

Understanding Mini Club Managers' Perceptions of Kid-Friendly Hotels' Marketing Practices in Turkey: An Application of Analytic Hierarchy Process

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine the priority of kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices from mini club managers' points of view with AHP technique. To accomplish that aim, data was gathered from 10 mini club managers who are employed in kid-friendly hotels located in Antalya, Muğla and İzmir. This study is descriptive in nature and tries to identify a situation as it exists. With the help of data collection form, mini club managers were asked to make pairwise comparisons about the relative importance of kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices. Data was analyzed with the help of Expert Choice software. Findings demonstrated that children's health and safety, price options, activities, food and beverage options and room options for children were clarified as the primary factors, respectively. Findings of this study are significant in terms of providing marketing tips for revising kid-friendly hotels' practices in accordance with the perceptions of mini club managers.

Key words: Marketing to children, Kid-friendly hotels, mini club managers, Analytic Hierarchy Process.

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INTRODUCTION

Children have a substantial influence in household spending (Rose, 2007: 23). Influence of children in household spending extends far beyond the products that they consume or use. This relates to such choices as buying a house, organizing holidays, choosing holiday destinations, buying a car, or even clothes for mother or father (McNeal, 1999; Mathiot, 2010). Thus, emergence of marketing efforts towards children in the recent years have become apparent.

Researchers indicate three main factors in the emergence of marketing efforts towards children. First, today's children have considerable amounts of money to spend on needs and wants of their own, followed by the freedom to spend it. This makes them an important primary market (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001: 61). Second, children are also a future market (McNeal, 1992). In fact, children develop brand loyalty at an early age, and favorable attitudes toward brands last well into adulthood (McNeal, 1992). For this reason, marketers intensify their efforts to develop brand relationships with young consumers, beginning when they are toddlers (Story and French, 2004: 3). Third, children have a dominant role in determining how to spend family's disposable income (Özata, 2007). In other words, children constitute an important market of influencers.

Due to developments in theory and practice, marketing to children has found an important place among other types of marketing (McNeal, 1999). According to this type of marketing, children should be informed, their needs and wants should be listened to and moreover they should be persuaded by marketers. The relevance of marketing to children to practice attracted the attention of academics on this issue and numerous academic studies with different perspectives adopted were carried out recently. These studies frequently focused on such issues as; the development of a child into a consumer (McNeal, Herndon & Yeh, 1998; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001; Ward, 1974), influence of children on purchasing decisions of their families (Gülerarslan, 2011; Işın & Alkibay, 2011), marketing healthful eating to children in the context of ethical marketing practices (Grier, Mensinger, Huang, Kumanyika & Stettler, 2007; Raju, Rajagopal & Gilbride, 2010; Story & French, 2004; Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2007), ethics in marketing to children (Grimm, 2004) and ethics in child targeted advertising (Karaca, Pekyaman & Güney, 2007; Nash & Basini, 2005). Academics studying in the field of tourism pointed out such issues as; factors that influence the hotel selection of families with children (Emir and Pekyaman, 2010), how children influence family's decision of attending group package tours (Wang, Hsieh, Yeh ve Tsai, 2004), children's expectations and level of satisfaction from family holidays (Gram, 2005), and the determination of marketing practices of kid-friendly hotels operating in Turkey (Özel, 2013).

Referring to the practical relevance of the subject, this study aims to determine mini club managers' priority of marketing practices of kid-friendly hotels in Turkey. Findings of this study are significant in terms of providing marketing guidance for current and future kid-friendly hotels operating in Turkey.

MARKETING TO CHILDREN IN KID-FRIENDLY HOTELS

Children's role in influencing the family's decision to buy and their influence in the level of total satisfaction for the service delivered fostered many businesses in the tourism industry to adopt marketing practices for children. For this reason, hotels, like other establishments in

tourism sector, have begun to diversify their products and services in accordance with the practices of marketing to children. For instance, a hotel chain in Caribbean has teamed up with "Sesame Street" to make its resorts more appealing for children (Economist, 2006). Thus, children can enjoy their holiday with the characters from Sesame Street in this resort. Another hotel in Algarve, offers a wide spectrum of activities such as soccer, t-shirt painting, magic shows, slumber parties, fashion shows, hiking, dolphin and seal shows. In a hotel in the South of Cyprus, towels and slippers are designed for both children and parents. Additionally, children can call reception and order milk and cookies before sleep (Gönül, 2007). German Ministry of Economics and Labor determined the qualifications of a good family hotel under the sub headings of business philosophy, location of the company, garden, equipments in the room, baby extras, child extras, security, playgrounds and cleaning units (Yılmaz, 2007: 54-56).

In Turkey, the scope and conditions of kid-friendly hotels have not been determined by the ministry or any other government agencies. For this reason, assessments of independent auditing companies, tour operators and customers have become influential in determination of kid-friendly hotels in Turkey by now. Recently, hotels in Turkey are in an effort to make their physical facilities and services compatible with marketing practices for children. For that purpose, arrangements are made in the physical structure of guest rooms. To exemplify, the number of family rooms proportionally increases, baby cradles and cots are placed in family rooms on demand, child-proof locks are inserted to plugs and special attention is given to balcony and terrace doors which should be lockable. Children's pools and water-based recreational facilities are widely offered and kids' clubs are created in hotels. Moreover, babysitting and health services are available 24 hours a day (Ölmezoğlu, 2011). Age segmentation can be observed among kids' clubs such as baby club, mini club, junior club, and teenager clubs. With this practice, kid-friendly hotels try to identify the differentiating requirements and desires of varying age groups. In a recent study conducted by Emir and Pekyaman (2010) in Turkey, families with children were asked to specify the factors that influence their choices of hotels. The most important factors were determined as; availability of child bed and closets suitable for children, availability of child menus at restaurants, importance given to hygiene, availability of pools for children and the availability of banisters near staircases, respectively. Surprisingly, location of hotel was found to be the least important factor in the choice of hotel. Another practice in the context of marketing to children in hotels relates to the price. Discounts are applied for specified age groups in kid-friendly hotels in Turkey. In particular, there is no charge or a considerable discount for children under 12 years of age in many hotels in Turkey (İçöz, 2001: 323). Besides, second child of the same family can be accommodated in the kid-friendly hotel at a discounted rate.

Another issue that should be addressed among the scope of marketing to children in kid-friendly hotels is mini clubs. Mini clubs among kid-friendly hotels offer a variety of games and educational activities for children during their holidays in a specially designed area designed under the supervision of qualified instructors. Here, the main goal is to contribute to the development of children's self-respect, arouse their interest towards learning and contribute to the mental and physical development of children. Mini clubs give children the opportunity to spend quality time while at the same time helping them to socialize with peers from different cultures. These clubs do not only present spaces for children where they can spend their free time but rather they provide an atmosphere for children to learn by having fun. For this reason, a great emphasis is placed on mini clubs in kid-friendly hotels as a separate division. Management of mini clubs and requirements of mini club staff employed here also appear as two other important issues. For instance, mini club staff should have

pedagogical training, speak one or two foreign languages, and be patient, and love children and nature.

Services offered in mini clubs play a significant role in providing quality time for families with children in the hotel. These services also provide positive experiences for families staying with their children. Therefore, it needs to be clarified which practices and services offered in mini clubs should be given greater weight. An examination of related literature reveals that, mini club managers' perceptions of the services offered in mini clubs and the level of importance they attribute to these services lack. However, it would bring benefit to understand mini club managers' perceptions of these services, who are primarily responsible from the services offered in mini clubs in kid-friendly hotels. This study is believed to contribute to theoretical and practical knowledge in terms of determining the level of importance of these services from mini club managers' points of view and providing helpful marketing tips for practitioners. Mini club managers can observe and detect problems better and they are capable of distinguishing more beneficial practices, which create positive experiences for children, from solely commercial practices, which do not create any added value for children. For this reason, determining mini club managers' perceptions of services offered in mini clubs and sharing the findings with the senior management will make it easier to modify or remove solely commercial practices and create positive experiences for both children and parents.

METHOD

The aim of this study is to determine the priority of kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices from mini club managers' points of view. Determining these priorities is expected to be guiding for hotel managements to realize which kids-marketing practices they should focus on and which other practices they should direct their investments to. On the other hand, discriminating the least important marketing practices will also help hotel managements to avoid directing excessive financial and human resources to these areas.

Development of Data Collection Form

A two-stage process was adopted for the development of data collection form. In the first stage, Özel's (2013) study was referred to in order to determine a full list of kids marketing practices offered for children in kid-friendly hotels. These practices were classified under five main categories which are called "room options for children", "food and beverage options for children", "activities for children", "price options" and "children's health and safety". Likewise, marketing practices towards children which took place under each of these categories were taken from Özel's study. In this study, 10 marketing practices were compiled under the category of room options for children, 13 were compiled under the category of food and beverage options for children, 64 were compiled under the category of activities for children, 2 were compiled under the category of price options and 11 practices were compiled under the category of children's health and safety.

The second stage consisted of eliminating these marketing practices which took place under five main categories according to the views of mini club managers. The reason of keeping the number of marketing practices limited is to prevent confusion that might occur during mini club managers' pairwise comparisons at the stage of data collection. At this stage, a total of ten mini club managers, who are employed in kid-friendly hotels located in Antalya, Muğla and Izmir, have been consulted. In the selection of mini club managers, willingness to participate in research has been sought. Mini club managers have been asked to rate the level

of importance of each marketing practice with a scale ranging from “very unimportant” (1) to “very important” (5). Completed forms were sent to researcher back via e-mail.

According to the evaluations of 10 mini club managers, marketing practices which have a score of 4.50 and above were defined as the most important ones. Thus, a list of the most important practices under each category was formed. In the final version of data collection form, 3 practices took place under the category of “room options for children”, 5 practices took place under the category of “food and beverage options for children”, 7 practices took place under the category of “activities for children”, 2 practices took place under the category of “price options” and 7 practices took place under the category of “children’s health and safety”. Consequently, out of 100 marketing practices, 24 practices were selected and used for further pairwise comparisons. Data collection form was given the final shape in a way that facilitated making pairwise comparisons for mini club managers. The hierarchy of marketing practices of kid-friendly hotels can be seen in Figure 1. As seen in the figure, a simple three-level hierarchical structure was constructed. The problem hierarchy consists of objective, main categories and marketing practices at the bottom. The highest level of the hierarchy is the overall goal; to construct an evaluation structure for determining the priority of kid-friendly hotels’ marketing practices. Under the overall goal, the second level represents the main categories comprising kid-friendly hotels’ marketing practices. Various sets of marketing practices associated with each category in the second level are linked to the third level. Mini club managers’ experience and kid-friendly hotels’ business expertise in operating a mini club were also included in the data collection form.

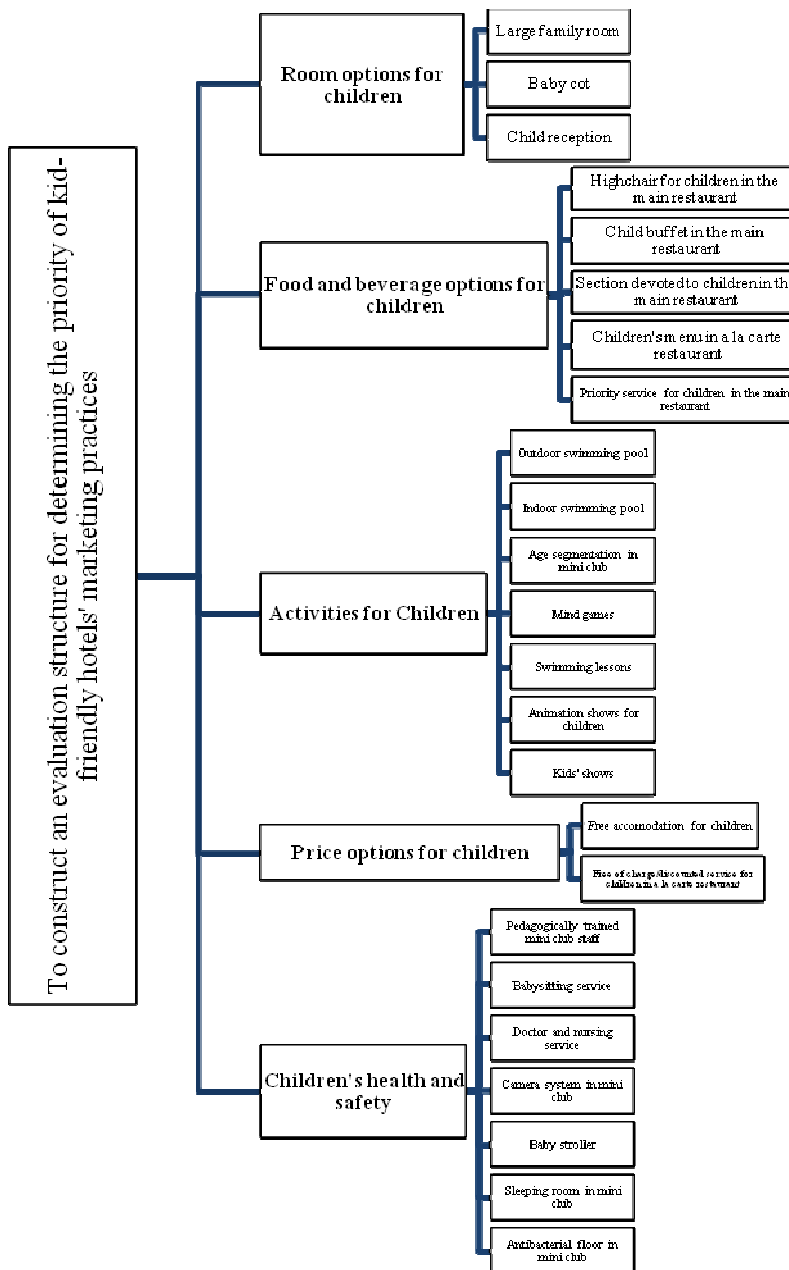


Figure 1. The Hierarchy of Kid-Friendly Hotels' Marketing Practices

Data Collection

Data was collected from 10 mini club managers during July and August in 2014. This time, researcher conducted interviews with 10 mini club managers and they were asked to make pairwise comparisons about the relative importance of kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices (categories and practices, respectively). The 9-point intensity of relative importance scale of Saaty (1980) was used for making this comparison (Table 1). For example, if practice A is extremely important with respect to practice B, then the intensity of this comparison is 9. In this case, practice B is 1/9 times important as practice A. Explanation of the filling out procedure to respondents and clarification of the points that cannot be understood contributed to gathering complete and consistent data from the respondents.

Table 1. 9-Point Intensity of Relative Importance Scale

Intensity of Relative Importance	Definition	Explanation
1	Equal importance	Two activities contribute equally to objective 1.
3	Moderate importance of one over another	Experience and judgment slightly favor one activity over another
5	Essential or strong importance	Experience and judgment strongly favor one activity over another
7	Demonstrated importance	An activity is strongly favored, and its dominance is demonstrated in practice
9	Extreme importance	The evidence favoring one activity over another is of the highest possible order of affirmation
2, 4, 6, 8	Intermediate values between the two adjacent judgments	When a compromise is needed

Source: Adapted from Saaty (1980).

Data Analysis

Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) was employed in the analysis of data. The AHP is a multi-objective decision-making tool which was introduced by Thomas L. Saaty. It uses the pairwise comparison method to rank order the criteria and alternatives of a problem which are formulated in hierarchical structure (Ku and Fan, 2009: 486). Before the analysis of data, consistency of each respondent was analyzed with the help of Expert Choice software. The consistency ratios for all the answers of 10 respondents resulted in acceptable values below 0.10 (Saaty, 1980). So, data analysis was carried out on 10 consistent questionnaires. To obtain an aggregate measure of the pairwise comparisons of all managers involved in this study, the geometric mean of the individual assessments was used (Chen, 2006). Geometric means of answers of 10 respondents were calculated with the help of Excel software.

Findings

Table 2 summarizes mini club managers' experience and kid-friendly hotels' business expertise in operating a mini club. As seen in the Table, kid-friendly hotels, where sample individuals of this study are employed, have a business expertise in operating a mini club for 10 years and more. Likewise, mini club managers have mini club expertise of 2 years or more, except one manager in the sample.

Table 2. Mini Club Managers' and Kid-Friendly Hotels' Expertise

Kid-Friendly Hotels' Level of Business Expertise in Operating a Mini Club		Mini Club Managers' Level of Experience	
Hotel 1	12 years	Mini Club Manager 1	5 years
Hotel 2	18 years	Mini Club Manager 2	2 months
Hotel 3	10 years	Mini Club Manager 3	10 years
Hotel 4	18 years	Mini Club Manager 4	2 years
Hotel 5	13 years	Mini Club Manager 5	5 years
Hotel 6	13 years	Mini Club Manager 6	8 years
Hotel 7	15 years	Mini Club Manager 7	15 years
Hotel 8	15 years	Mini Club Manager 8	7 years
Hotel 9	14 years	Mini Club Manager 9	9 years
Hotel 10	5 years	Mini Club Manager 10	17 years

Table 3 summarizes the consistency tests for marketing practices of kid-friendly hotels. As suggested by Saaty (1980), if the consistency ratio is smaller than 0.10, then the comparisons

are acceptable. As understood from the table, the group consistency ratio was found to be 0.03, which indicates an acceptable group judgment. Additionally, calculation of consistency ratios of five categories resulted in acceptable values below 0.10 (Table 3).

Table 3. Consistency Tests for Marketing Practices of Kid-Friendly Hotels

Level	Consistency Ratio	Consistency Test
Goal	0.03	Accepted
Categories	0.04	Accepted
<i>Room options for children</i>	0.01	Accepted
<i>Food and beverage options for children</i>	0.01	Accepted
<i>Activities for children</i>	0.02	Accepted
<i>Price options for children</i>	0.00	Accepted
<i>Children's health and safety</i>	0.04	Accepted

The data obtained as a result of the pairwise comparison of the categories and practices are given in Table 4. According to mini club managers, the most important category is children's health and safety (0.532). Other important practices are; price options for children (0,205), activities for children (0,115), food and beverage options for children (0,100) and room options for children (0,048) based on their perceived importance. The importance rankings of each practice under these categories have also been calculated separately with the help of software package. For instance, large family room is the most important practice (0.540) within room options for children, which is followed by baby cot (0.297) and child reception (0.163). Section devoted to children in the main restaurant (0.295) and child buffet in the main restaurant (0.295) have emerged as two more important practices within food and beverage options for children. In this category, the least important practice was found to be children's menu in a la carte restaurant (0.082). In terms of activities for children, outdoor swimming pool (0.295) was seen as much more important than the rest of practices. Age segmentation in mini club (0.241), animation shows for children (0.137) and mind developing games (0.120) shared the second, third and fourth places, respectively. The least important practice within this category is swimming lessons (0.045).

The category of price options for children had two practices and free accommodation for children (0.875) has emerged as much more important than free of charge or discounted service for children in a la carte restaurant (0.125). As determined by respondents of this study, children's health and safety is the most important category among kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices. According to mini club managers, the most important practice about children's health and safety is; doctor and nursing services (0.321). This is followed by the pedagogically trained mini club staff (0.244), antibacterial floor in mini club (0.155), camera system in mini club (0.094), and babysitting service (0.084). Sleeping room in mini club (0.063) was regarded as relatively unimportant while baby stroller (0.039) was regarded as the least important practice within this category.

Table 4. Local Weight and Global Weight for Each Practice in Marketing Practices of Kid-Friendly Hotels

Categories	Local Weights ¹	Practices	Local Weights	Global Weights ²	Ranking
Room options for children	0.048	Large family room	0.540	0.026	16
		Baby cot	0.297	0.014	21-22
		Child reception	0.163	0.008	24
Food and beverage options for children	0.100	Highchair for children in the main restaurant	0.156	0.016	15
		Child buffet in the main restaurant	0.295	0.029	9-10
		Section devoted to children in the main restaurant	0.295	0.029	9-10
		Children's menu in a la carte restaurant	0.082	0.008	21-22
		Priority service for children in the main restaurant	0.172	0.017	13
Activities for children	0.115	Outdoor swimming pool	0.295	0.034	7
		Indoor swimming pool	0.080	0.009	18-19
		Age segmentation in mini club	0.241	0.028	11
		Mind games	0.120	0.014	17
		Swimming lessons	0.045	0.005	23
		Animation shows for children	0.137	0.016	14
		Kids' shows	0.083	0.010	18-19
Price options for children	0.205	Free accommodation for children	0.875	0.180	4
		Free of charge/discounted service for children in a la carte restaurant	0.125	0.026	20
Children's health and safety	0.532	Pedagogically trained mini club staff	0.244	0.130	2
		Babysitting service	0.084	0.045	6
		Doctor and nursing services	0.321	0.171	1
		Camera system in mini club	0.094	0.050	5
		Baby stroller	0.039	0.021	12
		Sleeping room in mini club	0.063	0.034	8
		Antibacterial floor in mini club	0.155	0.082	3

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study have helped to determine how mini club managers prioritize kid-friendly hotels' marketing practices. According to the results obtained with the help of AHP, children's health and safety, price options, activities, food and beverage options and room options for children were clarified as the primary factors, respectively. The results indicate that children's health and safety is the most important practice that kid-friendly hotels should take into account while targeting kids' market. In this category, doctor and nursing service and pedagogically trained mini club staff stand out among other practices. This reveals the fact that mini club managers, like parents, give more importance to the health and safety aspects. Unless health and safety conditions are met sufficiently, facilities, services and all types of marketing efforts directed at children do not mean any sense. Therefore, kid-friendly hotels are required to have permanent doctor and nursing services for families with children. Likewise, at least some of the mini club staff should have pedagogical training. In this category, mini club managers also pay attention to health and safety issues such as antibacterial floor and camera system in mini club. Health and safety issues are expected to be carefully considered when a kid-friendly hotel investment or renovation in kid-friendly hotels is made.

Results indicate that, price is the second most important factor mini club managers take into consideration while targeting families with children. In other words, mini club managers

¹ Local weight is derived from judgment with respect to a single category

² Global weight is derived from multiplication by the weight of the category

attach importance to price, which is also seen as an important marketing mix element for adults. In this category, free accommodation for children was found much more important than free of charge or discounted service for children in a la carte restaurant. For this reason, it will be useful for hotels, which plan to invest in this area, to provide promoting price reductions for families traveling with children. Moreover, second child traveling together with family can take the advantage of discounts at a certain rate.

The category of activities for children has been identified as the third most important factor by mini club managers. In this category, outdoor swimming pool comes the first among other practices. This can be the result of kid-friendly hotels serving mostly in summer season. Age segmentation is another critical point. Thus, it can be said that kid-friendly hotels should provide differentiated products and services for their child guests. For instance, product and service packages for different age groups such as 6 months-3 years (mini club), 4-8 years (mini club), 9-11 years (midi club) and 12-16 years (teenagers club) can be offered. Mini club managers in the sample have also appreciated the importance of animation shows prepared for children and mind games. On the contrary, activities such as kids' shows and swimming lessons were regarded as less important than the rest of the activities. Thus, it should be remarked that practices, which can lead to expected permanent changes and developments in children's athletic and artistic skills and may result in experimental learning, are seen to be relatively less important. It can be said that mini club managers place more importance to purely entertaining and easily consumed shows and games than to educational practices.

Another relatively less important category of practices was determined as food and beverage options for children. In this category, child buffet in the main restaurant, special section devoted to children in the main restaurant and priority service for children were regarded as more important than the rest of food and beverage options by mini club managers. Moreover, the least important practice in this category has been children's menu in a la carte restaurant. This situation may be interpreted as a result of families with children choosing the option to eat in open buffet restaurant instead of a la carte restaurant. On the other hand, the presence of color printed a la carte menu cards, which are decorated with photographs of meals, can offer a unique experience for child guests and may allow them to keep the hotel brand in mind in the future. The least important category of marketing practices has been determined as the room options for children. In this category, large family rooms was found to be more important than baby cot placed in a standard room. The fact that, an extra baby cot does not provide the comfort of a normal bed may have formed the ground for this judgment. This information may be of critical importance for kid-friendly hotels in terms of providing large and comfortable rooms for families with children. Last of all, child reception was found to be the least important practice within the category of room options for children.

An evaluation of the results obtained from this study shows that mini club managers place special emphasis on the issue of children's health and safety. In other words, mini club managers are aware of the fact that none of the services or facilities offered for children in kid-friendly hotels will provide benefit unless children's health and safety is guaranteed first. For this reason, in-service training may be given to or seminars and workshops about children's health and security may be organized in kid-friendly hotels for mini club staff. Results of this study also indicate that kid-friendly hotel managements should pay attention to recruit pedagogically trained mini club staff and they should provide regular in-service training for mini club staff on such issues as child's physical and mental development and child psychology. Giving place to other departments' staff or temporary intern staff in mini club may probably lead to serious health and safety problems. Interestingly, an evaluation of

the judgments about the rest of categories also show that mini club managers find more common kids-marketing practices offered in most of the kid-friendly hotels more important. However, marketing practices which lead significant product and service differentiation are seen as less important. For instance, practices such as providing athletic skills and competencies for children, meeting children in a special section at the front desk, providing priority service for children in the main restaurant and providing children's menu in a la carte restaurant may differentiate kid-friendly hotels from their competitors and help them to be one step ahead of the competition in the kids' market.

The results of this study are limited to the opinions of mini club managers involved in the sample. Future qualitative research designs may concentrate on investigating mini club managers' opinions of how adequate these kids-marketing practices are in reality. Moreover, mini club staff's views of mini club practices can be derived and a comparison can be made between the results of this study. Likewise, an examination of parents' views with the help of importance/performance analysis may provide useful tips in terms of meeting parents' needs and wants in advance. Taking the views of different parties on this issue will be useful in terms of ensuring a holistic perspective.

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