

Tourists' Perceptions of Service Quality in a Lake-Based Tourism Area

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Abstract. The main objective of this paper is to investigate tourists' perceptions of services delivered by resort operators in a Malaysian lake-based tourism site. A face-to-face survey was conducted with tourists who had stayed for at least one night at any of the nine resorts in Lake Kenyir, a lake-based tourism area in Malaysia. Out of 245 registered tourists at Lake Kenyir resorts who were present at the time the survey was conducted, 157 tourists responded, yielding 127 usable responses. The data were analysed using a reliability test and descriptive analysis. The results showed that tourists are satisfied with products and services offered at Lake Kenyir. Assurance and sustainable constructs showed the highest service delivery scores. The high performance of the assurance and sustainable constructs, specifically involving the lake and the natural attractions as well as noncrowdedness and unspoiled settings, should be maintained to increase the frequency of tourist visits to the area. Future improvement efforts should also emphasise recycling and reuse and focus on factors outside of the typical resort services. Theoretically, this study extends the service quality model to include sustainable constructs and thus ensures that service quality assessment is suitable in its application to the lake-based tourism industry.

Keywords: tourist perception, tourist experience, service quality, lake-based tourism

1. Introduction

In a recent debate on the quality of tourism sites, one of the main issues was whether tourists were satisfied with the quality of the delivery process of services and products. Previous studies have highlighted the sites' concerns about the declining numbers of tourists, and the authors argued that the lack of tourists was because many were dissatisfied with the quality of service delivered to them by businesses in the tourism sector. Akama and Kieti [1] investigated the cause of the decreasing numbers of tourists in national parks in Kenya. They found that tourists were satisfied with the quality of the parks and related the decline in the number of tourists to bad transportation and political unrest in East Africa. Arabatzis and Grigoroudis [2] studied tourist satisfaction in Nadia National Park in Greece and found that tourists were dissatisfied with the infrastructure and recreation facilities in the park, which they regarded as important criteria for a quality destination. However, tourists were more satisfied with things the authors considered were less important, such as personnel and natural characteristics. Chui et al. [3] investigated the reason for the declining number of international tourists in an inland water-based national park in Kuala Tahan, Malaysia. They revealed that tourists rated the service quality as fair and complained about the cleanliness and hygiene of the park. The tourists rated transportation, hotels and restaurants, tour guides and public services provided in the area as only fair. Liu [4] conducted a case study on Lake Pedu, one of the lake-based tourism destinations in Malaysia and found that there was a mismatch between the type of tourism facilities developed in the area and the potentials of the locals. The problem is exacerbated by the failure of the tourism authority to involve

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local participation and engage in in-house training. As a result, the services were mediocre and not many tourists were visiting the area, which subsequently forced the resorts to cease operations [5].

Nevertheless, studies are not in agreement on which service delivery that the tourists are satisfied and dissatisfied. Alegre and Garau [6] studied sun and sand tourist destinations in the island of Majorca, Spain and found that tourists complained about overdevelopment, congestion and the dilapidation of the environment; this dissatisfaction deterred tourists from revisiting the area. However, in a study of a nature-based resort in Southeast Virginia, USA, Meng et al. [7] found that service delivery elements such as friendliness of the employees and quality accommodations were more important to tourist satisfaction than the unique natural environment. Cracolici and Nijkamp [8] studied the importance of pertinent versus complementary elements of tourist needs in Southern Italy and found that tourists placed greater weight on complementary elements, which were related to service qualities such as the quality of information, tourist services, products, living costs and safety issues, as compared with the environment or cultural characteristics of the area. These conflicting results raise a question regarding tourist perception of services delivered by resort operators in the Malaysian lake-based tourism industry.

This paper aims to investigate tourist perceptions on the quality of services and products provided in Lake Kenyir, a lake-based ecotourism area in Malaysia. The practical contribution of the study is that tourist perception of service quality can serve as a tool for determining the quality of the service provided. Service quality encourages tourist satisfaction [9] and tourist loyalty either in the form of repeat visits [10, 11] or longer lengths of stay [12]. Satisfied tourists will raise the resorts' financial performance and market share [13], while helping the resort to gain competitive advantages [9]. Therefore, the results of the present study will provide a holistic understanding of service quality constructs specific to the lake-based tourism area and help operators to focus on important constructs for future improvement.

2. Perception Study and Service Quality Constructs

Previous studies have shown that a perception study based on tourist experiences has been widely utilised to measure service or product quality. Among the popular models is the SERVPERF model introduced by Cronin and Taylor [14], who improved the five service quality constructs of SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Different from SERVQUAL, the SERVPERF model collects opinions on service quality based on the perceptions of the tourists after experiencing or using the services or products. A perception study is based on the argument that tourist satisfaction is a consequence of service quality [15]. This means that tourist satisfaction can be explained by the positive perception a visitor gains as a result of his or her experience after using a service or product [16]. The perception data were collected at the end of a trip [17]. Therefore, the SERVPERF model is said to consider performance attributes of Parasuraman's SERVQUAL model [18]. According to Ko [19], in cases where technical measurements of the services or products received by the tourists is difficult to obtain, tourist perception can serve as a valuable tool to assess the quality of services or products. A perception study (SERVPERF) is argued to be relatively easy to conduct [19], as opposed to a service gap study (SERVQUAL) that involves data collection before the tourists leave for their trips (tourist expectation) and after the tourists complete the trips (tourist perception) [1, 17, 20]. Unlike the SERVQUAL model, which faced much criticism because of its use of expectations in measuring service quality [21], the SERVPERF model is argued to be capable of explaining higher variances [14] and yielding better results [22].

Despite the argument regarding the advantage of the SERVPERF model as opposed to the SERVQUAL model, both models do not dispute the five constructs of service quality; tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. However, it is doubtful that the existing constructs are sufficient to explain service quality in tourism areas. Most recent tourism literature argues the need for responsible form of visiting tourism sites that conserves the environment and provides benefits to the locals. This characteristic of tourism produces the need for a special construct, named as a sustainable construct to be introduced to the existing service quality model.

Researchers are not in agreement regarding their views on sustainable constructs. What is obvious is that a sustainable construct is not just about the environment. Both natural resources and cultural assets are considered to be two important sustainable attributes in a tourist destination [23]. Respecting local culture,

preserving the environment and improving the economic well-being of the locals are considered sustainable constructs [24]. Other researchers consider quality of the environment [25], harmony with nature [26], recycling and solid waste processing [27], energy saving [28] and benefits to the locals [29] as sustainable constructs. As such, overdevelopment, overcrowding and neglecting of the environment are considered unsustainable [6]. Therefore, a sustainable construct should include unspoiled destinations and activities that are harmonious with the environment and the locals.

3. Methodology

The study focuses on Lake Kenyir, the largest man-made lake in Malaysia, specifically developed to generate electricity. The lake is famous for its fishing-related activities, where tourists are allowed to come into contact with endangered fish (kelah fish), as well as other nature-based activities, such as rain forest tracking, caving, canoeing and picnicking near waterfalls.

A face-to-face survey was conducted with tourists who had stayed at least one night in any of the nine resorts in the study area. The questionnaire consisted of six service quality constructs with 27 items; five of the constructs were modified from the service quality model proposed by Parasuraman et al. [30]. The sixth construct, the sustainable construct, was specially introduced to the model, containing seven questions. Two of the items, 'the area is visually attractive and has appealing natural attractions' and 'the area is uncrowded and unspoiled,' were adopted from Akama and Keiti [1]. Five other questions related to recycling, nature-based activities and harmony with the local environment, were adapted from Blancas et al. [28] and Khan [17]. A four-point scale was used to ascertain tourist perception, from 1 – very dissatisfied to 4 – very satisfied, so as to avoid neutral answers that usually exist in a five-point scale [31]. Out of the 245 registered tourists at the Lake Kenyir resorts at the time the survey was conducted, 157 respondents returned the questionnaire, though only 127 responses were usable for the analysis. A reliability test and descriptive analysis were performed using SPSS version 17.0. The mean scores of tourist perception for each construct were calculated and the highest mean score among the six constructs was considered to be the most important construct in determining the service quality of the destination.

4. Results

Ninety per cent of the respondents were between 18 and 49 years old. There were more male respondents (68 per cent) than females. A majority of them were Malaysian (94 per cent), and the remaining were from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Singapore, Sudan and Vietnam. Nearly 75 per cent had attended higher education, and 62 per cent were middle-income earners. Almost 68 per cent were staying for three nights while 37 per cent were repeat tourists, with 47 per cent of them having visited Lake Kenyir on two or three other occasions.

A reliability test was carried out to ensure that the items used were free from random error and to show internal consistency in each dimension (Pallant, 2005). The alpha value that approaches 1.0 shows high internal consistency reliability while a value less than 0.6 is considered to be weak (Sekaran 2003); weak values were eliminated. In all, Cronbach's alpha values for the tourist perception ranged from 0.65 to 0.78. This meant that all of the constructs were retained for further analysis.

The service quality level was calculated using the descriptive analysis. The mean scores for all constructs are presented in Table 1: Tourist Perception of Service Quality at Lake Kenyir.

Table 1: Tourist Perception of Service Quality at Lake Kenyir: Mean Scores

<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Perception (SD)</i>
1. Sustainable	
1.1 Visual attraction and appealing natural attractions.	3.34(0.56)
1.2 Non-crowded and unspoiled park	3.30(0.65)
1.3 Used natural/local resources as equipment and facilities.	2.94(0.65)
1.4 Emphasized that tourists recycle and reuse products	2.63(0.77)
1.5 Development was integrated with the local environment/culture	2.89(0.66)
1.6 Nature-based activities (jungle tracking, kayaking, birdwatching)	3.26(0.66)
1.7 Minimal changes to existing landform and vegetation	2.88(0.65)
Value for Sustainability	3.03(0.27)
2. Tangible	
2.1 The physical facilities and equipment were visually aligned and in good condition.	2.88(0.63)
2.2 Information centre gave relevant information.	2.96(0.68)
2.3 Adequate transport systems.	2.78(0.76)
2.4 Accessibility of physical facilities and natural resources	2.92(0.62)
2.5 Neat appearance of the resort staff	2.82(0.69)
Value for Tangibility	2.87(0.07)
3. Reliability	
3.1 Staff gave prompt services	2.87(0.71)
3.2 Staff provided services at the promised time.	2.73(0.69)
3.3 Staff provided accurate and correct information.	2.86(0.58)
Value for Reliability	2.82(0.08)
4. Responsiveness	
4.1 Willing to assist tourists	3.05(0.62)
4.2 Staff was never too busy to respond to tourist's question(s)	3.00(0.67)
4.3 Staff informed tourist of the exact service and product offered	2.96(0.61)
Value for Responsiveness	3.00(0.05)
5. Assurance	
5.1 Tourist felt safe and secure.	3.12(0.64)
5.2 Staff was consistently courteous with tourist.	3.11(0.61)
5.3 Staff had the knowledge to answer questions.	3.02(0.60)
5.4 Adequate safety facilities.	2.97(0.60)
Value for Assurance	3.06(0.07)
6. Empathy	
6.1 Staff gave tourist personal attention.	2.80(0.63)
6.2 Staff understood tourist's specific needs.	2.94(0.65)
6.3 Convenient locations of facilities and equipment.	3.01(0.66)
6.4 Comfortable facilities	2.98(0.66)
6.5 Adequate water supply	3.10(0.69)
Value for Empathy	2.96(0.11)
Overall Value	2.96(0.09)

Table 1 shows that the mean value for tourist perception is 2.96 (SD=0.09), indicating that those who visited Lake Kenyir were satisfied with the products and services offered (the value is greater than the middle value of 2.50). More specifically, all of the constructs showed a value of greater than 2.50. For the sustainability construct, the value for tourist perception was 3.03 (SD=0.27). For the constructs of tangibility and reliability, the mean values were 2.87 (SD=0.07) and 2.82 (SD=0.08), respectively. As for responsiveness, the mean value was 3.00 (SD = 0.05) while the mean values for assurance and empathy were 3.06 (SD=0.07) and 2.96 (SD=0.11), respectively. The results also show that assurance and sustainability had the highest mean scores, at 3.06 and 3.03, respectively, indicating that tourists were most satisfied with these two constructs.

All items also had mean scores above 2.50, indicating that tourists were satisfied with all of the items in this study. The item 'visual attraction and appeal of natural attraction' had the highest mean score at 3.34 (SD=0.56). This was followed by 'noncrowded and unspoiled park,' with mean score 3.30 (SD=0.65). However, the item 'emphasized tourists to recycle and reuse products' showed the lowest mean score of 2.63 (SD=0.77). Nonetheless, the tourists were still satisfied with this item.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by adding a sustainable construct to the service quality model. The result provides greater insight into tourist perceptions on the quality of services and products provided in a lake-based tourism area. The results show that tourists are generally satisfied with the products and services offered at Lake Kenyir, confirming the study by Akama and Keiti [1] but in contrast with Chui et al. [3] and Arabatzis and Grigoroudis [2]. The present study also shows that assurance and sustainable constructs have the highest performance and that tourists are very satisfied with the visual attraction and natural attraction, followed by the noncrowded and unspoiled characteristics of the location. These are the strengths of Lake Kenyir and probably the reasons behind tourist visits to the area. Therefore, resort operators, Lake Kenyir park managers and tourism authorities should focus on these constructs and items to maintain high performance to attract tourists to the area. In addition, tourists gave the item 'emphasised that tourists recycle and reuse products' the lowest score, implying a possible area of improvement in the future. This implies that factors beyond the product and service delivery provided the resort operators should also be assessed so as to increase tourist visits to the area.

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7. References

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