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**MALAYSIAN HOMESTAY OPERATORS AND VISITORS’
SATISFACTION: SERVQUAL ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

As one of the tourism products, homestay service in Malaysia documented a successful track record either in terms of the increasing number of homestay operator or the income earned. Malaysia homestays always preferred by the tourist who want to experience the lifestyle and culture of the local community and this rural tourism activity become iconic and high potential tourist attraction. However, some loopholes and weaknesses in the service delivery and the infrastructure is likely to diminish the satisfaction level. Therefore, this study is written to identify the effect of service quality offered by homestay operators on visitors’ satisfaction. 102 respondents who are experienced in staying at the Malaysia homestay were selected to answer the adapted questionnaire. Interval scale was used to record the responses for service quality dimensions and satisfaction parts that range from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 10 = *Strongly Agree*. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Statistics for Windows, Version 24.0 was used to code and analyse the data. This study found a significant positive effect of service quality on visitors’ satisfaction. It is hoped this study contributes to the awareness towards of homestay operators to give good services and upgrading the weaknesses which could affect their business.

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Keywords: Homestay, service quality, visitor, satisfaction, tourism, homestay operator.



1. Introduction

In 1995, homestay program has been announced as one of the official tourism product by the government of Malaysia, and it is one of the contributing factors for the economic earnings in the tourism industry (Bhuiyan, Siwar & Mohamad Ismail, 2013). Malaysia homestays always preferred by the tourist who want to experience the lifestyle and culture of the local community and this rural tourism activity become iconic and high potential tourist attraction (Ali, 2015). Since its inception, homestay program gained its momentum as the number of homestay operators in Malaysia increased exponentially from 612 in the year 2000, 3,211 in 2009 (Shahudin, Abdullah, Radam, Latif, Yacob, 2017) and the number grows to 4,025 as in March 2018 (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, 2018). This growth indicates that homestay industry has a significant role in Malaysia tourism industry, in fact, the total income earned shows a consistent upsurge since from RM4,923,433 in 2007 up until 2015 with RM 28,392,933.50. Although it shows a drop to RM27,714,894.10 in 2016 due to the decline in tourist arrival, the income from homestay industry recovered and rose to RM 30,124,466.06 in 2017 (Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, 2018). Hence, homestay industry in Malaysia has the potential to growth prosperously in the future contributions to the nation's economy. As homestay industry deals with providing services, thus it is essential for homestay program to know the satisfaction level of their customer since it is the main factor that can affect the loyalty and frequent visits by tourist (Ismail, Hanafiah, Aminuddin & Mustafa, 2016; Liu, Li & Kim, 2017). According to Mohd Fauzi, Wan Mohammad Sobri, and Suali (2017), measuring customer satisfaction is one of the methods to gauge performance effectiveness. Therefore it is vital to gain insight into the service quality provided by the homestay service provider and ensuring the tourist satisfaction level can be met.

2. Problem Statement

Just like many other services, homestay provider also will be evaluated by the visitor regarding its reliability, dependability and quality of services. A satisfied customer will bring positive impact to the service provider in a way they will be recognized and appreciated by offering a sense of loyalty (Ali, 2015). This is derived when the service provider able to achieve the customer perceptions and expectations towards the service performance (Ismail et al. 2016). Unlike the method of measuring the quality of goods that can be seen physically and measured objectively by certain indicators for example the number of defects, durability, stability and so on, measuring the service quality is related with the relationship of what is desired from the service and what they perceive they should receive (Kasuma, Esmado, Yacob, Kanyan, & Nahar, 2016). Since the tourism market is highly competitive and intense, it is important for the service provider to ensure that the visitors' satisfaction could be attained at the highest level as possible. According to Affizah, Melissa and Muhammad Ashraf (2017), poor performance and low service quality are the main factor and contribute to the poor performance of Malaysian homestay. Most studies in measuring the performance of homestay service adopting the SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Most of the result often rooted from the dissatisfaction towards the behaviour and the appearance of employees that defecting their satisfaction level. Other than the hygienic factor of bathrooms and toilets, as well as the level of service quality (Affizah et al. 2017; Ismail et al. 2016) are the main factor of the dissatisfaction. Therefore, it is important for Malaysian homestay provider to strategize their service

delivery and improved the necessary infrastructure, and other pivotal matters in order to remain sustainable in the future. Since tourism industry not only capable to boost the economy, but it also reflects the image of Malaysia and the international perception, thus any defects and poor services will also scratch the nation's reputation as well.

2.1. Service Quality

Service quality is one of the factors contributed to the customer satisfaction and loyalty. As what Parasuraman et. al. (1988) as originator SERVEQUAL theory defined service quality is a comparison of performance perceptions with expectations. He also added that the SERVEQUAL model has been developed with 5 dimensions such as tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Meanwhile, Ismail and Mohd Yunan (2016) suggested instead of 5 dimensions there are specific dimensions need to be highlighted such as readiness to recommend, retention and word of mouth since it is the most critical customer compliant in service quality. Meanwhile, (Kotler, Keller, Ancarani, & Costabile, 2014) defines that service quality as a measurement of service delivered to customers and their expectation towards what service provider could be offered best to them. The company which creates the satisfaction among customers indirectly succeed in giving its customers a sense of contributing to the promotion of the service that they are providing. In order to know whether the consumers are satisfied or not they will tell or 'words of mouth' to the others and gladly recommended to the other visitors to experience the service and re-repeat the service without compulsion (Yeo, Thai & Roh, 2015; Prakash, 2011). Hence, Basheer (2012, p.202) claimed the skill and competencies are important to enhance and develop the service providers business. He added there are several ways need to be highlighted such as:- "ways and means of delivering the service professionally, handling complaints, effective service encounters (the process in which a customer directly interacts with a service over a period of time which mainly refers to the interaction between a customer and a service delivery system), customer relationship management, employee positive attitude building, etc. will contribute to the improvement of the quality of services and this, in turn, will have a positive impact on customer satisfaction and revisit intention".

However, even though most researchers use the SERVQUAL theory but some are sceptical of the accuracy of this theory as it only measures expectation and perception. Thereby, Churchill and Surprenant (1982) stated there is new value contribute to the gap between perception and expectation. On the other hand, Cronin and Taylor (1992) focus on improvement on how the service quality should be measured in a right way. Likewise, Buttle (1996) stated that this theory is based on disconfirmation model that lead to the relationship between expectation and outcomes. Conversely, some scholars have been modified the original SERVQUAL dimension because they want to suit to their own context. Another limitation of SERVQUAL model is it is the inability to detect improvement or solutions toward the weaknesses of service quality happen, (Tan & Pawitra, 2001). After many years, there was a lot of scholars study on service quality to see the effectiveness of it in different sectors. Unexpectedly, most of the studies reveal the significant between service quality provided by service providers such as banking sector, retailing, supply chain and logistic, telecommunication and hotel leads to high customers satisfaction (Yeo et al. 2015, Ahmad et al. 2014; Kranias & Bourlessa, 2013; Segoro, 2013; Raza, Siddiquei Awan et al. 2012). This suggests to the rise of Multi-Criteria Decision Making (MCDM) technique cum with SERVQUAL

method where when the decision makers evaluate service quality could easily be assigned weights of different criteria, help them to point out the weakness and give a reliable decision. Consequently, the evaluation of service providers toward their services is more thorough as compared to SERVQUAL the dimension are only based on the judgement of decision-makers, (Ocampo, Alinsub, Casul & Enquig, 2017).

2.2. Visitors' Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a psychological concept that involves the feeling of wellbeing and a pleasure that results from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product and or service (Chi et al. 2008). Customer satisfaction is typically defined as a post-consumption evaluative judgment concerning a specific product or service (Gundersen, Heide & Olson, 1996). Satisfaction with the destinations visited by both the local and international tourists differs from one location to the other. This is because every destination has its very own tourist products which are considered unique by the tourists (Kunjumeran, & Rosazman, 2013). According to Eunice (2013), there is an increasing demand for better quality products and services including hotel services and hotel customers are becoming much more discerning and demanding, making the delivery of quality service one of the challenges facing the tourism industry especially the hotel sub-sector. There is a strong need to determine visitor expectation levels prior to the tourism experience, and whether performance actually lives up to these expectations. This information is important offerings to meet the dynamic needs of targeted segments (Fauzi, Shida, Masitah Izatul, & Badaruddun, 2013). Tourist satisfaction has an important role in planning marketable tourism products and services for destinations and its assessment must be a basic parameter used to evaluate the performance of destination products and services. According to (Fauzi et.al 2013). Majority of domestic tourists are satisfied with the accessibility to destinations although the overcrowding is always occurring at the destinations. Besides Kunjumeran, and Rosazman (2013) also said the quality of services, which include facilities, safety aspects and service aspects, in the Homestay Programmed have contributed to the numbers of domestic tourists coming to the homestay as well as helping to meet their demands. Besides, the quality of facilities and services have a positive impact on visitors' satisfaction to the homestay and it was also found to be in need of stakeholder action to improve visitor satisfaction, enhance the infrastructure, safety, and services. On the other hand, the marketing campaign for the homestay was very weak and needed improvement (Arfah, Shree, Noor, Jum'adi et al. 2015).

The service quality dimensions were found to be significant and influenced the visitor satisfaction and it also found out that better service quality enhances the homestay visitors' satisfaction. Due to that reason, it is important for the homestay providers to focus on their customers' need and requirements while staying and experiencing homestay programme because visitor satisfaction has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between homestay service quality and behavioural intention and it also will affect the visitors' preference for revisiting desire destination in future (Ismail et.al 2016). Customer service is one of the service quality aspects that can enhance customer satisfaction as well as increase customer loyalty towards the business because it is an important element that can emphasize customer service quality towards homestay operators in order to make the homestay program in Malaysia to ensure its become more competitive (Mutalib, Razzaq, Abdul, Hassan & Azman, 2018). Measuring satisfaction with a destination

is conceptually different from measuring satisfaction at the transactions level because influenced by the various transactions that occur at that destination, an individual's level of satisfaction is influenced by much broader, global factors, some of which are beyond the capacity of the tourism industry to affect (Ismail et.al 2016). The increasing importance of service quality as a major performance measurement of tourist products, the concept of service quality yet remains somewhat elusive. On the other hand, in service research, service quality is believed to impact on behaviour such as repurchase intentions, which are related to customers' satisfaction with suppliers' products or services (Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, 2010; Zabkar, Brencic, & Dmitrovic, 2010). The measurement of customer satisfaction can be determined by five major dimensions which are empathy, responsiveness, tangible, reliability and assurance (Parasuraman et.al 1988).

3. Research Questions

The research question for this study is:

What is the effect of service quality offered by the Malaysian homestay operators towards visitors' satisfaction?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the effect of service quality offered by the Malaysian Homestay operators towards visitors' satisfaction.

5. Research Methods

In total 102 visitors of the Homestay programme in Malaysia were participating on a voluntary basis by answering a given questionnaire using convenience sampling technique. The Homestay programme is under Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia. The data was collected through a self-administrated questionnaire which included three sections; Section A, B and C. Section A focus on demographic questions, Section B comprises 21 items of service quality (tangible, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance) and Section C is based on eight items of visitor satisfaction. Interval scales were used to record the responses in Section B and C that ranges from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 10 = *Strongly Agree*. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Statistics for Windows, Version 24.0 was used to code and analyse the data. Firstly, the reliability test was conducted to signify the consistency of the internal component in the questionnaire. The following Table 1 shows the reliability analysis that measuring the internal consistency of all the dimensions in the questionnaire based on the pilot study. The results indicate that all the Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the minimum value of 0.6 and all the dimensions are found to have good and acceptable reliabilities (Awang, 2015 and Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). Therefore, the same questionnaire will be used in the field study.

Table 01. Result of Reliability Analysis

Dimensions	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Tangible	5	.635
Reliability	4	.619
Responsiveness	4	.657
Empathy	4	.623
Assurance	4	.612
Visitors' satisfaction	8	.873

In addition, the assumptions to conduct regression analysis also were tested on the data including normality and multicollinearity tests. Test of normality based on skewness value ($-1.5 < \text{skewness} < 1.5$) is used to check whether the data is normal or not. Meanwhile, test of multicollinearity is used to check the correlation among predictor variables. Multicollinearity problem exists when the predictor variables are highly correlated among themselves, which it can affect the parameters of a regression model (Awang, 2015).

The final stage of analysis is to conduct a multiple regression analysis to identify the effect of service quality dimensions, as predictors on visitor satisfaction towards Malaysia homestay programme. Multiple linear regression analysis is used to describe relationship between variables. In multiple linear regression analysis, the dependent variables must be measured on a continuous scale. But the independent variable can be mixture of both continuous and categorical variables, which at least one of the predictor variables must be continuous in nature. The multiple linear regressions was used in this study to determine the variables known as dimensions (tangible, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance) that affects the visitors' satisfaction towards Malaysia homestay program. The dimension identified as significant predictor if the significance value (p -value) obtained from the multiple regression analysis is less than 5% significance level (α).

6. Findings

There are 48 (47.06%) male and 54 (52.94%) female visitors were involved in this study aged more than 18 years old. Descriptive analysis indicated that four dimensions; tangible ($M = 4.95$, $SD = .6037$), responsiveness ($M = 5.40$, $SD = .7498$), empathy ($M = 5.61$, $SD = .8079$) and assurance ($M = 5.88$, $SD = .6309$) does not met the visitors' need since the mean values below than six ($M < 6.00$). Meanwhile the reliability dimension ($M = 6.85$, $SD = .7451$) met the visitors' need ($M > 6.00$). It shows that the visitors' satisfaction towards Malaysia homestay based on each dimension of service quality offered by the operators need to be monitored and improved so that the visitors may repeat their visit (Kim & Lee, 2010; Le Na, 2010).

Next analysis is to check the regression assumptions started with the normality assumption. The normality test shows the data was approximately normally distributed since the skewness values are between -1.500 and 1.500 whereby tangible dimension (skewness = $-.649$), reliability (skewness = $-.125$), responsiveness (skewness = $.083$), empathy (skewness = $.076$), assurance (skewness = $-.456$) and visitors' satisfaction (skewness = 1.235). Next Table 2 shows that the all the correlation values between the five dimensions of service quality offered by the Malaysian homestay operators is less than 0.85, indicated that

there is no multicollinearity problem. Therefore these results may suggest that the multiple regression analysis is appropriate to achieve the research objective.

Table 02. Result of Correlational Analysis

Dimensions	Tangible	Reliability	Responsiveness	Empathy	Assurance
Tangible	1.000	-.146	.393	.357	.239
Reliability		1.000	-.365	.187	-.577
Responsiveness			1.000	.460	-.060
Empathy				1.000	-.356
Assurance					1.000

A multiple regression analysis shows that the result of the model is significant ($F_{5, 96} = 153.733$, p -value $< .05$) with at least one of the service quality dimensions is significantly affecting the visitors' satisfaction towards Homestay programme in Malaysia, as shown in Table 3. In addition, the correlation value, $r = 0.943$ obtained from the analysis indicated that there exists a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Furthermore, the coefficient of determination, r^2 is 0.889 which indicates the five dimensions of service quality can explain 88.90% of the variation of visitors' satisfaction towards the Homestay programme, and the other 11.10% by other predictors.

Table 03. Analysis of Variance

Model	Sum of Squares	Degree of freedom	Mean square	F-value	p-value
Regression	47.502	5	9.500	153.733	.000
Residual	5.933	96	.062		
Total	53.435	101			

Results in Table 4 shows that the tangible, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance dimensions become the significant predictors of visitors' satisfaction towards Malaysia Homestay programme (p -value $< .05$). Based on the standardized beta obtained, tangible dimension ($\beta = .586$) was identified as the most significant predictor towards visitors' satisfaction followed by assurance ($\beta = -.398$), empathy ($\beta = .267$), reliability ($\beta = .224$) and responsiveness ($\beta = .140$). These result consistent to previous studies based on different service quality dimensions towards customers' satisfaction as conducted by Mbutia et al. (2013), Che Rahim and Nasir (2013), Yator (2012), Alsaqre (2011) and Oschell (2009).

Table 04. Regression Analysis

Model	Coefficient	Standardized Beta	t-value	p-value
Tangible	.706	.586	13.947	.000
Reliability	.219	.224	4.461	.000
Responsiveness	.136	.140	2.905	.005
Empathy	.241	.267	5.924	.000
Assurance	-.459	-.398	-8.029	.000

7. Conclusion

This study found that there is significantly strong positive relationship between all the dimensions of service quality provided by the homestay operators and visitors' satisfaction towards Homestay programme in Malaysia. In addition, tangible, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance dimensions become the significant predictors in determining the visitors' satisfaction level based on statistical values obtained. As conclusion, this study shows service quality offered by the homestay operators has significant positive effect on visitors' satisfaction towards Homestay programme in Malaysia. Therefore, in order to ensure the visitor always satisfied with the Homestay programmed, the operators need to upgrade their services including facilities, activities and also safety. Based on the positive feedback, some of the respondents feel better to stay at the homestay compared to other place because they can join more activities and learn different culture. In future, the homestay operators need to look at the customer needs and wants. Perhaps the information revealed from this study can help homestay operators and others for further action to commercialized homestay programme.

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