The Roles of Socio-Economic Characteristics in Satisfying Repeat *Umrah* Visitors

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to analyze the roles of socio-economic characteristics in satisfying repeat *umrah* visitors' in Malaysia. The study distributed 2,020 survey questionnaires at various locations in Malaysia during January-May 2011 of which 62.8% are repeat visitors. The findings indicate that the respondents are mostly married males aged between 26-55 years old. Most of them are public sector employees with an income bracket ranging from USD909 to USD3,030. Majority of the respondents planned at least six months ahead of the trip and spend their money mostly on local transportations, food and beverages and shopping activities while performing *umrah*. In order to encourage repeat visitations, the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia and Department of *Waqaf, Zakat* and *Hajj* (JAWHAR) should develop long-term relationship with the visitors. Integrated promotional efforts should be organized involving the cooperation between Malaysia tourism development and travel package operators, airlines and all agencies concerned, especially with authorities in Saudi Arabia. Future research should investigate service gap and satisfaction on the quality of services from the perspective of tour operators to complement existing findings.

Key words: Socio-economic characteristics · Satisfaction · Repeat *umrah* visitors

INTRODUCTION

Tourism can be used as a means to attain the objective of economic diversification and growth. Any increase in tourism income is expected to lead to a rise in real wages and hence consumption in the host country. Therefore, income from tourism must be linked with other economic sectors, depending on the distribution of tourists' spending. The patterns of tourists spending and their duration of stay in a particular country are important for understanding the economic impact of tourism [1].

Repeat visitors represent the backbone of tourism industry. The literature on foreign tourists showed that there is greater impact of repeat visitors on the well being of the destination areas. The repeat visitation represents an attractive and cost-effective market segment for most destinations through their familiarity of the destination and the stable income source they provide. The

concentration on repeat visitation would increases revenues as well as reduces costs with the lessened reliance on continually catching the attention of new visitors. People's preferences for travel experiences are now more diversified and their travel types and motivations have become more specific to date.

The objective of the paper is to examine the roles of socio-economic characteristics in satisfying repeat *umrah* visitors' in order to capture reasons for repeat visitations. The paper also measures the service gap and satisfaction on the quality of services provided by tour operators.

Literature Review
***Umrah* and Tourism:** Repeat visitors are defined as those who have performed *umrah* more than once. There are some studies proving the greater impact of repeat visitors on the well being of destination areas. Tak-Kee and Wan [2] showed that repeat visitation represents an attractive

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and cost-effective market segment for most destinations. Oppermann [3] pointed out that repeat visitors signify a stabilizing influence for most destinations through their familiarity of the destination and the stable income source they provide. Gyte and Phelps [4] mentioned that concentration on repeat visitation would increases revenues as well as reduce costs due to lesser reliance on continually catching the attention of new visitors. Reid and Reid [5] recognized that repeat visitors could also serve as informal information channels to link networks of prospective travelers to a destination through word-of-mouth communication.

Abdul Rashid *et al.* [6] carried out an impact analysis study on tourism industry based on questionnaire method in 1991. They evaluated the impact of tourist expenditures on each of the gross output, employment and imports. Their results highlighted a number of tourism strategic sectors and at the same time focus on other sector, which benefit from tourist expenditure through indirect and induced income and employment generated. Bashir and Abdul Rashid [7] analyzed the economic impacts of changing tourist profile in Malaysia between 2001 and 2002. They have shown in their results that tourism activities in Malaysia appear to be favorable not only to the external account but also in generating local value-added and tax revenue.

According to economic experts in Makkah, *hajj* and *umrah* industry will generate a return of more than RM81 billion (USD1=RM3.30) in the future [8]. Last year's statistics on the inbound tourists to Saudi Arabia recorded the following statistics: almost half (47.1%) of the total numbers of the inbound tourism trips were for religious purposes, followed by visiting friends and relatives (20.8%) and business visits (14.7%). The inbound visitors spent an estimated RM24.4 billion, of which RM23.3 billion was spent on tourist trips and RM571.5 million on day trips, excluding the cost of international transportation which amounted to RM2.2 billion. During the visit, expenditure for religious purposes accounted for about 65% of the total expenditure, followed by business visits (17.6%) and visiting friends and relatives (8.6%) [9].

The cost of *umrah* performance in Malaysia is approximately RM488.8 million annually [10]. This is due, among others, to repeat *umrah* travelers among Malaysians in recent years. Tourism in Malaysia contributes about 7% of the country's gross domestic product. The tourist industry employs at least half a million people, or about 5% of the country's workforce. The money generated from the rise in tourism plays a role in reducing the country's deficit.

Service Gap and Satisfaction of Repeat Visitors: The quality of tour operators' plays an important attribute for the tourist market either on the supply side, because increases their services competitiveness, or on the demand side, characterized by pilgrims more demanding and well informed. The Department of *Waqaf*, *Zakat* and *Hajj* (JAWHAR) as a government body in Malaysia, is fully in charge to delineate legislative system which emphasizes the necessity to provide high quality of services for *hajj* and *umrah* related activities. It is important for *umrah* tour operators to be attentive to their consumers' needs and, at the same time, to correct the negative effects arising by asymmetric information which the tourists most of the time cannot control.

Quality guarantees promised by tour operators that offer *umrah* packages in order to be recognized in the market, does not come with certification system or ratings as their trademarks. However, it is true that, also without guarantees, it is possible to find another important quality dimension: the perceived quality. Pilgrims and tour operators have their idea of quality that is not measurable. However, it can be identified judging on the quality expressed by the operators of a package, previous experience with them or other respective operators or through words of mouth. Price is usually the first priority in identifying the best operator to be chosen.

Asero and Patti [11] proposed that through positive tourists' experiences, they could identify the good quality and higher satisfaction of goods and services. There is also strong link between destination image and satisfaction to influence repeat visitation [12] and tendency to be loyal with the same service provider [13]. According to Zeithaml and Bitner [14], "satisfaction is the consumer fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment". It has an application of the SERVQUAL model been suggested that satisfaction is a broader concept than service quality. It includes both cognitive and affective evaluations, while service quality evaluations are mainly a cognitive procedure. A number of studies in the services marketing literature have reported that these two constructs are strongly related.

This study reports an application of the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman *et al.* [15, 16, 17, 18] in the tourism industry particularly *umrah*. The SERVQUAL model is a diagnostic tool that includes 22 items to appraise five key service factors: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (RATER). The five-dimensional format of SERVQUAL

allows researchers to assess the level of service quality along each dimension. The purpose of this model is to help identify areas of weaknesses and strengths in the quality of service a company delivers. This study contributes to the literature since there have been limited attempts to investigate the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in the *umrah* tourism industry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling Frame: The study used purpose sampling based on Sekaran [19]. The respondents are repeat visitors who have performed *umrah* over the period 2004-2009. The study also include tour operators that offer *umrah* packages.

Survey Instrument: For the study, survey on expectations and perceptions of *umrah* repeat travelers was conducted in two phases using open ended (Phase 1) and close-ended (Phase 2) questionnaires which are further explained below.

Phase 1: This study employed the Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT) which uses open-ended questionnaires based on the work of Johns and Lee-Ross [20, 21]. The respondents were asked the following questions: "The things I expected from this tour operator"; "The things I like best about the services provided by this tour operator"; and "The things I like least about the services provided by this tour operator".

The researchers conducted a survey during mid 2010 to 1,200 repeat *umrah* travelers residing around Klang Valley. Out of this, 75% (900 questionnaires) are usable to be used to construct the second round of the questionnaire.

Phase 2: The survey instrument was designed according to existing literature in service quality (including expectations and perceptions of repeat *umrah* travelers) and *umrah* management areas as well as the findings from Phase 1. The focus of the survey is on the following dimensions: responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy and reliability. The answers was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". In addition, data on socio-economic characteristics of the respondents was gathered in order to construct the profile of repeat *umrah* travelers.

The study distributed 2,020 survey questionnaires in January-May 2011 of which 83% (1,679 respondents) are repeat visitors. The survey instrument was modelled after the MTM questionnaires. The instrument items,

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha for RATER Dimension

Item	Expectation	Perception
Assurance	0.878	0.848
Responsiveness	0.906	0.756
Reliability	0.902	0.757
Empathy	0.880	0.843
Tangibles	0.890	0.926

format and procedures were the same except for some minor adjustments to suit *umrah* visitors. The questionnaire included 33 questions on expectations and 33 questions on perceptions towards the services provided by tour operators; 18 questions on traveling patterns and 10 questions on socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. Demographic information solicited includes age, gender, marital status, current address, occupation sector, highest education level, educational stream and household income.

The survey instrument was adapted based on the established service quality dimensions (SERVQUAL) and the attitudinal scale questions adapted from Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's concept to measure perceptions and satisfaction. The instrument was subjected to peer-review evaluations and pilot testing and subsequently improved based on the feedback received. Table 1 represents the results of reliability analysis of each dimension pertaining to service quality of tour operators. All dimensions registered a Cronbach Alpha of above 0.70.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that in general, those aged 46-55 year-old is the highest age group (31%), following by 36-45 year-old age group (29%). Both groups are dominated by female. Married status led in all age categories. Typically, the respondents go to perform *umrah* in large groups organized by specialty travel agencies such as Lembaga Tabung Haji (LTH). A typical *umrah* package tour costs around RM5,000. Most of the packages are led by professional guides called *mutawwif*.

The main purposes of the visits were mainly religious activities, apart of their leisure activities such as visit sacred and historical locations, shopping and carry out their business. Repeat *umrah* visitors mostly traveled with their spouses for the second time and brought children along with their spouses for the third visit. The respondents were also asked reasons for repeat *umrah* visitations. The top four answers, arranged from highest to lowest, were religious purposes, preparation to
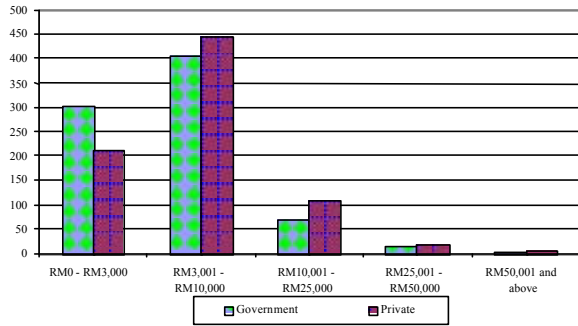
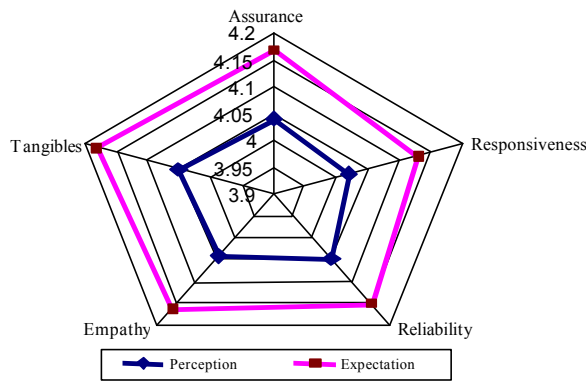Fig. 1: Crosstabulation for household income and employment sector

Fig. 2: Differences between perception and expectation of services provided
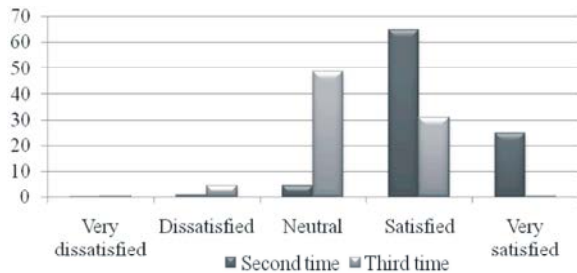

Fig. 3: Comparison of repeat *umrah* travelers' satisfaction

perform *hajj*, traveled with family and sponsored by employer, respectively. Hence, faith-based tourism motivates repeat visitations.

Most of the repeat visitors were accompanied by their spouses (42%) and children (25.4%). Most of them stayed at the hotel provided by their appointed tour operators. The duration of stay was within one to three weeks. The frequently used mode of transportation is air using Malaysian Airline System (MAS) services, followed by LTH (34.24%) and private travelling agencies (59%).

Meanwhile, Figure 1 indicates that most of the repeat *umrah* visitors are public sector employees with an income bracket ranging from RM3,001 to RM10,000.

A total of 52% of the respondents set aside savings in the amount of RM1 to RM500 every month to carry out their intention.

All participating *umrah* travelers expected and perceived tangibles as the most important aspects to be highlighted followed by assurance, empathy, reliability and responsiveness dimension as shown in Figure 2. The differences show that the greatest mismatch arises in the assurance and tangibles dimensions, with empathy as a close second. Some of the respondents said they were dissatisfied with the tour operators. However, the differences between expectation and perception are quite small in every dimension. Nonetheless, the existences of the gaps indicate that there are rooms for improvements in the quality of services provided by the tour operators.

On the other hand, it is estimated that 87.2% of the repeat visitors are satisfied with the services provided. The total of 83.2% of the respondents mentioned that they will utilize the services of the same tour operators for their next *umrah* trip, the dissatisfactions notwithstanding. Comparing the level of satisfaction between the second and third *umrah* visitors, they were more satisfied with the quality of service of the tour operators during the second time visit compared to the latter, as illustrated in Figure 3. This might indicate increase level of expectation due to familiarity with the destination visits.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the repeat *umrah* visitors are mostly males, aged 26-55 year old and public sector employees earning between RM3,001 to RM10,000 per month. In general, they are satisfied with services provided by the tour operators. However, the findings indicate that there are gaps in the five RATER dimensions, the highest is tangibles aspect followed by assurance. The findings imply that policy makers and organizations involved in *umrah* industry should pay specific attention to the tangibles aspect such as process and facilities that are related to *umrah*. For the assurance aspect, the emphasis should be on service knowledge in *umrah* practices. In order to encourage repeat visitation, the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia and JAWHAR should develop long-term relationships with the repeat visitors. Integrated promotional efforts should be organized involving the cooperation between Malaysia tourism development and travel package operators, airlines and all agencies concerned, especially with authorities in Saudi Arabia. Future research should investigate service

gap and satisfaction on the quality of services from the perspective of tour operators to complement existing findings.

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