

# Service Quality Attributes Influencing Spa Goers' Satisfaction in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

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Wellness Tourism has become a booming niche product of tourism. The Malaysian government views the spa industry as a catalyst to boost the economy. Somehow, the empirical study on the satisfaction of spa-goers specifically in Malaysia is limited to knowing which service quality attributes can help the spa owners focus on and sustain the business. Thus, this study aims to examine the relationship the service quality attributes to spa-goers satisfaction as a catalyst to help the spa owners to improve the business according to spa-goers' expectations. An empirical study was conducted with 365 spa-goers ranging from 18 years and above who have enjoyed any services in spa centres in Kuala Lumpur. Self-administered questionnaires were given at 59 spas registered under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Data analysis was performed using SPSS and PLS-SEM. Resultantly, service quality attributes' reliability, empathy, and assurance of spa providers positively affect the spa-goers satisfaction when choosing a spa centre. This study provides spa owners to re-formulate the strategies to retain their customers and be sustained in the spa industry. However, this study is limited as the findings were based on spa centres located only in Kuala Lumpur only, Thus, the study can be replicated as future research in other states for a wider and comprehensive understanding of spa-goers and it will expand the knowledge in the spa industry.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of travel has broadened to the point that it supersedes just only to derive pleasure. Individuals search for relaxation in places where their quality of life will be improved. The motive of modern-day visitors is far more concerned with their health and fitness when away from daily stressors. Hence, Benner, King, and Milner (2004) proposed Health Tourist, which includes pleasure-oriented services with an element of stress relief and is a niche sector in the tourism business. There are two forms of health tourism: medical tourism and wellness tourism. According to the Global Wellness Institute, the wellness tourism sector was a \$639 billion global business in 2017, accounting for approximately 14% (\$438.6 billion) of all domestic and international tourist expenditures and expanding twice as fast as overall global tourism (He et al., 2021). These may be noticed in the global spa industrial activities, which actively advance the spa business to the next level of the relentless globe with a new era of more provident and advantageous people groups. The Worldwide Spa and Wellness Summit (GSWS) has been administering the global spa sector to enhance the quality of services that engage all levels of stakeholders by discussing both regional and global levels (Hashim et al., 2019). The spa industry is thriving because spa treatments may be traditionally practiced to assist visitors to revitalise their body, mind, and soul. Although some visitors regard spas as luxury products they do contain the necessary attributes that lead to spa visitation, which includes personal space, escapism, time away, and retreat (Cohen & Bodeker, 2019). Asia has been a popular spa destination and a thriving industry given the traditional methods, which include the use of natural treatments. Surprisingly, the future of the wellness sector will be as bright as predicted by the Global Wellness Institute (2017).

Since the Asian financial crisis in Southeast Asia in 1997, wellness tourism, a specialty product, has been recognised as a spinning money business (Okech, 2014). Wellness tourism is also viewed as a positively developing sector. Malaysia will not be left behind and will seize this chance to boost wellness tourism, particularly the spa business, to attract this sort of specialised market. According to Hashim et al. (2019), Malaysia is well-known for the development of health tourism due to its traditional therapies which are the oldest treatments worldwide. The attractive medical tourism packages have made Malaysia one of the most competitive spa and wellness tourism destinations in Asia. Although the spa business is critical to the country's beneficiaries, spa owners or managers must be inventive and competitive to stay in the service industry. Since services are ethereal and most experienced, they are difficult to quantify (Jamshidi & Keshavarz, 2018). According to Jamshidi and Keshavarz (2018), poor service quality might result in a loss of 12% of customers. Fiesolem, a spa customer, wrote a complaint on the Trip Advisor website about his negative experience. The customer stated that the treatments received made him pick another spa and not return to the facility (Trip Advisor, 2018). Hence, it is critical to provide good services to boost a customer's perceived value and satisfaction. Apart from that, the peculiarity of the spa industry has been disregarded with just a few research contributing to the spa literature (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2016). Furthermore, research on service quality aspects that enhance happiness and contribute to the survival of spa enterprises has received little attention (Lagrosen & Lagrosen, 2016). Hence, this study aims to the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***2.1 Wellness Industry***

Wellness is defined by the Global Wellness Institute (2022) as the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to holistic health. This definition has two significant features.

First and foremost, health is not a passive or static condition, but rather an "active pursuit" including intentions, decisions, and actions. Second, wellness is connected to holistic health, which includes physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and environmental aspects in addition to physical health. While Wellness tourism is defined as travel aimed at preserving or improving one's well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2022). Global Wellness Institute (2022) also stated that North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific are the three regions with the most wellness tourism. In 2020, the United States accounted for 19% of all trips and 37% of all spending. The top five nations (the United States, Germany, France, China, and Japan) accounted for 64% of the worldwide market, while the top twenty accounted for 87%. Given that they were more severely impacted by the epidemic (Indonesia and Russia), or had weaker tourist development and/or economic volatility even before the outbreak, some nations slipped out of the top twenty in 2020, including Brazil and Russia. In 2019, wellness travellers took 936 million international and domestic wellness excursions, up to 145 million from 2017, before dropping to 601 million in 2020. In 2020, wellness vacations accounted for 6.5% of all tourist trips but 16.2% of all expenditures. This is because wellness tourists spend significantly more on each trip than ordinary travellers.

## ***2.2 Spa Industry in Malaysia***

Spas are defined as institutions that promote well-being via the provision of therapeutic and other professional services aimed at regenerating the body, mind, and spirit, according to the Global Wellness Institute (2022). While Asia-Pacific continues to have the most spas, Europe has the greatest spa income. The spa sector grew at a quick pace from 2017 to 2019, reaching \$110.7 million in sales and 165,714 spas in 2019. This reflects an increase of 8.7% in yearly sales, owing to increased consumer earnings, continued tourism expansion, and a growing willingness to spend on wellness-related items. Malaysia is geographical, surrounded by Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, and Thailand as a cross-border country and made up of two regions (1) Peninsular Malaysia which lies between Singapore and Thailand, and (2) East Malaysia across the South China Sea on Borneo Island. Interestingly, Malaysia has a tropical climate which is generally warm and rainy season throughout the year with temperatures ranging from 21° to 32° Celsius. Another point is Malaysia has prominent and beautiful beaches and islands are some of the factors that attract tourists coming to the country. The greatest strength of Malaysia is the friendliness of multicultural citizens who always be hospitable to tourists who come to Malaysia. Due to the natural treatments and remedies, the wellness segment is showing a positive progression which grew by 10% in 2014, the government of Malaysia hopes to develop the spa industry further to attract visitors with the money and inclination to spend on luxurious experiences.

The Star Online (2019), in the heading news of '*A Refreshing Take on Wellness,*' has interviewed Samantha Pang, the founder, and director of Vita Spa, a Malaysia-based spa. In the interview, she said there is demand as people in this millennial era are busy working to support their living and believe massage and spa services are vital to support balancing their lifestyles. The emergence of the spa industry assists Malaysia in becoming a top tourist destination in Asia. Tourists choose Malaysia not just to unveil the beauty of the country's culture but also to engage and relax with the natural resources that Malaysia provides to tourists. However, despite all these positive emerging spa reviews, Malaysia is still lacking studies on the service quality of spa establishments to the spa-goers' satisfaction. Therefore, from the problem statement, the issue has been stated by one customer about the negative experience that he has encountered apart from the positive progression of the spa industry in Malaysia. Thus, this study is important to look back at all the necessary service quality offered by the spa owners really meet the spa-

goers' satisfaction so that the spa industry will be sustained forever and makes Malaysia a top global destination in the World.

### ***2.3 Customer Satisfaction***

Customer satisfaction is something that is taken very seriously nowadays. Customers are less likely to patronise a specific service or business if they had previous disappointing experiences. Satisfaction is defined as a net positive experience that arises from consumers' impressions of a service provider's actual provisions in proportion to their expectations of the service (Marinkovic & Kalinic, 2017). According to Dewi et. al. (2022), customer satisfaction can be in the form of anger, irritation, dissatisfaction, joy and pleasure. The customer is not only a part of the actual consuming process in the hospitality industry but he or she also has pre-determined service and quality expectations. Customers in the hospitality industry today are more time-pressed, smart, and demanding than ever before (Anwar, 2017). Before implementing management tactics to increase service quality, it's important to know where your customers come from and what degree of satisfaction they anticipate. Satisfaction is a critical aspect of a company's product since it measures the degree of expectation between the company's offering and the expectations of its customers. Customer satisfaction has an impact on both the company and the product because satisfied customers imply more products and profits (Copley, 2017; Akoi & Yesiltas, 2020). It has also been discussed previously. The product quality and services that firms deliver to their customers have an impact on customer satisfaction.

### ***2.4 Service Quality***

The Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model is a framework for measuring and capturing customer service quality. According to Abdullah and Afshar (2019), quality is an elusive and muddled idea. It is critical to distinguish between products and services due to their distinct qualities. Because services are intangible, it is difficult for suppliers to describe them and for consumers to assess them (Ali et al. 2021). The SERVQUAL model has proven that the most dominant components of a service sector are the most dominant components of customer satisfaction (Yi and Nataraajan, 2018). It has been applied in many service sectors and focuses on different aspects of service quality. Various scholars have developed several relevant service quality definitions. The difference between a customer's expectation of a service provider and their appraisal of the services is referred to as service quality (Ali et al. 2021). The success or failure of a hospitality firm is determined by the cumulative impact of service interactions in which consumers take part (Abdullah, 2018). Given the diverse claims made by different researchers, quality is a little more difficult to quantify than consumer satisfaction. Consumer impression is influenced by two aspects, according to (Anwar & Abdullah, 2021), such as expectations and quality standards. Various research has been conducted to uncover aspects of service quality that most significantly contribute to basic quality assessments in the service environment. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985), there are 10 service quality dimensions. These dimensions fit as a service quality field from which these SERVQUAL model elements were obtained. After further refining, five parameters for evaluating service quality as mentioned by Kim (2021) which is, tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The five dimensions of service quality and their concise definitions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Service Quality Dimensions

Dimensions	Explanations	Sources
Tangible	the physical facilities, equipment, employees, and communication materials' appearance	Ali et al. (2021)
Reliability	Service provider's capacity to offer consistent and accurate service.	Ali et al. (2021)
Responsiveness	The organization's preparedness to resolve difficulties that arise and its capacity to deliver prompt service	Ali et al. (2021)
Assurance	Employees' civility and knowledge, as well as their capacity to inspire trust and confidence	Ali et al. (2021)
Empathy	Paying specific and sincere attention	Kim (2021)

### 2.5 Service Quality and Satisfaction

The SERVQUAL model has demonstrated that the most dominant components of a service sector are the most dominant components of customer satisfaction (Yi and Natarajan 2018). It has been applied in different service industries and focuses on different dimensions of service quality to analyse the relationship between customer satisfaction and various aspects of service quality. According to Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016), the proposed service quality dimension in the spa study is different from the service marketing literature. Customer satisfaction is inversely proportional to service quality (Rigopoulou et al., 2008). It is simply "the level of quality of products and services provided to customers, as well as their level of service satisfaction" (Kim, 2021), and it is "the result of a comparison between consumers' perceptions of perceived and expected services, as well as the functional relationships among variables such as technical quality, functional quality, and image" (Prentice and Kadan, 2019).

Service quality is an important and prominent aspect in consumer-centred company organisations, according to Omar et al. (2021) and Blut (2016), while Kim (2021) describes it as a dynamic factor in the customer satisfaction model. A previous study by Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2016) also found that there is a reason to believe there are some differences in the service quality dimension of spa-goers from different cultural backgrounds. Supported by Chea (2022) study of Cambodia's Spa Industry, service quality has the greatest influence on customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, a recent local study conducted in 2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia, found that there is a significant association between staff service quality as well as ambiance with spa customer satisfaction (Suria et al., 2020). In line with that, Mohamad et al. (2021) believes that the spa industry needs to reconstruct itself to make sure the spa industry will stay relevant in Malaysia's context and become the top destination for global wellness. Therefore, the following hypotheses and study framework are proposed:

- H1: There is a significant relationship between tangibility and customer satisfaction.*
- H2: There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction.*
- H3: There is a significant relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction.*
- H4: There is a significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction.*
- H5: There is a significant relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction.*

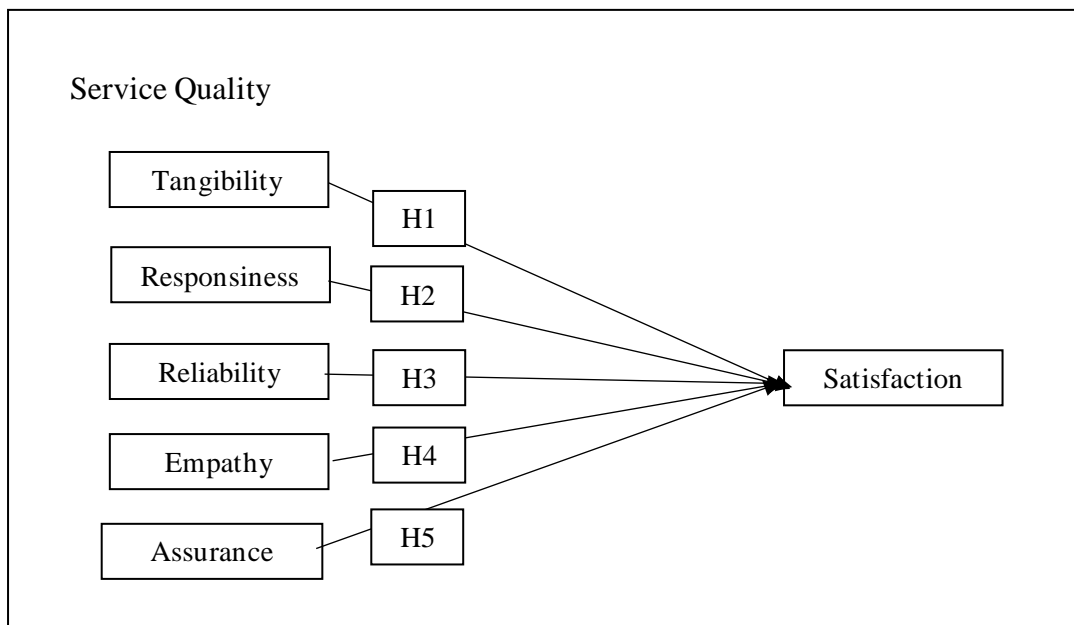


Figure 1 Proposed Research Framework

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a quantitative, non-experimental, and cross-sectional approach conducted in a non-contrived setting. To achieve the research objective, the correlational study data through primary data was applied. Simple random sampling was used in data collection through a self-administered questionnaire. The study targeted 18 years old and above spa-goers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. There are 59 spas available in Kuala Lumpur which are rated by the ministry of tourism and culture (MOTAC), ranging from two-star to five-star ratings. The spas were divided into five geographical location groups to ensure the data generalisability of the study. The questionnaire was distributed around participating spas according to the designated geographical location group and rated spa by MOTAC. A total of 365 responses were involved in hypothesis testing. The minimum sample size required in this study was 300 samples aligning with a total of 30 survey items used in the data collection (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, a minimum sample size for the study was achieved. The study was mainly analysed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) and PLS-SEM through SmartPLS software. The questionnaire used in this study comprised a total of six sections, namely (1) tangibility, (2) reliability, (3) responsiveness, (4) assurance, (5) empathy and, (6) customer satisfaction (Liu, 2013; Kwon, 2015; Cheung, 2012; Giritlioglu, Jones & Avcikurt, 2012). The survey item measurements used by the study were adopted and adapted from previous scholarly work according to analyses and critical literature reviews.

#### 3.1 Respondent Profile

Based on the descriptive analysis conducted, females recorded the highest response in the survey participation with 64% (n = 223), whereas males were only 36%. The respondents in this study were mainly 26-29 years old (31.5%), followed by 22-25 years old (31.5%), and 30-34 years (15.3%). Respondents who were between 18-21 years old and 35 years old and above represented 9% of the samples. Additionally, a higher proportion of the respondents attained a Bachelor's degree 43.6% (n = 159), 20.3% (n = 74) with Diploma, followed by Master's Holders (14.8%; n = 54), SPM certificate (5.5%; n = 20), others (5.5%; n = 20) and PhD. Holders (3.8%; n=14). Most of the respondents (n = 112) had a monthly income of RM1000 and below, followed by those earning RM2001-RM3000 (21.1%; n = 77), and RM4001-RM5000 (10.7%;

n = 39). The majority of respondents were Malaysians (64%; n= 236). The majority of respondents rarely go to the spa centre (59.5%; n = 217), whereas 117 of them go to the spa centre once a month and 6.3% visit the spa twice a month. Besides, most of the respondents spent between 1 and 2 hours at a spa centre 1-2, 34% of them spent less than one hour only 9 respondents spent more than four hours.

### 3.2 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Model measurement was conducted purposely to confirm the reliability and validity of the instruments. Based on table 2, all of the constructs score an excellent Cronbach's alpha of 0.60 and above. Moreover, the composite reliability of the constructs similarly scored an excellent level. The composite reliability of the constructs scored more than 0.70 suggesting good reliability (Hair et al., 2017). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs scored more than 0.50. Thus, convergent validity is achieved (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2 Reliability Analysis

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Assurance	0.987	0.989	0.95
Customer satisfaction	0.987	0.989	0.949
Empathy	0.980	0.984	0.925
Reliability	0.981	0.985	0.931
Responsiveness	0.983	0.987	0.937
Tangibility	0.958	0.967	0.856

### 3.3 Hypotheses Testing

Figure 1 shows the direct path hypothesis testing of the study conducted through 2000 bootstraps subsamples and a 95% confidence interval. The indicators in determining the relationship tested were (*p*-value (below 0.05) and *t*-value (more than 1.96 [two-tailed test]) which proved a statistically significant relationship as stated by Hair et al., (2017). The analysis found that out of the five hypotheses tested, only three were significant (reliability, empathy, and assurance) toward customer satisfaction. Tangibility and responsiveness were found to be statistically insignificant toward customer satisfaction as the score *p*-value exceeded 0.05 and the *t*-value scored less than 1.96. So, H1 and H2 are not supported. On the other side, reliability was found to be statistically significant toward customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.128$ ,  $t = 2.075$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). When reliability increased by 1 standard deviation, customer satisfaction increased by 0.128. Therefore, H3 was supported. In addition, H4 was supported as the analysis indicated a positive and statistically significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.441$ ,  $t = 7.216$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). When empathy increased by 1 standard deviation, customer satisfaction surged by 0.441. Lastly, H5 was also supported whereby the analysis indicated a positive and statistically significant relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.263$ ,  $t = 3.644$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). When assurance increased by 1 standard deviation, customer satisfaction also increased by 0.263. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of the research model is 0.924 which means the model only explains 92.4% of the variance. Table 3 shows the results of the hypothesis testing.

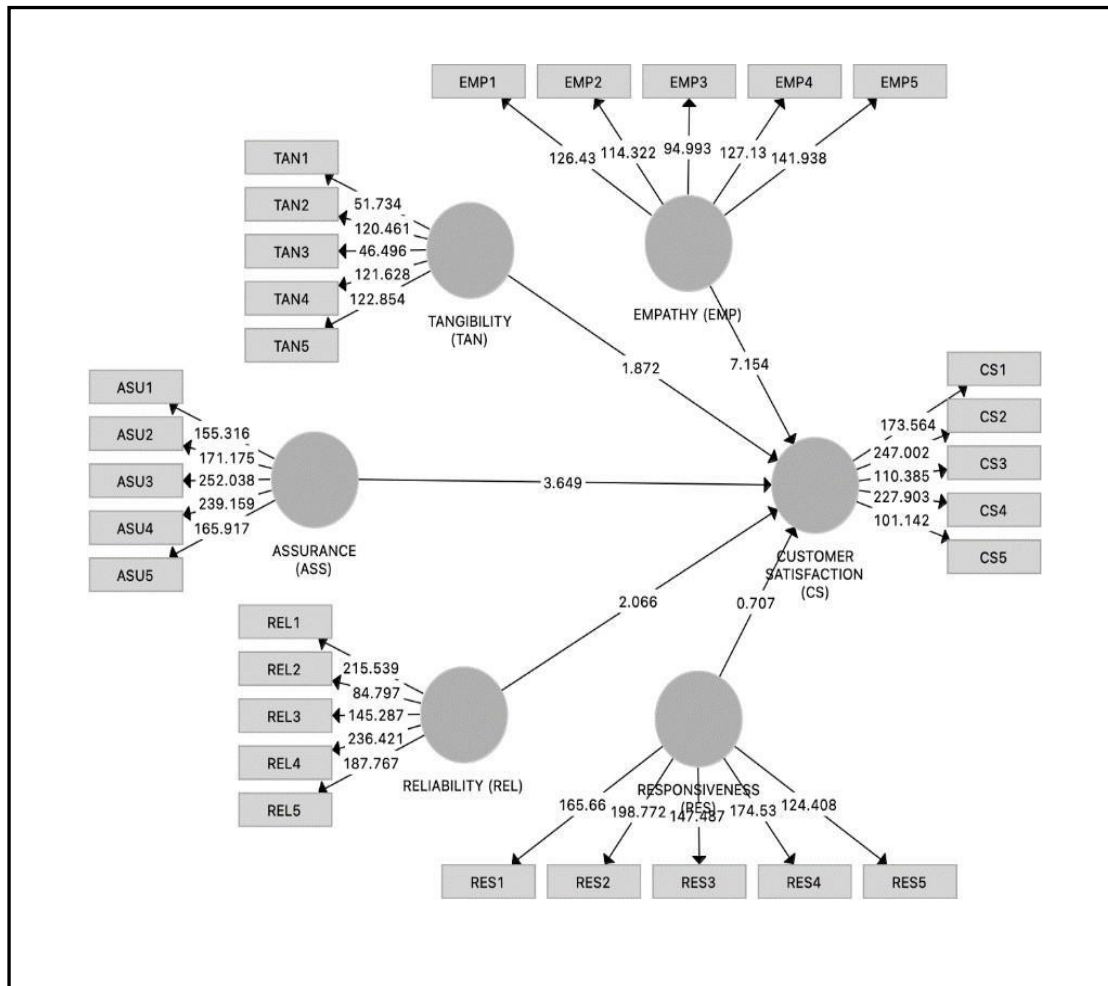


Figure 2 The Structural Equation Modelling Analysis

Table 3 Results of the Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	STDEV	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	Decision
H1	0.103	0.054	1.892	0.059		Not Supported
H2	0.052	0.073	0.708	0.479		Not Supported
H3	0.128	0.062	2.075	0.038	0.924	Supported
H4	0.441	0.061	7.216	0.000		Supported
H5	0.263	0.072	3.644	0.000		Supported

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction among spa customers in Kuala Lumpur. The results showed that out of five hypotheses, only three were statistically significant. Tangible and responsiveness were found to be not significant toward custom satisfaction, which is different from Rigopoulou et al. (2008) study, where all the service quality attributes had a positive effect on satisfaction. The tangibility aspect of spa services probably did not directly influence customer satisfaction as spa and wellness services are mainly perceived as emotionally perceived services. Indeed, the



services are mainly connected to the intangible aspect of services. Thus, the tangibility or physical aspect of services is not the primary reason for a customer to visit a spa for treatment. Additionally, responsiveness is not statistically significant toward customer satisfaction, probably because of the nature of the spa services themselves. Unlike other forms of services such as restaurants, spa services are mainly associated with a personal experience and pre-booking method of handling customers and crowds, purposely to ultimately satisfy the spa customer. Thus, the personal experiences of spa customers have generally become standard in the industry. The calmness of the environment and staff treatment also probably justified the insignificant relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction as most of the spa services use pre-booking systems for treatment.

On the other hand, reliability was found to be statistically significant toward customer satisfaction and this is supported by Chea's (2022) study, which found that this attribute has a great influence on customer satisfaction. As spa services are considered personal services and equipped with a certified staff (spa expert), the reliability of the promised services significantly influences customer satisfaction. It probably justified the finding. The promised services, such as health product use (massage oil, face location, body location, and others), normally become one of the important selling points for the spa and are used in the marketing activity of the spa. Thus, the reliability of the promised services influences customer satisfaction.

Empathy was found to be statistically significant in customer satisfaction. As spa services can be classified as personal experience services, the empathy of the spa staff significantly influences customer satisfaction. The capacity to feel or experience what another person feels or experiences by picturing what it would be like to be in that person's shoes is a part of emotional intelligence, which holds a strong connection and relationship with the customer. It probably justified the finding. Moreover, the personalised services given by the spa staff will strengthen the emotional attachment and empathy between the customer and the spa staff, and this is supported by the study of Suria et al. (2020), where the service quality of staff is significant in customer satisfaction, especially empathy.

Lastly, assurance was also proven to be significant statistically toward customer satisfaction, and this result is similar to a past study by Omar et al. (2021), who believe that assurance is one of the prominent aspects of service quality attributes that lead to customer satisfaction. The knowledge and decorum of employees are crucial to eliciting trust and confidence among spa customers. Customers anticipate that businesses will be industry leaders in the services they provide. It helps reassure customers that they can trust the spa. It will also lead to positive word of mouth and customer testimonials. It probably justified the finding.

To recap on the methodology part, the service quality attributes do affect the spa-goers' satisfaction. Interestingly, from the Malaysian perspective, the result shows that reliability attributes, assurance attributes, and empathy attributes are the most concerning factors in their satisfaction with spa establishments. Most of the respondents want the spa providers to reassure them that they can use all the spa facilities and feel safe, especially regarding their privacy matters. On top of that, spa-goers also want the services to be delivered according to their preferences. Lastly, the spa providers should know about customer well-being and the spa industry, it is supported by Mohamad et al.'s (2021) article that the spa industry needs to reconstruct itself to ensure the spa industry will stay relevant.

Consequently, the findings of the study could be useful to spa owners or spa managers to re-strategize their marketing plan to maximise their revenue and minimise the cost on which

attributes to focus as the tangibility attributes and responsiveness attributes do not cause any effect on the spa-goers satisfaction. Apart from that, the spa owners or spa managers could do an investigation on the dissatisfied spa-goers to improve the current service so that it could meet the spa-goers' needs and expectations. Last but not least, the findings could help to extend the body of knowledge of the spa industry from the Malaysian perspective as the country has multiracial residents.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

As every spa entity lies in the hospitality and tourism industry, the need of winning customer satisfaction is very important to serve a customer like a king of the world. Dealing with a human is very crucial as it involves services that help a business to succeed. A good service can retain its customers to increase the business profit and the role of customer satisfaction is vital for any business entity as it becomes a benchmark for a successful business. Therefore, spa owners need to monitor all the attributes of service quality as it has a direct impact on the customer's satisfaction. The spa owners should recognise the potential changes in the customer demands and always innovate their services, so the customer feels worthy of attending the spa centre and being satisfied. Further studies can be carried out as the current study is focused on service quality as the independent variable. However, many other possible factors may influence customer satisfaction as a spa-goer, hence it may be possible to provide deeper insight into the factors those spa owners need to stress their total offering. By considering aspects, the addition of more independent variables such as brand image could be desirable for future research to assess the brand image of spa entities influencing customer satisfaction.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

AMG and MSZ conceived and planned the experiments, carried out the experiments and data preparation. MSAL planned, carried out the simulations and contributed to the interpretation of the results. MZZ took the lead in writing the manuscript. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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