

## **TOWARDS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TOURISTS' EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION**

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**Abstract:** This study evaluated the compatibility between the expectations and satisfaction of international tourists toward the attributes and quality of services offered. Data were obtained from a survey of 420 international tourists visiting Penang, Malaysia. Findings indicated that the highest expectations of visitors were the safety and image or appearance of the destination. The results further demonstrated that the most negative gap between tourists' expectations and satisfaction can be found in the local transportation service, and the most positive gap was observed in cultural uniqueness. By detecting the weak components of the attributes and the quality of service, this study presented implications for local tourism authorities to better understand the essential policies and actions in improving the quality of the tourism industry in the locale.

**Key words:** tourist expectation, tourist satisfaction, image, gap analysis, Malaysia

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is recognized as one of the third largest industry in the world (Lozano-Oyola, 2012). In fact, Southeast Asia drew more than 81 million international tourists in 2011 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). The governments of Southeast Asian countries strive to generate direct and indirect employment opportunities through this industry (Coccosis, 2008; Constantin & Mitrut, 2008). In 2012, Malaysia has experienced an influx of 25

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million tourists. With a GDP contribution of 7% in 2012, the Malaysian tourism sector generated 811,500 jobs (WTTC, 2013), indicating the significant influence of the tourism industry on the economic growth of Malaysia. The most tourist attractions in Malaysia refer to beaches, nature, resorts, beautiful geological landforms/landscapes, unique geological phenomena and geoheritage sites (Adriansyah et al., 2015).

Identifying the needs and demands of a tourist plays a major role in the success of the tourism industry. For the past few years, the quality of products and services offered by tourist destinations has been emphasized as a variable that induces high levels of satisfaction. A tourist's satisfaction is relevant to his/her selection of a future destination (Tian-Cole & Crompton, 2003) and affects their future behaviour (Bigné et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2007). A review of the tourism literature revealed that satisfaction is determined by a balanced average of the gap between tourists' expectation and actual experience (Chi & Qu, 2008; Truong & Foster, 2006; Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

Thus, examining tourists' expectations in achieving standard levels in the quality of service is necessary to ensure their satisfaction. Tourist expectation has been defined as a preconceived perception of travel outcome (Wang et al., 2016). Assessing tourists' expectations and their own experiences can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of a destination based on the beliefs of the former. However, to date, only a few studies have assessed the expectations and experiences of tourists (Wang & Davidson, 2010). Generally, the perceived quality of a service can be measured by comparing the post-trip experiences of tourists against their pre-trip expectations (Shoemaker et al., 2007). Extant literature shows that the gap analysis between expectation and performance is considered a strong instrument with which to discover the critical objects for a destination and to provide an opportunity for decision-making through which authorities can improve levels of satisfaction among tourists (Jain & Gupta, 2004; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Wang & Davidson, 2010).

To bridge the gap in the satisfaction literature, this study aims to examine the differences between the pre-trip expectations and post-trip satisfaction of international tourists in Penang Island, a famous island off the northwest coast of peninsular Malaysia. By empirically examining the behaviours of tourists, this study is likely to provide better understanding of the most influential factors in realizing tourists' satisfaction. Moreover, the findings and implications of this study are expected to shed light on the contributions of different components in improving the satisfaction level of tourists. Research indicated the importance of tourist satisfaction and argued that satisfaction plays an important role in planning marketable tourism products and services (Egresi & Polat, 2016). In particular, Penang Island exudes a special tourism image with the combination of its amazing geological features, rich cultural diversity, and unique history as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. Therefore, the findings of this study are anticipated to encourage concerned authorities to improve the quality of services being offered in the Penang World Heritage Site as one of the main tourism destinations in Penang Island.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A recently conducted research on tourism has focused on the perceptions of tourists toward destination, in consideration of the fact that a traveller's perceptions can influence tourism marketing (Ahmed, 1991). An image of a destination is established by a collection of perceptions regarding a product or service, which are obtained from different sources (Assael, 1984). As a set of positive and negative perceptions toward a destination, destination images describe the real or actual experiences of tourism in a specific destination. Tourists' perception affects the formation of a destination image, and in

return, the perception is affected by specifying the similarities and differences among the facilities, attractions, and service standards of several destinations (Laws, 1995). From another perspective, a concurring destination image is influenced by the experiences of a service, mental reaction of a tourist toward the performance of a service, and distance level among the predicted and experienced services (Yu & Goulden, 2006).

Given the significant role of destination image in determining the destination choice of tourists (Lee et al., 2002), many empirical studies have focused on the relationship between the perception and satisfaction of tourists and destination image at the global level (Bigné et al., 2001; Castro et al., 2007; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Studies have revealed the most effective factors in generating the destination image and the effects of this image on tourist satisfaction, which may persuade tourists to select interesting places to visit and to make frequent trips to these places (Chi & Qu, 2008; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

A positive travel experience is generally associated with a positive image among tourists, and consequently, a more positive image of a particular destination are held by a visitor. Studies have determined the positive effect of destination image on satisfaction (Bigné et al., 2001; Chi & Qu, 2008; Lee, 2009), in which more positive destination images tend to lead to a higher level of satisfaction. As a result, visitors are more likely to revisit that destination. Varvara (2012) stated that the satisfaction of customers can be assessed by the satisfaction levels attained from the consumption or usage of a product or service, respectively. In particular, Varvara (2012) explained that the evaluation of satisfaction can be established within the process of service delivery.

In the context of tourism, a review of the literature revealed that different studies have dealt with various aspects of consumer satisfaction in tourism, travel, hospitality, and recreation (Ali & Howaidee, 2012). However, tourist satisfaction is a psychological concept, which shares the pleasure of tourists with the achievements of their hopes for and expectations from a product or service (WTO, 1985). Research has also indicated the significant association between visitors' perceived value of destination and their satisfaction (Iniesta-Bonillo et al., 2016). Expectations are normally formed based on the performance perceptions on products, services, and experiences.

Studies have suggested that a consumer's future choice of a product or service is directly influenced by his or her past experience (Zeithaml et al., 1993; Sukiman et al., 2013; Anderson & Hair, 1972; Hoffman & Bateson, 1997; Hosany & Martin, 2012; Jin & Song, 2012; Oliver, 1997; Oliver & Burke, 1999; Prakash & Lounsbury, 1984). Research has demonstrated that tourists will value their experiences depending on their expectations, the context, the situation and the resources present (Prebensen & Xie, 2017). Oliver and Swan (1989) described consumer satisfaction as a relationship between the costs of what the tourist spends and the benefits he/she anticipates. A study on tourist expectation formation found that travel motivation, advertising and word-of-mouth recommendations influence travellers' cognitive image and the interactions between cognitive and affective image contribute to form tourists' expectations toward travel destination (Wang et al., 2016).

Measuring tourist satisfaction must be focused on multiple dimensions. Tourists may have varying motivations for visiting particular destinations, and as such, they may also have different satisfaction levels and standards (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The greater the similarities between the outcomes and expectations, the higher their satisfaction would be. In agreement with the latter statement, a wide range of methods and approaches to assess consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction have been employed by scholars. The outcomes of a comparison can be estimated based on the positive and negative disconfirmations, which lead to either a satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Oliver (1997)

reported that positive disconfirmation is obtained when the experiences of tourists (post-trip perception) exceed their expectations (pre-trip perception), whereas negative disconfirmation is formed when their expectations exceed their actual experiences. Only a few studies have evaluated the pre- and post-trip experiences of travellers based on the significant role of tourist satisfaction in choosing destinations (Wang & Davidson, 2010).

In accordance with the results of an empirical research, Weber (1997) concluded that satisfaction level is increased when the post-trip perception of travellers has exceeded their expectation. On the contrary, some studies (e.g., Hui et al., 2007; Martín et al., 2009; Rodríguez del Bosque et al., 2006) have demonstrated that tourists experience a psychological struggle when they perceive a meaningful difference between their expectations and experiences. This condition magnifies or exaggerates the inconsistency of situations (Anderson et al., 1994), in which the destination image can be subsequently influenced and the satisfaction level of tourists can be decreased.

First developed by Richard Oliver (1980), many studies have used expectancy disconfirmation theory (Ali & Howaidee, 2012). This theory has also been examined and tested in various studies (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). Based on this theory, when a consumer purchases a product or services, he or she has pre-purchase expectations about the anticipated performance of these products and services. Subsequently, the outcomes of using the products or services are compared with the initial expectations of consumers prior to usage (Ali & Howaidee, 2012).

The perceived quality of a product or service may influence the post-consumption behaviour of tourists (e.g., Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chi & Qu, 2008; Zhang et al., 2014). Generally, the quality of service is greatly contingent upon the expectation of consumers and is often known as the difference between a customer's experience and his/her expectation of the service. Studies have explained the effects of service expectations in the tourist destination choice (e.g., Kanousi, 2005; Kueh & Voon, 2007). The positive effects have encouraged researchers and scholars to determine the expectation level of tourists in the quality of services prior to their tourism experience (Sukiman et al., 2013), because the actual achievement of performance lives up to the tourists' expectations.

Service quality is an important element of assessing the processes of measuring equality and improving equipment; however, very few studies have focused on service quality in the field of tourism (Ali & Howaidee, 2012). Quality is a considerable concern because it is used to evaluate the productivity of a specific product or service in tourism marketing and tourism service sector (Godbey, 1997). Moreover, the quality of tourism service influences the destination image, which subsequently affects both the expected and perceived qualities (Prabhakaran et al., 2008).

The effects of the quality of services have led scholars and researchers to focus on the components of the overall tourism product. Middleton and Clarke (2012), for example, classified the quality of tourism products in a destination into five major elements, namely, attractions, facilities and services, accessibility, image, and price. Considering the significant effect of confirmation of expectation on tourist satisfaction, the gap analysis is employed to assess the differences between expectations and experiences in the field of tourism. The findings of this analysis can be used to recognize poor quality destinations or products (Wang & Davidson, 2010). Despite numerous studies on the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of tourists, the gap between the expectations and satisfactions of travellers has rarely been assayed, particularly in Malaysia. Earlier studies in other contexts can help enhance our understanding of tourists' expectations. These studies, however, cannot be directly applied to the context of Malaysia, hence the need to conduct this study.

## **CONCEPTUAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT**

Many previous works have attempted to determine the factors that influence the satisfaction of tourists. A great deal of attention has been given to the importance of understanding and maintaining consumer satisfaction across various industries. This study aims to advance research on consumer satisfaction in the context of tourism. Gauging the satisfaction of visitors lies within the general area of consumer satisfaction. In the marketing literature of consumer satisfaction, the notion of satisfaction can be measured by the difference between a consumer's expectation of a service and the actual performance of a service. Ryan (1995, p. 41) stated that "if tourist satisfaction is seen as the congruence of need and performance, then dissatisfaction can be perceived as the gap between expectation and experience".

Another research suggested that analysing the gap between expectation and experience is the dominant tradition used in understanding consumer satisfaction (Pearce, 2005), and is known as expectancy or confirmation /disconfirmation theory. This theory suggests that the consumer is deemed satisfied if performance exceeds expectations, neutral if performance equals expectations, and dissatisfied if performance falls short of expectations (Oliver, 1980, 1997). This proposition implies that a gap analysis must be performed to explore the areas that require improvements, in order to enhance tourist satisfaction and to achieve sustainable tourism. Hence, thoroughly understanding the tourists' expectations can lead to enhanced quality of services offered in destinations, thereby improving the overall satisfaction of travellers. Based on the above discussions, the following research questions are drawn:

-is there any difference between the pre-trip expectations and post-trip satisfaction of international tourists in Penang Island?

## **MEASURES**

### **The study context**

The survey was conducted in Malaysia, in which the tourism industry has witnessed continuous growth over the past few decades. The required data were collected by administering a survey to international tourists visiting Penang Island from October to December 2013. Penang Island, a considerably famous island tourism destination in Malaysia, is the third most common tourist spot in the country and is located at the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

This turtle-shaped island is renowned for its beaches, elegant colonial architecture, rich variety of wildlife, spicy cuisine, and multi-cultural population. These qualities shape the unique tourism image of the island. Penang has numerous well-preserved heritage buildings; thus, its capital city (George Town) has been listed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. Despite being the second smallest state in Malaysia, Penang is a thriving tourist destination. In fact, the hotels in the island accommodated 3,096,907 foreigners in 2012. These hotels are considered the third largest following the hotels offered in Kuala Lumpur and Pahang. This figure accounts for almost 12% of the total number of foreigners who stayed in hotels in Malaysia.

The sampling areas were located at sites that have been identified to attract island tourists. Four trained interviewers, who were divided into two groups, approached adult tourists over the age of 18 years. Respondents were randomly selected by using a systematic sampling method as they departed via the selected locations. The sample consisted of 420 leisure tourists interviewed during their visit to Penang. During the interview survey, leisure trips were differentiated from trips made to visit friends, relatives, or other purposes. All the 420 respondents completed the questionnaires. The

sample comprised 52% male, 63% were aged between 18 and 35, and 46% were single. Finally, majority of the respondents (47%) were college educated and 68% stated that they were on their first trip experience to Penang. The majority of the respondents were Chinese (12%), followed by Australian (10%) and Singaporean (6%).

### Research instrument

A self-administered three-page structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The survey instruments, which were related to all constructs in the proposed model, were included in the questionnaire. The questions measured the expectations and satisfactions of tourists toward the destination. In particular, the tourists' expectations were gauged in terms of 12 main areas, namely, the friendliness of the local people, ease of local communication, destination image, cultural uniqueness, variety of tourist attractions, value for money, safety, ease of access, availability of information, quality of services, transportation, and cleanliness. These items were adapted based on the work of Mathieson and Wall, 1982 and Song et al., 2012.

The scores for expectation items were based on a five-point Likert-scale format ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important). Another five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent) was also used to measure the experiences of tourists. The reliability of all constructs was assessed and confirmed because the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs were higher than the recommended value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006). The final set of questions asked the respondents about their demographic information, and travel behaviour. In particular, the respondents were asked about the nature of their visit to Penang through the following items: (1) how many times have they visited Penang, (2) who they were visiting with, (3) reasons for visiting Penang, and (4) how did they find Penang as a destination.

## RESULTS

A paired *t*-test was conducted to examine whether a gap existed between the expectations and satisfaction of destination facilities and services. The *t*-test has been applied to determine the significant difference between tourists' expectations and experiences as suggested by Chaudhary, 2000; Hui et al., 2007 and Johann, 2014. The purpose of the test is to determine whether there is statistical evidence that the mean difference between paired observations on a particular outcome (i.e. expectations vs experiences) is significantly different from zero.

**Table 1.** Paired *t*-test on attraction attributes and services

Attributes	Expectations (pre-trip)	Experiences (post-trip)	Gap	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Destination image	3.946	3.769	-.177	-3.505	.001***
Cultural uniqueness	3.382	3.774	.392	6.093	.000***
Variety of tourism attractions	3.863	3.818	-.045	-.865	.388
Value for money of retail goods	3.682	3.898	.216	3.556	.000***
Safety and security	3.920	3.764	-.156	-2.862	.004***
Ease of access to attractions	3.879	3.914	.036	.650	.516
Friendliness	3.381	3.647	.266	-1.839	.067*
Availability of information	3.381	3.381	.000	4.028	.000***
Ease of communication	3.686	3.383	-.303	-4.912	.000***
Quality of accommodation services	3.624	3.396	-.228	-3.902	.000***
Local transport services	3.895	3.392	-.503	-8.901	.000***
Cleanliness	3.795	3.721	-.074	-1.349	.178

Note \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$  (2-tailed)

Table 1 shows that in nine of 12 attributes, the gap between the expectations and experiences was statistically significant. The largest positive gap (positive disconfirmation) between the expectations and experiences came from 'cultural uniqueness', followed by 'availability of information', and 'value for money of retail goods'. Meanwhile, 'local transport services', 'ease of communication', 'quality of accommodation services', 'destination image', 'safety and security', and 'friendliness of the local people' had a negative gap between the higher levels of importance and lower levels of satisfaction (negative disconfirmation). However, no significant mean differences were observed between the expectations and experiences of 'variety of tourism attractions', 'ease of access to attractions', and 'cleanliness', for which the levels of satisfaction were relatively high (over a three on average from a five-point scale for all items).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study aimed to examine the compatibility between the expectations and satisfactions of international tourists based on the attributes and quality of services offered in Penang Island. The attributes and services were classified in terms of 12 main areas, as shown in Table 1. Data were randomly collected from the international tourists visiting the tourist attractions in Penang during the period of October to December 2013. A gap analysis was conducted to address the research objective.

The results of the gap analysis demonstrate the differences between the pre-trip perception and post-trip experiences of tourists in terms of the quality of products and services. The analysis indicates that the tourists are not satisfied with several attributes and the quality of some services. In particular, the tourists believe that their perceived values, which are related to a number of attributes in the destination, are less than their expectations. The negative gap values also demonstrate that the satisfaction of tourists is less than their expectations. Moreover, there are positive difference values for cultural uniqueness, price of retail goods, access to attractions, and availability of information because these aspects are all higher than what the tourists have expected from their trips. Thus, the local tourism authorities must consider these positive attributes as valuable investment opportunities through which they can enhance the local economy of Penang.

Meanwhile, the tourism industry also faces some weaknesses in terms of destination image, variety of tourism attractions, safety and security, ease of communication, cleanliness, and quality of services. These aspects play a significant role in the development of the tourism industry. Hence, Malaysian authorities must work on improving the quality of services offered within the Penang heritage zone. Evidence confirms that there is an underperformance in the tourism industry in the study context. However, earlier studies also revealed that Malaysia underperforms in some tourism attributes, including cleanliness, usage among local people, and safety (Sohail et al., 2007; Sukiman et al., 2013; Tang, 2011).

The results of this study also indicate a negative gap for perceived destination image, suggesting that the tourists' expectations are greater than their real actual experiences in the destination. Hence, the tourists' pre-trip perception of Penang is superior to the real image, which is formed by personal experiences. One possible explanation is that the Penang heritage area has been advertised and promoted by media sources, magazines and online sources, such that the induced image has formed greater representation than an organic image for those who decide to visit Penang. The negative difference value for Penang attractions could be due to the induced image, which has been emphasized by advertisers and promoters. Therefore, the tourism-related advertising should present a more realistic image of Penang as a tourist destination. The

destination image remarkably affects the satisfaction of tourists and may even influence their selection of a destination or of other factors related to their visit (Chi & Qu, 2008). Weaver and Lawton (2007) suggested that a positive destination image may serve as a pull-factor for the destination that can increase the loyalty of tourists.

By considering the significant influence of a positive image on the flourishing tourism industry, local tourism authorities must focus on initiating effective actions to ensure that the tourists' expectations are met. Moreover, to develop effective tourism marketing, one must consider the base image held by tourists before the trip to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Thus, promotional advertising strategies must be strictly monitored by authorities to create realistic and sensible presentations of the destination image through tourism-related advertising, promotional activities, and public relations services.

Our results reveal that safety and security are areas that are most in need of improvement, which is in line with a study conducted in an Indonesian context (Chaudhary, 2000). While migration and poverty in urban areas have increased crime rates in developing countries, international tourists can be considered one of the most appropriate targets for offenders operating in tourist destinations. Safety and security are considered major challenges for the development of the tourism industry. Therefore, it is particularly crucial that they be resolved to ensure safer environments in Penang and other tourist spots in Malaysia. In terms of ease of communication, which is another tourist dissatisfaction element, could be attributed to the non-English speaking background of tourists, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai visitors, who were surveyed in this research. Therefore, this study suggests that skilled experts with the ability to speak and understand other languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai, must be employed in the tourism sector.

The results of this study also reveal that the tourists are not satisfied with the friendliness of the people in the area. Local authorities and service suppliers, including public transportation, shopping complexes, hotels, tourists companies, travel agents and tourist information, must improve their social skills and friendliness to create a more hospitable environment and increase the quality of service in the Penang tourist zone. The last tourist dissatisfaction element is related to the quality of services, including accommodation, public transportation, and cleanliness.

The real experiences of tourists demonstrate inadequate quality of services and major defects in public services and facilities at the Penang heritage area. Thus, apart from ensuring the required supervision in all tourist destinations, maintaining and improving the quality of services in public areas, public transportation facilities, and environment cleanliness should also be prioritized. The success of the tourism industry is realized when authorities know and understand the tourists' expectations. This study reports considerable findings regarding the empirical implications for the tourism industry in Penang heritage area, listed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. The results of this study may contribute to the improvement of the current marketing strategies for tourist destinations in Malaysia.

### **Recommendations for future research**

We identified consistent empirical evidence. However, some limitations and suggestions for future research are worth noting. First, this study did not consider ethnic diversity among the study respondents. Considering that tourists from many different nations visit the study area, future research must focus on examining the measurement invariance both between and within different ethnic groups because of the unique characteristics of the study sample. This condition must be considered so



that we can understand if tourists with different ethnic backgrounds have varied expectations and experiences. Second, in addition to the attributes of a destination, several other factors could affect the destination image.

Substantial research has indicated the importance of individual factors and the interactions among structural factors (e.g., age and income level) in explaining the destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Therefore, future studies must address and consider the moderating effect of age and income level on the formation of destination image and on the satisfaction of tourists. The last limitation of this study is the scope, which is restricted only to tourists visiting one island in Malaysia. The expectations and satisfactions of tourists may definitely not be generalized to all other areas in Malaysia or destinations in other countries, because of exclusive social characteristics, cultural textures, and environmental structures in each destination.

In sum, this study provided a significant contribution to the marketing literature, particularly to the tourism literature, by presenting information that can help local tourism authorities gain a better understanding of the weaknesses and strengths of the attributes of destinations in Penang Island, in which further actions and effective policies must be implemented.

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