

Service Quality Dimensions and Customer Satisfaction in the Budget Hotel Sector: Empirical Evidence from Kelantan, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how customer satisfaction in low-cost hotels in Kelantan, Malaysia, is affected by service quality parameters, particularly assurance, responsiveness, and reliability. A quantitative research design based on Expectation-Confirmation Theory and the SERVQUAL framework was used. A structured online survey using Google Forms was used to collect primary data from visitors who had previously stayed at low-cost motels in Kelantan. SPSS was used to analyze 119 valid replies in total. A sample size of $N = 119$ offered adequate statistical power, according to an a priori statistical power analysis using G*Power (Power = 0.95, $\alpha = 0.05$, $f^2 = 0.15$). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability testing were used to examine the data. The results show statistically significant positive connections between customer satisfaction and assurance, responsiveness, and dependability. Notably, the strongest associations with guest satisfaction were seen in staff responsiveness and service dependability. These research findings demonstrate that low-cost hotel operators cannot compete on the basis of pricing alone; professional behavior, timely staff help, and consistent service delivery are crucial for raising visitor happiness and increasing customer retention. This study fills a significant empirical gap in regional Malaysian hospitality literature and offers useful insights for low-cost lodging providers in tourist destinations.

Keywords: Service Quality, SERVQUAL, Customer Satisfaction, Budget Hotels, Kelantan Tourism, Hospitality Management.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

By creating jobs and marketing Malaysia as a top travel destination, the hotel sector significantly boosts the country's economy (Abdullah et al., 2024). According to Abdullah et al. (2024), there are a variety of hotels in Malaysia, from high-end businesses to low-cost lodgings, all of which are intended to cater to distinct market niches and visitor expectations. Budget hotels concentrate on offering reasonably priced lodging for budget-conscious tourists, students, backpackers, and business travelers looking for short stays, whereas luxury hotel

guests prioritize individualized service, attention to detail, and premium experiences (Marzuki et al., 2011) (Samsul et al., 2024). Budget hotels typically prioritize strategic locations and operational efficiency while operating with simpler designs, fewer amenities, fixed room rates, and cheaper building and running costs (Samsul et al., 2024). Budget hotel managers actively work to improve service quality in order to stay competitive and encourage visitor loyalty in a market that is becoming more and more competitive (Aminudin et al., 2022).

Located on Peninsular Malaysia's northeastern coast, Kelantan is well-known for its natural features, traditional crafts, and rich cultural legacy, which attract an increasing number of tourists from both domestic and foreign countries every year (Marzuki et al., 2011). The natural environment and cultural legacy of Kelantan, which borders Thailand along the Golok River, have a significant impact on local economic growth thru tourism (Marzuki et al., 2011). Kelantan has grown in importance as a holiday destination for those on a tight budget, while being less urbanized than major resort hubs like Langkawi or metropolitan centers like Kuala Lumpur (Marzuki et al., 2011). In order to satisfy local demand and compete in the regional lodging market, a large number of low-cost hotels have been built (Marzuki et al., 2011). According to (Marzuki et al., 2011), satisfying tourist expectations, increasing customer satisfaction, and fostering brand loyalty all depend on service quality.

Established models like SERVQUAL, which gages aspects like assurance, responsiveness, and dependability, are frequently used to assess service quality (Aminudin et al., 2022). The degree to which a customer's pre-purchase expectations are satisfied or surpassed by the service they receive is known as customer satisfaction (Kotler & Keller, 2020). Three key service dimensions have a significant impact on customer satisfaction in low-cost hotel settings: assurance (staff knowledge, courtesy, competence, and trustworthiness), responsiveness (prompt employee assistance and quick issue resolution), and reliability (consistent, accurate service and clean facilities) (Noorkhizan et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2021; Singh & Prasad, 2023). According to (Rahman et al., 2021; Singh & Prasad, 2023), customers are far more likely to return and offer favorable recommendations if they believe that the services are dependable, accommodating, and reassuring.

1.2 Problem Statement

Customer happiness, repeat business, and long-term business sustainability are all largely attributed to service quality, according to recent hospitality literature (Abdullah et al., 2024; Said et al., 2023). The SERVQUAL paradigm developed by Parasuraman et al. has been used in a number of empirical studies conducted in Malaysia to assess the impact of core service dimensions such assurance, responsiveness, and dependability on guest assessments (Aminudin et al., 2022; Noorkhizan et al., 2024). However, luxury resorts, expensive hotels with star ratings, and large metropolitan agglomerations like Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi continue to be the focus of a disproportionate amount of current empirical research (Abdullah et al., 2024; Padlee et al., 2019). These upscale, urban environments have operating characteristics, pricing schemes, and visitor demographics that are very different from those of local low-cost lodging industries (Samsul et al., 2024). A significant study gap concerning low-cost hotels operating in non-metropolitan and culturally diverse places like Kelantan is created by this spatial and contextual bias (Aminudin et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2021). Due to its diverse local customs, border-state location close to Thailand, and unique consumer expectations, Kelantan has a distinctive socio-cultural and economic landscape (Marzuki et al., 2011). Budget hotels in the area have severe resource limits, lower capital reserves, and inadequate staff training skills, despite the fact that domestic and budget-conscious tourism to Kelantan has increased dramatically (Ismail et al., 2021; Samsul et al., 2024). As a result, operational bottlenecks, inconsistent service delivery, slow front desk responsiveness, and poor facility upkeep are commonplace for local operators (Aminudin et al., 2022; Rahman & Omar, 2022).

Additionally, empirical results from various Malaysian regions show a discernible lack of consistency in the particular service aspects that determine customer satisfaction (Aminudin et al., 2022; Raziman & Tengku Mansor, 2021). For instance, research on Kuala Lumpur's three-star urban hotels highlights that customer satisfaction is mostly determined by dependability, certainty, and responsiveness (Noorkhizan et al., 2024). On the other hand, research on hospitality in Perlis emphasizes tangibles and empathy as key elements, noting that certainty and dependability had little statistical impact (Raziman & Tengku Mansor, 2021). According to research conducted in Langkawi, assurance has a greater influence on guest satisfaction than any other

SERVQUAL factor (Aminudin et al., 2022). These conflicting empirical findings show that opinions about service quality cannot be extrapolated to other parts of Malaysia or hotel levels (Aminudin et al., 2022; Rahman & Omar, 2022). Local hotel managers lack practical empirical guidance on how to deploy limited operational capital because there is still a dearth of localized research that explicitly targets Kelantan's budget hotel sector (Aminudin et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2021). Operators run the risk of misallocating limited resources toward non-essential physical upgrades while ignoring crucial human service touchpoints in the absence of clear empirical evidence identifying which service quality dimensions—specifically, reliability, responsiveness, or assurance—most strongly drive guest satisfaction in Kelantan (Padlee et al., 2019; Said et al., 2023). Increased visitor unhappiness, unfavorable internet reviews, lower retention rates, and decreased competitiveness in a market that is becoming more and more crowded are all consequences of this operational disconnect (Ahmad & Zainal, 2020; Rahman & Omar, 2022). Thus, by experimentally investigating the particular links between service reliability, staff responsiveness, employee assurance, and customer satisfaction among budget hotel visitors in Kelantan, this study directly fills this localized research gap (Aminudin et al., 2022; Said et al., 2023).

1.3 Research Objectives

To resolve the research problem, this study established three specific research objectives:

RO1:	To determine the relationship between Reliability and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan
RO2:	To examine the relationship between Responsiveness and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan
RO3:	To identify the relationship between Assurance and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan

1.4 Research Questions

Correspondingly, three research questions guide this investigation:

RQ1:	Is there a relationship between Reliability and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan?
RQ2:	Is there a relationship between Responsiveness and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan?
RQ3:	Is there a relationship between Assurance and Customer Satisfaction in Budget Hotels in Kelantan?

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.5.1 Academic Perspective

From an academic standpoint, this study adds to the body of knowledge on customer satisfaction and service quality in hospitality management by concentrating on low-cost hotels in Kelantan (Aminudin et al., 2022). There is little empirical data about low-cost hotels in less urbanized areas because previous Malaysian research has mostly focused on luxury or star-rated urban hotels (Abdullah et al., 2024). By assessing the precise effects of dependability, responsiveness, and assurance on client pleasure in a local budget lodging scenario, this study closes this gap (Aminudin et al., 2022). Future scholars looking into service management and customer behavior in low-cost hospitality settings will find these empirical findings to be a useful resource (Padlee et al., 2019).

1.5.2 Practical Perspective

Practically speaking, the results provide managers, owners of low-cost hotels, and other hospitality professionals in Kelantan with useful information (Ismail et al., 2021). Operators can prioritize important enhancements in staff training, employee response times, and service consistency by determining which aspects of service quality have the most impact on passenger satisfaction (Rahman & Omar, 2022). Improved service delivery improves visitor experiences, encourages return business, and produces favorable word-of-mouth referrals (Ahmad & Zainal, 2020). Additionally, these results help tourism officials develop guidelines to enhance the general sustainability and competitiveness of Kelantan's low-cost hospitality industry (Marzuki et al., 2011).

1.6 Definition of Terms

Keyword	Definition	Author
Customer Satisfaction	Expresses customer preference and post-consumption evaluation regarding a firm's commercial performance relative to expectations.	(Noorkhizan et al., 2024)
Reliability	The dependability, consistency, and accuracy with which promised services are executed by the provider.	(Noorkhizan et al., 2024)
Responsiveness	The willingness and ability of personnel to help customers and provide prompt, effective service.	(Noorkhizan et al., 2024)
Assurance	The knowledge, courtesy, competence, and trustworthiness of employees that inspire trust and confidence.	(Noorkhizan et al., 2024)
Budget Hotel	Accommodation featuring low construction/operating costs, simple design, strategic location, fixed room rates, and essential services.	(Samsul et al., 2024)

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Overview

Malaysia's hospitality sector makes a significant contribution to employment generation, international destination marketing, and national economic development (Abdullah et al., 2024). Competition has increased in all hotel categories due to the rapid growth of tourism, from luxury hotels to low-cost establishments (Abdullah et al., 2024). Budget hotels compete mostly on location, cost, and effective service delivery (Samsul et al., 2024), whereas luxury businesses focus on upscale physical facilities and customized experiences to foster loyalty (Marzuki et al., 2011). According to regional hospitality research conducted in Kelantan, consumer switching behavior is decreased and visitor satisfaction is greatly impacted by service quality (Ahmad & Zainal, 2020). Research on local 3-star and low-cost lodgings shows that location, competitive pricing, staff behavior, and room atmosphere all influence overall guest opinions (Ismail et al., 2021). Customer satisfaction is a cognitive post-purchase response that happens when perceived service performance meets or above baseline expectations. It is based on Oliver's (1980) Expectation-Confirmation Theory and Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL framework.

2.2 Core Service Quality Dimensions

2.2.1 Reliability

Reliability Based on (Noorkhizan et al., 2024), reliability is the capacity of the service provider to supply promised services consistently, precisely, and dependably. Reliability in hotel operations includes efficient

check-in and check-out procedures, accurate invoicing, consistently clean rooms, and useful amenities like air conditioning, plumbing, and Wi-Fi (Noorkhizan et al., 2024; Rahman & Omar, 2022). Reliable service delivery immediately increases overall guest happiness, reduces operational failures, and fosters customer trust (Parasuraman et al., 2020; Said et al., 2023).

2.2.2 Responsiveness

The readiness, zeal, and promptness of service staff in helping customers, responding to questions, and handling complaints is referred to as responsiveness (Aminudin et al., 2022; Anwar & Qadir, 2017). In order to minimize wait times and prevent minor service issues from turning into formal complaints, front-line employees (housekeeping staff, receptionists) must react quickly to guest requests (Anwar & Qadir, 2017). Respect for client time is communicated by high response, which raises guest satisfaction (Aminudin et al., 2021; Parasuraman et al., 2020).

2.2.3 Assurance

Assurance indicates employees' job expertise, civility, competence, and ability to communicate trust and security (Noorkhizan et al., 2024). Customer safety, professional politeness, courteous communication, and open business transactions are important components (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Noorkhizan et al., 2024). According to Ismail et al. (2021) and Rahman & Omar (2022), guests' perceptions of overall service quality rise when they feel safe, appreciated, and confident in staff competency. This leads to increased satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth.

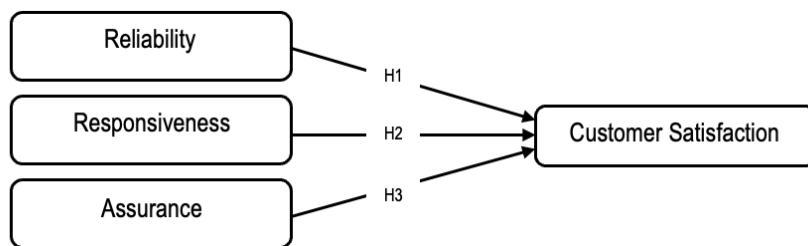


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

2.3 Hypothesis Development

H1:	There is a significant relationship between Reliability and Customer Satisfaction in budget hotels in Kelantan
H2:	There is a significant relationship between Responsiveness and Customer Satisfaction in budget hotels in Kelantan
H3:	There is a significant relationship between Assurance and Customer Satisfaction in budget hotels in Kelantan

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

Using standardized empirical data, this study used a quantitative research approach to evaluate statistical correlations between customer satisfaction and service quality aspects (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Both domestic and foreign tourists who have stayed in low-cost hotels around Kelantan made up the target demographic. Non-probability purposive sampling was used since a comprehensive sampling frame of all budget hotel guests in Kelantan was not available (Berndt, 2020). In order to maximize data accuracy and relevance, screening criteria

made sure that every participant had direct, recent experience staying at a budget hotel in Kelantan (Ali et al., 2016; Mohamad et al., 2018; Ong et al., 2017).

G*Power software was used to do an a priori power analysis (for linear multiple regression fixed model, R^2 departure from zero) in order to determine the necessary sample size. The input parameters were $f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power ($1-\beta$) of 0.95, and three predictors (assurance, responsiveness, and dependability). A minimum total sample size of $N = 119$ (actual power = 0.9510, critical $F = 2.6835$) was required by the analysis. For data processing, a final sample of 119 valid, complete responses was assembled.

3.2 Research Instrument and Operationalization

A structured online survey created with Google Forms was used to gather data, providing a convenient, affordable, and safe way to contact hotel customers (Lobe et al., 2020; Nadya & Pustika, 2021). The questionnaire was designed in both Bahasa Melayu and English to avoid linguistic ambiguity. There were three components to the survey instrument:

Part A:	Demographic characteristics (gender, age group, ethnicity, education level, monthly income) using a nominal scale.
Part B:	Independent variables measuring Reliability (5 items), Responsiveness (5 items), and Assurance (5 items), adapted from Aminudin et al. (2022), Padlee et al. (2019), Rahman et al. (2021), Raziman and Tengku Mansor (2021), and Singh and Prasad (2023).
Part C:	Dependent variable measuring Customer Satisfaction (5 items), adapted from Kotler and Keller (2020) and Thao et al. (2021).

*Parts B and C were scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS software:

Analysis	Description	Sources
Descriptive Analysis	Frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to profile demographic characteristics and summarize core variable ratings	(Lawless & Heymann, 2010).
Reliability Analysis	Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficients were calculated to assess internal consistency reliability across constructs, with values > 0.70 indicating acceptable scale reliability	(Middleton, 2020).
Pearson Correlation Analysis	Evaluated the bivariate linear relationships between independent variables (reliability, responsiveness, assurance) and customer satisfaction to test hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.	(Schober et al., 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

N = 119 validated replies made up the final sample. Male respondents made up 42.0% of the sample, while female respondents made up 58.0%. The majority of respondents (61.3%) were between the ages of 20 and 29, which reflects the demographic that predominates when it comes to affordable lodging, particularly young professionals, university students, and frugal domestic travelers.

4.2 Scale Reliability and Descriptive Analysis

Strong reliability across all assessed constructs was validated by internal consistency testing, with Cronbach's alpha values surpassing the conventional 0.70 level (Middleton, 2020). On a 5-point scale, mean scores varied from 3.98 to 4.11, suggesting generally favorable visitor opinions.

Construct	Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha	Mean	SD
Reliability			0.842	4.02	0.58
Responsiveness	IV	5	0.865	3.98	0.61
Assurance			0.829	4.11	0.56
Customer Satisfaction	DV	5	0.881	4.06	0.56

4.3 Hypotheses Testing (Pearson Correlation Analysis)

Pearson correlation analysis (r) was conducted to evaluate hypotheses H1, H2 and H3.

Hypothesis		r - value	p - value	Result
Reliability > Customer Satisfaction	(H1)	0.612	p < 0.001	Supported
Responsiveness > Customer Satisfaction	(H2)	0.658	p < 0.001	Supported
Assurance > Customer Satisfaction	(H3)	0.589	p < 0.001	Supported

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis Result			
H1	Reliability exhibited a strong, statistically significant positive correlation with customer satisfaction	r = 0.612 p < 0.001	Supported
H2	Responsiveness demonstrated the highest positive correlation with customer satisfaction	r = 0.658 p < 0.001	Supported
H3	Assurance showed a statistically significant positive correlation with customer satisfaction	r = 0.589 p < 0.001	Supported

DISCUSSION

According to the empirical findings, customer satisfaction in low-cost hotels in Kelantan is strongly influenced by service quality characteristics (Aminudin et al., 2022). Guest satisfaction was shown to be most strongly correlated with staff response ($r = 0.658$). Human service interactions become the main source of value in low-cost hotels with few physical amenities (Anwar & Qadir, 2017). Visitors appreciate timely check-in processes, prompt room inquiries, and swift settlement of complaints (Aminudin et al., 2022). Additionally, there was a substantial correlation between reliability and pleasure ($r = 0.612$). According to Noorkhizan et al. (2024) and Said et al. (2023), budget hotel visitors anticipate key operational commitments like clean rooms, working air conditioning, reliable hot water, and correct invoicing to be routinely delivered. Lastly, guest confidence is strengthened by assurance ($r = 0.589$). Employee interactions that are courteous, truthful, and informed foster confidence and guaranty that visitors feel secure when visiting Kelantan (Ismail et al., 2021; Rahman & Omar, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how customer satisfaction in low-cost hotels in Kelantan, Malaysia, was affected by the service quality aspects of assurance, responsiveness, and dependability. Customer satisfaction is positively correlated with all three service quality aspects, according to empirical research. The study shows that in order to drive client satisfaction and preserve company growth in regional tourism areas, budget hotel owners must maintain consistent service delivery, quick staff reaction times, and professional conduct.

5.2 Recommendations for Management

Recommendation	Description
Enhance Staff Responsiveness	Hotel managers should conduct regular customer service training focused on efficient check-in protocols, active listening, and fast complaint resolution.
Maintain Service Reliability	Operators must establish strict daily maintenance and housekeeping checklists to ensure room amenities (AC, hot water, cleanliness) are dependable and error-free.
Build Staff Assurance	Management should train personnel in professional communication, local tourism knowledge, and transparent service handling to instill security and trust among guests.

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Limitation and Future Research	Description
Sampling Scope	This study utilized non-probability purposive sampling with $N = 119$ respondents in Kelantan. Future research should utilize larger samples across multiple Malaysian states to enhance generalizability..
Methodological Scope	While Pearson correlation established linear associations, future research should utilize Multiple Linear Regression or Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to measure relative variable weights

	and potential mediating factors (e.g., perceived price or brand image).
Model Dimension	Future studies could incorporate additional SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles and empathy) as well as online technology dimensions (such as mobile booking convenience).

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