

ADAPTING SERVICE BLUEPRINT WITH A TOUR PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores the flows and processes of a tour program to identify interactions between tourists, tour operators, and service providers. Additionally, it highlights critical problems and issues encountered during the tour that may decrease tourism performance and tourist satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach: Participant observation was employed to investigate a one-day trip. Researchers took part in the tour program as both tour operators and tourists, which enhanced data triangulation and ensured consistency in the findings. A service blueprint was adapted to diagram and visualise (1) tourism processes based on the tour itinerary, (2) the main actors involved in the tour program, and (3) tour logistics flows: physical, information, tourist, and financial. Problems and issues encountered during the tour were recorded to highlight critical supply chain and logistical concerns that may require improvement.

Findings: The adapted service blueprint proved useful for diagramming the tour program. It outlines the tourist journey and the interactions between tourists, the tour operator, and other service providers. Key touchpoints were identified and found to significantly impact tourist satisfaction. The findings also indicated that both the tour operator and the guide played crucial roles in enhancing tourist satisfaction and influencing overall tour performance. Some issues that arose during the trip, such as delayed public transport, were nearly impossible to eliminate, as they fell outside the tour operator's primary responsibilities and presented challenges that increased costs and extended the duration of the tour. Based on this study, several opportunities for future research in the areas of supply chain and marketing are suggested.

Practical implications: The study demonstrates how to visualise a tour program using the adapted service blueprint.

Originality/value: The study proposes the adapted service blueprint which can effectively map a tour program.

Keywords: tourism supply chain, tourism logistics, service blueprint, touchpoint, tourist experience

Article classification: research paper

Introduction

The tourism sector is one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors (UN Tourism, 2023). Its contribution to the economy—and vice versa—arises from the myriad activities and businesses involved (Aratuo and Etienne, 2019). These businesses encompass, but are not limited to, tour operators and agencies, travel and transportation, lodging and accommodation, shopping, recreation and entertainment, and food and beverage (Pizam, 2009; Piboonrungraj, 2012; Aratuo and Etienne, 2019). As a result, the tourism service system is complex and involves various stakeholders and resources (Gao et al., 2022).

From a marketing perspective, scholars generally agree that tourism branding, service quality, tourist satisfaction, and tourist experience are influenced by the different stakeholders involved in tourism (Faerber et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2022; Kim and So, 2022; Kim and So, 2024). These areas of research have garnered significant academic attention. Chen et al. (2021) have called for studies that explore how different tourism service providers affect the tourist experience. Similarly, Gao et al. (2022) have urged investigations into the supply-side aspects of tourism, which are often overlooked in the literature, specifically regarding the interactions and collaborations among stakeholders in the tourism network.

In response to these calls, this study adopts a supply chain approach. Scholars have suggested that understanding the "AS-IS" state of the supply chain—in terms of its network structure, processes, and configurations—is essential for further action (Lambert et al., 1998). Visualisation-aid tools are often employed to reveal this "AS-IS" status (Banomyong et al., 2019). This study adapts the visualisation-aid tool of service blueprinting to uncover the "AS-IS" status and activities of a tour program. The findings indicate that the tool requires adaptation but proves useful in identifying actors, interactions between tourists and service providers, as well as the flows and processes involved in the tour

program. Critical problems and issues encountered during the tours were revealed, indicating potential decreases in tourism performance related to cost, time, and tourist satisfaction.

Moreover, this study identified interactions not only between tourists and service providers (B2C) but also among various service providers (B2B) involved in the tour program, addressing the call for research on B2B collaboration (Gao et al., 2022). Based on the study's findings, further research on the tourism supply chain and logistics, as well as tourism marketing, is encouraged.

Literature review

Tourism supply chain

A tourism supply chain consists of multiple interrelated supply chains due to the involvement of various stakeholders in providing services to tourists. These stakeholders can be categorised as firms at the upstream end (e.g., businesses that supply resources and services) or at the downstream end (e.g., businesses that sell tourism products and services to tourists) (Zang et al., 2009; Piboonrungraj, 2012). Zang et al. (2009) outline a tourism network structure from an upstream-downstream perspective. The downstream end of a tourism supply chain includes tourists, while tour agents act as retailers, gathering and distributing tourism products. At the upstream end, tier-1 suppliers are considered service providers that directly supply tourism services to tourists (e.g., theme parks, shopping malls, restaurants, and hotels), while tier-2 suppliers are other companies that provide tourism-related goods and services to first-tier suppliers.

While Zang et al. (2009) suggested a tourism network structure, Piboonrungraj (2012) classified stakeholders based on their roles. First, input providers (e.g., food supply chains) supply resources and materials for service operations. Second, service providers (e.g., restaurants, hotels, and airlines) are key players that deliver services to tourists and significantly influence tourist satisfaction. Third, tour agents and operators serve as intermediaries and gatekeepers within the tourism supply chain, assembling tourism-related products and services for tourists while managing tourist flows. Fourth, freight transport facilitates the physical movement of goods between input providers and service providers. Fifth, passenger transport is responsible for transporting tourists. Finally, supportive businesses (e.g., souvenir shops and waste management companies) aid in supporting tourism operations.

The flows and processes of the tourism supply chain can be explained in three stages: pre-travel, on-travel, and post-travel (Piboonrungraj, 2012; Gao et al., 2022). These stages are adapted from the concepts of customer journey and customer experience, which originated in consumer research (Faerber et al., 2021; Gao et al., 2022). In the pre-travel stage, tourists engage in activities such as inquiring about information, arranging trips, and processing booking procedures. During the on-travel stage, they travel and receive services from various providers. The post-travel stage encompasses all activities tourists undertake after the trip is completed, including providing feedback.

Performance measures used in the tourism supply chain can be categorised into three groups (Zang et al., 2009). Financial performance measures include revenue, profit, and costs (e.g., distribution, production, and inventory). Operational performance measures focus on response time, lead time, and product quality and availability. Overall supply chain performance measures primarily centre on tourist satisfaction.

Tourist experience and touchpoints

The tourist experience is influenced by various stakeholders and touchpoints (Gao et al., 2022). From a consumer perspective, these touchpoints refer to the interactions between customers, products, services, firms, and other influencers (Kim and So, 2024). Kim and So (2024) further explain that touchpoints are perceived by tourists when services are realised, occurring at the moment service providers and tourists interact within a service scope.

In the tourism literature, Kim and So (2022) note that there is limited knowledge regarding touchpoints and the tourist experience. Specifically, there are questions about how we define and identify touchpoints in tourism, which touchpoints have the most significant impact on the creation of tourist experiences, and how multiple touchpoints integrate within the service delivery process to ensure superior tourist experiences.

Service blueprinting

Many approaches can be used to improve tour performance and enhance the tourist experience (see, for example, Zang et al., 2009; Piboonrungraj, 2012; Gao et al., 2022). One such tool is the service blueprint, pioneered by Shostack (1982), which has been utilised to explore improvements in the tourism service system (Gao et al., 2022). A service blueprint helps visualise activities, steps of service production, and the actors involved, providing a comprehensive overview of the design of tourism products (Gyimóthy, 2000; Gao et al., 2022). It enables organisations to identify and address inefficiencies and weaknesses in the service process (Harris and Van Der Veen, 2020).

Service blueprinting and touchpoints are interrelated concepts. While service blueprinting reflects how a company realises its services for further improvement, touchpoints illustrate the customer's perspective on what occurs during the service experience (Kim and So, 2024). Touchpoint mapping, also known as customer journey mapping, extends beyond the service firm's scope to include customer thoughts and feelings, whereas service blueprinting is limited to services in action (Harris & Van Der Veen, 2020).

Creating a service blueprint involves five components and four steps (Bitner et al., 2008) (Figure 1). First, customer activities are delineated, encompassing all steps that customers take as part of the service delivery process that is performed by the contact employees. These activities can be depicted chronologically. Second, the actions of contact employees are outlined, both onstage and backstage. Onstage activities are separated from customer activities by the line of interaction (i.e., touchpoints). These operational activities are visible to customers and are performed by the contact employees who deliver service to customers. Backstage activities are separated from onstage activities by the line of visibility. These are invisible to customers although they are performed by the contact employees. Third, support processes are separated from backstage activities by the line of internal interaction, which includes all activities performed by the not-contact employees but contribute to producing products and services. These processes also refer to the systems and procedures undertaken by employees in support of service delivery (Pandey and Kulshrestha, 2021). Finally, physical evidence is delineated, encompassing all tangible elements that customers encounter.

Physical evidence	
Customer actions	
Onstage/visible contact employee actions	Line of interaction
Backstage/invisible contact employee actions	Line of visibility
Support processes	Line of internal interaction

Figure 1: Service blueprinting (adapted from Bitner et al., 2008)

Service blueprinting clearly has limitations and needs to be adapted for investigating the supply-side aspects of tourism. Firstly, onstage and backstage activities are performed not only by tour agents and operators (firms at the downstream end) but also by other service providers, such as restaurants and hotels (tier-1 suppliers). There was only one firm (a hotel) in Bitner et al. (2008) and Pandey and Kulshrestha (2021). However, due to the complex nature of tourism, the contact employees come from different firms. Therefore, both onstage and backstage activities must be expanded to include tier-1 suppliers.

Secondly, support processes are activities performed or the systems and procedures undertaken to support the service delivery. In the tourism context, generally, these support processes can be the systems, procedures, and not-contact employees of service providers and tour operators. The activities should be expanded to these entities of companies in various supply chains that provide tourism-related goods and services to tier-1 suppliers and tour operators.

Due to these challenges, this study's scope is limited to tier-1 suppliers and support processes are not considered. Future research should explore tier-2 suppliers and other systems, procedures, and not-contact employees of companies in various supply chains that provide tourism-related goods and services to tier-1 suppliers and tour operators.

Research methodology

Tour programme

The tour program used in this study was a one-day trip offered to both international and Thai students at the International College for Sustainability Studies (ISWUIC), Srinakharinwirot University. The tour itinerary was created by the second author, who has over 10 years of experience as a tour planner and has used this itinerary for more than 3 years. The trip was designed as a tailor-made private tour, featuring three destinations: the Grand Palace, Wat Pho, and Wat Arun (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The itinerary for the study (authors)

The investigation for this study was conducted during the trip in March 2024, which included 67 Thai and international students. The second author acted as the tour operator, while a professional tour guide with over 10 years of experience in tour guiding was hired to lead the group.

Participant observation

Participant observation was employed to investigate this tour program. All authors, except the first, participated in the trip, taking on roles as both tour operators and tourists to observe and record all activities that occurred. The second author served both as a tour operator and data collector, while the remaining authors acted solely as data collectors. The main activities focused on the tourists' actions as outlined in the itinerary. During the observation, most tourists' activities aligned with the itinerary; however, some deviations were noted and recorded in field memos. Other activities performed by the tour operator (the second author), the tour guide, and other stakeholders involved in the trip were also documented. The field memos served as the primary data source for generating the blueprint.

After the trip, all data collectors developed their own blueprints separately, using Figure 1 as a guide. This process enhanced the research's trustworthiness through data triangulation. The first author (etic perspective) and the second author (emic perspective) then analysed and integrated all blueprints to create a comprehensive service blueprint for this study. Further adaptations were made as necessary to ensure the blueprint was well-suited to the study's context.

Findings

Adapted service blueprinting

The adaptation of a service blueprint was an iterative process. The chronological stages include pre-travel, on-travel, and post-travel stages (Gao et al., 2022), illustrating the activities in which tourists engage during their trip (Figure 3). The tourism process is defined as encompassing all tourist activities according to the itinerary, as well as other activities performed by service staff involved in tourism. Tourist activities consist of physical evidence—tangible and sensory stimuli to which tourists are exposed—and the activities undertaken by tourists, which may include those specified in the itinerary as well as other spontaneous actions during the trip.

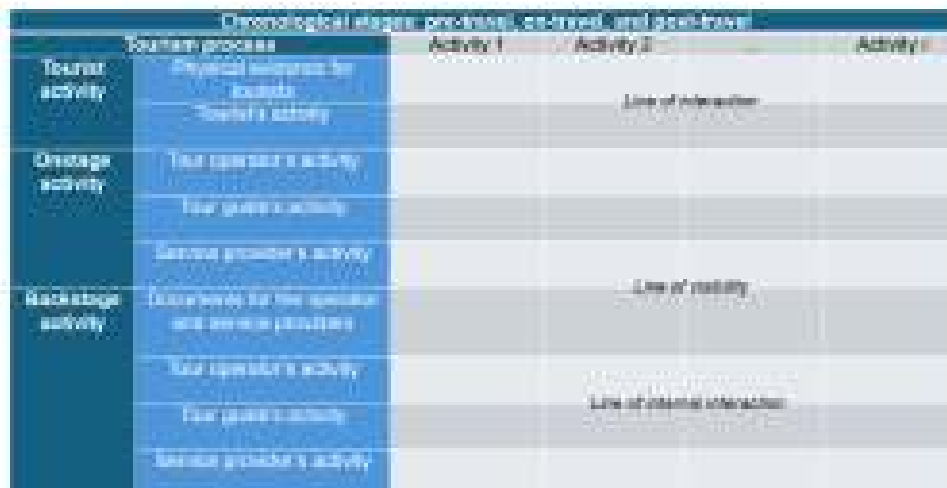


Figure 3: The adapted service blueprint (authors)

Onstage activities include tasks performed by the tour operator, the tour guide, and other service providers. In this study, the guide is considered a Ser-1 service provider. While tour operators are responsible for planning tours and itineraries, assembling tourism products and services, and coordinating with service providers, tour guides lead, communicate with, and educate tourists, facilitating interactions between them and other service providers (e.g., destinations and hotels) (Cetin and Yarcin, 2017). Thus, a tour guide acts as a representative of the tour operator and is responsible for ensuring the smooth process of the tour itinerary on behalf of the operator (Cetin and Yarcin, 2017). Additionally, in this study, the guide is distinguished from other service providers, as they engage with tourists throughout the entire trip, while service providers, such as destinations, interact with tourists for only a brief period. The activities of other service providers are also considered part of the onstage activity, as they are delivered directly to the tourists (i.e., they are touchpoints).

The backstage activity encompasses tasks performed by the tour operator and Ser-1 suppliers. Documents for the operator and service providers are introduced in the blueprint, serving as contracts that outline the commitments regarding the tourism products and services provided to tourists. Activities carried out by the tour operator, the guide, and other service providers are included in this stage. The adapted service blueprint shown in Figure 3 was further used to illustrate the tourism process as illustrated in Figure 4 and 5.

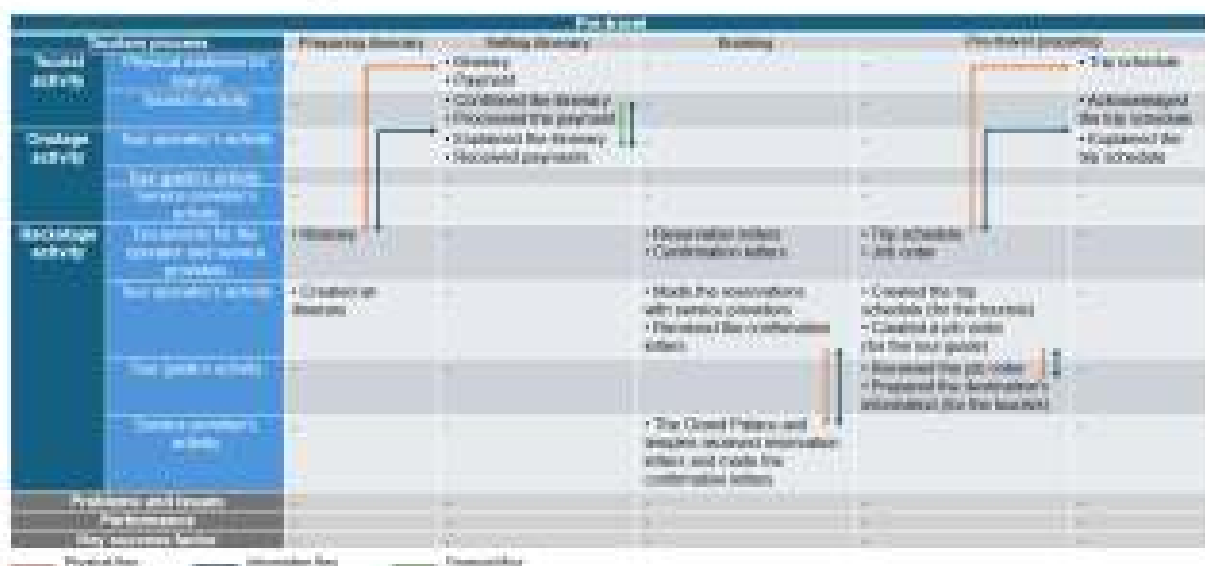


Figure 4: The adapted service blueprint for the pre-travel stage (authors)

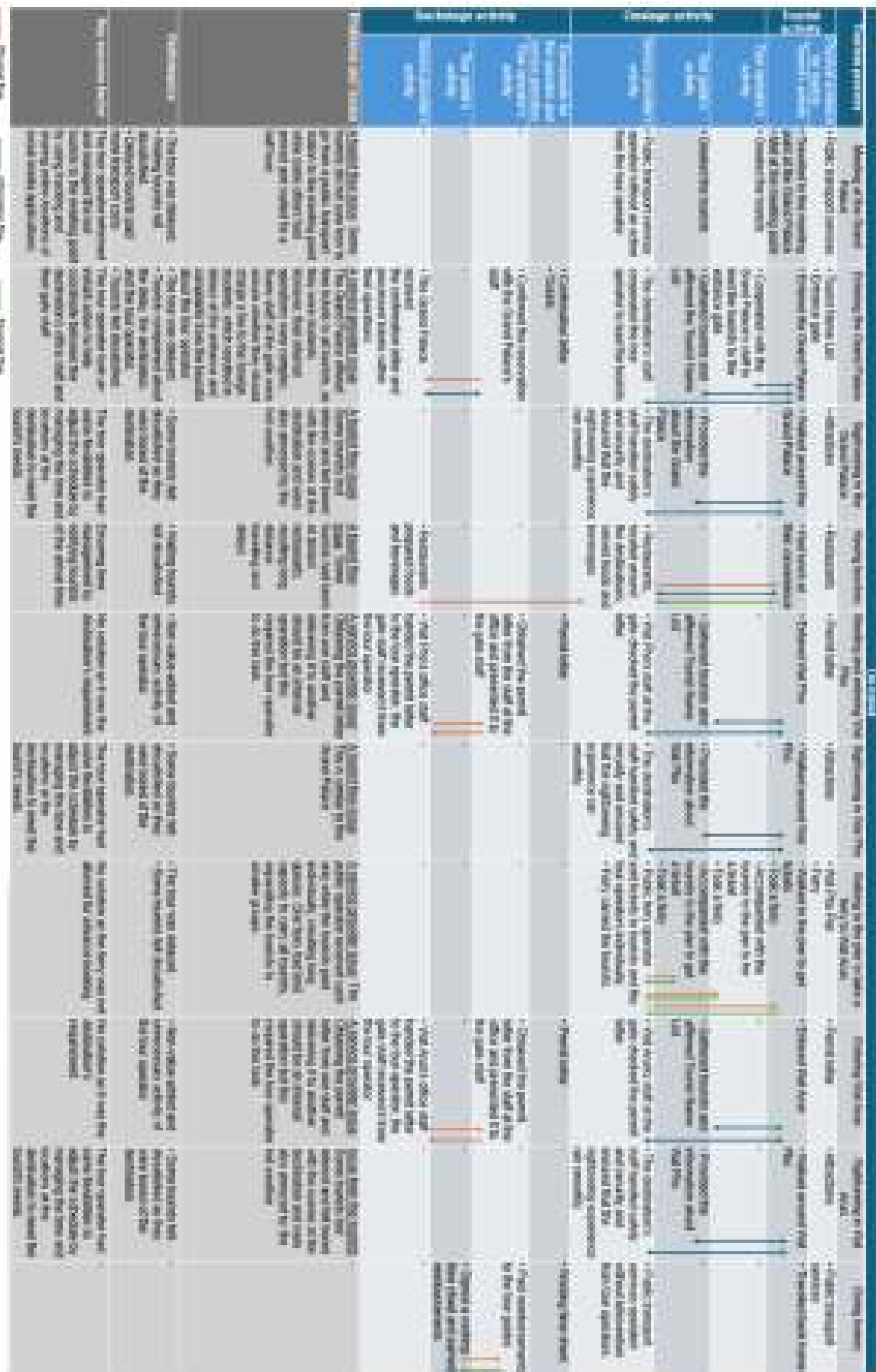


Figure 5. The adapted service blueprint for the on-travel stage (authors)

Adapted service blueprinting across all three stages

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the adapted service blueprints for the pre-travel and on-travel stages. The post-travel stage could not be developed in this study, as it was a one-day trip, and most activities between service providers and the tour operator were completed on the same day. Future research should explore the interactions and collaborations among these B2B firms involved in the post-travel stage.

Additionally, each blueprint includes three flows: physical, information, and financial. For example, in Figure 4, the itinerary and trip schedule were delivered to the students as an online document, resulting in both information and physical flows, while the payments made represent the financial flow. In all figures, the tourist flows are depicted horizontally within the tourism process. Problems and issues encountered during the tours are highlighted as critical supply chain and logistical concerns that may require improvement.

Discussions

The findings indicated that the adapted service blueprint can be used to map the tour program, identify actors and their activities, and reveal operational problems and weaknesses in the tourism chain. Several lessons learned from the study are as follows.

First, the tour operator played a crucial role in addressing problems that arose during the trip. This operator was essential because the trip was neither commercial nor routine. The tour operator and guide could collaborate in real time to operate the tour efficiently. In commercial contexts, a tour guide, rather than an operator, typically approaches to problems. Because tour operators conduct pilot trips to inspect all destinations, activities, and potential issues before the actual tours, tour guides are generally encounter and solve most problems easily.

Secondly, onstage and backstage activities often occur simultaneously. In some trips, multiple tour operators are needed to manage challenges effectively. For instance, at our case study locations (Wat Pho and Wat Arun), the tour operator was required to present a permit letter from the destination's office at the gate, even though the letter was supposed to be delivered internally. This necessitated at least two staff members: one to care for the tourists and another to handle backstage operations. However, this issue fell outside the tour operator's primary responsibilities and posed challenges that increased costs and extra time for the operator. Additionally, public transport also impacted tour performance, adding extra tasks for the operator. These problems were nearly impossible to eliminate.

Several opportunities for future research emerge from this study. From a supply chain perspective, the service blueprint serves as a basis for visualising a tour program. Since this study focused on a domestic trip, examining an international trip may show more complex and would be worthwhile to investigate to make the blueprint robust. Further studies should integrate support processes in the adapted service blueprint. Other visualisation tools, such as swim lane mapping, should also be employed to reveal decision-making processes in the pre-travel stage, where various information flows and decisions across multiple parties exist.

From a marketing perspective, several touchpoints were identified and found to have significant impact on tourist satisfaction. The service performance of staff at destinations also affected the tour's performance and, consequently, overall tourist satisfaction. The tour operator and guide played an important role in enhancing tourist satisfaction and influencing overall tour success. Interestingly, allowing tourists to exercise free will—wandering and choosing their meals at their convenience—enhanced their satisfaction but also introduced new challenges (e.g., delays). Future studies should explore the relationships between tourist activities and those performed by individual service staff, as these interactions can significantly affect both tourist satisfaction and tour costs.

Conclusion

In this study, a service blueprint was adapted to diagram and visualise the main actors involved in a tour program. Tourism processes were revealed according to a tour itinerary, while four logistics flows were identified: physical, information, tourist, and financial. Problems and issues encountered during the tours were highlighted as critical supply chain and logistical concerns that need improvement.

The primary contribution of the study is the adapted service blueprint that can be applied to the tourism context. An application of the adapted tool was demonstrated through a case study of a student field trip. Breaking down the tour programs using the concepts of logistics and supply chain can provide insights into problems and issues, as well as key success factors for tour programs. The study suggests further research opportunities in the supply chain and marketing areas.

The adapted service blueprint offers practical implications. The study demonstrates how to employ such tool to diagram and visualise tour programs as well as to identify problems and improvement opportunities. Understanding current tour operations should guide practitioners in better addressing problems and challenges, and in developing their tours to be more efficient and beneficial.

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