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A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION TOWARDS SERVICE QUALITY IN A THREE-STAR HOTELS IN PERLIS

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ABSTRACT

The hotel industry has the central element in contributing income for Malaysia. This study aims to examine the relationship between the service quality dimension and customer satisfaction in the three-star hotels in Perlis. The conceptual model is based on the SERVQUAL model, and the dimensions used by this study are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. By investigating these factors, the study will identify the most significant factor contributing to customer satisfaction, especially in three-star hotels, Perlis. A total of 131 respondents who were the customers of Hotel Seri Malaysia Kangar had participated in the present study by completing a questionnaire on study skills. The findings found the tangibility, responsiveness, and empathy indicate a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. However, there is no significant relationship between reliability and assurance among customer satisfaction towards the hotel. This study contributes to the significant element that plays an essential role in improving the hotel service quality.

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1. Introduction

Lately, the hotel industry in Malaysia is rapidly developing and competing. However, the pandemic COVID-19 has affected a lot of demand and industry revenue. To boost the hotel industry, the government has tried to revive the hotel industry by introducing various Malaysian tourism promotions. For instance, under the Budget 2021, Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Abdul Aziz has continued the Wage Subsidy Programme (WSP) for another three months at a rate of RM600 per month for employees with wages of RM4,000 and below for the tourism sector. The government support is essential to help the tourism industry continues sustaining during Covid-19 pandemic. Since Malaysia is still under Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), tourists are encouraged to visit their respective state without crossing it. This domestic tourism plan can help to revive the hotel industry in Malaysia.

Generally, tourism has become a high earner and income for Malaysia. The hospitality industry is a broad category of services, includes accommodation, food and drink services, event planning, theme parks, and transport. Other services include hotels, restaurants, and bars. This sector has contributed significantly to the economy in the last 30 years, mainly as a foreign exchange earner. According to data from the Valuation and Property Service Department I (Figure 1), the Ministry of Finance reported that in September 2020, there were 3,4443.000 units of Malaysia hotels. These records have shown an increase of Malaysian hotels from the previous number of 3,423.000 units for Jun 2020. Besides, this data has been updated quarterly, averaging 2,380.000 units from March 2000 to September 2020, with 83 observations.

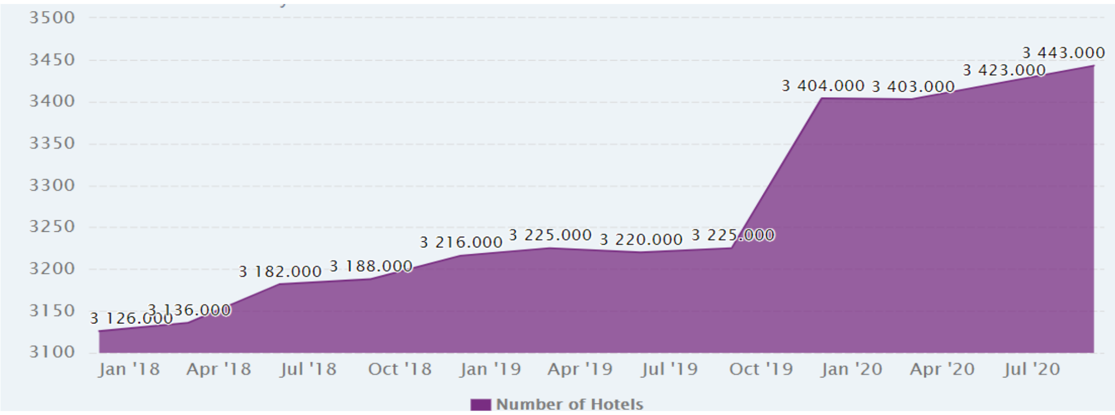
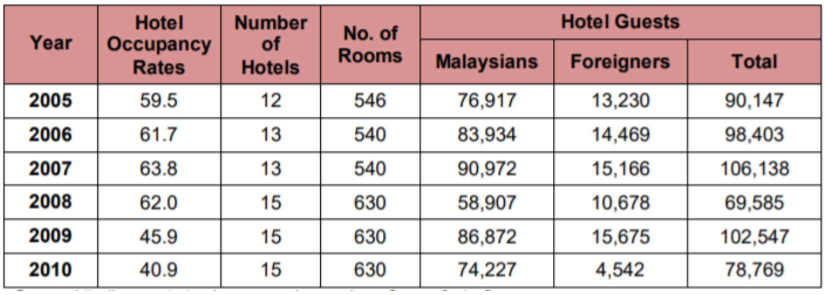


Figure 1: Number of hotels in Malaysia (CEIC Data, 2020)

Findings from the data show, there are a lot of competitions in the hotel industry in Malaysia. Normally, tourists will choose the hotel that provides the best service. Studies have also found that service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty are the important factors that can make hotels stand out in industry competition (Shahin & Dabestani, 2010; Lee, Cho & Ahn, 2012). Moreover, five different quality service components have become vital factors that influence guest satisfaction and indirectly influencing customer loyalty, retention, and overall hotel revenue (Ha, Minh, Anh & Matsui, 2015).

Table 1:

Perlis Average Hotel Occupancy Rates and Hotel Guests, 2005-2010



Year	Hotel Occupancy Rates	Number of Hotels	No. of Rooms	Hotel Guests		
				Malaysians	Foreigners	Total
2005	59.5	12	546	76,917	13,230	90,147
2006	61.7	13	540	83,934	14,469	98,403
2007	63.8	13	540	90,972	15,166	106,138
2008	62.0	15	630	58,907	10,678	69,585
2009	45.9	15	630	86,872	15,675	102,547
2010	40.9	15	630	74,227	4,542	78,769

According to data reported by the Ministry of Tourism, Perlis average hotel occupancy rates and hotel guests for 2005 to 2010 has indicated that since 2007, the occupancy rate declined from 63.8% to 40.9% in 2010. Besides, the number of hotel guests from foreign countries fell sharply and showed a negative average annual growth rate (AAGR) of 19%. This scenario shows poor performance in the hotel industry in Perlis. Findings have shown that lack of product development, destination management, and focussed marketing are the main factors that contribute to this situation. Additionally, most past studies examined the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the Malaysian hotel industry (Amin et al., 2013; Shamsudin et al., 2019: Lahap et al., 2016; Cheng, L., & Govindarajo, 2020). The previous studies have focused on four and five-star hotels only. However, there were limited studies done at the third-star hotel in the Northern area especially, Perlis. Hotel operators in Malaysia who have three stars and below need to be concerned because they are also the contributors to the country's economic sector. In addition, people with the modest incomes will choose the low-cost and more economical accommodation. Hence, the star rating of hotel is not the main factor of customer loyalty. It is the good quality of service that will affect the hotel guests and their loyalty to the hotel. It is essential to classify the service quality, recognize the dimensions of service quality and their value to consumers as competition grows, and enhance the quality of services provided to the hotel industry (Fick & Ritchie, 1991). Besides, consistency is a vital aspect for service organizations of which consumers are highly impressed, reacting either positively or negatively to service provider. Hotels can maintain the interest of consumers and achieve comparative advantages over their rivals by delivering premium service. Therefore, a study on customer satisfaction and service quality in three-star hotels in Perlis need to be conducted as it can boost the economy. The conceptual model is based on the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which measures various service quality dimensions and their relationship to customer satisfaction. The dimensions used by this study are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It is believed that not many researchers have studied the impact of service quality offered and customer satisfaction. In this sense, the hotels have faced problems such as poor management from the concerned department as they lack of staff and this leads to bad decision-making. The client's perspective on the service quality is considered as one of the most significant factors which influences the performance of hotel industry. Hence, this study explores the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in three-star hotels in Perlis.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000), customer satisfaction describes the after-purchase analysis and emotional approval of the finished purchase process. Customer satisfaction is an indicator of how goods and services of a company fulfill or satisfy the client expectations (Fornell, 1992). The hotels will automatically have their competitive advantages if they present a positive image to the guests. The discrepancy between expectations and perception of service quality reflects customer satisfaction and it is strongly related to customer loyalty. To achieve customer satisfaction, it is vital to recognize and anticipate the needs of customers and be able to satisfy them. Based on the literature, several empirical studies found the linkage between customer satisfaction with tangible (Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011), empathy (Hossain, 2012; Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011), responsiveness (Karunaratne & Jayawardena, 2010), and reliability (Markovic & Raspor, 2010). When a customer is completely satisfied with the product/service offered, he or she may be loyal to continue to purchase again in the future.

2.2 Tangibility And Customer Satisfaction

The first dimension in SERVQUAL model is tangibility. According to Dabholkar et al., (1996), tangibility refers to hotel facilities' physical presentation, including the professionalism of workers. Munusamy et al., (2010) described that the tangible element can offer representative facilities, equipment, and communication materials to the appearance of a company. The findings also emphasize that there is a strong correlation, and that customer loyalty is important for the company performance. This statement is also supported by Salman et al., (2011), which indicates the same finding. The data shows that customers are satisfied by the hospitalities, image of staff and furnishing. Hence, it is hypothesized that;

H1. The tangibility of service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

2.3 Reliability And Customer Satisfaction

The reliability dimension relates to the capacity of the front office hotel workers to provide services reliably and efficiently (Dabholkar et al., 1996). Reliable service efficiency must meet the needs of customers. The guests' expected quality will increase if the service delivery is handled well (Brink & Berndt, 2005). Any customer needs to know if his or her provider is trustworthy and meets the set specifications with satisfaction, in which reliability is crucial for the customer first experience (Delgado & Ballester, 2004). Reliability is an indicator of customer satisfaction because it has been shown to have a major impact on customers (Jamal & Anastasiadou, 2009). Thus, it is suggested that;

H2. Reliability of service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

2.4 Responsiveness And Customer Satisfaction

The factor of responsiveness requires the ability to support clients and offer timely services. It is crucial that the hotel front office workers are ready and able to support clients in delivering timely service and satisfying needs of customers. Employees at the hotel should have the power to adequately listen to the guest requests, questions, and concerns while improving the quality of service and enhancing guest loyalty (Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017). Responsiveness is one of the critical dimensions since any individual will feel more valued if he or she gets the finest possible service performance. Thus, it is suggested that.

H3. Responsiveness of service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

2.5 Assurance And Customer Satisfaction

The factor of assurance is related to the expertise and etiquette of staff and their capacity to promote respect and trust, including integrity, courtesy, reputation, and protection (Parasuraman et al., 1991). This is the understanding and courtesy of the staff and their capacity to express faith and trust. Hotels are strongly required to instill confidence in their visitors to ensure that they feel comfortable during their stay. This factor also has a significant impact on the happiness of visitors. Thus, it is suggested that;

H4. Assurance of service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

2.6 Empathy And Customer Satisfaction

The empathy dimension is the availability of compassion and individualized customer care, including responsiveness or accessibility and ease of interaction, productive communication, and customer perception (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Quality-of-service empathy refers to how the company appears to care and provide its customers personal attention to make the customers feel extra appreciated (Gunarathne, 2014). A dominant dimension is consumer-centered. Hence, the organizations need to ensure that they pay careful attention to their clients' needs and cope adequately with their problems. Small service firms are better positioned than their bigger, invariably standardized counterparts to handle clients as individuals. Thus, it is suggested that;

H5. The empathy of service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

3. Method

The type of the study is correlation which investigates and determines the relationship between variables by distributing questionnaires to people. The time horizon of the study was cross-sectional because data came from different individuals in a single time, and the data were collected from respondents only once. This study chose individuals who were visiting a hotel for their stay. These hotel guests were from different states and regions. This method was used to generalize the research results from the research findings. The questionnaire results could only be seen by the researchers. To ensure confidentiality, the researchers implemented measures to protect the privacy of respondents' information. An email address was attached to each self-administered questionnaire after completing the questionnaire. This study distributed 160 questionnaires, and 113 were returned with a valid questionnaire return rate of 70.63%. This research's measurement consists of five scales, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy of service. The questionnaire used two languages, which were Malay and English to ensure the respondents were able to understand all the formulated items. This questionnaire adopted a Likert 5-point scale to measure each scale. In terms of scoring, respondents were required to choose a scale from one (1) to five (5), strongly disagree to strongly agree.

4. Results and Discussion

160 respondents were involved in the study. The questionnaire had been collected for two weeks at Hotel Seri Malaysia Kangar. The total number of questionnaires returned were 113. The frequency distribution was obtained from the personal data or characteristics of respondents in this study. There were six demographic variables collected for this study which included gender, race, age, marital status, qualification, and frequency of stays at a hotel in a year. Validity and reliability test of the instrument was conducted prior to using the questionnaire. The validity test was conducted to determine whether all questionnaire questions were in the right concept. To test the validity of the questionnaire, Pearson correlation analysis was carried out using SPSS 23. The items in the questionnaire were significantly correlated and this indicates that they were valid. Based on the significant value obtained by the sig. (2 tailed) of 0.000 o<0.05, it can be concluded that all instruments in variables in the study were valid. Reliability analysis was conducted to test the value of Cronbach's alpha values for each variable. The objective of reliability test was to ensure the consistency of items in the instruments. The Cronbach's alpha values for each variable were presented in Table 2. As a result, all variables in the study were highly reliable. Thus, the outcome of instruments was suitable for a higher level of analysis.

Table 2:
Cronbach Alpha

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Frequency	Remarks
Tangibility	.889	5	Very good
Reliability	.911	6	Very good
Responsiveness	.936	3	Very good
Assurance	.931	5	Very good
Empathy	.898	5	Very good
Customer Satisfaction	.962	7	Very good

For the reliability test, Cronbach Alpha for tangibility is .889, which is good. Another three independent variables are reliability, responsiveness, and assurance, which show the best value: .911, .936, and .931, respectively. It is because the values are .90 and above. The last dimension, empathy, also shows a good reliability result where Cronbach's Alpha is .898. Based on the table above, alpha values ranged from .889 to .962.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis examines general statistics description of variables in the current study. Mean, minimum, standard deviation were used to obtain for interval-scale independent and dependent variables.

Table 3:
Descriptive Analysis

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tangibility	113	1.40	5.00	3.9345	.67794
Reliability	113	1.00	5.00	3.8791	.67856
Responsiveness	113	1.00	5.00	3.9705	.81108
Assurance	113	1.00	5.00	3.8673	.80561
Empathy	113	1.20	5.00	3.8779	.71735
Customer Satisfaction	113	1.00	5.00	3.8496	.81661

Table 3 represents the minimum total score of respondents' answers for tangibility which is 1.40 while the maximum score is 5.00. For reliability, responsiveness, and assurance, the minimum total score of respondents' answers is 1.00, while the maximum score remains the same for every variable, which is 5.00. For the last independent variable, empathy, the minimum score is 1.20, and the maximum score is 5.00. Besides all the scores, the mean scores for all service quality dimensions ranged from 3.8496 to 3.9705. It shows responsiveness with the highest score (3.9705) that reflects employees' willingness in service companies to help the customers answers their requests and provide prompt service. The dependent variable, customer satisfaction, has a minimum total score of 1.00. The maximum total score is 5.00. While the mean for this variable is 3.8496, which shows the most of the independent var 4.6.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The researcher uses correlation analysis to examine the relationship between all the variables used in the study. The correlation is significant at the level of 0.01. Table 4 below shows the scales which are used to interpret the relationship between dependent and independent variables:

Table 4:
Pearson's Correlation Analysis

Correlation Coefficient	**Relationship**
0.7 and above	Very Strong
0.5 – 0.69	Strong Relationship
0.3 – 0.49	Moderate
0.1 – 0.29	Low Relationship
0.01 – 0.09	Very Low Relationship

Table 5:
Correlation Analysis between All Variables

	TAN	**REL**	**RES**	**ASS**	**EMP**	**CS**
Tangibility	1					
Reliability	0.775	1				
Responsiveness	0.551	0.668	1			
Assurance	0.530	0.564	0.797	1		
Empathy	0.626	0.659	0.768	0.796	1	
Customer Satisfaction	0.715	0.741	0.757	0.657	0.778	1

Table 5 shows that there is a strong positive correlation in correlation analysis for service tangibility towards customer satisfaction (r=0.715). The relationship is significant at 0.01 level. While for the reliability of service, there is a very strong positive correlation (r=0.741). The relationship is significant at 0.01 level. There is a very strong positive correlation (r=0.757) for responsiveness towards customer satisfaction. The relationship is significant at 0.01 level. As for assurance towards customer satisfaction, there is a positive correlation (r=0.657). The relationship is significant at 0.01 level. The last independent variable, which is empathy, resulted as the strongest correlation towards customer satisfaction (r=0.778).

4.3 Multiple Regression

In this study, multiple regression aims to analyze the relationship between tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy with customer satisfaction. The r-square for this study is 74.70% which represents the model and explains all variations in the response variable in this study. These variables statistically significantly predicted customer satisfaction, F(5,107) = 63.142, $p < .0005$.

Table 6:
Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-.511	.256		-1.996	.048
Tangibility	.300	.096	.249	3.121	.002
Reliability	.188	.105	.156	1.788	.077
Responsiveness	.335	.093	.333	3.594	.000
Assurance	-.106	.093	-.104	-1.132	.260
Empathy	.394	.105	.346	3.744	.000

Note: **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Multiple regression analysis aims to evaluate the relationship between all independent and dependent variables. In this model, tangibility of an independent variable is significant with the dependent variable with value (β=0.249, p=.002). Simultaneously, the other independent variable of empathy is also significant with the dependent variable with the value (β=0.346, p= .000). Another independent variable is the responsiveness that is also recorded a significant value with the dependent variable, which is β=0.333, p= .000.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality of the three-star hotels in Perlis by using several dimensions which are tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The data that was obtained from the study enable the stakeholders of the hotels to maintain the best services especially at the current situation in Malaysia. It also helps them to understand how customer satisfaction affects the hotel performance in the long term. The tangibility of service has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction as it shows a value of .002. The accommodation infrastructure and employee expertise were important determinants of customer satisfaction in respect of low-end establishments. It is found that there is a strong relationship between customer satisfaction with tangibility (Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011). Another model that is recorded to have a significant value with customer satisfaction is empathy, with the significant value being at .000. It can be concluded that empathy from the employees helps to provide satisfactory services to the customers. It is therefore important as to ensure that the employees' experiences will be able to assist and provide care to the needs of the customers.

Responsiveness has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction concerning the responsiveness dimension is recorded as the strongest dimension to measure customer satisfaction based on service quality. This is supported by Minh et al., (2015), which stated that responsiveness is related to representing customers and accessibility to respond to inquiries from customers. The flexibility to satisfy the needs of customers has the biggest effect on customer satisfaction. Assurance of services has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Employees play an essential role in the hotel business as customers are expecting the services to be provided by well-qualified, experienced, and trusted employees (Jani & Han, 2014). The empathy of service has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. According to Ahmad et al., (2019), empathy affects the quality of service because it helps individuals look at the situation from another viewpoint and step in the shoes of someone else.

Customer satisfaction has become a vital concern for companies and organizations in their efforts to improve product and service quality and maintain customer loyalty within a highly competitive marketplace. Instead of misleading the clients, the hotel must constantly conduct precise advertisements on what they offer, especially in the hotel websites' and brochures (Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017). Different scholars, such as Knutson (1988), and Naumann (1995), have found that customer satisfaction is the cheapest form of marketing.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was conducted in Perlis to discuss the relationship between service quality among hotel guests and customer satisfaction. This study has the following limitations. Firstly, it employed the average guests that visited the three-star hotel only. Future research has suggested that it is essential to continuously seek different variables or constructs to strengthen the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. This is because the scores of measurements and objects within dimensions may offer valuable knowledge about service features and therefore, further improvement can be made. It is possible that the application of these ratings can contribute to more appropriate decision-making. Hotel workers will adopt techniques to increase employee efficiency through appropriate hospitality preparation and learning systems to deliver superior quality service.

Secondly, this study was only able to identify the relationship between the level of operation and customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, there were different constructs of service appraisal such as perceived value, image, cultural interaction, service experience, and form of service which need to be also connected to the quality of service and customer satisfaction. Therefore, future research needs to combine these structures to boost the explanatory capacity of the structural models.

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