

Innovative Storytelling to Add Value to Homestay Tourism

Kornkanok Nindum

Faculty of Management Science, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, Thailand

E-mail: n_kornkanok@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study aims to innovate storytelling to add value to homestay tourism. By using qualitative research methodology, this study conducted non-participant observation and in-depth interviews on purposive samplings of the target population. Selected participants are professionals in communication arts, social science, tourism management, and homestay entrepreneurs. The innovative storytelling process begins with entrepreneurs considering both the tangible and intangible characteristics of the primary local resources that are different from other communities and develop them into experiential tourism destinations. The narrative method's selection must consider an uncomplicated narrative structure, a few characters, and only one clear theme. The emotional narrative method is based on the time frame of the story. The narrative strategy applies the unique storytelling technique of influencers, reviewers, or travelers, using their personal narrative styles, symbolic images and elements to convey the story. This also includes broadcasting through various communication channels, including social media or mainstream media.

Keywords: Innovation Storytelling, Homestay Tourism, Social Media

Introduction

The UNWTO World Tourism Barometer reported 671 million international tourists traveling around the world in the first half of 2019, resulting in the continuous growth of 10 trillion U.S. dollars in the world economy. There are many types of tourism to welcome tourists from all over the world including, historical tourism, health tourism, ethnic tourism, or homestay tourism. Homestay tourism is one of the most popular destinations for travelers who search for a nature getaway, genuine social interaction with hosts, and local culture and traditions (Frederick, 2003) (Wang, 2007). With its objective to create new experiences and activities for tourists, homestay tourism generated over 15 million U.S. dollars.

Among various types of tourism, homestay tourism has long been established in Thailand. In 2005, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) had established the first set of Thailand's homestay standards to grant an official government certification for homestays that meet specific indicators (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015). With prominent support from the government, homestay tourism in Thailand has dramatically improved to provide tourists with accommodations, community culture, and learning exchanges.

One of the most successful examples of homestay tourism in Thailand is Kratom Plai Na Village in Chiang Rai, the northernmost province of the country. The current study selected this village as a case study because it is located in Chiang Rai's potential tourism area. Due to its abundant natural resources, comfortable climate, beautiful natural scenery, and unique culture and tradition, Chiang Rai has always been at the top of travelers' wish lists. In addition, as the city is situated near the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and China, Chiang Rai has continued

to gain popularity among both Thai and foreign tourists. Over 3.7 million tourists visited Chiang Rai in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports [MOTS], 2019; Nindum, 2019).



Figure 1 Numbers of Thai and Foreign Tourist Arrivals in Chiang Rai in 2019

Between the years 2018 to 2021, Chiang Rai has implemented a development strategy with a vision to be *the city of trade, investment, agriculture, and tourism that is enriched with prosperous Lanna culture and joyful citizens* (Chiang Rai Provincial Administrative Organization, 2020). One of the development strategies is to preserve the Lanna cultural base to add value to cultural, ecological, and health tourism (Chiang Rai Provincial Statistical Office, 2020). This strategy is consistent with the study of Raymond (2007) that applied the concept of creative tourism to develop tourism of New Zealand's South Island. By relying on the local cultural capital, this strategy successfully increased revenues for the community.

Regardless of tourism popularity in Chiang Rai, the tourist demand for homestays has decreased. As part of this study, the author conducted interviews with homestay owners and found a lack of marketing strategy to add value to the destination. With the author's intention to find a solution for this problem, the storytelling technique is highlighted in this study to better communicate with homestay tourists. According to Kalid and Mahmood (2016), storytelling is a knowledge gathering and transmitting process to communicate with target audiences. The storytelling must create content that can determine the identity and behavior (Godsil & Goodale, 2013) of the destination. A valuable story that engages tourists' attention will lead to interaction with the target audience and activities that benefit the business. In addition, the study of tourist behaviors in Southeast Asia found that tourists prefer to experience lifestyles of local people and different cultures in another side of the world, e.g., ethnic tourism. Hence, storytelling communication is essential in spreading the destination information to the target tourists (Thuy & Santasombat, 2013). Another study by Yong and Hassan (2019) found the positive effect of social media on the success of homestay owners in the north of Borneo Island in Malaysia. The result of this study emphasized the importance of effective communication on online platforms.

Realizing the importance of storytelling, this study's primary objective is to apply the modern storytelling technique for homestay tourism to facilitate the communication between entrepreneurs and tourists. The secondary objective is to add value to the tourist attraction, which will create more careers and revenues for the community and expand the tourism industry's growth. The development of innovative storytelling will also create the community consciousness and awareness of natural resource values, arts, cultural heritage, and authentic local traditions. Therefore, this study expected to provide an example and a new innovative

form of communication for homestay businesses and similar organizations. The results of this study will strengthen the business communication skills of tourism-related businesses and homestay owners. It will also help in adding value to tourist destinations within the local communities. Managerial implications for sustainable business practices and directions for future research are discussed according to previous point, this research aimed to innovate storytelling to add value to homestay tourism.

Literature Review

Storytelling is the process of communicating knowledge and experiences between an interpersonal or an informal group of people. The storytellers narrate a story by sharing their memories, life experiences, impressions, lessons learned, and pride in their work to motivate and inspire audiences (Wichianpanya, 2015). The purposes of storytelling can be different under the story's designation (Lukosch, Klebl, & Buttler, 2011). Storytelling is also a vital knowledge management method that affects the established communication's effectiveness or goals, which can be varied depending on different individuals and various social factors. It may focus on attitudes, beliefs, expectations, common understandings, norms, values, connotations, and contexts that are full of diversity. The process includes explanations of complex behaviors, events, rules, and routines that must be consistent with individual behaviors with common goals (Schäfer, 2004). The storytelling elements are the plot, the theme, the conflict, the character, the scene, the dialogue, the perspective, and the special symbols. Hence, storytelling as a new form of communication can create an exciting story and benefit homestay tourism.

Homestay tourism is a form of tourism that tourists reside and have meals at the host family's residence (Jamal, Othman, Maheran, & Muhamad, 2011). Homestay is a commercialization process that utilizes the residential and empty spaces within the house for profitable purposes (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). This alternative form of tourism allows tourists to experience authentic Thai folklife by exchanging cultures and ideas with the host families. The host family must agree to welcome tourists to stay under the same roof and must willing to share their local wisdom and cultures with tourists. The homestay owners and their family members must also coordinate with the community to manage the homestay business. The community social club or cooperative should also be established for affiliated members of the village's homestay businesses (Chittangwattana, 1999).

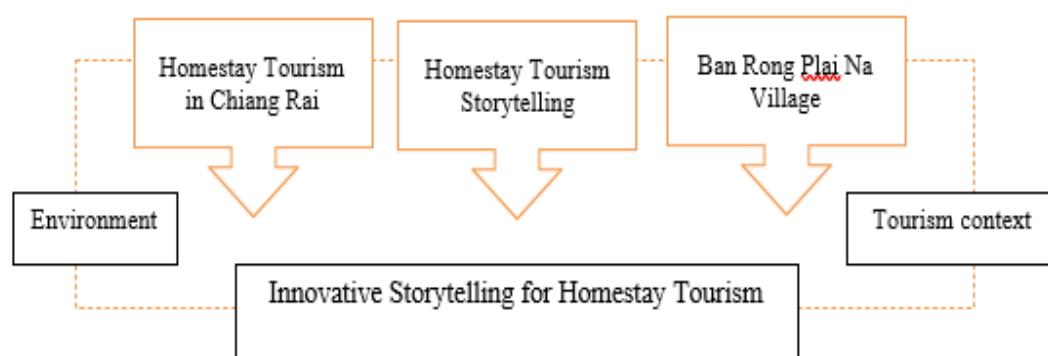


Figure 2 Framework of the Study.

Research Methodology

This research applied qualitative research methods using in-depth interviews and non-participant observation on purposive samplings. Data was collected from Kratom Rong Plai Na Village in Bua Salee Sub-District, Mae Lao District, Chiang Rai Province. The homestay received a Thailand Homestay Standard award from the Ministry of Tourism and

Sports. The goal of this data collection focused on communication establishment and promotion of homestay tourism at this village. The one-year data collection period started from November 2019 to October 2020. To get the most realistic and reliable information, this study's target population was drawn from two main groups of information sources: (1) the academics who provide information of tourism overview and homestay tourism, and professionals in Communication Arts, Social Science, and Management; and (2) a chairperson and 12 members of Ban Rong Plai Na Homestay.

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview based on the research framework's identified issues. The average time spent at each data source is approximately 1 hour. To answer research problems and get the most comprehensive information, details of questions included the overall tourism situation and homestay tourism in Chiang Rai, and the storytelling creation principles for the homestay tourism business.

The data analysis method was based on the conceptual framework of storytelling and the concept of homestay tourism. In-depth interviews from the targeted samplings, including professionals and homestay entrepreneurs, were conducted to generate an overview of the tourism business and create innovative storytelling. The data in the same topic were collected from multiple sources to compare and to find the truth. When the information is completed, the data was analyzed using various concepts, dimensions, and theories to examine the data while in the research field to confirm the contextual truth. The data interpretation was made by finding the correlation of data and descriptive discussion. The conclusion was drawn from the phenomenon, theories, and conceptual frameworks.

Research Results

In response to this study's objectives, the author analyzed the overall context of homestay tourism in Chiang Rai to gain an in-depth understanding of a topic. The study found that the overall homestay tourism situation in Chiang Rai is popular among Thai and foreign tourists because this type of shared accommodation is affordable. At the same time, it also provided tourists with a glimpse into facets of Thai rural lifestyles, arts, and cultural exchange, or even allowed tourists to participate in the local product manufacturing activities. However, when it comes to homestay service principles, each community member had different perceptions and understanding of the homestay business. Most homestay businesses in this province did not value the "Homestay Standards" as they do not guarantee the total number of guests. This study also found other problems in Chiang Rai's homestay tourism, such as the unequal and limited distribution of business benefits in the community, the lack of marketing expertise, and the absence of identity presentation. The latter particularly affected tourists' experience as all accommodations, products, and tourism activities within the province are very similar. In addition, the homestay service in many communities has been changed from its original concept that the hosts would maintain their original way of life by not adding decoration or rebuilding their premises.

The Ban Rong Plai Na Homestay has a long history in homestay tourism. The village is enriched with many beautiful tourist attractions, natural resources, traditions, cultures, annual festivals, and an attractive rural lifestyle. These elements brought tourists to continue visiting the village. The village is situated at the river mouth where it meets with the Laos River before flowing through the Mekong River. This area was located in front of Wat Sriwangmool, the temple of this community. In the past, there was a large salee tree (or banyan tree) in the middle of the lotus pond within this temple. For this reason, the district was named "Nong Bua Salee."



Figure 1 Rong Plai Na Village Map

In the past, this homestay community was very successful because of many reasons. For example, it is located nearby Wat Rong Khun (the White Temple) — one of Thailand’s most famous tourist attraction, the charm of Lanna Community, living lifestyles according to the philosophy of sufficiency economy, agricultural lifestyles that have developed a learning community, local activities for tourists, and unity of the community. The villagers also have a basic understanding of tourism management as they were able to target customers by providing a clear presentation of their tourism services and product selling. These elements impacted tourists' visitation. However, with the current situation, the homestay was not as successful as before. One of many reasons was because the village is the bypass destination, not the main attraction. The other reasons were the increase of new emerging hotels and accommodations, as well as the transition of local leaders that interrupt the administration within the community. “Ban Rong Plai Na community has strong community members who hold each other with love and unity. They know who their target visitors are. They know how to sell their products. For example, they provided tourism services for government officers by focusing on educational tourism. At the same time, they still maintained their agricultural lifestyle as they transformed their community into a learning center for a self-sufficiency economy.”

To add value to homestay tourism, the community needs to create a story that can communicate the homestay destination's identity with the public. These innovative story techniques are summarized as follows:

(1) The homestay entrepreneurs must consider the primary local resources and then develop them into an experiential tourist destination that appropriately responds to tourists' needs. Local resources are history, art and culture, products or services, or agricultural lifestyles that are different from other communities (Mossberg, 2008) (see Figure 2).

“Tales from the legend or community’s history would work as it will present the living culture and geographical aspect in the past. This also includes beliefs in the sacred objects or gods that can be narrated into a story to create value for the community.”



Figure 2 The atmosphere in the Rong Plai Na Village

(2) Choose a storytelling method based on:

The layout of the narrative method must be simple and have few characters. The action of the story should focus on prominent characters, beginning with the conflict or the origin of the community, e.g., village name.

The central topic should be clearly focused on the story's theme. Only one selling point should be presented.

Choose a catchy narrative method that can affect target audiences' emotions (Woodside, 2010). For example, the community can create a love story (feelings) by weaving the story together with the combination of tourism areas and atmosphere, leading to the climax of the story. The tie-in promotional products or services can also be inserted while communicating personal experiences or legends.

Set a reasonable timeframe by scheduling the sequence of events on a calendar. The presentation of events must be consistent with the content of the story. For example, presenting in episodes or an anthology series, customizing the theme for each month, or sorting episodes through content categories.

Invite celebrity influencers, reviewers, or travelers to the attraction and let them communicate with the wider public, using their unique ways of communication.

“Invite the reviewers or influencer to visit and let them speak for us. Let them write many things about this community to spread the word on social media to encourage others to come. It is time for the community to invest. These people know how to do the presentation. They have good writing skills.”

Using symbols with images and visual elements instead of the narration can also communicate the homestay's detailed story.

(3) Dissemination through a wide range of communication channels, either social media or mainstream media, to provide customers with communication access to the homestay.

Based on the data collection, Ban Rong Plai Na village is one of Chiang Rai's famous accommodations that focuses on conveying good local community cultures and exchanging knowledge and traditions between tourists and people in the community. Moreover, the homestay also provides a variety of activities for guests to experience nature. Although homestay is only a supplementary business to add additional income for members in the community, entrepreneurs of Ban Rong Plain Na expect to succeed in their businesses. They want the community to be broader and well-known among tourists. Therefore, the innovative storytelling tactic will be an essential marketing strategy that can add more value to the community. Content that is associated with the way of life and cultural dimensions are also important as shown in figure 3.

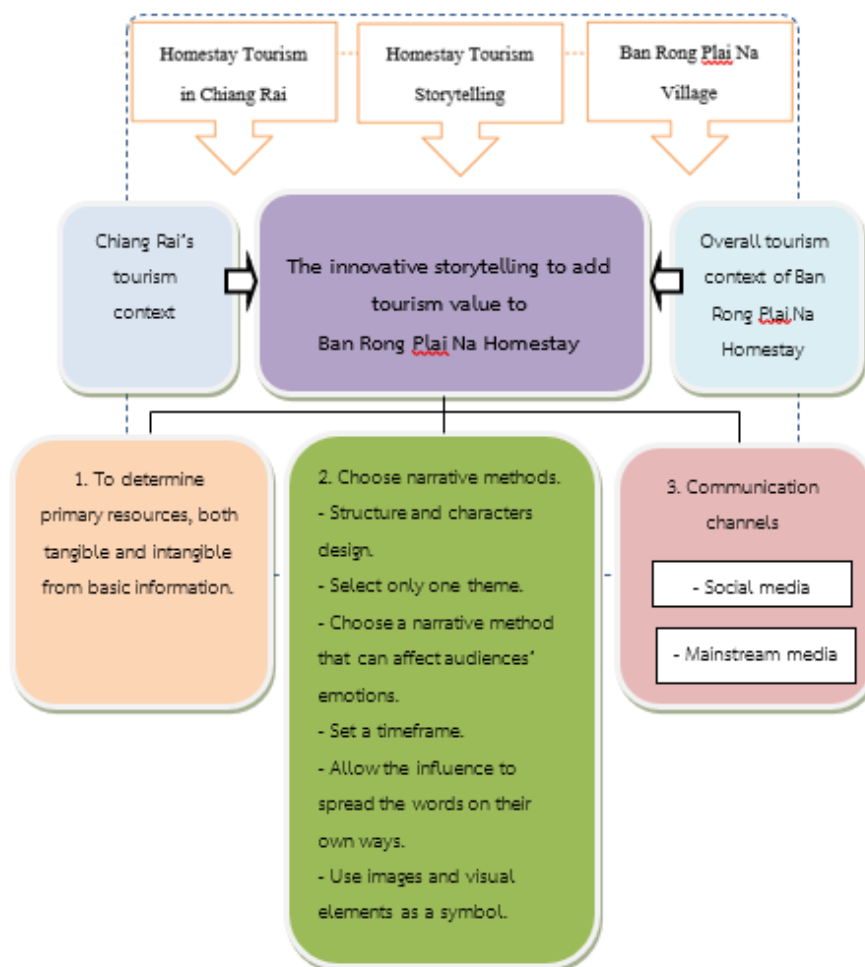


Figure 3 The Innovative Storytelling Framework to Add Tourism Value to Ban Rong Plai Na Homestay, Chiang Rai.

Discussion

This paper highlights the innovative storytelling approach for homestay tourism. Firstly, the community must consider the local resources before developing them to be a tourist attraction to respond to tourism demands appropriately. The examples of local resources such as products or history that are different from other communities. These resources can be developed into an experiential tourism destination by using innovative storytelling. The storytelling content can be a tale based on true stories or the village's history. This finding is in line with Nakabhop

(2018) study, which proposed that cultural tourism often focuses on community lifestyle and the revelation of local history, stories, beliefs, and community legends to increase the target audience's knowledge and impressions.

The selection of storytelling method must consider, firstly, an uncomplicated layout of the narrative structure and the actions of prominent characters. The story may begin with the conflicts or the origins of the community. Secondly, the story's theme should be clearly emphasized, and only one selling point should be presented. For example, the community may select only one type of local product that stands out and is made from natural ingredients to create a healthy story dimension. This finding links to the study of Holt and Thompson (2004) that discusses the dimensions of the protagonist's actions. Thirdly, select a narrative method that can affect the audiences' emotions. For example, the presentation of a love story (feelings) together with tourism areas, atmosphere, and tie-in promotional products or service in the climax. Fourthly, set a timeframe to release the story at appropriate timing, seasons, festivals, and contexts. A monthly theme or categories sorted in sequence, e.g., an anthology series, can also be planned. Fifthly, the community or the entrepreneurs should invite influencers, reviewers, or tourists to help promote the destination in a broader public awareness, using their unique ways of communication. According to this principle, consumers sometimes use storytelling through the consumption of products (which they own) (Hirschman, 1986; Kozinets, 2002; & Woodside & Chebat, 2001), and this is a different kind of community narrative technique. Finally, using visual symbols and visual elements can enhance the detailed story of the homestay very well. This finding links to the research of Warunsap, Wongprasit, Jiradetprapai, and Tekhanmag (2008) that discusses cultural communication through the narration by people within the communities. This will allow tourists to experience the culture in-depth and enable their cultural diversity learnings.

The dissemination through various communication channels, both on social media and mainstream media, provides customers with communication access, which will affect the visitors' attitudes and behaviors (Dellarocas, 2003; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). This study confirms the finding of Korez-Vide (2017) that previously proposed that entrepreneurs should publish stories through digital media to increase the reachability of the target audience (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Innovative storytelling development is a strategy that builds awareness. It can also attract and create demand for tourists. Therefore, homestay entrepreneurs should apply various techniques to create a story that narrates the destination's unique tourism experiences. This will lead to the creation of value-added communities and will drive local economic development.

Conclusion

Currently, the tourism situation in each region of Thailand has grown dramatically. It can be said that tourism is the primary source of income for the country. Homestay tourism is popular among Thai and foreign tourists who want to experience the Lanna lifestyle, culture, arts, Northern Thai traditions, or to enjoy the beautiful scenery in nature. Hence, the presentation for this type of tourism must be unique, creative, and different from the traditional presentation. The presentation can be done by using various storytelling formats based on the condition that the operator has defined, along with the guidelines for communicating through storytelling. Examples of these techniques are raising issues in conveying a story, selecting a narrative method that can affect the targeted audiences' emotions, selecting online characters or influencers, and selecting a timeframe to release the story at appropriate timing, etc. These techniques help to create unforgettable experiences for the tourists. It will also add value to the product or community, leading to long-term interactions with tourists and activities that can benefit the business. More important, it will be an essential guiding principle in creating

storytelling for different types of tourism businesses. In addition, it will help in building unique product/service identities within the industry.

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