Understanding Service Experience: A Critical Incident Technique Approach

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ABSTRACT

Service experience encompass positive or negatives experiences, whilst also differs between individuals while quality begins with the design of the service delivery system and thus being assessed by the customers during the service delivery process. Limited empirical study had been done in the identification of hotel failures while there is also less understanding on the attribution of these failures. Current information and data available are not sufficient and very minimal in the identification of the current and potential hotel failures. As service experience is a subjective matter and differs between individuals, a qualitative stance is deemed appropriate to be applied. In order to obtain this, a technique known as the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was utilized to investigate the perception of Langkawi resort hotel guests towards their service experiences during their stay in Langkawi, giving particular attention on negative experiences encountered. CIT was deemed suitable to be employed by having customers convey their personal experiences in their own words regarding their recent hotel stay, which are memorable to them either positively or negatively. CIT consists of a specifically defined procedure for collecting important observations of past events, which will then be classified into natural groupings between the events. This paper will highlight an analytical framework of CIT as forwarded by Gilbert and Lockwood (1999) which proposes three major stages of CIT application. These three stages are then broken down into six steps in constructing an explanatory framework of the data collected. By applying CIT, this paper aims to identify the negative experiences that guests generally encounter during their stay in Langkawi resort hotels. The application of CIT has led to the classification of negative incidents into categories and sub-categories. It also aims to explore who is attributable in influencing the negative incidents encountered. This study is considered significant to provide findings which can assist in the identification of common failures that guests generally encounter while staying in hotels in Langkawi whilst also identifying what attributes to these failures. Hence corrective efforts can be adjusted to improve resort hotel's service experience.

Keywords: Service experience, critical incident technique, resort guests, attribution

INTRODUCTION

Quality begins with the design of the service delivery system and thus being assessed by the customers during the service delivery process. This assessment, which is also regarded as the service experience, usually differs from one individual to another depending on the service consumption situation. Service experience is defined as a total functional and emotional value of a consumed service (Sandstorm, Edvardsson & Kristensson, 2008). According to Berry, Wall & Carbone (2006), a service experience is created through a combination of functional, mechanic and humanic clues, which in turn influences both rational and emotional

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ISSN: 2223-9944, e**ISSN: 2223-9553**
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perceptions of service quality. In addition, service experience can either encompass any positive or negative experiences that individuals encounter.

In understanding service experience, one would want to emphasis either positive or negative experiences. Agreeably, positive experience can lead to satisfaction and positive behavioural intention however, negative experience almost always brings complaints, frustrations, disgruntled guests, and disloyal customers to name a few. Appreciation of service experience will help alleviate problems to re-occur. While positive experience almost always brings positive outcomes, the other side of the coin needs further exploration.

This research is a small part of a bigger research with the main aim to identify and understand resort hotel guests' service experience during their recent stay in resort hotels around Langkawi Island. With the identification and acknowledgment of these experiences, these suppliers can better improve their services and minimize frictions leading to unsatisfactory encounters hence creating a more positive service experience. Although similar topic on service problems was being executed by past researchers, there had been minimal attempt on investigating this phenomenon in the resort hotel context. This phenomenon needs to be researched as a foundation of recognizing the importance of quality hereafter assisting resort hotels operations in delivering quality service at all times.

This paper aims to highlight the application of Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as one of the qualitative methods which can be applied to extract guests' experiences during their stay in resorts in Langkawi Island. Bitner et al., (1990) suggested that CIT takes on the stories that people have told and then they applied content analysis of the stories in the data analysis stage of the procedure. Various scholars have applied CIT in identifying service experiences in past researches. Despite the wide usage of this technique in various fields, research utilising this technique is scarce in focusing on problems that customers encounter in the resort hotel context and a detailed analysis of the attribution of these problems cannot be found in the academic literature. The usage of CIT has also adds to knowledge by having successfully extracted the critical incidents that customers encountered during their stay as not many customers wanted to share their experiences as this is regarded as rather personal.

In order to answer the research aims, two objectives are forwarded. Caution should be emphasised here that although this research only focused on two objectives and appears to be somewhat intuitive, these objectives are very specific and fundamental in acknowledging problems that resort customers encounter as a basis of resort operations improvements. This is especially critical as there has been minimal research in the academic field focusing in this context.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the paper are as below:

1. To identify what are the service problems that resort hotel guests commonly encounter during their stay

2. To explore what are the factors that resort hotel guests attribute to influence their perception in dealing with service problems

A resort is specifically focused as the context of the study due to the nature of the resort being a pleasure vacation destination which is leisure dominant where guests in general have a longer length of stay as compared to the normal business trip. In addition, resorts offer various types of services and recreation facilities in comparison to a standard, commercial hotel. Further, the resort hotel context provides a feasible avenue for investigating the potentiality of service failures to happen as it is highly dependent on the variability of its

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ISSN: 2223-9944, e**ISSN: 2223-9553**
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various processes and service offerings, and also due to human input is involved in the service delivery. It is foreseen that guests will experience different types of services during their duration of stay which might potentially affect their tolerance level.

To the author's knowledge, this is the first attempt to ascertain problems that resort hotel customers encounter. This might be different in terms of operations from other lodging establishments due to the nature of resorts being having longer stay duration, while also possessing special characteristics compared to traditional lodging entities. Thus, the outcome will add to the under-researched academic area of problems relating to service experience so that operators better understand ways to improve service operations theoretically and practically.

CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE (CIT)

There are many ways of collecting data for performing research in the hospitality industry with many researchers in this area are using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data. The chosen method need to be suited with what the researchers need to find out and what kind of study they perform. Limited empirical study had been done in the identification of failures in Langkawi hotels while there is also less understanding on the attribution of these failures. Current information and data available are not sufficient and very minimal in the identification of the current and potential failures in Langkawi hotels. As service experience is a subjective matter and differs between individuals, a qualitative stance is deemed appropriate to be applied.

As respondents need to explain and express their experiences regarding their service encounters, Critical Incident Technique (CIT) method was identified as an appropriate means to discover the objective. CIT, a qualitative technique first developed by Flanagan (1954), looks at specific incident that either contributes or detracts from an overall service experience by asking what are the memorable positive or negative service incident that had an effect on individual's overall experience.

CIT was deemed suitable to be employed for data collection due to the advantages of this method by having guests telling their personal experiences in their own words of their own experience regarding their recent resort hotel stay which are memorable to them either positively or negatively. Looking back, CIT was initially developed by Flanagan in collaboration with other colleagues to establish procedures for the selection and classifications of air crew in the United States Army Air Force during World War II. Since then, CIT has been extensively applied in various disciplines including management and human resources (White and Locke, 1981; Spencer, 1983; Latham and Shaari, 1980; 1984; Pursell et al., 1980). CIT has also been used in areas of hospitality (Bitner et al., 1990; 1994; Chung and Hoffman, 1998; Callan, 1998; Kivela and Chu, 2001; Lockwood and Deng, 2004; Tronvoll, 2011; Roa and Wong, 2012), tourism (Gilbert and Morris, 1995; Swanson and Hsu, 2009' Chen & Hsu, 2012); banking (Johnston, 1995), medicine (Lewis and Tully, 2009; Taylor, Bradbury-Jones, Kroll & Duncan, 2013), psychology (Neal, Godley, Kirkpatrick, Dewsnap, Joung, & Hesketh, 2006; Caldwell & Vera, 2012; Wong, Wong & Ishiyama, 2013).

Gilbert and Lockwood (1999) and Edvardsson (1992) stated that a critical incident is an event that can be described in detail and that deviates significantly, either positively or negatively from what the guests expects or considers normal in a service encounter and memorable to oneself. This is also being supported by Chung and Hoffmann (1998). They further added that CIT consists of a specifically defined procedure for collecting important observations of past events which then will be classified into natural groupings between the events. Bitner et

al., (1990) suggested that CIT takes on the stories that people have told and then applied content analysis of the stories in the data analysis stage of the procedure.

Lockwood (1994) is in the contention that an 'incident' would be any service encounter where guests interact directly with the service operations including service personnel, physical facilities and other tangible and intangible elements at any time. This study will follow Lockwood's (1994) description of 'incident' while bearing the term 'critical' as something that deviates significantly from what customer's expect (Gilbert and Lockwood, 1999; Edvardsson, 1992).

There had been several studies in applying CIT which attempted to look into satisfactory and dissatisfactory factors or as means of isolating positive and negative events (Bitner et al., 1990; 1994; Lockwood, 1994; Johnston, 1995; Bell et al., Gilbert and Lockwood, 1997). On the other hand, Edvardsson (1992) and Chung and Hoffman (1998) who applied CIT in their studies chose to look at negative factors only. As the purpose of this study is about identifying service problems encountered in a resort hotel stay, only negative incidents were collected. According to Edwardsson (1992), negative incidents are encounters which do not proceed normally but create friction, irritation and dissatisfaction.

It is accepted that there are three major stages to carry out CIT analysis (Gilbert and Lockwood, 1999). These stages are then broken down into six steps. Figure 1 below shows the analytical framework concerning the steps involved.
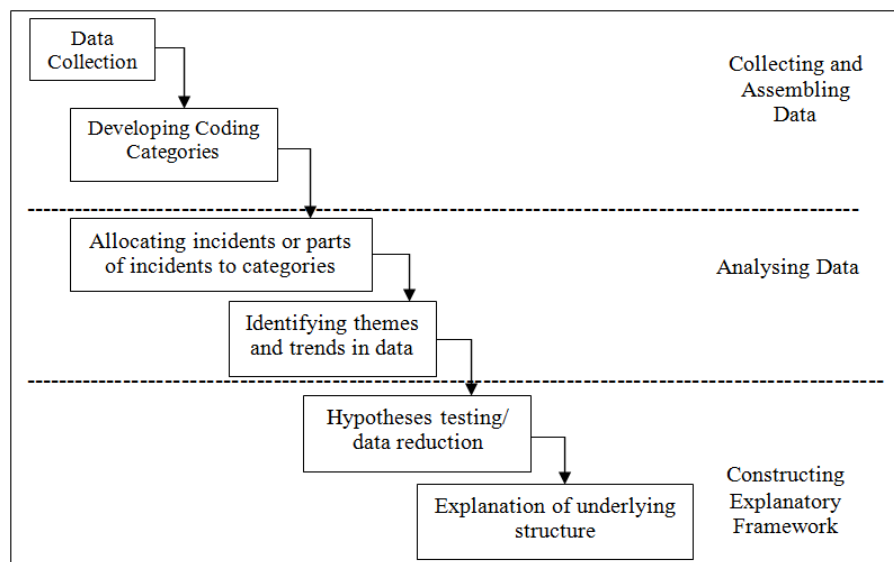

Figure 1. Analytical framework in conducting CIT

As can be seen in the above figure, the three major stages are firstly, collecting and assembling data, secondly analysing data and lastly constructing explanatory framework. The six steps are the process of data collection, developing coding categories, allocating incidents or parts of incidents to categories, identifying themes and trends in data, hypotheses testing or data reduction and the explanation of underlying structure.

There are several ways of collecting incidents through the CIT (Lockwood, 1994). Flanagan (1954) advocated four ways of obtaining data – individual interview, group interviews, questionnaire and record forms. Lockwood (1994) and Gilbert and Lockwood (1999) is in the agreement with Flanagan with personal and group interview whilst suggesting a self-completion form which is given to selected participants to be completed and returned. Personal interviewing method is where one-to-one interview can be conducted to elicit stories

of incidents. Group interviews can also be considered where a group of people be brought together and split into pairs where they then take turn in asking the incidents. Among the methods listed, a personal interview is regarded as the most rewarding in terms of clarification of information whilst eliciting additional information with little ambiguity (Lockwood, 1994). For the purpose of this study, a personal interview approach was deemed suitable to be adapted. This is due to having advantages in terms of eliciting greater detail in gathering the data and the researcher would simplify and validate the answer give at the point of time.

Despite the advantages of applying CIT in various studies, there had also been some criticism regarding the technique. Among the popular issues are the reliability and validity aspects of the categories developed. According to Gilbert and Lockwood (1999), this is due to the ambiguity of word meanings, category labels and coding rules in a particular study. However, past studies had concluded that data collected in CIT technique are both reliable and valid (Andersson and Nilsson, 1964; Ronan and Latham, 1974; White and Locke, 1981).

Specific incidents covering problems that guest encounter in a resort hotel stay has been limitedly addressed, whilst this study is conducted. Customer's acceptability regarding service problems they encounter can be a turning point leading to the failure acknowledgement that is the identification of unacceptable service events. By this, the resort could be aware of possible failures and ammend policies to identify all areas that can be improved and make customer's experience better in the future.

THE STUDY DESIGN

With reference to the analytical framework concerning the steps taken to conduct the CIT analysis, Figure 2 highlights the design of the study stage.
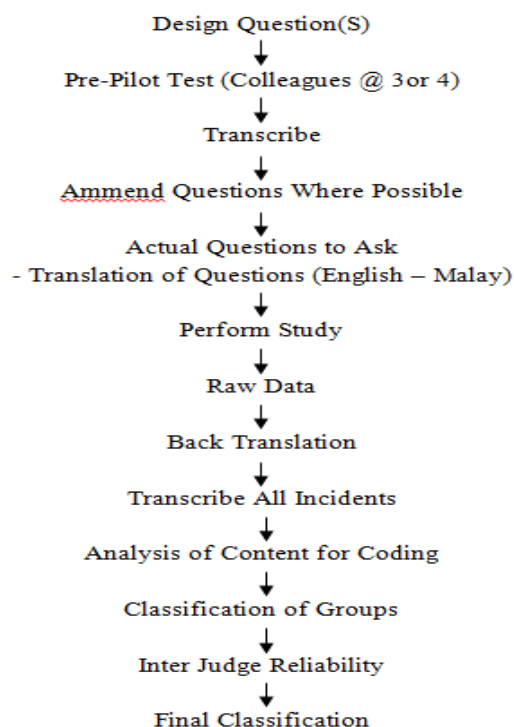

Figure 2. The Study Design

DATA COLLECTION

The data collection was conducted in a popular tourist destination island in a tropical climate surrounded by lush rainforests and pristine beaches in Malaysia during August 2011. For the purpose of this study and the advantages it holds, personal interview is deemed suitable to be adapted. As mentioned this method bears greater detail in collecting data and the researcher would simplify and validate the answer given at the point of time (Lockwood, 1994).

In addition, by having a one to one interview, the researcher has the opportunity to ask follow up questions to clarify any unclear points besides eliciting additional information with little ambiguity. It also provides the opportunity to probe and extract the required information (Callan, 1998). Andersson and Nilsson (1964) and Edvardsson (1992) are also is in the agreement that due to the ability to collect depth and richness of data, personal interview is the preferred method of data collection.

A pre-prepared questionnaire consisting of a set of questions was being arranged to be asked to the potential respondents. The questionnaire was first pre-piloted by three colleagues to check the wordings and adjustments were being made where possible. Since some of the respondents will involve local people, a translation of questionnaire from English to the mother tongue language (Malay) was being made by the researcher. Finally, before the questionnaire is ready to be used, the translated questionnaire was being back-translated for accuracy by a local language teacher and any disputes were being adjusted.

During data collection, a purposive sampling method was applied with respondents being approached at the beaches, shopping malls, resorts, airport and jetty point and a few occasions at the street shops. A purposive sampling is deemed suitable due to the "*need to target specific groups of people who can provide the desired information and conforms to some criteria set by the researcher*" (Sekaran, 2013, p. 277) where in this case are resort hotel guests who have had experienced at least one problematic encounter in their recent stay in a resort hotel. Before the interview took place, two filter questions which are regarded as the basic criteria in determining potential respondents were asked – whether the respondent(s) had stayed or are staying in a resort hotel and whether the respondent(s) encountered any problem(s) in their stay in the resort. If both filtered question were fulfilled, then only the interview be carried out.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT DESIGN

The questionnaire comprised of a short introduction and an explanation of the purpose of the study conducted, followed by some demographic background information including age, gender, travelling party, nationality, length of stay and whether the visit is repeat visit or first visit. There is no limit on the number of incidents to be described by each respondent so each of them is welcomed to describe as many incidents as they like. If respondents have a few incidents to tell, the guideline is that the incidents be described one by one as in every incident detailed, there are a set of questions need to be answered pertaining to the incident.

It then proceeds with describing an incident which is considered as problematic by the respondent(s). Follow up questions were asked regarding attribution of the incidents which they encountered. The interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed for further analysis. The respondents participated were locals and foreigners. English was mainly used as the interviewing medium while majority of the local respondents were happy to be interviewed in English, except for one respondent who spoke in local language and back-translation was being done for the analysis purposes.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

During data collection phase, 40 respondents were interviewed with a total of 127 incidents collected. On overall, each respondent's answer vary form one incident to a maximum of six incident, with a majority of respondents describing three incidents on average which they think are problematic during their stay in the resort hotels. According to Lockwood (1994), 50 incidents will allow the researcher to proceed with the category building stage but 100 incidents or more will provide more reliable categories. The development of categories is a subjective process looking for 'natural' groups within the incidents after an iterative process of repeated careful reading and sorting of the data that makes sense for a particular group to be formed (Lockwood, 1994). Each category and sub-category is given a detailed description so that others can understand. Therefore, from the 127 incidents, four categories and 12 sub-categories are formed following a categorisation classification process to describe the essence of the attitude about the incidents reported.

Inter-Judge Reliability Analysis

In order to improve the reliability of the categories formed by the first researcher, a second researcher, who is independent and was not involved in the initial classification of incidents; was asked to classify the whole incidents into categorisations formed by following a certain set of instructions. This is necessary for a judgement-based data as suggested by Perreault and Leigh (1989). Having read the description of each category, the second researcher coded the 127 incidents, providing an inter-judge reliability check agreement of 87.4% on the classification system.

This figure is considered to be high for a study with 12 categories. The reliability of the classification system is considered satisfactory if the inter-judge reliability is equal to or greater than 80% (Ronan and Latham, 1974). Since qualitative interpretation is subjective depending on own understanding, it might not be possible to get 100% accuracy in inter-judge coding however having more than 80% check ensures that the data can be viewed as valid, reliable and usable.

A classificatory schema was derived to respond to the first objective of the study based on the data gathered from the study results. This is in line with the data analysis stage set in the CIT analytical framework as previously suggested. The following sections will review the analysis of the developed classificatory schema.

Classificatory Schema

The initial sorting of the incidents has derived to four groups of categories and 12 sub-categories. Below is an operational definition on each of the problem categories and their sub-groups.

Category 1: Service Delivery System Failures

This category contains all the incidents which relate to core service problems where guests do not receive basic service or product from provider. This include basic product and services connected to room, food and beverage or recreation facilities to guests.

Product Problems

This sub-category gives rise to problems related to resort products offered eg: room dirty, room not cleaned, recreation facilities broken or dirty, tv reception not clear, decoration of room, air-conditioning, furniture in the room, bathroom, condition of room, linens, swimming pool, etc).

"The room had the appearance of being well worn, especially the floor and needs a refurbishment. The air conditioning system was effective but noisy and dripped water"

"The water-sports are very poor - 2 windsurfers that are broken and some other non-motorised equipment of a poor standard"

Capacity Issues

The incidents in this category includes problems related to the amount of product or services that should be produced to an acceptable standard, eg: rooms not ready, restaurant could not cope with overflow guests, limited food, poor quality/quantity and no replenishment, same food being served every day, etc.

"The choice of breakfast and dinner buffet are almost the same. The so called BBQ was far from satisfactory"

"The pool area was overcrowded and it was impossible to find a pool chair"

Slow/ unavailable Service

This category details the services which should be available but is lacking, delayed or absent be it due to internal or external causes eg: black out problems, slow staff performance, waiting too long for food/beverage, housekeeping staff did not replenish amenities in room after cleaning, etc.

"We also booked an island hopping trip with the resort but the pick-up for the island hopping was late…"

"Slow at check-in, not a very warm welcome. Waiting for a waiter/ waitress to refill just a glass of water for more than half an hour during dinner time"

Layout

Operationally defined here as the setting or arrangement of the resort or the resort infrastructures, this category includes examples such resort being very dispersed and huge, having a long way to get to certain point, the position or design of certain parts in the resort, etc.

"I think the compex is very large …with around 400 plus chalets set amidst the jungle…what I can say is that access was not good,…..many steps not suitable for children or disabled. The complex was so big…."

Category 2: Natural Environment

This category contains all the incidents or problems related to natural surroundings in relation to a resort experience, especially where the resort under study is an island destination and situated in a tropical climate. This category gave rise to a few sub-categories such as having wildlife/animals, unforeseen weather, uncontrolled noise and condition of seawater or beach area.

Animals

"We were kept awake by 2 amorous geckos last two nights who were calling across the room to each other!"

"There are instances with insects too…Maybe because it is located in the rainforest…. Our room was full of ants also. I would leave my coffee to cool and it would be full of them taking a swim….."

Noise

"We were bothered by our noisy neighbours.."

> *"Noise of aircrafts…..The hotel is basically at the end of the airport runway, with 737's flying over throughout the day"*

Beach/Sea

> *"The beach was really a crap too!!! It is a man made beach!!!! Muddy, lots of dangerous hidden sharp rocks in the water"*

> *"Sea wasn't very clear….the water sometimes were so muddy looking and there were quite a few dead jellyfish washed up"*

Weather

> *"It was raining season at that time…..and guess what???? The area was flooded…"*

> *"You will need to keep the balcony doors shut all the time due to the heat/humidity"*

Category 3: Employee Errors

The employee error category concerns the problems related to employee behaviours or attitude whether intentional or unintentional. This category contains two sub-categories that are the attitude and action of staff pertaining to specific situation.

Attitude

Employee's attitude means certain behaviour portrayed by staff either on purpose or accidentally for example: rudeness, unfriendly, do not understand request, etc)

> *"Attitude of staff is very disappointing…. Staff just seemed did not care at all….seems like they are talking to their colleaques, instead...no warmth or respect towards guests…."*

> *"The manager was very rude and unhelpful on the phone…..and seemed to be nonchalant and carefree about the whole thing…."*

Action

Problems concerning staff actions comprise of the act or staff doing something wrong than normal or expected behaviour in a hospitable manner or not doing something that is expected to do.

> *"I think the staff lack of training…..the cleaner tried to come into my room without knocking,*

> *"One of the hotel staff stole my bag which contained my wallet, important documents and cannon camera"*

Category 4: Value

This category of incident involves the worth of the service received compared to the price paid.

Star Rating

> *"I think the rooms are certainly not 4 star …..that's for sure,… would make it down to a 3 star based on the rooms"*

"Service and food are below average. Even spa treatments were below average. I don't think I would recommend this hotel to others……unless you are prepared for a 31/2 star hotel not 5…."

Price

"The total bill for our stay was amazingly high. And we had an awful holiday in the resort…."

"The restaurants are overpriced. Don't eat in the resort, instead go to the Oriental Village nearby…."

OTHER FINDINGS – DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The personal backgrounds of the respondents are as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Personal background

		Frequency	*Percentage*
Gender	Male	24	60.0
	Female	16	40.0
Age	< 34 years	24	60.0
	35 – 54 years	16	40.0
Origin (continent)	Asia	24	60.0
	Western	16	40.0
Travelling party	Friends/Spouse	25	62.5
	Family	15	37.5
Length of stay	1 – 2 night	8	20.0
	3 – 6 nights	27	67.5
	7 – 10 nights	5	12.5
First visit or repeat	First visit	36	90.0
	Repeat visit	4	10.0

Majority of respondents interviewed were males (60%) and mostly aged less than 34 years (60%). 60% of the respondents were from Asian countries with a large proportion of mixture coming from locally and Singapore while European visitors dominate the Western visitors. Most of the respondents interviewed travel with spouse/partner and friends (62.5%) as compared to with family (37.5%). In general, a large proportion of respondents stayed in the resorts between three to six nights (67%) which are usually a normal trend in resort hotel duration of stay due to being leisurely dominant.

Service Problems

Table 2. Resort problems classification overall frequencies

Category		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Group 1: Service Delivery System Failure	Product problems	28	22.0
	Capacity issues	13	10.2
	Slow/unavailable service	15	11.8
	Layout	6	4.7
	Group 1 total	62	48.7
Group 2: Natural Environment	Animals	17	13.4
	Noise	10	7.9
	Beach	8	6.3
	Weather	5	3.9
	Group 2 total	40	31.5
Group 3: Employee Error	Attitude	8	5.5
	Action	4	3.1
	Group 3 total	12	8.6
Group 4: Value	Star rating	4	3.1
	Price	9	7.1
	Group 4 total	13	10.2
Total		127	100

The categorisation process has derived the service problems into four categories and 12 sub-categories. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of incidents that fall in each category. The first category, service delivery system failure accounted the highest percentage with 48.7% of the incidents reported. The second category, natural environment recorded the second highest percentage with 40%. The third category which deals with employee error has 12% while the fourth category, value amounted 13%. From the table, it can be seen that the most reported problematic incident is regarding product problems for example, room not cleaned, room dirty, air-conditioning not working; swimming pool is dirty, etc. This sub-category has dominated nearly a quarter of the whole incidents reported.

The second most reported incident deals with animal issues in the resort experience, amounting 13.4% of the total incident with examples such as having insects in room, etc. Following this, slow or unavailable service recorded 11.8% of total incidents for instance pick-up service was late, slow at check-in, slow service in the restaurant, late room service, etc. The least reported incidents were concerned with employee action and star rating, both with the same percentage (3.1%) followed by weather (3.9%).

By far the two largest categories are the service delivery system failure and natural environment with a total of 62 incidents and 40 incidents respectively and between them accounted 80.2% of the total incidents. The other remaining two categories are the smallest with employee error giving a total of 12 and value with 13 reported incidents.

Attribution of Service Problems

Table 3. Attribution of service problems

		Frequency	*Percentage*
Internal	Management	105	82.7
	Animals	4	3.1
	Noise	5	2.4
	Beach	7	5.5
External	Weather	5	2.4
	Nightlife/parties	1	0.8
	Total	22	17.3
	Total	127	100

Table 3 highlights the frequencies that respondents associate with attribution of the service problems they encountered. Weiner (1985) mentioned that guests tend to attribute the causes of a problem either internally (management's fault) or externally (customer or others fault). From the above table, it can be seen that most of the causes of the problems faced by guests were the fault of the service provider (82.7%). It can also be seen that only 17.3% of the problems were caused by external factors with factors of animals, noise, beach and weather being in the natural environment group contributing the most. Perhaps this is hold to be true as errors related to these elements are mainly out of our control.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study has obtained a number of outcomes which provided evidence in answering the study objectives. Lovelock et al., (2001) forwarded the first law of quality, that is, "to do it right the first time". Therefore, a significant contribution is the recognition of failure identification in the first instance before customers could realise the failure. Focusing on service failure prevention will also aid in understanding how to better achieve continuous improvement, hence could assist organisations in improving service quality and enhancing long-term relationships between the service provider and the customers.

Among the outcomes was the development of the classificatory schema for resort hotel service problems which includes the identification of service problems frequencies according to categories and sub-categories. Respondent's demographics were also described. It can be seen that service delivery system failure which contributed the highest percentage of service problems encountered were derived from the resort. The point here is that resorts can minimise the problems arising from core service problems where it is bound to be resort-related by having more stringent procedures in blueprinting service delivery process to overcome bottlenecks should it be seen to occur. Most of the problems reported are associated with product problems therefore management should have regular check -ups and maintain all facilities at the highest level of standard at all times to minimise core service problems. Therefore, each part of service operations should be scrutinised with stringent procedures.

Having slow/unavailable service for example waiting for water for more than half an hour, late room service, etc and capacity issues are all core problems which call for urgent management intervention as these problems should not be happening in the first place. The same issue goes to employee error and value categories. Lack of training is also one of the

issues which should be addressed critically. No doubt problems are prone to arise due to unexpected circumstances. However, customers expect their problems to be solved not only the soonest possible but also fairly. Giving empowerment to staff to deal with critical matters should problems arise is one great example of minimising problems and customer dissatisfactions. In addition, having necessary recovery actions to compensate problems encountered can also minimise customer annoyance and discontent.

 On the other hand, the second largest reported incidents were incidents regarding the natural environment- where animal, noise, beach or weather-related issues are concerned as the venue of the study is a tropical tourist destination which is surrounded by rain forests and beaches. Nothing much can be done about wildlife around the resort premises as usually these are scenarios to be expected or even sought by most resort guests who fancy tropical resort in rainforest surroundings. Perhaps to make customers' expectations lower before patronising the resort, more up to date information in terms of current weather condition, current sea water condition, or putting more explanation regarding native wildlife is a brilliant step so that customers would know what to expect during their stay.

It is demonstrated that the majority of service problems were associated internally with exception of most natural environment problems connected to external factors. Internal causes includes factors inherent to the service provider such as the amount of effort put into the delivery of the service or the skill level demonstrated in dealing with service situations (Sparks, 2001). Heider (1958) is in the contention that in general people will attribute causes of service breakdowns towards internal features of the service providers. Perhaps this is an alarming sign that management had neglected the quality of core service that they should deliver.

CONCLUSION

In general, this study which has been conducted via CIT to extract customers' problematic experiences during their recent stay in Langkawi lodging properties is proved to be a suitable means to provide necessary data to support the study objectives. It was an effective tool to discover resort hotels' service problems which highlighted a classificatory schema of four groups of main categories with 12 sub-categories of service problems that guests normally encounter. As mentioned, by critically identifying categories and causes of failures, service providers are better equipped to anticipate failures, hence removing dissatisfying encounters beforehand and thus creating a memorable positive experience to ensure that the highest quality service is rendered at all times.

Although this study has surfaced resort hotel negative experiences to add to the body of knowledge, recommendations on future studies should dwell into looking at other accommodation sectors. Further comparisons can be made available by comparing and contrasting between different classifications of lodging entities to ascertain a comprehensive analysis of service problems that customers' encounter. Hence practical change can be made accordingly to minimise defects reoccurring in the future.

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