EFFECTS OF UMRAH SERVICE QUALITY ON PILGRIMS' SATISFACTION AMONGST UMRAH TRAVEL AGENTS IN SELANGOR, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to learn about perceptions of service quality rendered by Umrah travel agents on pilgrims' satisfaction. The necessary data were gathered using a convenience sampling method based on self-administered structure questionnaires to complete this task. To fulfil the paper's sole purpose, 397 respondents' responses were collected via an online survey, analysed and used for this study. Regression results indicate that there is a relationship between service quality and pilgrims' satisfaction. Out of the five dimensions of service quality, three dimensions which are reliability, empathy, and responsiveness have a significant relationship with pilgrims' satisfaction with travel agencies. This study provides implications and justifications for travel agencies to consider service quality as a principle and a significant factor in building customer satisfaction and loyalty with travel agents.

Keywords: Umrah travel; Service Quality; Pilgrim Satisfaction; Regression

INTRODUCTION

Service quality (SQ) is one of the most critical and result-oriented strategies for satisfying customers and convincing them to become loyal customers by delivering high-quality products and services that meet their needs and desires. To overcome any uncertainties and win the industry's marathon competitions, steady and continuous improvement in the quality of offered products and services is required.

According to Rajaratnam et al. (2014), most agents provide standard services to their customers in the Umrah travel industry. Still, different service quality is critical in gaining a competitive advantage. Because many organizations are offering Umrah travel services to offer their services, customers have the opportunity to choose agents who provide quality services at a lower cost. Umrah travel agents must improve their responsibilities while providing better services to succeed in the industry (Hassan et al., 2016). According to Othman et al. (2018), the benefits of Umrah travel in many Muslim countries are managed by the governments, and many have insufficient human resources and budgets. Regrettably, this may result in customer dissatisfaction. According to Maula (2016), customer satisfaction (CS) occurs when service quality meets the customer's expectations. Thus, according to Kant and Jaiswal (2017), service quality is the quality of service that clients, users, or customers perceive when compared to their expectations before purchasing the service. As a result, Malaysian Umrah travel agencies must focus on finding a solution to increase customer satisfaction while decreasing dispute cases or customer dissatisfaction. Travel agents link consumers (travelers' perspectives) and producers (such as airlines and hotels).

Although the industry in Malaysia has seen significant alliances and mergers, some agencies continue to operate independently and run small businesses that rely heavily on commissions paid by producers. Customers or prospective travelers who deal with an agency frequently receive effective and personalized service, and they can also benefit from the agents' expertise (Othman et al., 2019). As a result, this paper aims to learn about Umrah travel agents' perceptions and the impact of service quality (SQ) on pilgrims' satisfaction in Selangor, Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality

According to Kumar (2018), delivering services is a continuous engagement process between service providers and consumers; these services include various intangible activities aimed at solving customers' issues in return for either system's valuable cash or physical resources. According to Maula (2016), providing premium service quality is the key to gaining a competitive edge in the services market. According to Muala (2016), Ngo and Nguyen (2016), and Parasuraman et al. (1988), the degree of satisfaction of consumers is entirely based on their perception and opinion of service quality after experiencing it, as well as their faith in the supplier. Firms restore clients' perceptions of service quality by providing high-quality services.

In particular, in the Umrah travel sector, offering premium service quality provides a clear signal to clients in the performance assessment of both services. It is a significant factor in achieving a competitive advantage. Furthermore, Umrah travel agencies may quickly gain a competitive edge by developing long-term relationships with consumers and delivering high-quality services. According to Kant and Jaiswal (2017), Kumar (2018), and Saghier and Nathan (2013), the literature is replete with evidence supporting the existence of a significant link between CS and SQ. SERVQUAL, established by Parasuraman et al. (1988), is the most well-known scale for measuring SQ. It assesses and categorizes service quality across five categories. The five dimensions of service quality include tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

The first factor, tangible things are anything that has a physical existence or appearance that we can see and touch. According to Ngo and Nguyen (2016), tangibles include service quality, equipment, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), physical facilities and appearance (ambiance, lighting, air-conditioning, seating arrangement), and organizations that provide personnel services. Organizations arrange tangibles at random and integrate them to provide services to their customers, who then access them. Ngo and Nguyen (2016) define reliability, the second factor as the ability of a service provider to consistently and truthfully deliver on its promises. Customers are satisfied when they receive dependable services on which they can rely. Responsiveness, the third factor refers to the employee's readiness or willingness to provide services to customers. It is concerned with the timeliness of services. It also addresses understanding the customer's needs, wants, and desires, employee attention, convenient operating hours, properly attending to and solving the customer's problems, and ease and safety in their transaction. Izogo and Ogba (2015). Furthermore, assurance refers to employees' knowledge and courtesy, as well as their ability to instill confidence and trust in customers, which are critical factors in providing assurance when customers render services (Izogo & Ogba, 2015). The final factor, empathy is about devoting attention to every desired issue (Izogo & Ogba, 2015), addressing the problems appropriately, successfully handling the wants and worries, and eventually fixing them.

The SERVQUAL scale has been frequently utilized to assess SQ. The SERVQUAL measure has been extensively and productively used in several academic research investigations (Parasuraman et al., 1991, 2002). According to Muhammad et al. (2011), Vanniarajan and Gurunathan (2009), Khan and Fasih (2014), and Mahfooz (2014), the scale has been widely and positively discussed in several prominent published research studies, and Ashdaq et al. (2015); Jain and Gupta (2004); Omar et al., (2015); Thongthip and Polyorat (2015) ensure its reliability and validity. Proper and well-defined adjustments were made in response to SERVQUAL scale criticism (Parasuraman et al., 1991).

Customer Satisfaction

According to Arsanam and Yousapronpaiboon (2014), the literature clearly shows that CS is the key to long-term business success. To defend, win, and keep market

share, organizations must deliver quality-based goods and services that outperform their competitors (Khan & Fasih, 2014). According to Han and Hyun (2015), the central aspect of CS that leads to customer retention and loyalty is the industry of Umrah travel focuses on understanding customer service needs and learning how it affects service delivery and customer attitude (Muala, 2016). Companies may decide the steps needed to satisfy and fulfill the demands of their consumers by first knowing their views.

Companies in sectors such as Umrah service agents must research and identify their strengths and weaknesses, compare themselves to their rivals, and provide plans for future advancement and progress (Saghier & Nathan, 2013). The connection between the product or service supplier and their clients, particularly in the Umrah travel business, is critical to CS performance. As a result, providing high-quality services and goods is critical to maintaining and pleasing valued clients (Kant & Jaiswal, 2017). According to Maula (2016), providing and delivering high-quality services to clients allows businesses to compare and distinguish themselves in highly competitive marketplaces (Muala, 2016).

Relationship Between Service Quality And Customer Satisfaction

According to Arsanam and Yousapronpaiboon (2014), the literature clearly shows that CS is the key to long-term business success. Jabnoun and Hassan (2003) discovered that banks with a more pleasant atmosphere improve client satisfaction. According to one research, developing a substantial and long-term connection with clients is feasible by integrating physical and intangible high-quality features in goods and services given by travel services. This service quality dimension includes travel services, equipment, human resources (staff), and communication methods. In a nutshell, tangibles are about making first impressions. Every company wishes for its customers to have a memorable and pleasant first impression. Concentrating on this aspect will allow them to get the most benefits (Swar et al., 2012). Ibanez et al. (2014) evaluated the relationship between service quality factors and customer satisfaction. They discovered a tangible link between service dependability and consumer happiness. In addition to tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness, assurance has been identified as a significant dimension of service quality by Parasuraman et al. (1988). They proposed that all of these dimensions significantly enhance customer satisfaction. It is believed that if the employees of travel services display trustworthy behavior, the satisfaction level of customers can be enhanced significantly (Ashdaq et al., 2015). Furthermore, Iglesias and Guillen (2004) discovered a positive and significant link between empathy and customer satisfaction. Another research study stated that if there is an empathy gap, clients may stay dissatisfied with service quality. The above literature reviews will lead to the development of the following hypotheses:

    H1: Tangible dimension of SQ affects Customer Satisfaction with Umrah travel agents

    H2: Reliability dimensions of SQ affect Customer Satisfaction with Umrah travel agents

H3: Responsiveness dimensions of SQ affect Customer Satisfaction with Umrah travel agents

H4: Assurance affects Customer Satisfaction with Umrah Travel agents

H5: Empathy affects Customer Satisfaction with Umrah travel agents.

METHODOLOGY

The research was based on primary data acquired from pilgrims who performed the Umrah more than once in their lives and who reside in Selangor via a survey questionnaire. According to Louangrath (2017), the sample size calculated and measured for this study is between 30-500 respondents. The questionnaires were created using Google Forms and disseminated over social media platforms and applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Email, and Telegram. The questionnaire items are adapted from Khan & Fasih, 2014 and Kaura, et al., 2012 studies. A total of 27 items were used to measure variables of tangible, assurance, reliability, empathy, responsiveness, and traveler satisfaction. A five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Moderate, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree was utilized. A pilot study by pretesting the structured questionnaire and reliability test were conducted and the result of Cronbach alpha were all above 0.70 indicating good reliability. For data collection, 397 replies were collected, completed, and analyzed in total. Statistical software for the social sciences was utilized to analyze the data (SPSS). In addition, descriptive analysis and multiple linear regression were employed to evaluate the aims of the study.

FINDINGS

Respondents' Demographic Profile

Table 1 of demographic respondents indicates majority of respondents are from the age of 51 years old and above (38.8%). 51.9% of respondents are male, while females comprise 48.1%. Moreover, 25.9% of the respondents are no longer working or retired. Most of the respondents' levels of education recorded were Degree holders (32%). The income level that recorded the highest contribution for this study is between RM 1,500 to RM 5,000 (43.6%). The majority of the respondents have performed Umrah more than twice (50.1%).

Table 1: Demographic Frequency Analysis (Sample size = 397)

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Age	18-28 years old	83	20.9
	29-39 years old	79	19.9
	40-50 years old	81	20.4
	51 years old and above	154	38.8
Gender	Male	206	51.9
	Female	191	48.1

Occupation	Student	33	8.3
	Private sector employee	84	21.2
	Public sector employee	99	24.9
	Self-employed	78	19.6
	Retire	103	25.9
Education Level	SPM	73	18.4
	STPM/ Diploma	104	26.2
	Degree	127	32.0

Descriptive Analysis

Based on Table 2, the most important aspect of service quality among pilgrims is under the empathy dimension (M= 3.81) 'The employees of the travel agency understand the specific needs of their customers. On the other hand, the lowest mean score is 4.66, recorded for tangible dimensions which is 'The travel agency has modern equipment' and in empathy dimension 'The travel agency is responding to customers 24 hours'. On the other hand, the highest mean score for travelers' satisfaction with service quality is 3.83, 'How do you rate services, and did they meet your needs and expectations regarding quality and performance?'. The results of the descriptive analysis indicate that in general, travelers tilt towards the level of strongly agree, thus the perception of service quality dimensions of travel agents has an impact on pilgrims' satisfaction.

Table 2: Variables' Descriptive Analysis (Sample Size=397)

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tangible				
The travel agency has modern equipment.	2	5	4.66	.662
Do the travel agency's physical facilities are visually appealing?	2	5	4.67	.640
Do the employees of travel agencies have a neat, professional appearance?	2	5	4.74	.578
The material associated with the service (pamphlets or statement) will be visually appealing at the travel agency?	3	5	4.70	.590
Assurance				
The behavior of employees will instill confidence in customers.	3	5	4.80	.475
The customers feel safe with the travel agency.	2	5	4.76	.550
The employees are consistently courteous with customers.	2	5	4.78	.520

Reliability				
When the travel agency promises to do something by a certain time, they do.	2	5	4.69	.621
The employees will give prompt service to customers.	3	5	4.73	.569
The travel agency performs the service right the first time.	2	5	4.71	.626
The travel agency provides the service at the time they promise.	3	5	4.74	.548
Empathy				
The travel agency will give customers individual attention.	2	5	4.78	.487
The travel agency is responding to customers 24 hours.	2	5	4.66	.683
The travel agency has an employee who gives customer personal service.	2	5	4.70	.662
The employees of the travel agency understand the specific needs of their customers.	3	5	4.81	.435
Responsiveness				
The travel agency's employees tell customers exactly when services will be performed.	3	5	4.80	.460
The employees of the travel agency give prompt service to customers.	2	5	4.78	.538
The employees are never too busy to respond to customers' requests.	3	5	4.75	.563
The employees are always willing to help customers.	2	5	4.77	.526
Customer Satisfaction				
How do you rate their responsiveness in dealing with you?	3	5	4.80	.480
How do you rate the staff in dealing with you?	2	5	4.80	.527
How do you rate services, and did they meet your needs and expectation regarding quality and performance?	3	5	4.83	.427
How do you rate the travel agency's information delivery based on time performance and their commitment to meet your information delivery expectation?	2	5	4.79	.526
How do you rate travel agency's staff approach to quality management to ensure complete customer satisfaction?	2	5	4.78	.532
How do you rate competitiveness of the travel agency's services, and do they represent the best value for total cost that spent by you?	2	5	4.78	.517

Multiple Regression Analysis

To see whether there is a significant relationship between pilgrims' service quality dimensions of tangible, assurance, reliability, empathy, and responsiveness and their influence on satisfaction, a single-step multiple regression was conducted. The 19 items in the service quality dimension and 7 items in the dependent dimension (satisfaction) collapsed and entered the equation. The outcomes demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between the service quality dimension on travelers' satisfaction. The traveler's perception of the service quality dimension was able to explain 81.2% ($R^2 = 0.812$, F—change = 148.054, $p < 0.000$) of the variance in satisfaction. It shows that pilgrims' perception of service quality rendered by travel agents is found to influence their satisfaction significantly and positively. Besides that, Table 3 shows the value of beta coefficients for this study. This study suggests that the responsiveness dimension of service quality (0.910) has the strongest influence on their satisfaction with the travel agency. However, assurance and tangible dimensions of service quality, have statistically insignificant relationships towards pilgrims' satisfaction with travel agency ($p>0.05$). Therefore, hypothesis testing results for H1 and H4 are rejected, while H2, H3 and H5 are accepted.

Table 3: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficient Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.605	.108		5.586	.000
Tangible	-.088	.057	-.109	-1.562	.119
Assurance	.042	.055	.045	.757	.449
Reliability	.163	.060	.200	2.695	.007
Empathy	-.122	.055	-.136	-2.208	.028
Responsiveness	.884	.052	.910	16.843	.000

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the descriptive analysis reveal that pilgrims' perception of the service quality dimension for travel agents has an impact on their satisfaction, and tilts towards the level of strongly agree indicating they are very satisfied with their services. The results of the regression analysis also reveal that the independent variables, service quality dimensions such as tangible, assurance, reliability, empathy, and responsiveness of travel agency, have a substantial impact on pilgrims' satisfaction. Between the dimensions of service quality in travel agents, the responsiveness dimension has the greatest influence on their satisfaction, followed by reliability, and empathy. Thus, this study's findings indicate a significant association between responsiveness, reliability, and empathy dimensions and satisfaction. It implies that when service quality rendered in terms of responsiveness, reliability, and empathy in travel agencies is high, travelers' satisfaction increases. Pilgrims found it is important for travel agency employees to be responsive in

delivering their services such as employees of Umrah travel agencies to tell customers exactly when services will be performed, provide prompt services, willingness to help and are never too busy to respond to customers' requests. This is in line with a previous study by Ngo & Nguyen (2016) stating that customers are delighted when personalized attention and employees pay heed to client concerns.

Besides responsiveness, reliability also proves as an important dimension in service delivery in improving customer satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the findings of Ibanez et al. (2014) study where there is a tangible link between service dependability and consumer happiness. The findings of this study also reveal that empathy is also an important dimension of service quality. It proves that customers who are handled enthusiastically are more likely to return and are more willing to forgive any faults that may arise. This results in customer retention and the formation of a new customer pool. This concludes that empathy helps increase service quality, client loyalty, and satisfaction (Rajaratnam et al., 2014). The result of this study however found that both tangible and assurance in service quality do not affect their satisfaction with the travel agency. The result does not corroborate with previous studies by Rajaratnam et al., 2014 and Parasuraman et al., 1988 who propose that all these dimensions significantly enhance customer satisfaction.

This analysis yields useful information that is essential for future research, particularly in similar places with similar conditions. As far as academic perspectives are concerned, this study will bring fresh insights for future research, as it reveals that travel agency employees must place their hospitality self at the top of their priority list to remain employed by travel agencies. In terms of practical considerations, the owners of travel agencies should make sure that their employees are equipped with the right personality and skills needed to operate a travel agency. The travel agency business in Malaysia will grow as customer satisfaction with their services increases, as they will become loyal to the agency for future travel.

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