



## Enhancing Service Quality through Employee Knowledge in the Tourism Industry

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### ABSTRACT

The tourism industry plays a crucial role in Malaysia's economy, driving long-term growth and development. To deliver high-quality customer experiences, the industry must consider numerous factors, including the level of knowledge of its employees. This study explores the relationship between knowledge and service quality in the context of tourist guides working in the Southwest Sarawak (Kuching), Central Sarawak (Sibu) and Northeast Sarawak (Miri) regions. The study was conducted using a stratified random sampling method, and data was collected through a survey questionnaire. The data was analysed using Structural Equation Modeling techniques, and the findings indicated a significant relationship between knowledge and various service quality dimensions, including reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. The study aims to inform the development of effective policies and programmes by the Ministry of Tourism and its agencies and to provide a foundation for future research on the Malaysian tourism industry.

**Keywords:** service quality, knowledge, assurance, tangible, empathy, reliability

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry plays a significant role in serving as a primary source of long-term economic growth in Malaysia and worldwide (Puah et al., 2018). The tourism industry in Malaysia is the third largest foreign money earner, accounting for about 7.0 per cent of the country's economy in 2016 (Misachi, 2017). Tourist arrivals or revenues, as well as human capital investment by tourism actors such as the government and travel firms, significantly influence economic growth (Puah et al., 2018). During the launch of Tourism Infrastructure in 2020, the Tourism Malaysia Ministry set a target of thirty million tourist arrivals through the Visit Malaysia 2020 campaign (Tawie, 2019), especially in Sarawak. Tourism guides play a vital part in making Sarawak a desired tourist destination. They can provide tourists guidance in visiting a nation or region satisfaction by making practical and effective use of their knowledge to give information and interpretation of the country's culture or location (Thoo, 2015).

The tourism industry's success hinges on customer service quality, as most of the revenue is generated from tourists. The quality of customer service is a critical aspect of a company's success (Arthur and Bennett, 1995), impacting its brand reputation, profitability, and culture. A strong customer service programme can enhance the industry's brand image, attract new customers, and maintain its competitive advantage. One of the most effective ways to expand the tourism sector is by increasing the number of employees within the organisation. This will not only facilitate the growth of the industry but also lead to better customer service. It is essential for employees in the tourism sector, including hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and flights, to have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide high-quality service to customers. Malaysia's tourism industry is expected to grow due to its rich human capital, and knowledge plays a crucial role in ensuring that employees can deliver outstanding customer service. Customers expect a positive experience (Boshoff and Allen, 2000), and the value of a product or service is directly linked to their perceptions of service quality (Berry and Parasuraman, 1992).

In addition, most previous studies in the field of employee competencies have only looked at healthcare leadership competencies (Calhoun et al., 2008), human resource development competencies (Chen, Bian, & Hom, 2005), and leadership competencies (Yoon, Song, Donahue, & Woodley, 2010), with only a few studies looking specifically at customer service competencies such as in knowledge. Moreover, most past research has focused on customer service competencies in the hotel, restaurant, and other industries (Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). Thus, this study examines the effect of knowledge on service quality in the Sarawak tourism industry.

The concept of service quality refers to how well a company delivers its services to its customers (Lewis, 1991). It is a measure of how well the expectations of its customers are satisfied. Researchers have various models that they can use to analyse service quality, even though some claim that it is hard to measure due to its intangible nature (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985). According to Parasuraman et al. (1991), delivering high-quality services in the tourism industry is the most effective way of ensuring that a company's offerings are differentiated from those of competitors (Nasr et al., 2012). Ladhari (2009) stated that the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) model is a good tool for assessing service quality in various tourism sectors. However, selecting the most critical dimensions of the model is also vital to ensure that the results

are valid and reliable. Five quality factors can be considered when it comes to service quality: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness.

According to Caruana and Pitt (1997), the concept of reliability refers to the ability of a service provider to provide the best possible service. It is done through the consistency of its performance and the accuracy of its records. It also means that the company honours its pledges to the customers (Parasuraman et al. 1985). Regardless of the type of service offered, customers value the reliability of the products and services they purchase. It is why they will most likely develop brand loyalty and be satisfied with the service they receive.

Assurance includes the ability to inspire confidence and trust in employees and the knowledge and courtesy of the company's systems and people (Shahin and Samea, 2010). After a negative experience, customers may question the company's security and credibility. Due to the technological advancements in the credit card industry, consumers are more likely to use their credit cards online (Niranjanamurthy and Chahar, 2013). However, there are still risks associated with this type of transaction, such as unauthorised access to their information. To minimise these risks, customers should consider choosing an organisation with the necessary security and confidentiality to protect their information.

The concept of tangibility refers to the quality of service provided by the physical facilities and tools used to perform their functions (Parasuraman et al., 1985). It can also be divided into various sub-factors to identify gaps in the service; for instance, airport passengers may not expect the newest aircraft, but they also have other expectations, such as good hygiene and legroom. It is why tangibility is an essential factor in assessing the quality of service in various industries (Blešić et al., 2011).

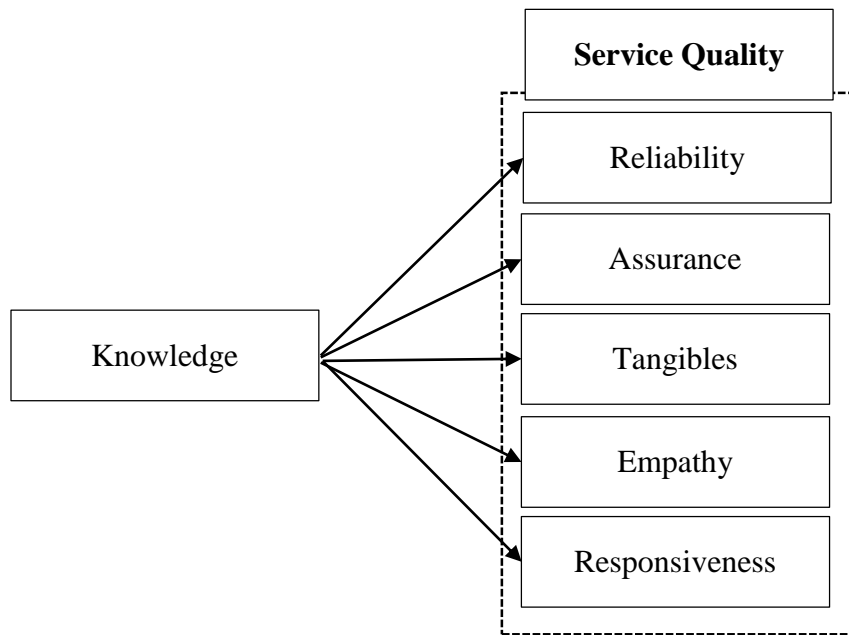
Empathy is a dimension that refers to the care and attention that a customer receives from a company (Ramya, Kowsalya, and Dharanipriya, 2019). It is usually achieved through the staff's willingness to listen to and understand the customer's needs and provide adequate services. The way staff members are organised, approachable, and polite when needed are some factors that influence how well a company's customers will feel about its services. In countries like Japan, staff members are expected to be friendly and professional. Good approachability is also essential for customers, increasing their confidence in the organisation.

Responsiveness is a dimension that employees consider when it comes to providing a service. For instance, it can be related to the timeliness of service, such as when a transaction receipt is sent out immediately (Parasuraman et al. 1985). A study by Prabakaran et al. (2008) revealed that responsiveness is crucial for the sustainable development of Kerala's tourism industry. It also noted that foreign tourists value the responsiveness dimension. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) noted that service employees are crucial in delivering quality services. Moreover, Wilson and Frimpong (2004) noted that customers who are satisfied with their service are more likely to feel valued and have higher perceived quality. It is an essential factor that service-oriented organisations should consider when enhancing their customer experience.

## 1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives are:

- a) To examine the relationship between knowledge and reliability
- b) To examine the relationship between knowledge and assurance
- c) To examine the relationship between knowledge and tangibility
- d) To examine the relationship between knowledge and empathy
- e) To examine the relationship between knowledge and responsiveness



**Figure 1.** Framework of the study.

## 1.2 Hypothesis Development

### 1.2.1 Knowledge and Reliability

There has been notable research on knowledge competency and dependability rate, but there have been few empirical investigations into these parameters, with only two recent studies attempting to investigate the relationship between customer service knowledge and reliability rate (Appalayya and Paul, 2018; Lee, Liao, and Wu, 2018). Regarding the relationship between knowledge competency and customer service dependability, formal training is not only provided to front-line personnel, which has resulted in a lower reliability rate since staff cannot win consumer trust (Liebermann and Hoffmann, 2008). The organisation should provide a high degree of training to enable staff to learn more expertise and improve customer service reliability (Bestoon Abdulmaged et al., 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H1: There is a relationship between knowledge and reliability of service quality.

### **1.2.2 Knowledge and Assurance**

Ryan and Cliff (2008) have emphasised the need for assurance in customer service knowledge and customer service assurance. According to Ghasemaghaei (2019), knowledge competency can raise the assurance rate of customer service because employees can use and assimilate information before the consumers. It was corroborated by recent research by Meesala and Paul (2018), Tahir, Sezer, Özge, and Aslhan (2019), and Taylor et al. (2019), which found that if employees know to assimilate information to consumers accurately, the assurance rate will increase. Appalayya and Paul (2018), on the other hand, reveal that there is a contradiction because they discovered that customer assurance does not have a significant impact on performance growth. Tourist guides and tourist assistants should be given information about the products or services by travel or tourism agencies to attract and acquire client confidence (Bestoon Abdulmaged et al., 2019). Employees with 'customer need knowledge' can provide better customer service (Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H2: There is a relationship between knowledge and assurance of service quality.

### **1.2.3 Knowledge and Tangible components of Service Quality**

Customers' expectations of the tangible components of the organisation include the modern quality of the office, equipment, advantageous interaction channels, and many other things in terms of knowledge competency and customer service tangible rate. Employee knowledge needs better comprehension when the customer asks about the facilities (Rasmussen, Jensen, Nielsen, & Kristiansen, 2018). According to a study that measured tangibles, customers' perceptions of a company's tangible features are lower than their expectations (Vo, 2017). If there is a lack of physical appearance, it will have an impact on the appearance when offering services to customers, as well as a poor impression of the business among customers, resulting in a drop in the organisation's growth (Dossinger, Wanberg, Choi, & Leslie, 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H3: There is a relationship between knowledge and tangibles of service quality.

### **1.2.4 Knowledge and Empathy**

Employees who build empathy with customers are essential in a business regarding knowledge competency and customer service empathy rate (Paparoidamis, Tran, & Leonidou, 2019). Emphatic employees pay more attention and are better equipped to discern consumer needs (Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). Highly motivated employees who demonstrate empathy and make an attempt to resolve service problems should be recognised by the company because they add to the customer's favourable opinion of the company. Knowledge and empathy

among employees are critical factors of client happiness and loyalty, as well as enhanced firm growth (Yani-de-Soriano et al., 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H4: There is a relationship between knowledge and empathy for service quality.

### **1.2.5 Knowledge and Responsiveness**

Regarding knowledge competency and customer service responsiveness, the organisation should hire people with excellent skills to build responsiveness to client problems (Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). Customer satisfaction and loyalty to an organisation are influenced by employees' responsiveness capabilities, such as delivering detailed information, providing service promptly, and being eager to assist customers (Appalayya & Paul, 2018). Employee responsiveness in customer assistance impacts the organisation's growth success (Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). Knowledge acquisition aids in increasing employee response in the workplace (Qureshi, 2019). The responsiveness of a travel agent has a significant association with customer loyalty, which directly aids customer service effectiveness (Krittapat et al., 2019). Travel agencies' customer service responsiveness is determined by travel agents' knowledge of serving customers (Meesala & Paul, 2018). If the information provided is inaccurate and the travel agent's response time is late, customer service will lose trust and the ability to gain client loyalty (Krittapat et al., 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H5: There is a relationship between knowledge and responsiveness to service quality

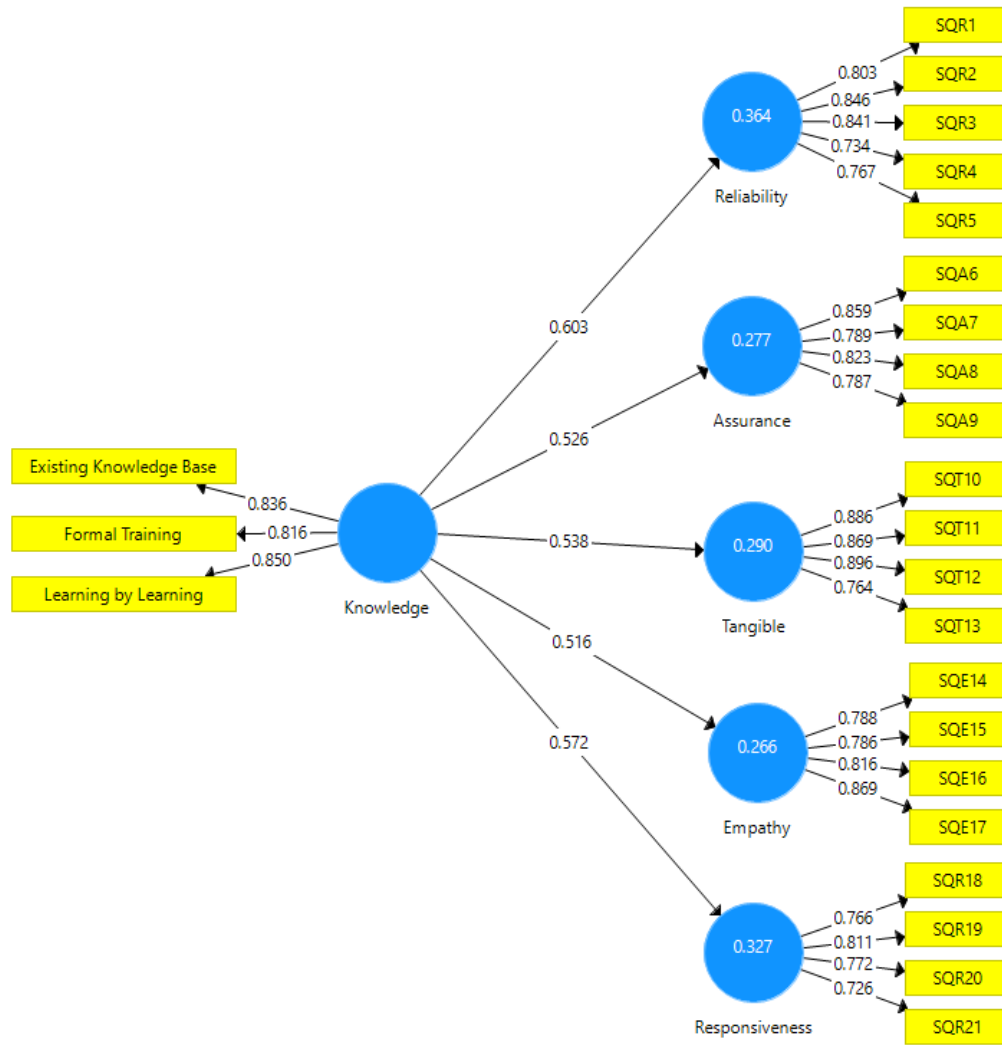
## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This study utilises survey research and cross-sectional data methodology. This research is quantitative for the ease of collecting observable and measurable data on variables. Therefore, this research collected quantitative data based on structured closed-ended questions or a Likert scale. In this study, the population consists of 297 tourist guides in three districts in Sarawak, which are Southwest Sarawak (Kuching), Central Sarawak (Sibu) and Northeast Sarawak (Miri). The sampling technique is stratified random sampling. In the sample size calculation for this study, the researcher chooses a medium effect of 0.15, a significance level of 0.05 and an error probability of rejecting the null hypothesis at 0.95 with a total sample size of 169. In this study, the survey questionnaire is adapted from previous studies. The total respondent for this study was 186, which is above the requirement. The instrument is relevant for this study because the measurement items are tested in terms of their validity and reliability by previous researchers such as Daniel and Berinyuy (2010) for service quality items such as "I will perform a quality service"; Lin, Lin, and Chen (2017) knowledge items such as "my educational background is relevant to my current job" The variable knowledge, responsiveness, tangibles, assurance, reliability, and empathy is indicated by using a 5-point Likert-type scale, where "1" indicate "Strongly Disagree", "2" indicate "Disagree", "3" indicate "Neutral", "4" indicate "Agree", and "5" indicate "Strongly Agree".

### **3 RESULTS**

Although the PLS estimates the structural parameters and the measurement, the proposed analysis was performed in two phases: the structural model and the measurement model; the former was evaluated based on its reliability, internal consistency, discriminant validity, and convergent validity. The model was tested using the PLS-SEM version 3.0 of the SMARTPLS software. The study's direction of causality was determined by considering the indicators' construct manifestation, which is the construct itself determines the measurement. Bagozzi (2007) and Mackenzie, Podsakoff, and Jarvis (2005) noted that the indicators' direction of causality depends on the measurements determined by the construct itself.

The reliability indicator is calculated after the internal consistency reliability of the various items has been confirmed. As indicated in Figure 2, the items should have a factor loading greater than 0.60 (Hair et al., 2017). All the items meet the minimum requirement, which ranges from 0.726 to 0.896. Thus, none of the items was removed because they met this criterion.



**Figure 2.** Measurement model.

**Table 1.** Indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity.

			Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Assurance	SQA6	0.859	0.832	0.888	0.664
	SQA7	0.789			
	SQA8	0.823			
	SQA9	0.787			
Empathy	SQE14	0.788	0.832	0.888	0.664
	SQE15	0.786			
	SQE16	0.816			



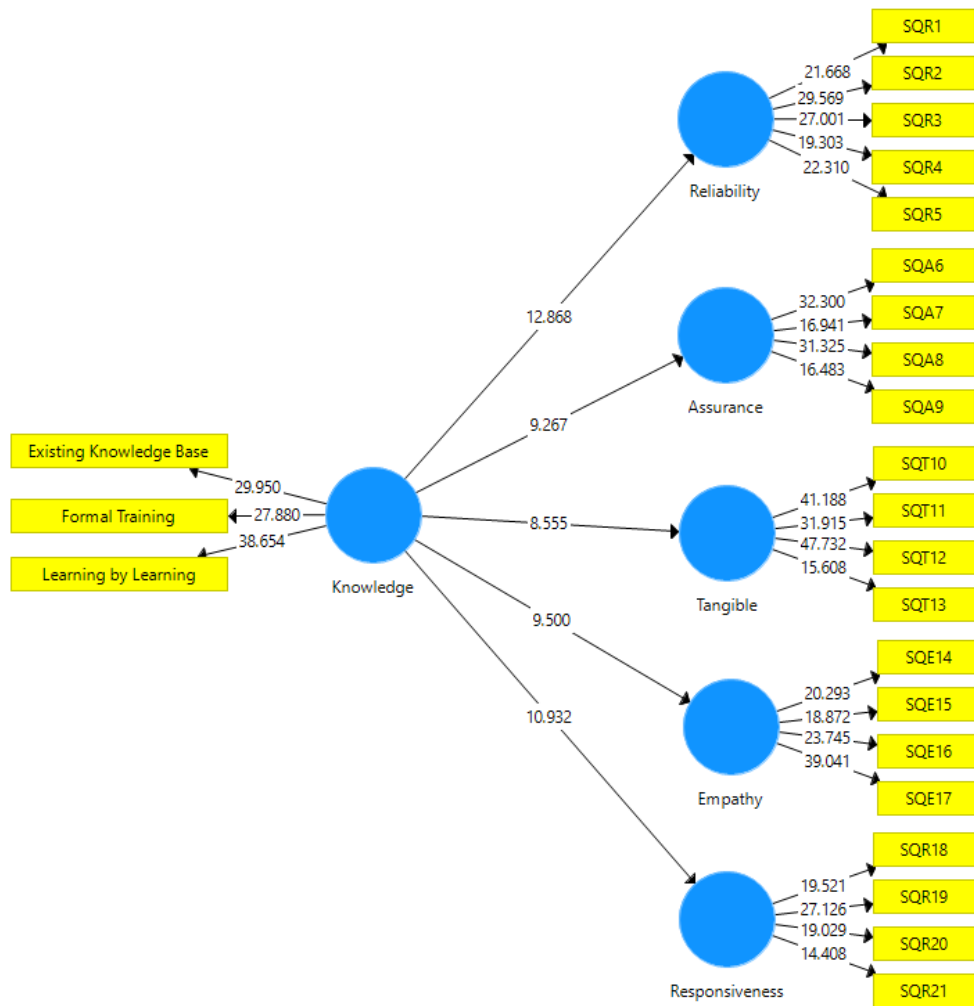
			Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Knowledge	SQE17		0.869		
	Existing Knowledge Base		0.836	0.782	0.696
	Formal Training		0.816		
Reliability	Learning by Learning		0.850		
	SQR1		0.803	0.858	0.639
	SQR2		0.846		
	SQR3		0.841		
	SQR4		0.734		
Responsiveness	SQR5		0.767		
	SQR18		0.766	0.771	0.592
	SQR19		0.811		
	SQR20		0.772		
Tangible	SQR21		0.726		
	SQT10		0.886	0.876	0.732
	SQT11		0.869		
	SQT12		0.896		
	SQT13		0.764		

The consistency of the constructs was evaluated using the composite reliability procedure. The convergent validity was confirmed by the average variance extracted and the CR value, which exceeded .80 for all the variables (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Table 1 shows the value of the AVE at over .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The measurement model's analysis objective was to verify the discriminant validity's existence (Table 2). This method is based on the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations proposed by Hensler et al. (2015). To meet the HTMT criterion, the correlation coefficients between constructs were not below .85. A statistical significance analysis was performed to determine the path of the coefficients. The goal of the structural model was to determine the significance of the coefficients' path using a statistical technique known as the bootstrapping method (Hair et al., 2011).

**Table 2.** HTMT value.

	Assurance	Empathy	Knowledge	Reliability	Responsiveness	Tangible
Assurance						
Empathy	0.734					
Knowledge	0.644	0.627				
Reliability	0.724	0.793	0.733			
Responsiveness	0.615	0.529	0.727	0.737		
Tangible	0.693	0.743	0.646	0.764	0.612	

The five proposed relationships were all significant (see Figure 2). Table 3 presented the result of H1: knowledge is a significant relationship to reliability (t = 12.868, p value= 0.00), H2: knowledge is a significant relationship to assurance (t = 9.267, p value= 0.00), H3: knowledge is a significant relationship to tangible (t = 8.555, p value= 0.00), H4: knowledge is a significant relationship to empathy (t = 9.500, p value= 0.00) and H5: knowledge is a significant relationship to responsiveness (t = 10.932, p value= 0.00). Therefore, H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 are confirmed. The most dominant influence of knowledge is reliability because the beta value is the highest ( $\beta = 0.603$ ), followed by responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.572$ ), tangible ( $\beta = 0.538$ ), assurance ( $\beta = 0.526$ ), and empathy ( $\beta = 0.516$ ).



**Figure 3.** Structural model.

**Table 3.** Hypothesis testing result.

	Beta	Standard Deviation	t Value	p Values	Result
H1: Knowledge → Reliability	0.603	0.047	12.868	0.00	Supported
H2: Knowledge → Assurance	0.526	0.057	9.267	0.00	Supported
H3: Knowledge → Tangible	0.538	0.063	8.555	0.00	Supported
H4: Knowledge → Empathy	0.516	0.054	9.50	0.00	Supported
H5: Knowledge → Responsiveness	0.572	0.052	10.932	0.00	Supported

#### 4 DISCUSSION

Reliability is seen as a component that affects consumer perceptions of the quality of the service. Hypothesis H1 suggested that there is a relationship between knowledge and reliability of service quality. The results of this study showed a significant relationship between knowledge and the reliability of service quality. Therefore, these results validate the empirical linkage between knowledge and the reliability of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis H1 is supported. This finding aligned with a study by Wu, Lee, and Liao (2018) and Appalayya & Paul (2018) found that customers with an elevated level of knowledge increase the reliability towards service quality. According to Tseng and Wu (2014), the term "customer knowledge" refers to providing adequate knowledge to its consumers. This knowledge level is believed to help an organisation maintain its quality and improve customer satisfaction. This knowledge can also help an organisation educate its customers on its policies and procedures. Knowledge of the latest technology and procedures is critical for any organisation to provide its clients with the best possible service. Doing so will help decrease their defensiveness and raise their awareness.

Hypothesis H2 suggested a relationship between knowledge and assurance of service quality. This study showed a significant relationship between knowledge and assurance of service quality. Therefore, these results validate the empirical linkage between knowledge and assurance of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis H2 is supported. This finding aligned with a study by Meesala and Paul (2018), Tahir, Sezer, Özge, and Aslhan (2019), and Taylor, McDougall, Ollis, and Alford (2019) found that the assurance rate of a travel or tourism organisation will increase due to the knowledge its employees have about the products and services that they offer. It can help them to provide the best possible service to their customers. (Bestoon Abdulmaged et al., 2019). Employees with "customer need knowledge" will be better equipped to satisfy customers (Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2019). Tourist assistants and guides can confidently reassure clients by developing their professional and interpersonal skills. These individuals will also easily handle various situations (Wu, Tsai, Hsiung, & Chen, 2015). To foster confidence among tourists and clients, tour guides and staff members need to have the necessary assurance in their abilities to provide the best possible service. It includes having the necessary knowledge and skills in customer service.

Hypothesis H3 suggested that there is a relationship between knowledge and tangibles of service quality. The results of this study show a significant relationship between knowledge and tangibles of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis H3 is supported. It is similar to a study by Rasmussen et al. (2018) found that when requested to advise a customer about physical facilities, an employee who

knows about the amenities will do so with more understanding. Providing the best possible service to the customers efficiently is very important for a business. It can be done by interacting with the tourist agent and the consumer. Besides that, the tourist can also help the consumer gain knowledge about the destination. Consumers need to know about the services that a tourist agent provides. To provide a good service, the company should prepare the necessary equipment and tools. Even though the consumer does not ask for the materials, they have high expectations of the agency. A company's quality of service is crucial to its customers and helps it support the tourism industry. It is done through the establishment of an excellent physical facility and equipment. Besides this, the company should also provide other necessary equipment and materials to increase its customer's knowledge and improve its profit.

Hypothesis H4 suggested a relationship between knowledge and empathy for service quality. The results of this study show a significant relationship between knowledge and empathy for service quality. It is aligned with Paparoidamis, Tran, & Leonidou's (2019) study. Hence, Hypothesis H4 is supported. According to Yani-de-Soriano et al. (2019), developing empathy and knowledge is particularly important for employees, as it can help them improve their customer service and enhance their company's growth. A high level of knowledge and empathy is also very beneficial for a company as it allows them to communicate effectively with their customers. According to Homburg, Wieseke and Bornemann (2009), understanding a customer's needs is especially important for employees, allowing them to make better decisions and improve their performance. It is why organisations must reward those who show empathy.

Hypothesis H5 suggested a relationship between knowledge and responsiveness to service quality. The results of this study show a significant relationship between knowledge and responsiveness to service quality. Hence, Hypothesis H5 is supported. This finding aligned with the study by Nwulu and Ateke (2018). Being able to provide detailed information to consumers and being able to help them on time are some of the factors that contribute to customer loyalty and satisfaction. The ability to respond effectively among employees can help a business grow. Providing effective and efficient customer service is very important for businesses to grow. To ensure that their employees are competent and able to respond effectively to their customers, an organisation should provide them with training and coaching. The success of a travel agent depends on how responsive he or she is to the needs of their customers. The agent's ability to provide adequate customer service will suffer if the information is inaccurate.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

Based on the research findings, the present study has contributed to several practical contributions regarding service quality in the context of Sarawak. The findings would be relevant to policymakers such as the Ministry of Tourism and agency tourism in Malaysia in designing policies and programs related to the tourism sector. The result of this study can benefit practitioners in understanding and presenting adequate indications for confirming a significant relationship between the variables (knowledge and service quality). Furthermore, the limitations were identified, such as this study examining only the tourism industry. Future research should consider the need to examine other industries, such as food, cultural which may provide more in-depth results. The study was conducted quantitatively and relied on a single instrument for gathering

data. This method limits the ability of researchers to collect information about the participants' thoughts and feelings. The results of this study suggest that the responses may not accurately reflect the study's overall findings. Therefore, future studies must combine qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate Malaysia's tourist guiding competencies.

Furthermore, the study used a cross-sectional design to collect the opinions of the respondents at a specific point in time. The study was conducted cross-sectional, which precludes the making of causal inferences from the population. As a result, it might not be able to provide the long-term data needed to represent the consumers' behaviour. Future research should consider a longitudinal study to gauge a better representation of emerging issues in customer service within the region

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