion who stayed in hotels or resorts. The tests indicated no significant association between religion and travel companion, visiting experience, time spent in Luang Prabang, and suggestions for tourism management.

4.11 The association of tourists' demographic characteristics and sources of information

To investigate if there was a significant association between tourists' gender and the information sources which were used by tourists, the Pearson's chi-squared test was used. The results of the tests showed that out of the seven sources of information, only 'Newspaper' had a statistically significant association with gender of the tourists at the .05 level (X^2=4.362; p=0.037). The finding indicates that male tourists were more likely to use newspapers as their information source in shaping their journey to Luang Prabang than female tourists were.

The results of Chi-square tests indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the age of international tourists and the use of book/magazine as sources of information at the .01 level (X^2=10.815; p=0.001). In addition, older tourists (41-81 years) used book/magazine more frequently than younger counterparts did. The outcomes of the Chi-square tests proved that there was a statistically significant association between tourists' region of residence and sources of information at .01 level and .05 level (X^2=13.959; p=0.001), (X^2=7.704; p=0.021), (X^2=16.506; p=0.000), and (X^2=13.046; p=0.001). The findings show that the tourists from Asia and Pacific preferred to use 'Book/magazine', 'Friend/relatives', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' compared to those tourists from Europe, America and others. The results of Chi-square tests indicated that there was a statistically significant association between tourists' religion and the sources of information at .01 level (X^2=8.884; p=0.003), (X^2=15.223; p=0.000), (X^2=12.027; p=0.001), and (X^2=10.974; p=0.001). The finding showed that the tourists who believe in a religion tended to use 'Travel agent/tour operator', 'Book/magazine', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' more than tourists who had no religion or did not want to answer about their religion. There was also no statistically significant association between tourists' educational level and sources of information. There was no significant association between tourists' demographic characteristics and the use of 'Travel guidebook' and 'Internet'. In another word, the differences of tourists' demographic characteristics did not affect on the use of travel guidebooks and internet using.

4.12 The differences in tourists' opinion regarding the importance of information sources

In this part of the study, independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were employed. The tests attempted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in tourists' opinion regarding the importance of information sources based on the differences in tourists' demographic characteristics (gender, age, religion, education and region of residence).

The results of independent sample t-test showed the difference in international tourists' opinions regarding the importance of sources of information, based on tourists' gender. The findings indicate that male tourists gave the rating score for 'Book/magazine' as an important source of information, which is higher than female tourists. On the other hand, female tourists gave the rating score for 'Friend/relatives' as an important information source higher than male tourists. The results of independent sample t-test showed a difference in international tourists' opinion regarding the importance of sources of information based on tourists' age. The findings point out those older tourists gave the rating score for 'Travel agent/tour operator', 'Book/magazine' and 'Newspaper' as important sources of information, higher than younger tourists. In contrast, younger tourists gave the rating score for 'Internet' as a significant source of information, higher than older tourists.

The results of independent sample t-test showed the difference in international tourists' opinions regarding the importance of sources of information based on tourists' religion. The findings indicate that tourists who believe in a religion gave the rating score for 'Travel agent/tour operator', 'Book/magazine', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' as important sources of information, higher than tourists who had no religion or did not want to answer about their religion. The results of One-way ANOVA test show the difference in international tourists' opinions regarding the importance of sources of information based on tourists' region of residence. This finding confirmed that tourists who were from Europe gave the rating score for 'Travel guidebook' as a significant source of information, higher than tourists who were from Asia Pacific. On the other hand, tourists who were from Asia Pacific gave the rating score for 'Newspaper' as an important information source, higher than tourists who were from Europe. There was no significant difference in international tourists' opinion regarding to the importance of information sources based on tourists' educational level.

4.13 The differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' demographic characteristics

In this part of the study, independent samples t-tests were applied to determine whether there was a significant difference in tourist satisfaction towards tourism activities, facilities and services, depending on the differences in tourists' demographic characteristics (gender, age, region of residence, education and religion). Independent sample t-test were performed in order to determine whether there was a significant difference between participants with respect to gender groups in terms of tourist satisfaction towards tourism activities, facilities and services in Luang Prabang (see Table 5). The analysis found that there was a significant difference in tourist satisfaction towards 'Natural scenery and landscape viewing' and 'Souvenir shop'. The analysis also revealed that the level of female tourists' satisfaction was higher than male tourists for both, natural scenery and landscape viewing, and souvenir shop. In another word, female tourists were more satisfied with natural scenery and landscape viewing and souvenir shop compared with their male tourists.

The results of independent sample t-test (see Table 6) showed that there were statistically significant differences between the mean levels of tourist satisfaction based on tourists' ages. The findings indicate that young tourists (18-40 years) had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Walking along the bank of Mekong, Khan river and wetland', 'Cuisine', 'Night market', 'Cleanliness of environment' and 'Bars and restaurants' than older tourists (41-81 years). In contrast, the older tourists had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Sa paper product' than the younger tourists. The results of independent sample t-test (see Table 7) show the differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' education. The findings indicate that tourists who had a lower education background (lower than universities) had a higher level of satisfaction for 'Woodcarving', 'Sa paper product', 'Textile weaving and pottery', 'Pharmacies', 'Tourism information center', 'Interpretation and signage at tourism sites', 'Souvenir shop', 'accommodation', 'Bars and restaurants', and 'Facilities and services in overall' than tourists who had a higher education background. The results of independent sample t-test (see Table 8) show the differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' religion. The findings indicate that tourists who had no religion had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Sunrise and sunset viewing', 'Cuisine', 'Accommodation', 'Bars and restaurants', and 'Price of goods and services' than tourists who believed in a religion.

The results of One-Way ANOVA test (see Table 9 and 10) show the differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' region of residence. The findings reveal that tourists from America and the Middle East had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Walking along the bank of Mekong, Khan river and wetland', 'Transportation between tourism sites', 'Bars and restaurants' and 'Price of goods and services' than tourists who were from Asia Pacific. The findings also indicate that tourists from America and the Middle East had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Cycling around', 'Friendliness, politeness and honesty of local people', 'Transportation between tourism sites' and 'Bars and restaurants' than tourists who were from Europe.

The tests also show that tourists who were from Europe had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Transportation between tourism sites' than tourists who were from Asia Pacific.

5. *Discussion and Conclusion*

The objectives of this research are threefold: to study the association between socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and their travel characteristics ; to study the association between the socio-demographic characteristics of international tourists and the sources of information; and to examine whether there are differences between international tourist satisfaction levels, based on the socio-demographic characteristics.

The total of 400 international tourists from more than 30 different countries participated in this research. The top five countries in terms of tourist representation were Australia, the UK, the US, France and Thailand. This finding differed from the results of a study conducted by Sirisack et al. (2014) which focused on the characteristics and motivations of foreign tourists who visited Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR. The top five of tourist generating countries in their paper were Thailand, Germany, France, the UK, and Japan. Possibly, there were more participants from Thailand and Japan because the questionnaire was obtained in Thai, Japanese and English language. The majority of respondents were female (56%), and they are younger than 40 years old (52.3%). Some of this finding was similar to the past studies on tourism in Luang Prabang by Phosikham, (2010), and Sirisack, (2014). The largest group of participants had a higher education qualification, completing a university degree. Although Luang Prabang is often seen as a religious cultural heritage and tourist destination, almost half of the survey respondents confirmed that they had no religion and about six percent of tourists did not want to answer about their religions.

This study found that the age of international tourists who visited Luang Prabang had relationships with their gender, education level and religion. On one hand, more females represented in young tourist group (18-40 years old) and they had a higher educational background. It was noticeable that more young tourists had no religion. On the other hand, more male respondents accounted for the older tourist group (41-81 years old), and they had a lower educational level compared with their younger counterparts. The analysis also revealed that more elder tourists believed in a religion. The travel characteristics of international tourists in this research is partially similar to Sirisack et al.(2014).The majority of respondents were independent tourists, first time visitors, traveled with partners, stayed in the guesthouses, stayed in Luang Prabang from three to six nights, and gave suggestion for the management of tourism in the town of Luang Prabang.

Regarding the tourism information sources used by international tourists in shaping their journey to Luang Prabang, the top three information sources that were predominantly used were "travel guidebook", "internet" and "friend/relative". This finding supports the research conducted by Phosikham (2010). The international tourists not only highly used these three sources of information, but also ranked them as the most important information sources. This implies that the sources of information which were more often used were also ranked as the most important ones. This finding confirmed that both formal information sources (travel guidebook and internet), and informal such as word of mouth information sources (friend/relative) were important factors which shape the journey of international tourist to Luang Prabang.

This research found that there were statistically significant relationships between international tourists' socio-demographic characteristics and their travel characteristics, socio-demographic characteristics and tourism information sources, as well as significant differences of international tourist satisfaction level, based on their socio-demographic characteristics as follows: Gender: gender differences between tourists affect their travel characteristics. While female tourists traveled with friends and visited Luang Prabang for the first time more than their male counterparts, male tourists preferred to travel alone and were more likely to revisit, with up to four times visiting experience in Luang Prabang.

In terms of information sources, male tourists used 'Newspaper' as their sources of information more than female counterparts. However, the former gave rating score for 'Book/magazine' as an important source of information higher than the later. Furthermore, more females than males ranked 'Friend/relatives' as an important information source. Regarding the tourist satisfaction levels on tourism activities, facilities and services in the town of Luang Prabang, this research found that female tourists were satisfied with the natural scenery and landscape views as well as souvenir shops, more than male tourists.

Age: similar to gender, age differences of the international tourists also affect their travel characteristics. Younger tourists traveled with friends, traveled as independent tourists, and stayed in guesthouses more than elderly tourists. In contrast, older tourists traveled through tour operators, had longer stays in Luang Prabang, and stayed in hotels or resorts more than young tourists. In terms information sources, older tourists used 'Book/magazine' as their sources of information more than younger tourists. Thus, elderly tourists gave rating scores for 'Book/magazine', 'Travel agent/ tour operator', and 'Newspapers' as important sources of information higher than young tourists. In contrast, young tourists ranked 'Internet' as an important information source higher than older tourists. Regarding the tourists' satisfaction level on tourism activities, facilities and services in the town of Luang Prabang, this research found that young tourists had a higher level of satisfaction for 'Walking along the bank of Mekong, Khan river and wetland', 'Cuisine', 'Night market', 'Cleanliness of environment' and 'Bars and restaurants' compared with older tourists. In contrast, the older tourists had a higher level of satisfaction for 'Sa paper product' than the younger tourists.

Region of residence: the differences of tourists' region of residence influenced their travel characteristics. On the one hand, international tourists who were from Asia and Pacific had visiting experience more than three times, stayed in Luang Prabang for two nights, stayed in the hotels, and gave suggestions for the tourism management in Luang Prabang more than tourists who were from Europe, America and the Middle East. On the other hand, tourists who were from Europe had the first time visiting experience, gave fewer suggestions for tourism management, stayed in Luang Prabang from four to six nights, and stayed in guesthouses more than tourists who were from Asia and Pacific. This finding supports the claim of UNCTAD (2014) who stated that there are two main categories of tourists in Luang Prabang. First, a very high number of backpackers trying to live as cheaply as possible, and second, a high-end package tour visitors dominated by the Asian market. The Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center (2009; cited in UNCTAD, 2014) defined the traditional backpackers as tourists who use budget accommodation, involved in longer rather than very brief holidays, predominantly under 40 years of age, had flexible itineraries, and involved in social activities during their holidays. Therefore, we can possibly infer that backpackers in this research were those tourists who were young, and had longer stayed in guesthouses which were cheaper than hotels or resorts.

In terms of information sources, the tourists who were from Asia and Pacific used 'Book/magazine', 'Friend/relatives', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' more than tourists who were from Europe, America and the Middle East. Therefore, tourists who were from Asia Pacific gave the rating score for 'Newspaper' as an important information source higher than tourists who were from Europe. Conversely, tourists who were from Europe gave the rating score for 'Travel guidebook' as a significant source of information, higher than tourists who were from Asia Pacific. Regarding the tourist satisfaction level on tourism activities, facilities and services in Luang Prabang, this research found that tourists who were from America and the Middle East had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Walking along the bank of Mekong, Khan river and wetland', 'Transportation between tourism sites', 'Bars and restaurants' and 'Price of goods and services' than tourists who were from Asia Pacific. The finding also indicated that tourists who were from America and the Middle East had a higher level of satisfaction for 'Cycling around', 'Friendliness, politeness and honesty of local people', 'Transportation between tourism sites' and 'Bars and restaurants' than tourists who were from Europe. The test also showed tourists who were from Europe had a greater level of satisfaction for 'Transportation between tourism sites' than tourists who were from Asia Pacific.

Educational level: the educational levels of international tourists did not much affect their travel characteristics. The results of the tests showed that there was no significant association between education and travel characteristics, except for mode of travelling. There was no significant association between tourists' educational level and sources of information. Regarding tourist satisfaction levels on tourism activities, facilities and services in the town of Luang Prabang, tourists who had a lower education qualification tended to have higher levels of satisfaction for 'Woodcarving', 'Sa paper product', 'Textile weaving and pottery', 'Pharmacies', 'Tourism information center', 'Interpretation and signage at tourism sites', 'Souvenir shop', 'accommodation', 'Bars and restaurants', and ' Facilities and services in overall' compared with tourists who had a higher education. Religion belief: like other aspects of socio-demographic characteristics, international tourists' religious beliefs influenced their travel characteristics. International tourists who believed in a religion traveled with group tours and stayed in hotels or resorts more than tourists who had no religion. However, tourists who did not believe in a religion traveled as independent tourists and stayed in guesthouses more than tourists who believe in a religion.

In terms of information sources, tourists who believed in a religion used 'Travel agent/tour operator', 'Book/magazine', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' more than tourists who had no religion or did not want to answer about their religion. Similarly, tourists who believed in a religion gave the rating score for 'Travel agent/tour operator', 'Book/magazine', 'Television/radio' and 'Newspaper' as important sources of information higher than tourists who had no religion or did not want to answer about their religion. Regarding the tourists' satisfaction level on tourism activities, facilities and services in the town of Luang Prabang, tourists who had no religion had higher levels of satisfaction for 'Sunrise and sunset viewing', 'Cuisine', 'Accommodation', 'Bars and restaurants', and 'Price of goods and services' than tourists who believed in a religion.

Notably, this research indicated that the differences of tourists' demographic characteristics did not affect their usage of travel guidebooks and the internet. In another word, there was no significant association between tourists' demographic characteristics and the use of 'Travel guidebook' and 'Internet'. It implies that nearly all international tourists who visited Luang Prabang used travel guidebooks and internet as their sources of information, and this finding is useful for tourism marketing and the management of tourism in Luang Prabang.

The results of this research not only achieve its objectives, but also can explain the claim raised by UNCTAD (2014) regarding the tourist types in Luang Prabang. UNCTAD (2014) stated that Luang Prabang is the country's most cherished tourism gem, and attracts all types of tourists from backpackers to boutique travelers. While backpackers have traditionally been very important to Laos and Luang Prabang, this seems to be slowly changing. Since the luxury Asian market has become a significant target for Luang Prabang, the infrastructure, tourism human resources as well as tourism activities, facilities and services should be improved in order to meet the need of the market and increase the tourists' satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that these developments are done in a way that is sustainable and does not have any negative impact on Luang Prabang's unique cultural and natural heritage.

6. Recommendation

Based on the finding of the research, the results of the analysis suggest the following recommendation for tourism marketers and all tourism related sectors in Luang prabang:

- Improve the use of electronic and social media wisely. The Lao national and Luang Prabang tourism websites should be updated regularly and upload sufficient tourism information because internet has become the most significant information source that are massively used by tourists. Alongside with high technology sources, traditional channels such as book/magazine, travel agent, TV/radio and newspapers also need to be improved as far as some tourists rated them as important sources of information, especially religious and elderly tourists who are often from Asia Pacific.
- Encourage international tourists to stay in the town for longer period of time and for Luang Prabang to be able to cater for both the emerging high-end Asian tourists as well as backpackers.
- Increase the level of tourists' satisfaction for both backpackers and luxury tourists by improving the quality of services, especially the transportation between tourism sites.

Table1: Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Sex	male	179	44.0
	female	224	56.0
Age	18-40	209	52.3
	41-81	191	47.8
Region of residence	Asia and Pacific	147	36.8
	Europe	161	40.3
	Americas and the Middle East	92	23.0
Education	Lower than university	88	22.0
	University	312	78.0
Religion	Buddhism	51	12.8
	Christian	145	36.3
	No religion	181	45.3
	Do not want to answer	23	5.8

Table2: Travel characteristics

Travel characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Companion	alone	66	16.5
	Spouse/partner	177	44.3
	Friend(s)	86	21.5
	Child(ren)	7	1.8
	Spouse/partner and child(ren)	14	3.5
	Other	50	12.5
Mode of travelling	Group tour	48	12.0
	Independent tourist	352	88.0
Visit	first visit	307	76.8
	two times	51	12.8
	three times	15	3.8
	more than three times	27	6.8
Time spent in Luang Prabang	one night	20	5.0
	two nights	59	14.8
	three nights	123	30.8
	4 to 6 nights	136	34.0
	7 to 9 nights	37	9.3
	more than 9 nights	25	6.3
Accommodation	Individual house	12	3.0
	Guest house	202	50.5
	hotel	149	37.3
	resort	37	9.3
Suggestion for tourism management	No suggestion	195	48.8
	Give suggestion	205	51.2

Table3: Chi-Square test on age of tourists with travel characteristics

Travel characteristics		18-40 years	41-81 years	X^2	P-value
Companion	alone	29	37	13.478	0.019
	Spouse/partner	89	88		
	Friend(s)	53	33		
	Child(ren)	3	4		
	Spouse/partner and child(ren)	3	11		
	other	32	18		
Mode of travelling	Group tour	13	35	13.478	0.000
	Independent tourist	196	156		
Visit	First visit	169	138	Non sig	
	Two times	22	29		
	Three times	8	7		
	More than three times	10	17		
Time spent in Luang Prabang	One night	13	7	12.883	0.025
	Two nights	31	28		
	Three nights	65	58		
	4 to 6 nights	65	71		
	7 to 9 nights	27	10		
	More than 9 nights	8	17		
Accommodation	Individual house	5	7	25.333	0.000
	Guest house	129	73		
	hotel	65	84		
	resort	10	27		
Suggestion for management	No suggestion	104	91	Non sig	
	Give suggestion	105	100		

Table 4: Chi-Square test on the tourists' region of residence with travel characteristics

Travel characteristics		Asia and Pacific	Europe	America and other	X^2	P-value
Companion	alone	29	21	16	Non sig	
	Spouse/partner	52	78	47		
	Friend(s)	30	38	18		
	Child(ren)	3	2	2		
	Spouse/partner and child(ren)	8	2	4		
	other	25	20	5		
Mode of travelling	Group tour	14	20	14	Non sig	
	Independent tourist	133	141	78		
Visit	First visit	101	124	82	19.914	0.003
	Two times	23	23	5		
	Three times	5	8	2		
	More than three times	18	6	3		
Time spent in Luang Prabang	One night	7	6	7	19.847	0.031
	Two nights	29	11	19		
	Three nights	44	50	29		
	4 to 6 nights	42	66	28		
	7 to 9 nights	15	17	5		
	More than 9 nights	10	11	4		
Accommodation	Individual house	6	3	3	13.301	0.039
	Guest house	67	97	38		
	hotel	62	45	42		
	resort	12	16	9		
Suggestion for management	No suggestion	84	69	42	6.736	0.034
	Give suggestion	63	92	50		

Table 5: The differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' gender

Tourist satisfaction	male		female		t	p
	X	S.D	X	S.D		
Natural scenery and landscape viewing	4.15	0.688	4.30	0.726	-2.071	0.039
Souvenir shop	3.54	0.956	3.84	0.835	-3.285	0.001

Table 6: The differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' age

Tourist satisfaction	18-40 years		41-81 years		t	p
	X	S.D	X	S.D		
Walking along the bank of Mekong and Khan river or wetland	4.06	0.817	3.89	0.811	2.052	0.041
Sa paper product	3.50	0.784	3.68	0.824	-2.092	0.037
Cuisine	4.16	0.816	3.95	0.867	2.469	0.014
Night market	4.29	0.855	4.00	0.872	3.438	0.001
Cleanliness of environment	3.67	1.055	3.30	1.057	3.508	0.001
Bars and restaurants	4.25	0.745	4.10	0.793	1.993	0.047

Table 7: The differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' education

Tourist satisfaction	Lower than university		University		t	p
	X	S.D	X	S.D		
Woodcarving	3.69	0.875	3.50	0.709	2.012	0.045
Sa paper product	3.76	0.879	3.54	0.779	2.255	0.025
Textile weaving and pottery	3.96	0.867	3.74	0.834	2.045	0.042
Pharmacies	3.56	0.931	3.33	0.868	2.108	0.036
Tourism information center	3.44	0.953	3.13	0.889	2.790	0.006
Interpretation and signage in the tourism sites	3.71	0.883	3.45	0.935	2.311	0.021
Souvenir shops	3.90	0.935	3.66	0.885	2.279	0.023
Accommodations	4.38	0.718	4.13	0.801	2.621	0.009
Bars and restaurants	4.36	0.730	4.12	0.776	2.540	0.011
Facilities and services in overall	3.79	0.627	3.59	0.534	2.813	0.005

Table 8: The differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' religion

Tourist satisfaction	Buddhism, Christian or others		No religion or not want to answer		t	p
	X	S.D	X	S.D		
Sunset and sunrise viewing	3.96	0.849	4.18	0.747	-2.664	0.008
Cuisine	3.96	0.862	4.15	0.822	-2.258	0.025
Accommodation	4.10	0.841	4.28	0.727	-2.272	0.024
Bars and restaurant	4.07	0.785	4.27	0.746	-2.640	0.009
Price of goods and services	3.79	0.972	3.99	1.017	-2.002	0.046

Table 9: The differences in tourist satisfaction based on the tourists' region of residence

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Walking along the bank of Mekong and Khan river or Wetland	Between Groups	7.133	2	3.567	5.451	.005
	Within Groups	257.804	394	.654		
	Total	264.937	396			
Cycling around	Between Groups	4.768	2	2.384	3.767	.024
	Within Groups	234.197	370	.633		
	Total	238.965	372			
Friendliness, politeness and honesty of local people	Between Groups	4.318	2	2.159	3.688	.026
	Within Groups	231.778	396	.585		
	Total	236.095	398			
Transportation between tourism sites	Between Groups	16.018	2	8.009	10.400	.000
	Within Groups	305.732	397	.770		
	Total	321.750	399			
Bars and restaurants	Between Groups	8.341	2	4.171	7.223	.001
	Within Groups	228.666	396	.577		
	Total	237.008	398			
Price of goods and services	Between Groups	10.720	2	5.360	5.489	.004
	Within Groups	387.658	397	.976		
	Total	398.378	399			

Table 10: Mean score comparison on the differences in tourist satisfaction based on tourists' region of Residence

Walking along the bank of Mekong and Khan river or wetland		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	3.82	4.02	4.17
Asia Pacific	3.82			
Europe	4.02			
America and the Middle East	4.17	0.006*		
Cycling around		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	3.82	3.71	4.01
Asia Pacific	3.82			
Europe	3.71			
America and the Middle East	4.01		0.021*	
Friendliness, politeness and honesty of local people		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	4.35	4.29	4.56
Asia Pacific	4.35			
Europe	4.29			
America and the Middle East	4.56		0.014*	
Transportation between tourism sites		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	3.70	3.95	4.22
Asia Pacific	3.70			
Europe	3.95	0.043*		
America and the Middle East	4.22	0.000*	0.032*	
Bars and restaurants		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	4.04	4.16	4.42
Asia Pacific				
Europe				
America and the Middle East		0.000*	0.019*	
Price of goods and services		Asia Pacific	Europe	America and the Middle East
	X	3.72	3.88	4.16
Asia pacific	3.72			
Europe	3.88			
America and the Middle East	4.16	0.002*		

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