

Critical Elements of Customer Service Among Homestay Operator to Improve the Quality of Homestay Program in Malaysia



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Abstract: *Homestay program is a service industry; from people to people through people. It is aimed to increase the economic income of rural areas. However, the level of homestay program competitiveness is still low due to many studies reported about the quality of service offered by the homestay operator was not at the satisfactory level. Hence, the customer's satisfaction is very important in order to make the homestay program become successful and improve the rural area economic income. There are many studies on the service quality in the homestay sector in Malaysia but not much research focusing on service delivery which also emphasizes the quality and customer satisfaction aspect. This study is to identify the critical elements that can improve the quality of customer service in Malaysian homestay program. Therefore, this study will measure the interrater reliability of each element which the researcher has gathered from qualitative method on previous study. Fleiss' kappa statistical method will be used to measure the four constructs of customer service; human relation, skill, knowledge and attitude. This method will measure the nine experts' consensus and verify the critical elements of customer service in homestay program in Malaysia. The findings of this study show that from 71 elements of four constructs only one element was disagreed by two experts. In conclusions, all the experts agreed with four constructs as they believed that the constructs will improve the quality of customer service. These constructs and elements may be the guidance for the homestay operator in Malaysia in order to improve the customer service quality and foster the competitiveness of the homestay in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Service delivery, service quality, customer service, homestay program, customer satisfaction*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The homestay program that was introduced in 1998 has successfully become one of the alternative accommodation options in Malaysia. It has offered a very unique concept by which the customers can experience the host's culture and lifestyle in their homes and interact with the local community at a reasonable cost [15]. Homestay programs are primarily aimed at improving the economy of the rural community by getting involved in the tourism industry [3]. However, [1] and [18] in their studies stated that homestays in Malaysia are not competitive and viable. Many complaints have been reported in previous studies that disrupt the competitiveness of the homestay program.

[22] stated that most homestays in Malaysia have service issues. [16] stated that customers are dissatisfied with the quality of Seri Tanjung Homestay services in terms of its cleanliness. [10] states that the quality of homestay services in Malacca is very bad. However, the most important aspect of service in Malaysia's homestay program is the quality of service. [6] mentioned that quality service is part of customer service which has the ability to get the desired service at the right price from the chosen provider.

[21] have defined customer service as dependably and accurately meeting the needs of customers in a manner that is timely, responsive, courteous, proactive and sensitive to the customer needs; projecting competence; and building relationship and mutual respect. While [14] defines customer service as the action of taking care and meeting the need and desire of the customers which involve providing and delivering high quality service and assistance before, during and after meeting the customer's requirements. Customer service is a holistic approach to offer services that meet customers' needs and expectations by managing effective interactions and relationships between organizations and customers [13]. Meanwhile [8] defines the customer service as 'how' you deliver and it is as important as what you deliver. However, past studies over homestays have focused on service quality but not much focusing on service delivery which is also part of customer service.

Proficiency in delivering professional services remains as an unexplored part because it is constantly changing [23]. [20] argue that the delivery of customer-oriented services can solve problems to understand the complex human needs. Understanding customer needs and requirements can be improved through the quality of service delivery [5] and it will be one of the key factors to be successful [10].



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[10] in his study has suggested that the homestay program should focus on the customer service aspect in future. Thus this study aims to find the elements of customer service which contains both the areas i.e. service delivery and service quality. It will help to increase the quality of the customer service, customer satisfaction and at the same time can increase competitiveness among homestay operators. The interrater reliability analysis has been used to find the elements of research in concern about the interpretation of experience or interest from different experts to have congruent hypotheses [24] This study used the four construct of customer service among homestay operators of the homestay program in Malaysia obtain through the researchers' previous study. This study was conducted to determine the reliability of the elements obtained by the consensus of Fliess' Kappa coefficient of consent value. The constructs that have been designed by the researchers are; Human relations, Knowledge, Skills and Attitude. This study aimed to verify the elements of customer service in Malaysia's homestay program based on experts' approval through Fleiss' Kappa coefficient value.

II. METHODOLOGY

Based on previous studies, the researchers have identified the elements of customer service among homestay operators in homestay program in Malaysia to increase the customer satisfaction and homestay competitiveness through qualitative method. This study will further with the process of getting the clarification from both experts who are involved in previous study to measure the experts' agreement on the four constructs of customer service. Therefore, the next step taken by researchers was to analyses the value of the coefficient using Fleiss' Kappa calculation method to verify the element of customer service in homestay operations in Malaysia. Fleiss' kappa is a continuation of Cohan Kappa who measured the approval of two or more experts. This step has looked at the reliability of the element on the findings. Based on findings of [12] Fleiss' kappa is a simple measurement process which involves the approval of the experts using percentage value.

The study involved nine experts in various agencies as referred to the customer service and homestay stakeholders. They are: one expert academician who has done much research on homestay program, two academicians who had been trainers in 'We are the hosts' program for homestay operators under Ministry of Tourism and Culture of Malaysia, one trainer officer from INFRA who was giving the training for homestay operators who want to join the program, two officers from Ministry of Tourism and Culture, two representatives from the industries being experts in customer service and one representative from a homestay operator. The criterion for selection of the experts in this study was that they must have broad knowledge in related field and experience of more than five years in related field.

Fleiss' kappa is the method of analysis of calculating the percentage to obtain interrater reliability index [25], [26]. The confidence index (K) of Fleiss's kappa is calculated like the formula given in equation (1).

$$k = \frac{P_a - P_s}{1 - P_s}$$

P_a = represent the actual observed agreement
 P_s = represent the chances agreement

(1)

From the calculation, we can conclude that if the value k approaches the value 1, this means that the study reaches agreement among the experts. Meanwhile, if the k value approaches 0, that means there is no agreement between the experts. The value of the Kappa Coefficient shows in Table I as stated by [11]

Table-I: The Kappa value of coefficient approvals.

Kappa Value (K)	Level of Agreement
< 0.00	Poor
0.01 – 0.20	Slight
0.21 – 0.40	Fair
0.41 – 0.60	Moderate
0.61 – 0.80	Substantial
0.81 – 1.00	Almost Perfect

(Landis and Koch, 1977)

This reliability method is recommended to be used when the researchers have ordinal and nominal scale data. This study has nominal scale that can range from 0 (disagree) to 1 (agree). [7] maintained that Fleiss Kappa is a better solution to control the random agreement factor that might come out from different experts. The interrater reliability test from the selected experts is involved to finalize theme findings.

III. FINDING

This study finalized four construct to measure the consent of the experts to enhance the quality of customer service among homestay operators in Malaysia. Researchers have carried out four constructs of customer service in their previous study with a qualitative approach and this finding will discuss the result of the Fleiss' kappa findings of all the critical constructs and elements. The first construct involved is Human Relation that can help the operators have closer relations with the customers. Through better human relations, the operators can easily understand the preferences of their customers and better understand what are their needs and make customers really trust on them. The quality of customer service can improve successfully by using the seven elements under this construct such as building human relations, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, culture exposure and after sales relation. The detailed result of the human relations' construct is briefly described in table II.

Table-II: Human relation construct of all the experts involved

HUMAN RELATION CONSTRUCT		Rater									%
Elements	Sub-Elements	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Building Human Relation (Rapport)	Verbal	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
	Non-Verbal	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0.78
	Appearance	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Etiquette	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Friendly Serve	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
Responsive	Ready to serve	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Proactive	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Commitment	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Respond to Grievance	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Reliability	Punctual	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Service as promises	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.78
	Consistent and Equal	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00



Assurance	Responsible	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Safety	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Trust on capability	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Best Experience	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Empathy	Feel	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Think	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Do	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Say	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Culture Exposure	Respect Culture	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Teach manner	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Traditional food	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
After Service Relation	Gift	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
	Technology	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Traditional	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
	Invitation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00

As referred to table II, it shows that most of the sub elements have level of agreement at ‘almost perfect’ which has the k value between 0.81 – 1. However, there are only two sub-elements, non-verbal under building human relation’s element and service as promises under responsive element have the level of agreement as ‘substantial’ which has the k value between 0.61 – 0.80.

High skill in customer service must be taken into consideration because the operators are dealing with various sorts of customers. They have to handle the customer needs and wants, customer emotions and need to collaborate with stakeholders to create a good homestay service experience and at the same time it will increase customer satisfaction. The skills involved in this study are as described in table III.

Table-III: Skill construct of all the experts involved

SKILL CONSTRUCT											
Elements	Sub-Elements	Rater									%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Communication	Talking	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Reading	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
	Listening	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Writing	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
	Translating	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0.67
Negotiation	Apologize	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Explanation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Substitute Choice	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.78
	Discount	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0.67
Teamwork	Discussion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Facilitation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Task Collaboration	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.89
Emotional Management	Family emotion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Customer emotion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Community Emotion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Belonging Emotion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Cooking and Serving	Serving time	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	During serving food	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Serving boundaries	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Housekeeping	Clean	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Refreshment	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00

As referred to table III, it shows that most of the sub elements under “skill” construct have the most consensus among all the experts. The score shows that it is between the ‘almost perfect’ range which is between 0.81 – 1. Meanwhile, there are three scores which fall under ‘substantial’ range which is between 0.61-0.80.

Table IV shows the results of another construct that can enhance the customer service quality effectively. “Knowledge” is really important for the homestay operators to be up to the mark in order to assist or guide the customers in the best way of homestay operations. [21] have stated that the being informative is very important because customer wants to know how their problem will be resolved. The knowledge that the operator should have is as stated in table IV.

Table-IV: Knowledge construct of all the experts involved

KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCT											
Elements	Sub-Elements	Rater									%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Basic knowledge	Customer	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.78
	Product	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Process	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Local area	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Technology	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Foreign culture	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Current issue	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Government Support Knowledge	Law (Act)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Training	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Manual Reference	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
Record keeping	Customer Needs & Wants	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Historical Pattern Analysis	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Customer Feedback	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Booking System	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Operator Skills record	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00

As referred to table IV, it shows that most of the sub elements under knowledge construct have the highest consensus among all nine experts with the score of k value being 1 in all the sub-elements. However, only one sub-element which is knowledge about customer falls under ‘substantial’ level of which the score stood between 0.61-0.8. The k customer knowledge is 0.78.

Good service providers also affect by their attitudes. Based on [19], customer deserves to get special treatment from the service provider and it will show that they are valuable to the operator. Good attitude will portray the credibility of the service provider, affect the customers’ good perspective and improve customer satisfactions. The good attitude will enhance the quality of customer service. The qualities of attitude that an operator should have are as stated in table V.



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Table-V: Attitude construct of all the experts involved

ATTITUDE CONSTRUCT											
Elements	Sub-Elements	Rater									%
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Affective	Confidence	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Patient	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Passion	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Honest	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Firm	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0.33
Cognitive	Positive thinking	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Polite	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00
	Eager to success	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1.00

As referred to table V, it shows that most of the sub elements show that their k value is 1. As stated in the kappa value, all of its elements are at the ‘almost perfect’ level. Meanwhile only one sub-element, has no consensus among all the experts with the k value 0.33. That score falls in ‘fair’ level with their range being between 0.21 – 0.40.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to find the constructs and elements of customer service framework to improve the homestay competitiveness among the operators of homestay program in Malaysia. As many previous studies had focused on the service quality, the service delivery factor remained unexplored. This study has filled up the gap with focus on the combination of service quality and the service delivery areas that make the customer service framework become more sharply focusing on the issue regarding the service problem. Four important constructs with the details of critical elements and sub-elements would be good to ease the issue in customer service as the customer would be delighted if the operator has close relations with them and make them feel comfortable to let them know their problems or needs and wants. Strong relationship has to be built up before, during and after the service. It will make the customers always remember the homestay operator and make them come back just to get the same treatment like before. In service operations, we will need the skill in handling the customer needs and wants. How to communicate in proper way when the customer is in a good mood is a lot easier rather than dealing them when they become angry or disappointed with the service. Fast action has to be taken to win back customers’ trust and interest with better service. If not, the customer would not like to make the next trip. The homestay operator must be knowledgeable in order for them to help the customer solving the issues during their stay. The knowledge of the operator is also the main point of customer’s judgment on overall effectiveness of the service provided. Customers deserve to have the good attention and attitude when they come to the door of a service provider. Positive attitude will make them feel valuable and will make them come back. Researchers have used the Fleiss’ kappa method to reanalyze the theme generated from their previous study. This study measured the consensus of the experts towards the critical constructs and elements of customer service framework. This study involved the agreement of the nine experts from various industries in related area. This is important to make sure that the critical constructs and the elements are perfectly and accurately fit with the purpose of improving the quality of customer service. Therefore, the findings show that the reliability measured of each construct supported the

requirement of the elements in developing the customer service framework. It is show that the constructs and the elements using in this study are very important in order to get the quality of customer service can fill up all the gab related to the customer service area.

This study will make the impact on service offered by the homestay operators. A complete construct of customer service which are touches on all the area of customer service will make the service provided by the homestay operator become more quality. Apart from that, the homestay program’s competitiveness among homestay operators and other businesses related to the accommodation will increase. At the same time, it will give the awareness to the homestay operators to make continuous improvement from time to time. This study would recommend the future researchers to strengthen the consensus with more experts involved in this kind of study.

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