

HOMESTAY SERVICE EXPERIENCE FOR TOURIST SATISFACTION AND SUSTAINABILITY AMIDST COVID-19 CHALLENGES

Boo Ho Voon*

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Teck Weng Jee

Swinburne University of Technology, Sarawak Campus, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

Corina Joseph

Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Muhammad Iskandar Hamzah

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Patricia Melvin Jussem

Faculty of Hotel Management and Hospitality, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

Ai Kiat Teo

SMK DPHA Gapor, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Although tourist homestay experience has been commonly recognized as an important criterion for community-based and eco-friendly destination loyalty, not much is known about the measurement of its service experience. A scientific inquiry into the tourist experience will be an essential differentiation tool for sustainable competitive advantage in this alternative hospitality sector. Our research aims to develop a measure of homestay service experience and to use this measure to investigate the influence of homestay service experience on tourists' satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Specifically, the HomeServe inventory is established through qualitative and quantitative processes. Focus group interviews and questionnaire survey techniques were employed. A total of 866 usable questionnaires were obtained from the nationwide survey. Reliability and validity analyses were done on the measurement items. Measurement and relationship analyses were done using the confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling. Eight dimensions (32 items) of homestay service experience were identified (i.e., Culture, Guiding Service, Food and Beverage, Environment, Cleanliness, Accommodation, Services, and Accessibility). The measurement and model fit indices were found to be satisfactory. This newly found multi-dimensional construct of tourist service experience is in line with tourist-oriented service management. It was found that service experience has a direct positive effect on tourists' satisfaction.

* Corresponding author: Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kota Samarahan, Sarawak. Email: bhvoon@uitm.edu.my

Managerial and research implications of the measurement were discussed for more effective tourist experience management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, specifically the homestay programs, is a very important service sector in Malaysia. The response to these programs has been encouraging partly due to sustainable tourism initiatives by the government, though there are still areas for further improvement. The homestay programs require a more effective and efficient management process typically in the area of performance measurement and management for a more effective income generation and sustainability of the programs. However, scant attention has been given to the performance assessment system and a unique competitive edge has yet to be identified for the measurement domains and process. Service experience is believed to be pivotal towards this end. A scientific inquiry on the homestay service experience (HomeServE) will be the potential differentiation tool for sustainable competitive advantage within the community-based tourism domain.

This research aims to develop a measure of homestay service experience and investigate the homestay service experience's influence on tourists' satisfaction and behavioural intention. Specifically, the HomeServE inventory is established and validated through qualitative and quantitative processes. Despite the popularity of service experience in hospitality studies among scholars (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2018; Wibowo et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020; Zeithaml et al., 2020), remarkably little research has explored service experience in the context of homestays, particularly in the Southeast Asian region. The experiential consumption of community-based lodging is different from mainstream hotels which are void of community socialization, that necessitates a better understanding of consumer motives and value-seeking behaviours. For instance, the cultural exposure and localized recommendations offered by hosts may provide tourists with exotic experiences that cannot be experienced in conventional hotels. Consumers especially independent tourists, often gauge these experiences due to the learning and socializing opportunities provided through a typical homestay accommodation.

This research contributes to the existing literature on service experience, satisfaction, and behavioural intention in several ways. First, it instigates advancement to the literature on service experience by inductively examining the crucial traits that capture different facets of homestays' lodging experience. The themes that emerged from the qualitative findings provide unique insights that could fit with our conceptualization of HomeServE. Second, it builds on these pieces of evidence to create nomological linkages between HomeServE and tourist outcomes, namely, satisfaction and behavioural intention. In this regard, the output is a parsimonious empirical framework that is tested for model fit and robustness suitable to be incorporated in future research applications in community-based hospitality and lodging services particularly during the post-COVID-19 era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Customer Experience*

A customer's effect and/or emotional experience of service could play a greater role than any other factors in ensuring business success in the competitive business environment. A satisfactory and positive personal experience with a service-based transaction (e.g., homestay tourism) will lead to repeat purchases (e.g., Leino et al., 2021; McKenzie, 2000; Wang et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2020). Every stage of service delivery should provide authentic experiences. Gilmore and Pine II (2007) opined that experiencing authenticity is crucial for effective management. They argued that such a unique experience and authenticity should be the primary source of differentiation, which is the real value demanded by the customers. The various service needs for different customers, including customer experience of vulnerability, need to be understood for inclusive customer experience (Leino et al., 2021).

The customer experience (i.e., tourist experience) has been regarded as a useful tool to gain superior service performance (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Silva et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019). However, there is less emphasis on empirical research to investigate the experience and quality practices of the priority service sector such as homestay tourism. The hospitality and service practices of the homestay operators need to be understood and measured for effective and efficient management of the programs to benefit the stakeholders, especially the tourists. The existing literature in services marketing mainly reports on contemporary theories and studies related to hospitality and tourism management as well as marketing and management. Community-based tourism marketing has been explored in a multi-cultural Malaysian context, namely from the perspectives of consumption values, service quality, and stakeholder approach (e.g., Ho et al., 2017; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a comprehensive, reliable, and valid measurement for the homestay service experience that encompasses customers' experiential journey throughout the accommodation service experience has yet to be established. Thus, the formulation of a holistic homestay experience model is expected to benefit the tourism service marketing and management.

2.2. *Service Experience in Tourism and Hospitality Industry*

The ability of the accommodation providers to offer an elusive hospitality experience is becoming important as a competitive strategy. Experiences are personal, unique involvement of cognitive and affective moment-of-truth of events that involve multi-sensory interactions with surrounding cues (Kufedjian, 2003). Kufedjian focused on primary experience (one's as opposed to others', current as opposed to past or future, and actual as opposed to dreamlike or imagery ones), rather than non-primary experience (all other experiences). Experience is translated (rather than defined rigidly) in terms of the sensory aspect of the consumption such as through tasting, hearing, smelling, visualizing, and/or impressing. The experience varies from situation to situation in which the emotional aspect occurs almost in all-consuming situations (Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Zhao et al., 2020).

Since a homestay establishment is more of a service business, the service experience is the service delivery subjective perception (Groth & Gilliland, 2001). Andersson and Mossberg

(2004) argue that certain elements that affect the level of satisfaction of service experience include food, service, fine cuisine, restaurant interior, good company, and other guests. These elements are said to influence the level of arousal and thus the perception of the service experience. Service experience is also defined as the emotional feelings of the consumer during the service encounter (Hui & Bateson, 1991), where service encounters are intangible series of interactions between the consumer and the service setting, or the environment. And it is noted that emotions are contagious in social situations (Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007). Contrary to purchasing products that offer tangible benefits, consumers buy tourism services that yield memorable experiences. In line with understanding, many researchers tend to agree that the service experience will lead to better customer satisfaction and loyalty in the hospitality-driven service sector (e.g., Kim & Moon, 2009; Leino et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2020).

2.3. COVID-19 and Homestay Tourism

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected tourist destinations all over the world. At the onset of the pandemic, the adverse effect was recorded in favorite tourism countries, for example, France and Italy. The tourism industry in Malaysia, particularly the airline and hotel businesses, has been adversely impacted by the pandemic. As a result, tourists from other parts of the world are delaying, and, worse still, canceling bookings and their travel plans to Malaysia. The number of tourists has declined due to the travel restrictions and bans by the Malaysian government to combat the spread of the virus.

Tourist arrivals to Malaysia fell by 83.4% in 2020 with the country welcoming only about four million tourists. The massive drop in international tourist arrivals is attributed to the closure of Malaysian borders since 18th March 2020 due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), as announced by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, the homestay programs in Malaysia have been very much affected. The premises that cater to tourists are required to vacate them. This includes homestay entrepreneurs. The tourism sector is one of the worst affected industries. However, the economic stimulus package is expected to assist the tourism industry to sustain itself throughout this challenging period (Foo et al., 2021).

Despite the creation of virtual visit initiatives for several tourist destinations, the tourism sector cannot exploit the full-scale benefits of social, cultural, and economic based on an online platform, dissimilar to other economic sectors. It has been advocated by Moreno-Luna et al. (2021) that tourism involves personal experiences in tourist destinations. As a result, tourism businesses have been competing with each other to re-open tourism with new innovative business ideas and plans.

The tourism, hospitality, and travel industry as well as energy industry are the world's largest employers, but the tourism, hospitality, and travel industry is very sensitive to major devastation such as COVID-19 pandemic (Chang et al., 2021). One of the aspects in the charter by Chang et al. (2021) to establish balanced and sustainable tourism, travel, and hospitality industry is to transform any future crisis into opportunities for sustainability by:

- (i) monitoring the potential tourism demand;
- (ii) prioritizing segments and anticipating changes in tourist behavior;

- (iii) ensuring connectivity and strengthening relationships with a range of distribution companies;
- (iv) guaranteeing links between potential visitors and destinations;
- (v) restarting tourism activity to maximize economic, social, and environmental contributions;
- (vi) minimizing any negative impacts of restarting the tourism economy.

COVID-19 is extensively perceived as a massive worldwide challenge. The pandemic has caused widespread problems for the hospitality industry. There are concerns that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, financial support for sustainability actions will be considerably cut down. Counter-arguments propose sustainability will go on to be valuable in re-creating, and possibly enhancing, the relationship between the hospitality industry and both the natural and social capital wherein it is finally subjected to (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

3.1. *Theoretical Background*

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory provides insights on how customers think, feel, and react -in stimulation to diverse environmental attributes, during service interactions (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Sultan et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Several later studies have adapted and verified the model to function in a retail setting, which was initially intended for general environmental psychology. The theory emphasizes 'stimuli' as a set of social-environmental inputs that can influence their internal states. Although the interactions may involve the same service provider, every individual has a different experience from the next, since each experience is uniquely derived from the individual's state of mind. Once a stimulus triggers a decision-making situation, customers tend to evaluate -by thinking (cognitive process) and feeling (affective process), the information on the different cues in the environment. This second stage is also termed the 'organism' construct. The 'response' dimension comprises the customers' outcome behaviour - either to approach or to avoid, based on their ability to make well-informed decisions. The related research hypotheses are developed. based upon the S-O-R theoretical premise.

3.2. *Hypothesis Development*

In the community-based hospitality sector context, culture, guide service, food and beverages, environment, cleanliness, accommodation, general services, and accessibility are recognized as the main factors representing service experience (e.g., Gallan et al., 2021). Thus, in this research, we conceptualize the tourist experience as a second-order construct comprising these eight sub-scales. The cultural dimension describes the lifestyle and traditional encounters that can be experienced live via social interactions with the homestay family. Homestay services – especially in the rural community, typically offer a unique experience for tourists. For instance, the foreign tourists can learn about local history, traditional dances, songs, food, games and sports, and festivities from their hosts. Besides, the physical and practical hands-on activities such as performing rituals, cooking, and handcrafting, expose visitors to active learning and self-

discovery. These cultural encounters can create memorable tourist experiences (e.g., Voon & Lee, 2009; Wang et al., 2019).

Guide service could be provided in the form of personalized advice, hands-on tutorials, and exploration such as jungle trekking and sightseeing. As it involves intimate human-to-human interaction, a tour guide's competence, people-handling skills, and knowledge potentially enrich tourists' consumption of epistemic and experiential values. According to Salazar (2012), community-based tourists spend the majority of their time with tour guides, who are often the only locals with whom they interact. The quality of the tourist experience, specifically local natural and cultural heritage, highly depends on the credibility of their advice and the richness of the imparted knowledge. Hence, we expect that personalized social ties and connections offered by the local guides go to great lengths in nurturing tourists' satisfaction in homestay programs. In terms of food and beverages, food publicity in destination marketing symbolizes the manifestation of a culture that marks the regional and ethnic identity of the community (Stalmirska, 2020). In the decision-making process of visitors, especially those with great a passion for food or often referred to as 'foodies', food and beverage experiences play an important role. The 'foodie traveler' market segmentation is diverse, and while some desire to be involved in the food preparation and cooking process, others enjoy sharing and interacting with their gastronomical encounters via social media (Knollenberg et al., 2021).

The homestay environment is another dimension that tourists often look for when lodging in community-based homestays. The physical and surrounding environment is an essential attribute that contributes to a pleasant stay. Many researchers have associated a pleasant environment with elements such as nature, relaxation, and serenity. Through eco-tourism, tourists tend to appreciate the physical environment of the natural sites' destination, especially one that offers great scenery, tranquillity and serenity (Shasha et al., 2020). A cozy atmosphere enhances a guest's stay experience through multiple sensory cues, inducing feelings of pleasure and delight. Nevertheless, only when the physical environment is clean does one feel relieved and at ease. In this regard, the cleanliness dimension relates to the homestay's ability to offer clean, tidy, and hygienic facilities and services. Ferri Sanz et al. (2019) revealed that scholars often focused on cleanliness as a latent indicator of a homestay destination's service quality.

Accommodation relates to the homestay provider's ability in presenting sufficient basic amenities and lodging facilities for a guest's proper night stay. The availability of services, bedding, and restrooms is critical in making a positive first impression on visitors. In this sense, functional values contribute to guests' satisfaction, especially when they are served with affordable and reasonably priced lodging (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016). Given that accommodation expectation fulfillment is at the heart of all hospitality experiences, meeting this requirement is essential for guests' perceptions of other experiences to be positive. The presence and consumption of local culture and information by visitors pave the way for mutually beneficial host-guest relationships. For instance, good homestay program provision is linked to higher tourist satisfaction, resulting in longer or repeated stays (Ogucha et al., 2015). Similarly, we predict that the element of accessibility has a significant impact on tourists' satisfaction with a homestay provider. Within the homestay setting, where researchers often overlook the accessibility factor, ease of access and journey comfort are particularly important to visitors with special needs (Ferri Sanz et al., 2019). In addition, independent travelers can appreciate homestays that are easily accessible through multiple modes of transportation.

Based on these discussions, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: Homestay Service Experience has a direct positive effect on tourist satisfaction.

Customer emotional experience is illustrated as the various kinds of emotions, such as excitement, joy, pleasure, contentment, worry, frustration, or anger while having, experiencing or visiting a specific service(s) (e.g., Voon & Lee, 2009). Previous research indicate that positive emotional experiences lead to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty towards service personnel and organisation. Studies have indicated that satisfaction is closely related to emotions and feelings. Businesses have to address the emotional state of customers' experience while getting business products and services. As customers (the society) become more affluent, service experiences that complement their lifestyles and brands that reflect their aspirations are what they are into (Smith & Wheeler, 2002). Businesses need to offer that unique and differentiated experiences for their customers to create loyalty and belongingness among their customers. Understanding the customers' needs and wants in food services, the emotional experience of the customers towards their services will go a long way towards assisting the homestay operators to overhaul and develop their businesses to face the competition. Emotional criticalness is echoed as equally important in the product and service functionality management (Berry et al., 2002). As basic issues that could affect the moments of true experiences of customers need to be satisfied in the best possible manner, aspects such as food safety and cultural wholesomeness are responsibilities that homestay establishments must provide their patrons (Kuan, 2009).

H₂: Homestay Service Experience has an indirect positive effect on revisit intention via satisfaction.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to identify the key dimensions for homestay service experience and investigate the relationships among the service experience, tourist satisfaction and behavioural intentions. The qualitative phase involved focus group interviews followed by the quantitative phase, which used a structured questionnaire survey. The main target population of the study was the tourists who had visited homestay destinations in Malaysia.

The study started with a relevant literature review on services marketing and management, hospitality management, and service quality theories and measurements to identify the tentative critical dimensions for the tourists' experiences. This was followed by the focus group interviews which aimed to discuss the service experiences for excellent homestay service management and tourist satisfaction. Each focus group had 8-12 participants representing the various selected groups of tourists (by age groups, gender, and race). All the group discussions were audio-taped and analyzed accordingly to generate the required dimensions and items for constructing the survey questionnaire.

The duly designed questionnaire was validated by four experts in the field of services marketing, service management, and hospitality management. They commented on the questionnaire design as well as the relevance of the dimensions and items included in the questionnaire. Issues such as

double-barrelled items, technical words, and the number of items were addressed accordingly. The face validity of the questionnaire was enhanced after the revision. The improved questionnaire was also validated by asking fifty respondents who had ever visited homestay destinations. The duly answered questionnaires were returned and analyzed statistically. The reliability scores of the measurement items were found to be satisfactory (i.e., Cronbach's alpha more than 0.70). The structured questionnaires were then distributed to the target population and the respondents were selected through the quota sampling technique. They were invited and participated in the survey voluntarily. The customers returned the duly answered questionnaires to the enumerators concerned at the respective homestay destinations and programs. The returned questionnaires were then given to the researchers or the specified supervisors. This was an anonymous survey where the respondents' answers were not personally identified to enhance the reliability and validity of the data.

A total of 866 usable questionnaires were analyzed. The respondents were recruited based on quota sampling (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Namahoot & Laohavichien, 2018), and the control characteristics were age, gender, and race. Following the suggestion of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the intended total sample sizes were considered sufficient for the target population of even more than a million. Reliability check and confirmatory factor analysis were done on the survey data to confirm as well as validate the factors which were identified through the exploratory factor analysis earlier on. The numerous goodness of fit indices (e.g., Normed, CFI, GFI, RMSEA, AGFI, and TLI) were used to confirm the goodness of the measurement model which helped to identify the determinants for service experience. The validity tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and criterion-related validity were also conducted accordingly. A structural model was specified and tested using the empirical survey data to assess the relationships among the homestay service experience, tourist satisfaction, and behavioural intention.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The background information and characteristics of the eight hundred and sixty-six respondents are shown in Table 1. The respondents were carefully sampled in line with the target population based on some demographic characteristics as the controlled variables as quota sampling was employed. More female (52.8%) respondents participated in the survey and most of the respondents were aged 21-30 years old. Foreigners accounted for about 6% and about 48% of the respondents were Bachelor's Degree holders. They were from different walks of life (i.e., Students – 42.4%, public sector – 19.12%, Private sector – 22.9%, Self-employed – 10.3% and Unemployed only 4.5%). About 81% of the respondents earned RM3000 or less per month.

Table 1: The Respondents' Characteristics

	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	409	47.2
	Female	457	52.8
Age	20 or less	45	5.2
	21-30	579	66.9
	31-40	136	15.7
	41-50	74	8.5
	51 and above	32	3.7
Marital Status	Single	592	68.4
	Married	264	30.5
	Divorced/Widow	10	1.1
Nationality	Malaysian	816	94.2
	Foreigner	50	5.8
Education	SPM or lower	124	14.3
	STPM/Diploma	267	30.8
	Degree	415	47.9
	Postgraduate	52	6.0
	Professional	8	0.9
Occupation	Student	367	42.4
	Public sector	165	19.1
	Private sector	198	22.9
	Self-employed	89	10.3
	Unemployed	47	5.4
Monthly Income	1000 or less	441	50.9
	1001-3000	262	30.3
	3001-5000	116	13.4
	5001 and above	47	5.4

Comprehensive multidimensional constructs for all the service experience dimensions were created for this research (refer to Figure 1) which comprised eight dimensions and a total of 32 items. The dimensions are namely: Culture (5 items), Guiding service (6 items), Food and Beverages (3 items), Environment (4 items), Cleanliness (4 items), Accommodation (4 items), Services (3 items), and Accessibility (3 items).

Cronbach's alpha for all the scales used in this research was further analyzed for its reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all the eight dimensions were good and items-to-total correlations for all these items were satisfactory (more than 0.40). These suggested that there were satisfactory internal consistency of the items and the measures were considered to be good to gauge tourist experience. The factor loading for the eight factors are shown in Table 2. The total variance explained was 62.9%.

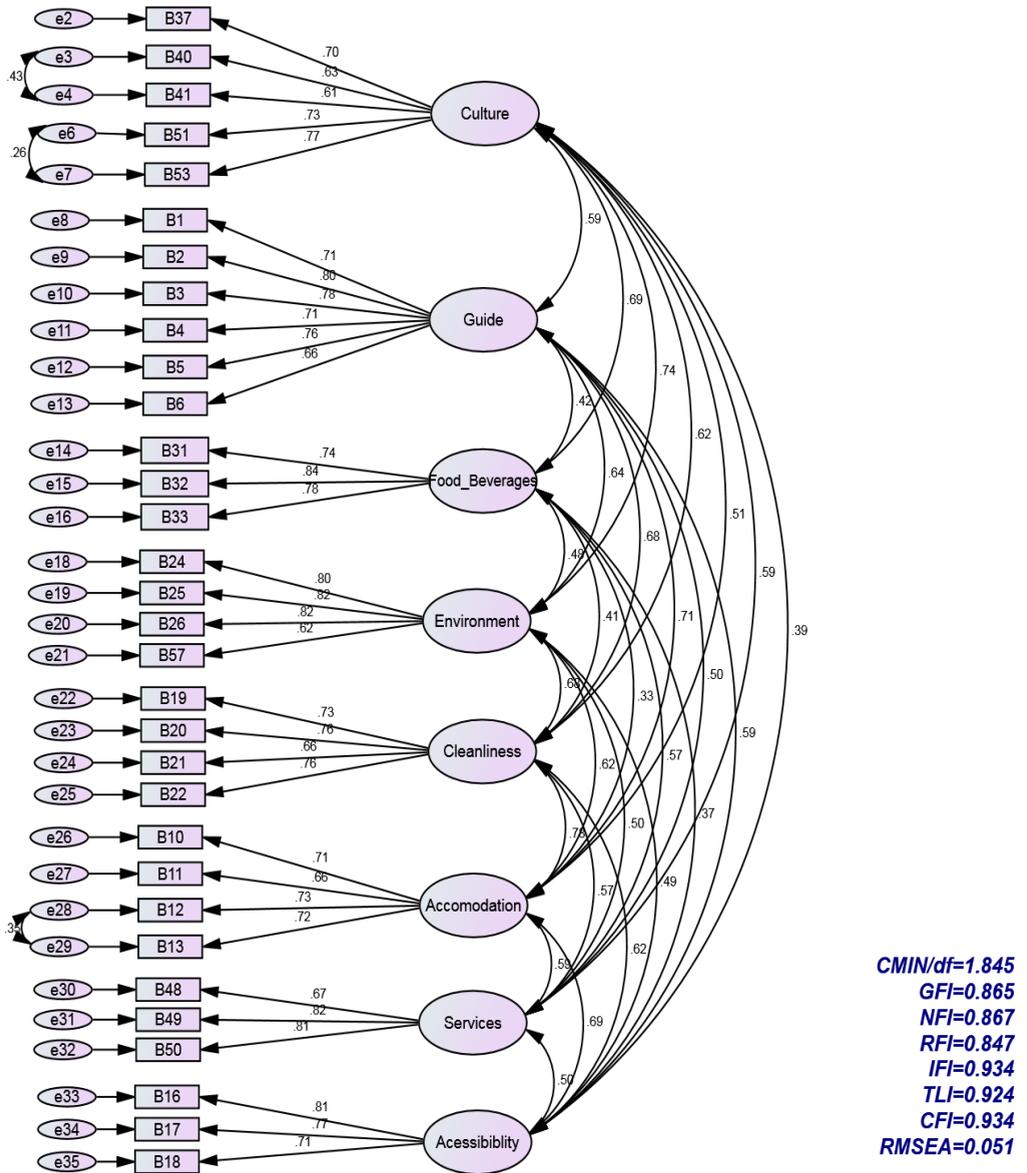
The goodness of measure for the tourist satisfaction measurement was also checked and the results indicated that it was a good scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient stood at 0.85 and the item-to-total correlations of the items were: 1) satisfied with the services provided (0.758), 2) Quality of the service is excellent (0.774), 3) Service provided can meet my expectations (0.731), 4) I have good experience with the homestay (0.742), and 5) I am happy with the service provided (0.704).

Table 2: Dimensions and Items of Homestay Service Experience

Dimensions/Items and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients		Item-Total-Correlation	Factor Loadings
Culture (0.84)			
1	The homestay cultural activities are very interesting.	0.598	0.500
2	I enjoyed knowing the language of the people.	0.641	0.663
3	I have an opportunity to learn their native language.	0.652	0.782
4	The people of the homestay are special/unique.	0.638	0.711
5	There is a unique culture for the homestay.	0.693	0.618
Guide Service (0.88)			
6	Sufficient information about the homestay before the trip.	0.645	0.658
7	The person-in-charge of the trip understands my needs.	0.744	0.738
8	The guide is friendly to me.	0.719	0.683
9	The guide gives me individual attention.	0.666	0.717
10	The guide is always willing to help me.	0.699	0.672
11	The guide is knowledgeable about the homestay.	0.603	0.577
Food & Beverages (0.83)			
12	There are many choices of food and drinks.	0.660	0.732
13	I can get exotic (special) local food in the homestay.	0.733	0.757
14	I can taste foods that I have never eaten before.	0.668	0.654
Environment (0.85)			
15	Good nature trail(s) is/are found near the homestay.	0.697	0.637
16	There is serenity (quietness) surrounding the homestay.	0.741	0.680
17	A restful and relaxing atmosphere is found at the homestay.	0.755	0.739
18	The homestay environment enables me to relax.	0.546	0.633
Cleanliness (0.82)			
19	There is a clean environment surrounding the homestay area.	0.643	0.668
20	Guestroom cleanliness is acceptable.	0.673	0.634
21	The food and drinks served are hygienic.	0.591	0.648
22	Bathrooms and toilets are clean.	0.656	0.594
Accommodation (0.82)			
23	Enough bathrooms/toilets to accommodate visitors.	0.580	0.505
24	Do not have to spend much on the homestay accommodation.	0.589	0.626
25	Sufficient electricity supply in the homestay.	0.708	0.683
26	The water supply is enough for visitors' use.	0.666	0.667
Services (0.81)			
27	Good telecommunication services (e.g., telephone, internet).	0.599	0.735
28	Tour guiding services are provided.	0.705	0.714
29	Good homestay packages/programs are available.	0.673	0.630
Accessibility (0.81)			
30	The location of the homestay can be easily found.	0.680	0.729
31	The homestay is easily accessible by the right mode of transport.	0.667	0.724
32	The road condition along the journey is satisfactory.	0.609	0.675

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was done to investigate the goodness of the measurement model (Figure 1). The measurement model was drawn based on the eight dimensions and the correlations among them were specified. The model fit indices were good (i.e., CFI=0.93, GFI=0.86, RMSEA=0.05). The correlations ranged from 0.33 to 0.78 suggesting that the eight dimensions were significantly associated, but they were not strongly associated (coefficient less than 0.85). The discriminant validity of the construct was exhibited.

Figure 1: The Measurement Model for Homestay Service Experience

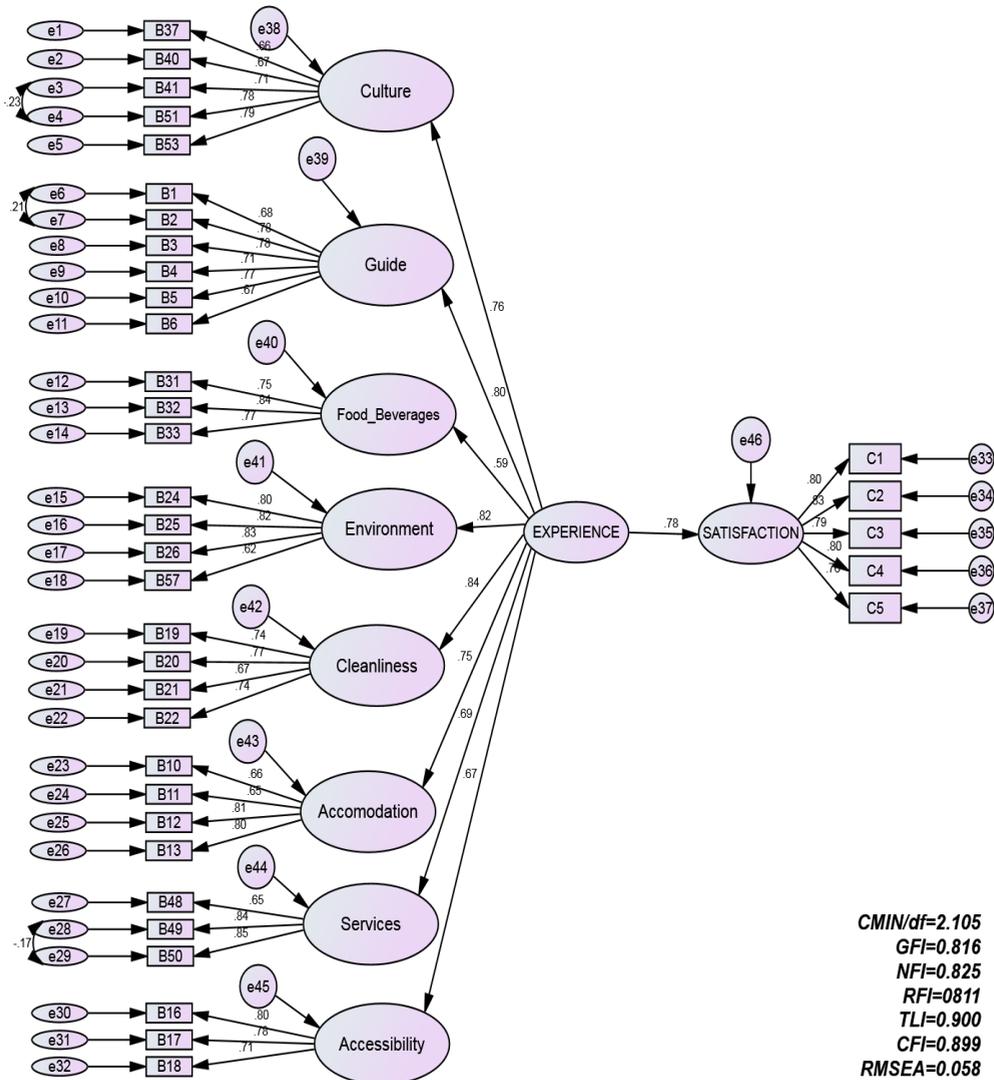


Further structural modelling procedures were performed to test the causality in the proposed model (Figure 2). Such procedures provide estimates on the overall model fit, as well as the direct and indirect effect of the predictor’s variable (service experience) in the proposed model (Meyers et al., 2006). The proposed causal model was further assessed using multiple fit indices

including Minimum Discrepancy per Degree of Freedom (CMIN/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation Index (RMSEA). The Structural Equation Modeling for the causal model (Tourist Experience-Tourist Satisfaction) also showed an acceptable model fit (i.e., CMIN/df = 2.105, CFI=0.90, GFI=0.82 and RMSEA=0.056).

The bootstrapping procedure was used to test the causal model, resulting in (numbers) samples in (number) iterations (Nevitt & Hancock, 2001). The suggested paths in the model indicated statistically significant results (path coefficient = 0.78, p-value < 0.05). This indicated that the impact of tourist experience on tourist satisfaction was promising.

Figure 2: The Impact of Tourist Experience on Tourist Satisfaction



6. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

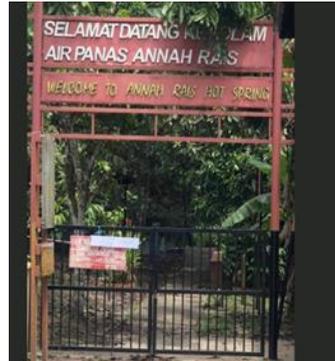
This newly found multi-dimensional construct of the tourist experience is in line with tourist-oriented service management for delightful customer service, more so in the emerging markets, where natural resources are plentiful which need the improved global customer service management for service profit optimisation. Moeller et al. (2016) argue that there is always a need to instil greater levels of cross-cultural competency in the emerging markets' workforce. This is especially necessary as the modern conceptualization of service advocates that the value of service is ideally a good combination of the tangibles and intangibles (e.g., human factors and natural resources). Undoubtedly, vigilant service management is essential post-COVID-19 pandemic challenges as the safety and health of the tourists, homestay operators and all the related stakeholders are of paramount importance.

The service tangibles as well as the physical appearance of the people and facilities are considered essential in service. Many research studies suggest that the retail settings such as the visual complexity of an environment's interior design could influence customer experience (e.g., Putri, 2021; Orth et al., 2016; Voon et al., 2009). Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the service tangibles and physical appearance of the built environments might not be very appealing (e.g., labels, signs, tapes), but these are for the safety and health of all. The tourists are more fascinated by the natural beauty and authenticity. The findings are in line with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory that provides insights on how customers think, feel, and react -in stimulation to diverse environmental attributes, during service interactions (Sultan et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021).

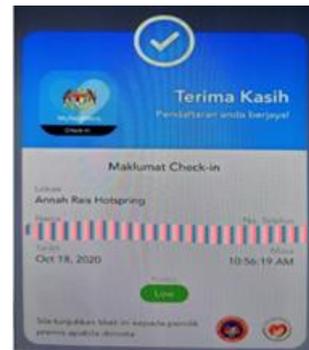
The outcomes of this study demonstrated that service experience does impact tourist satisfaction, hence a positive experience will yield positive impact. Extra mandatory procedures like scanning the QR Code using *MySejahtera* (an app that monitors the outbreak via contact tracing) and registering check-in details might be troublesome, and to some extent disruptive to visitors. However, health-conscious tourists may appreciate these vigilant practices since compliance toward these measures shall serve to protect their lives as well as the tour operators' livelihoods (Figure 3). Tourists may still be satisfied if they are effectively explained and reminded in a friendly manner by operators who recognize the need of maintaining tourist satisfaction while reducing the risk of infection. This is consistent with previous research, which found that interpersonal service satisfaction is critical in explaining customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry (e.g., AlOmari, 2020). Being responsive in a subtle manner necessitates striking a fine balance between enforcing safety compliance (via physical distancing rules) and imposing a limit on their enjoyment (due to the restrictions). The 'response' dimension of the S-O-R theory comprises the customers' outcome behaviour, either to approach or to avoid, based on their ability to make well-informed decisions. Hence, a balanced delivery of service experience is an important strategic element that drives strategic sustainability as well as the economic growth of homestay programs during a prolonged health crisis.

Figure 3: Some Best Practices During COVID-19 Pandemic

Information on COVID-19



Notice on COVID-19



MySejahtera App



Thermometer Scanner



Full Vaccination



Clean and Hygiene

Given the paucity of research on how customers' experiences with homestay services are translated into satisfaction, this study has tried to advance the literature toward a better understanding of customers' experiential journeys, which cover eight distinct experience elements. For instance, the guide service and cultural facets are crucial drivers of tacit interpersonal and humanized experiences that could be unique to certain community-based tourism activities. Hence, our model provides a better elucidation of cross-cultural competency as a highly distinct value offering among homestay operators.

Homestay programs in multi-cultural nations in the emerging economies, such as Malaysia, have much to offer especially in terms of eco-tourism and cultural tourism (Tan & Lim, 2018). The unique, friendly, and helpful people coupled with the beautiful natural environment will provide the best and memorable experiences for tourists. This service-driven sector has contributed to the nation's economy and improved the quality of life for the multiple stakeholders involved. Towards this end, the experience factor has to be sustained and leveraged through holistic performance measurement and management.

With regard to the current pandemic situation, homestay owners need to assure tourists that they are in full compliance with all standard operating procedures (SOPs) issued by the authorities and that their health and safety are always their priority. The tourists should also be encouraged and reminded to abide by the basic proactive measures such as social distancing, practicing good hygiene, wearing a mask, and washing hands frequently. Everyone needs to take precautionary measures to protect themselves from COVID-19. This is not to burden anybody but it is a win-win situation for both parties (homestays operators and visitors).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research contributed to hospitality and tourism theory and practice; however, there is still room for improvement. Firstly, the research's scope of exploration of the critical success factors of homestay businesses sustainability (which includes homestay host family, authenticity, safety, location, accommodation, and activities) was limited in its consideration of homestay-related socio-environmental factors (i.e., culture, guide service, food and beverages, environment, cleanliness, accommodation, services, and accessibility). Existing studies have shown that tourists' decision-making extends beyond socio-environmental influences and is affected by a range of other impeding factors such as economic and social factors (e.g., Gu & Wong, 2006). Thus, future studies should extend the findings of this research by exploring factors from other perspectives, such as the economic impact of homestay activities with the utilitarian-related perspective in relation to the price of homestay products and services offering, as well as hedonic-related perspective with the value obtained from consuming homestay related products and services.

Secondly, the findings have provided a general overview of tourist experience and satisfaction with participation (i.e., consumption of products and services) of homestay offerings, whereas there is no distinction between actual and intended consumption. Homestay providers that have employed strategies to leverage the tourists' experience and satisfaction are now encountering issues related to excursionist tourists, but do not necessarily participate and consume the homestay-related products and services (Sood et al., 2017). Thus, to extend the findings, future research should adopt a clearer tourist profiling lens to ascertain how to increase participation and consumption of homestay-related products and services and to identify the factors affecting the actual amount of money and frequency with which tourists spend money on different homestay-related services.

Thirdly, the tourist service experience dimensions are contextual and tourist-oriented. Their specific consequences on other safety and health criterion will need to be investigated accordingly. Future research can employ relevant quantitative techniques such as SmartPLS SEM, logistics regressions, and others to investigate more types of causal relationships and also identify items that will lead to greater satisfaction as well as a higher level of tourist loyalty (e.g., Dabestani et al., 2017) especially for disaster management such as COVID-19. Besides, samples from different cultural settings from other parts of the emerging markets, or the world can be used to understand the situations more contextually for effective tourist relationship management. It will be good if the critical experience attributes (e.g., health-consciousness, anxiety, safety) can be identified using quantitative methods such as Kano modeling for effective Kansei engineering.

It is undeniable that the hedonic and emotional aspects of the tourist experiences most probably will determine their revisit intentions. The homestay operators will be able to focus their resources on improving the critical areas. The health- and safety-oriented dimensions and items amidst COVID-19 challenges will be essential to care for the operators, visitors, and community. Undoubtedly, their close relationships and co-operation with the government departments, agencies, other channel members (e.g., travel agents), and local stakeholders such as churches, neighbourhood committees, associations, and others will be necessary to consistently and continuously ensure the safety and health of all parties.

Finally, the homestay destinations ideally should be a 'living habitat' for the tourists though on a temporary basis. Furthermore, it is also significant for homestay providers and practitioners to understand the interrelationship between service experience and tourist satisfaction in a comprehensive manner, even before tourists arrive at the destinations. Of course, merely the local tourists are available and supporting (though most destinations do not have visitors or tourists) during and straight after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is highly important as well for decision-makers within the hospitality sector to understand how service experience as an offering, directly or indirectly influences tourists' satisfaction towards homestay programs and offerings. The homestay programs remain an integral part of local tourism and services. Homestay tourism soars beyond its core purpose of tourism service provisions towards an integral part of community economic and wellbeing development programs which potentially can assist homestay and the community abilities in generating a desired level of income. The operators are cooperating with the authorities and work hard towards improving and complying with the necessary stipulated safety and health requirements for the benefit of all amidst the COVID-19 challenges. The philosophy and practices of putting the interests of the tourists and stakeholders first will be advantageous to homestay tourism and it is hoped that with the post-COVID-19 period in sight, the industry will be leveraged to provide vigilant service to all tourists, thereby benefitting the tourism sector.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This empirical research on tourist experience with the homestay programs in Malaysia has explored and quantified a new and useful construct of experience for tourism marketing and management. It is a potential measurement tool to benefit the tourism sector in the emerging markets for a more sustainable competitive advantage. The service experience dimensions and items are essential to guide the operators to focus on the relevant safety and health issues amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The multi-dimensionality of tourist experience suggests that homestay operators need to take care of their tourists in a holistic manner. All the components are important and need to be well-managed to create delightful and memorable experiences. The physical, natural, cultural, humanistic and facility aspects of the premises and programs are essential towards creating good and memorable experiences. During the COVID-19 situation, the operators and tourists will be more vigilant and careful to adhere to the existing SOPS to safeguard their safety and health. Adhering to the COVID-19 SOPS aims to sustain the homestay business and enable the operators to regain the lucrateness of the business in the light of the post-COVID-19 environment.

It is crucial for homestay providers and practitioners to consistently and continuously understand the interrelationship between service experience and tourists' satisfaction in a holistic manner. It is highly important as well for decision-makers within the hospitality sector to understand how service experience as an offering, directly or indirectly influences tourists' satisfaction towards homestay programs and offerings. Homestay programs are now an integral part of local tourism destinations and services beyond its core purpose of service providers towards an integral part of community economic and wellbeing development programs which potentially can assist homestay and the community abilities in generating a higher level of income. Homestay tourism is imperative in promoting and upholding responsible tourism for sustainable development.

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