

## Structural Relationships between Aspects of Hotel Service Quality and Their Effect on Tourist Satisfaction

(Hubungan Struktur antara Aspek Kualiti Perkhidmatan Hotel dan Kesannya ke Atas Kepuasan Pelancong)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the impact of assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy on the level of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery. A questionnaire is distributed to 200 respondents who are patrons of hotels in the Federal Territory of Labuan, Malaysia and are familiar with their services. The resulting data is analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via AMOS 5.0. The findings support previous research and demonstrate that tourists' satisfaction can be enriched by changes and improvements in hotel services significantly associated with empathy, tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness. The amount of empathy perceived serves as the best predictor of tourist satisfaction, followed by the extent of the discernible tangible benefits. By recognizing the impact of assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy on tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery, tourism marketers and planners should be able to attract more tourists by placing greater emphasis on the key aspects of hotel service considered in this study.*

### ABSTRAK

*Kajian ini menguji kesan jaminan, kebolehpercayaan, tindak balas, tangible dan empati terhadap kepuasan pelancong mengenai penyediaan perkhidmatan hotel. Soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada 200 responden yang telah mengunjungi dan menerima perkhidmatan hotel di Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan, Malaysia. Data telah dianalisis dengan menggunakan Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) menggunakan perisian AMOS 5.0. Hasil kajian ini menyokong penyelidikan terdahulu yang menunjukkan bahawa kepuasan pelancong boleh dipertingkatkan dengan mengubah dan memperbaiki perkhidmatan hotel kerana ia mempunyai kaitan signifikan dengan empati, tangible, kebolehpercayaan dan tindak balas. Empati merupakan faktor yang mempunyai pengaruh terbesar terhadap kepuasan pelancong diikuti oleh faedah-faedah yang tangible. Dengan mengiktiraf kesan jaminan, kebolehpercayaan, tindak balas, tangible dan empati terhadap kepuasan pelancong mengenai perkhidmatan hotel yang diterima, pemasar dan perancang pelancongan sepatutnya boleh menarik minat lebih ramai pelancong dengan memberikan penekanan kepada aspek-aspek utama penyediaan perkhidmatan hotel tersebut.*

*Keywords: Tourist Satisfaction; Hotel Services; Assurance; Reliability; Responsiveness; Tangibles; Empathy*

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been recognized as a social phenomenon. Part of a tourist's experience is shaped by the service quality delivered by the hotel staff, which influences his/her bonding experience with the destination (Nella & Christou 2010). Tourists evaluate the quality of hotels by comparing them with other hotels. The tourism product at a destination comprises all attractions, facilities, services and other ancillary features that the visitors experience, use or visit during their stay. In this study, the proposed theoretical model draws from SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988), which is used to measure the service quality. SERVQUAL has been extensively validated and successfully applied in a variety of instances of human behavior studies. Assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy are all predicted to influence the hotel guests' experience during their stay. Quality

attributes of the service environment in totality play vital roles in the tourists' evaluation of hotel service quality. The status of tourism as a scientific object in the academic field is still in question (Frédéric & Mathis 2012). However, the dynamic patterns of consumer behavior, in particular amongst tourists, and the demand for quality service requires service providers to have an in depth knowledge about the relationships between service quality and customer satisfaction. This knowledge allows service providers to provide services that meet or, better yet, exceed the expectations of tourists.

Service quality has been identified as a key competitive advantage in global markets (Ojo 2010). Following this argument, it is of great interest for the current study to shed light into the impact of assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy on the level of tourist satisfaction regarding hotel service delivery. Better service quality improves the relationship between

customers and the organization. This is a two-way flow of value (Ojo 2010). Customers' satisfaction increases when companies create products and services that offer great benefits and features for them. High customer satisfaction enables the service provider to experience higher sales volumes; secure repeat sales through customer loyalty; reduce marketing expenses through positive word-of-mouth; improve operating efficiencies; and, ultimately, produce a better bottom line (Beatty et al. 1996; Buttle 1996).

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows. The following section reviews the literature on service quality dimensions and their relationships with tourist satisfaction. The research hypotheses are also included in this section. A description of the research methodology and empirical findings of the study are then provided. After recognizing important limitations, the final section discusses implications and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourist satisfaction is influenced and can be explained *via* several factors, such as assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy. These are the factors considered under SERVQUAL, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) as a means of measuring service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1988) draw a distinction between service quality and customer satisfaction because "service quality is a global judgment or attitude relating to the superiority of the service, whereas satisfaction is related to a specific transaction". Customers compare their expectations of services with actual performance outcomes (Brunner-Sperdin, Peters & Strobl 2012). Prior research by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Walker, Johnson and Leonard (2006) conclude that nourishing service quality generates higher levels of satisfaction. There is a positive relationship between the service quality and customer satisfaction (Beerli, Martin & Quintana 2004; Yee, Yeung & Cheng 2010). Most research finds that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction (Balaji 2009; Bedi 2010; Kassim & Abdullah 2010; Kumar et al. 2010; Naeem, Akram & Saif 2009).

### ASSURANCE

Assurance is related to the knowledge and courtesy of the employees, as well as their ability to convey trust and confidence to the customer. Tourists need freedom from doubt or hesitation about the tourism products offered by the travel agency. The service personnel play an important role that effects customers' perception in service settings (or of services) (Brunner-Sperdin et al. 2012). Indeed, the courtesy of the employees and the amiability of the environment influence customer satisfaction (Gunawardane 2011). Therefore, service management

needs to create a desirable atmosphere for intangible interpersonal interactions (atmosphere/service) (Brunner-Sperdin et al. 2012) to meet customer expectations and provide satisfaction. In view of the above, this study hypothesizes that:

H<sub>1</sub>: Assurance of hotel service delivery affects levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery.

### RELIABILITY

Reliability refers to the ability of employees to perform the promised service, timely and accurately. The overall structure of the business is determined by the characteristics of the core elements together with the features of each of the separate elements (Albayrak, Caber & Aksoy 2010). On the other hand, Ariffin and Maghzi (2012) state that hospitality involves interactions between a provider and receiver, as well as a blend of tangible and intangible factors, which means that a company's tangible and intangible products complement each other to deliver a better service to customers. Reliability also refers to competence which requires staff which is knowledgeable and confident enough to respond to questions and requests accurately (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry 1990). Competence has a significant influence on customer satisfaction (Agus, Barker & Kandampully 2007; Nadiri & Hussain 2005). Hence, this study also proposes that:

H<sub>2</sub>: The reliability of hotel service delivery affects levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery.

### RESPONSIVENESS

Responsiveness is related to the willingness of the employees to assist guests and provide prompt service. Tourism companies are responsible for providing a better experience for the customers during their vacation period. Thus, a product must appeal to travelers seeking either business or leisure activities (Xu 2009). The hotel should be ready to serve the customers within an environment and with services that enrich their travel experiences. This can be accomplished through the provision of an extraordinary level of hospitality that can actually play a role in ensuring that tourists return to a particular hotel in the future (Ariffin & Maghzi 2012). The wholesome quality of the hospitality delivery rendered by the hotels can help the tourists to develop a strong bond with the establishment. Therefore, this study also hypothesizes that:

H<sub>3</sub>: The responsiveness of hotel service delivery affects levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery.

## TANGIBLES

Tangible refers to the physical appearance of public companies, inclusive of all available facilities. Tangible elements in tourism products can be evaluated, measured and subjected to specific standards of provision. The product is a complete experience that fulfills multiple tourism needs, and provides corresponding benefits to them (Xu 2009). Furthermore, the tourism sector attracts tourists by focusing on a particular business/leisure purpose (Xu 2009), such as accommodation (e.g., hotel and chalet), attractions (e.g., museums, art galleries and beaches), amenities (e.g., restaurants & public facilities) and ancillary features (e.g., travel agents and guides/organizers). Kumar et al. (2010) confirm that the tangibles dimension significantly influences customer satisfaction. Accordingly, this study also hypothesizes that:

H<sub>4</sub>: The tangibles associated with hotel service delivery affect levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery.

## EMPATHY

Empathy relates to the caring, individualized attention that employees of the company provide to their clients. Richins (1997) states that many specific consumption experiences involve a broad range of mixed emotions or ambivalence. The consumer might experience a high level of satisfaction that consists of both positive emotions (i.e., pleasure, happiness) and negative feelings (i.e., sadness, regret). Therefore, service is of value to an individual consumer if it makes his/her life pleasurable, more tranquil, safe and/or harmonious (Thuy & Hau 2010). This can be determined once the consumers assess the trade-off between the benefits that he/she receives and the costs to be paid (Ladhari & Morales 2007). Consequently, the study hypothesizes that:

H<sub>5</sub>: Empathy in hotel service delivery affects levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery.

Overall, the research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

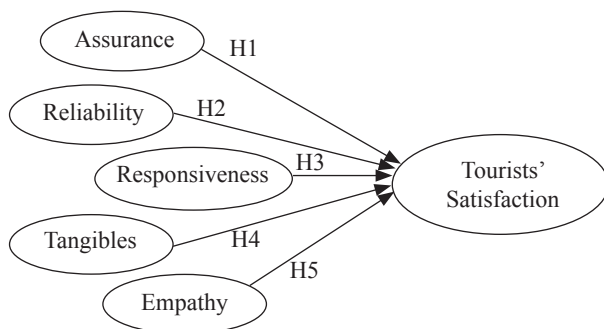


FIGURE 1. Theoretical framework

## METHODOLOGY

Of the 230 questionnaires that are randomly distributed to tourists during the period of 1 February 2011 until 15 March 2011, only 200 responses are returned for a response rate of 87 percent. The pool of respondents are selected from a population that has already experienced the tourism product, patronized and received services of hotels located within the Federal Territory of Labuan, Malaysia. Labuan Airport Terminal and Labuan Ferry Terminal have been chosen as the location of data collection because these are the areas where tourists are assumed to have already experienced the tourism product. The questionnaire comprises three sections: Section A is designed to extract the respondents' demographic characteristics, while Section B measures their perceptions of hotel service quality attributes, namely assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1988). Finally, Section C encompasses two items which are then aggregated into a mean score. This section is designed for respondents to rate their overall satisfaction levels towards the hotel service quality using items borrowed from Westbrook (1980). All instruments are designed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. All constructs included in the model are measured using multi-item scales designed to tap all relevant domains of the construct. While the scales used are based on previous works, all of the items are adapted so that the item content matches the industry. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis is then conducted using AMOS 5.0. SEM is selected because, through the confirmatory factor analysis, measurement error can be minimized through the multiple indicators per latent variable. SEM has the ability to estimate both direct and indirect effects and is a testable model. It also has the ability to ensure the consistency of the model with the data and to estimate effects among constructs.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 reports the demographic attributes of the respondents. Out of 200 respondents, 58 percent are male tourists and 42 percent are female, providing an almost equal response. More than half of them (69.5%) are aged 26 years old or younger. The distribution of respondents by location varies as 23 percent are from Peninsular Malaysia; 24 percent from Sarawak; 20.5 percent from Sabah; and 17.5 percent from Labuan. More than 80 percent of the tourists earn a monthly income of RM4000 or less, while 25 percent report higher earnings. The data infers that the sample is representative of the target population, i.e. people with experience of the tourism product.

TABLE 1. Profile of respondents

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	117	58.5
	Female	83	41.5
Age (years)	< 20	57	28.5
	21-23	43	21.5
	24-26	39	19.5
	27-29	38	19.0
	Other	23	11.5
State	Peninsular Malaysia	46	23.0
	Sarawak	48	24.0
	Sabah	41	20.5
	Labuan	35	17.5
	Other	30	15.0
Monthly Income (Malaysia Ringgit, RM)	1000 and below	54	27.0
	1001 – 2000	50	25.0
	2001 – 3000	46	23.0
	3001 – 4000	25	12.5
	4001 and above	25	12.5

## STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELLING

The SEM results include two components: the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model, which highlights relationships between latent variables and observed variables, aims to provide reliability and validity based on these variables. The structural model studies path strength and the direction of the relationships among the latent variables.

*The Measurement Model* Using AMOS 5.0, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is conducted to test the measurement model. It is necessary to test whether the measurement model has a satisfactory level of validity and reliability before testing for a significant relationship in the structural model (Fornell & Larcker 1981; Ifinedo 2006). The psychometric properties of the model – in terms of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity – are evaluated and the results are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Reliability and item loadings

Constructs	Items	Standardized Loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE
Assurance	ASS1	0.892	0.903	0.729
	ASS2	0.895		
	ASS3	0.774		
	ASS4	0.864		
Reliability	REL1	0.905	0.860	0.762
	REL2	0.938		
	REL3	0.787		
	REL4	0.827		
	REL5	0.860		
Responsiveness	RES1	0.831	0.898	0.718
	RES2	0.885		
	RES3	0.923		
	RES4	0.861		
Tangibles	TAN1	0.841	0.939	0.862
	TAN2	0.906		
	TAN3	0.759		
	TAN4	0.748		
Empathy	EMP1	0.832	0.954	0.905
	EMP2	0.882		
	EMP3	0.848		
	EMP4	0.802		
	EMP5	0.870		
Overall	SAT1	0.841	0.958	0.908
Satisfaction	SAT2	0.844		

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted

**Construct Reliability** Composite reliability (CR) is used to measure the reliability of a construct in the measurement model. CR offers a more retrospective approach to the overall reliability and estimates consistency of the construct itself, including the stability and equivalence of the construct (Hair et al. 2010). A value of 0.70 or greater is deemed to be indicative of good scale reliability (Hair et al. 2010). Table 2 indicates the ability of the calculated composite reliability to support construct reliability. The reading of composite reliability for each of the latent variables is above 0.7, i.e. greater than the benchmark. This indicates the high internal consistency of the scales and the reliability of the latent variables.

**Convergent Validity** Convergent validity shows the extent to which indicators of a specific construct converge or have a high proportion of variance in common (Hair et al. 2010). This validity is measured using standardized factor loadings. The significance of standardized regression weight (standardized factor loading) estimates reveals that the indicator variables are significant and representative of their latent variable. The factor loadings of latent to observed variables should be above 0.50 (Hair et al. 2010). The result of the CFA in Table 2 shows that the factor loadings of all observed variables or items are adequate and corresponded to their constructs, ranging from 0.748 to 0.938. These values are well above the threshold value of 0.50. This indicates that all the constructs conform to the convergent construct validity test.

**Discriminant Validity** Discriminant validity shows the extent to which a construct is truly distinct from other constructs (Hair et al. 2010). A commonly used statistical

measure of discriminant validity is a comparison of the average variance extracted (AVE) value with correlation squared (Fornell & Larcker 1981). As shown in Table 2, all AVE values are above the recommended 0.50 level (Hair et al. 2010), which implies that more than one-half of the variances observed in the items are accounted for by their hypothesized factors. Table 3 shows the correlation matrix for the constructs. The correlation estimates indicate a significant 2-way correlation between specified variables. All of the correlations between variables are less than 1 and statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. There is a positive correlation pattern among variables, except for the correlation between assurance and tourist satisfaction. Empathy ( $r = 0.326, p < 0.01$ ) turned out to have the highest association with perceived overall tourist satisfaction, followed by reliability ( $r = 0.296, p < 0.01$ ).

The diagonal elements in the correlation matrix in Table 3 have been replaced by the square roots of the AVE. For discriminant validity to be judged adequate, these diagonal elements should be greater than the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns. Thus, discriminant validity appears satisfactory for constructs so that it may be concluded that multicollinearity is absent. The skewness of all the items ranges from -0.118 to 0.197, below  $\pm 2.0$ . Similarly, the values for kurtosis ranges from -0.146 to 0.920, well below the threshold of  $\pm 10$ . Both the skewness and kurtosis are well below the said threshold, implying that the scores approximate a "normal distribution" or "bell-shaped curve".

TABLE 3. Correlations analysis between variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Assurance	0.854					
2. Reliability	0.141(*)	0.873				
3. Responsiveness	0.235(**)	0.331(**)	0.847			
4. Tangibles	0.184(**)	0.193(**)	0.285(**)	0.928		
5. Empathy	0.249(**)	0.241(**)	0.207(**)	0.505(**)	0.951	
6. Satisfaction	0.092	0.296(**)	0.149(*)	0.171(*)	0.326(**)	0.953
Mean	3.256	2.915	2.883	3.010	2.985	2.968
Std. Deviation	0.695	0.671	0.783	0.838	0.756	0.971
Skewness	0.197	0.092	0.023	-0.118	0.153	-0.149
Kurtosis	-0.352	0.509	-0.146	0.323	0.920	-0.376

Notes: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Figures in the column headings correspond to the row headings

#### THE STRUCTURAL MODEL

The test of the structural model is performed using SEM in order to examine the hypothesized conceptual framework

by performing a simultaneous test. To assess the model, multiple fit indices are computed and the results are reported in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Goodness-of-fit indices for the structural model

Fit Indices	Recommended Level of Fit	Model Value
Absolute Fit Measures:		
$\chi^2$ (Chi-square)		279.751
df (Degrees of Freedom)		224
Chi-square/df ( $\chi^2/df$ )	< 3	1.249
GFI (Goodness of Fit Index)	> 0.9	0.901
RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation)	< 0.10	0.035
Incremental Fit Measures:		
AGFI (Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index)	> 0.80	0.868
NFI (Normed Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.977
CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.943
IFI (Incremental Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.946
RFI (Relative Fit Index)	> 0.90	0.926
Parsimony Fit Measures:		
PCFI (Parsimony Comparative of Fit Index)	> 0.50	0.765
PNFI (Parsimony Normed Fit Index)	> 0.50	0.631

Overall, the fit indices indicate that the model is a good fit: Chi-square/df = 1.249, CFI = 0.943, GFI = 0.901, AGFI = 0.868, NFI = 0.977 and RMSEA = 0.035. All of the model-fit indices exceed the respective common acceptance levels suggested by previous research. Compared with the suggested cut-off value, the model fit indices demonstrate that the model exhibits a good fit with the data. Thus, it is possible to proceed with the text on the path coefficients.

Properties of the causal paths for the structural model (standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), standard error, and hypotheses result) are indicated in Table 5. The level of significance ( $\alpha$ ) is set at 0.05. The R-squared value is used to evaluate the strength of the proposed model. The results of the multivariate test of the structural model show that the model, as a whole, explains 62 percent of the variance in the levels of tourist satisfaction. Figure 2 depicts the structural model.

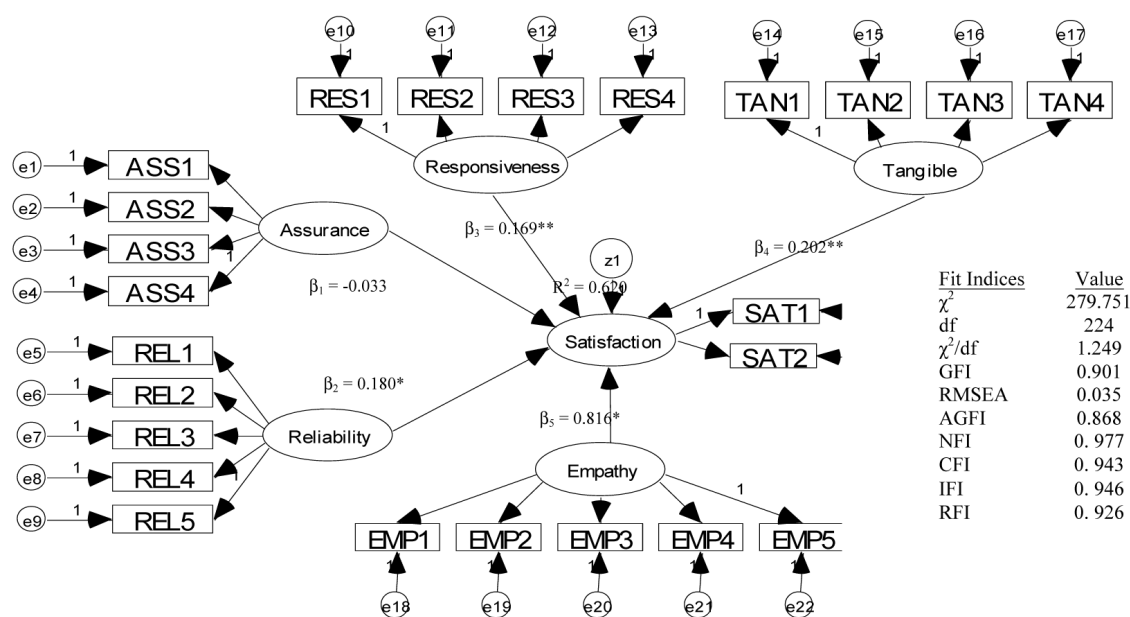


FIGURE 2. The result of structural model

TABLE 5. Summary of hypotheses testing results

Path	Estimate ( $\beta$ )	S.E.	C.R.	$p$	Results
Satisfaction <--- Assurance	-0.033	0.064	-0.502	0.616	Not Supported
Satisfaction <--- Reliability	0.180	0.152	2.549	0.011*	Supported
Satisfaction <--- Responsiveness	0.169	0.308	1.905	0.057**	Supported
Satisfaction <--- Tangibles	0.202	0.263	1.929	0.054**	Supported
Satisfaction <--- Empathy	0.816	0.176	5.678	0.000*	Supported

Notes:  $\beta$  = standardized beta coefficients; S.E. = standard error; C.R. = critical ratio; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.10$

Table 5 presents the summary of the hypotheses testing results, where each of the beta coefficients explains the relative importance of the 5 service quality factors in contributing to the variance in the tourist satisfaction levels. Four of the five factors remain significant in the equation with a different value of the beta coefficients, thus contributing different weights to the variance of tourist satisfaction levels. The most significant finding is found in relation to the empathy factor ( $\beta_5 = 0.816$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), which appears to be the most important predictor of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery. Hence,  $H_5$ , which states that empathy displayed in delivering hotel service (caring, individualized attention given by the hotel staff, etc.) affects levels of tourist satisfaction, is supported.

Next, there is a support for  $H_4$ , indicating that tangibles in relation to hotel service delivery do affect levels of tourist satisfaction ( $\beta_4 = 0.202$ ;  $p < 0.10$ ).  $H_2$  is also supported as reliability was the third most significant factor in explaining tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery ( $\beta_2 = 0.180$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The estimates are consistent with expectations, because the relationship is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and in the anticipated direction. The ability of hotel staff to perform the promised service, timely and accurately, clearly affects tourist satisfaction levels. Furthermore, the results confirm the importance of responsiveness in influencing tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery ( $\beta_3 = 0.169$ ;  $p < 0.10$ ). These results provide a support for hypothesis  $H_3$ . In contrast, the results on the impact of assurance on the overall tourist satisfaction with the hotel service delivery is insignificant, with a  $p$ -value  $> 0.10$ . Consequently,  $H_1$  is not supported.

## DISCUSSION

This research empirically examines the impact of assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy on the levels of tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery. The results from performing SEM show that all hypotheses are supported except for  $H_1$  (i.e. assurance). The results produce imperative findings on dimensions that significantly affect tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery, where empathy prevails as the most significant important predictor of tourist satisfaction. This finding lends a strong support for the findings of

Kumar et al. (2010) and Ladhari (2009). This is validated by the tourists, who perceive that members of the hotel staff understand the specific needs of clients, and show sincere interest when delivering the service. Indeed, the hotel staff offer personalized attention and try to provide what is in the guests' best interests. Therefore, hotel managers need to pay particular attention to how tourists feel during the service delivery process. Developing an in-depth understanding of customer relationship management strategies will enable hotel staff to better realize and articulate client needs. Consequently, being well informed about the perceptions of tourists may lead to valuable management initiatives concerning better hotel productivity. In other words, the caring, individualized attention that the hotel staff provides to its clients is a service that all hotel providers should be providing in order to maximize the tourist satisfaction.

The findings show that tangibles are another factor that has a significant effect on tourist satisfaction with hotel service delivery. This implies that tourists are satisfied when the hotel staff helps them by responding to any need with prompt service and patience when dealing with their queries and requests. The findings also indicate that tangibility elements, such as hotel décor, guest privacy, attractive rooms and staff appearance, enable the hotel to deliver services of the highest quality. There is, consequently, a pressing need to consider tangibles as inputs in the creation and development of the tourist's experience of hotel service quality. Lovelock, Wirtz and Keh (2005) report similarly, concluding tangible elements of services inform customers' perceptions about the behavior of service personnel and the quality of service delivered by these personnel.

Additional investigation reveals that reliability is the third most important dimension for the hotel provider to consider. This finding is in analogous with other literature on the services industry considering the impact of reliability on levels of customer satisfaction (Beh 2008; Md. Anisul, Mohammad & Md. Alauddin 2011; Vong 2007). The significant role of reliability in influencing tourist satisfaction presents a new challenge to hotel providers, requiring them to put more emphasis on honoring their promises to their customers and providing a high standard of service on a consistent basis. This is important in the sense that everyone recognizes the service quality offered when they experience it for themselves, either positively

or negatively. However, what stands out in the customer's mind is excellent service that exceeds their expectations. Tourists usually look for actual delivery of services that are promised by the hotel providers. Consequently, the hotel management should honor its promises to deliver a wholesome quality service to clients. By doing so, hotel providers can effectively differentiate their hotel services from those of their nearest competitors.

Interestingly, responsiveness is also found to have a significant effect on tourists' satisfaction with hotel service delivery. The findings imply that tourists will feel satisfied when they think that the hotel facilities are visually appealing, up-to-date and appropriate for the type of services offered. Earlier research (Beh 2008; Vong 2007) reaches similar conclusions on the role of responsiveness. Conversely, tourists seem to place less emphasis on the assurance dimension with regard to hotel service quality. Tourists are also less concerned about communication with the service personnel. Assurance is clearly not a strong source of customer satisfaction in a service setting. Similar findings are documented by Mokhlis (2012) and Munusamy, Chelliah and Mun (2010).

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has highlighted the importance of empathy as the most powerful predictor of tourist satisfaction associated with hotel service delivery. The core concept of empathy is based on employee-customer interactions that instill positive feeling about jobs among the hotel staff and about delivering a high-quality service to hotel guests. Hotel management should make sure that their staff is trained to offer personalized services to their customers. This is important to strengthen and nurture long-term relationships with customers. Hotel management needs to take note that prompt and reliable services delivered as promised and at a consistently high standard are the key ingredients needed to encourage customer loyalty and satisfaction.

The main contribution of this study is that it proposes a way to assess hotel quality services in accordance with guests' needs (reflected through their perceptions). This study uses SEM to empirically validate the proposed causal relationships between the variables, concurrently. The findings furnish knowledge about the fundamental relationships among the variables. This knowledge is crucial because it can enhance the hotel management performance. The hotel service providers would be able to formulate the kind of policy that will place emphasis on, and prioritize, the more important aspects of their services so that they are in a better position to accomplish their business goals. Overall, it is imperative for hotel management to successfully integrate the four service quality elements, i.e., empathy, tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness in order to show their commitment to satisfying their customers' multiple needs. Notwithstanding the significant findings obtained, the implications of this

study are limited by the small size of the sample used for analysis. The results stemming from the sample might not be generalized beyond the specific conditions of this study. It is recommended that further research be conducted on a larger population with more diversified random samples across different nationalities, because this study is conducted based upon the findings from a sample that consists solely of Malaysian respondents. It might also be interesting to perform another analysis comparing different tourist segments in terms of their attitudes and behavioral intentions.

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