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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *RUMAH TERBUKA* DURING EID FESTIVITY IN PROMOTING VISITOR ATTRACTION

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the multi-ethnic backgrounds, Malaysians celebrate their annual festivals and all of the celebrations have become a cultural tradition. The major ethnic group festival celebrations include Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Malays), Deepavali (Indians) and Chinese New Year (Chinese), have been recognised by the Malaysian government to be a national celebration and yearly events. These events are popularly known as Rumah Terbuka. Even though the celebration of Rumah Terbuka festivals have started and celebrated widely many years ago, each celebration has managed to attract a huge crowd from different ethnicities and backgrounds. People are willing to spend time queuing which sometimes could stretch into long hours before they can be seated and enjoy the Rumah Terbuka festivals. Therefore, it raises a question on factors that influence visitors to attend the festivals. Hence, this study empirically examines the factors that influence visitors to attend the Rumah Terbuka Aidilfitri festival. Using this festival in Perak as

the contextual setting, the visitors were given questionnaires to be answered. Through a series of analyses, some useful insights or predictors on the issue of interest were obtained. Majority of the respondents demonstrated positive responses on the attributes of the festival. Improvement needs to be done by the government authorities or the organiser in planning and managing such festival in order to increase visitor satisfaction. The findings for this study could contribute to the body of new knowledge regarding the festival celebration.

Keywords: *eid festivity, rumah terbuka, Malaysia, Malays, festival, foods, visitor*

INTRODUCTION

Known as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation in Asia (Suku & Nishal, 2007), Malaysia has a population of 27.7 million which comprises three major ethnicities with 67% Malays/Bumiputras, 24.7% Chinese and 7.4% Indians as well as other minority ethnic groups (Hashim & Mahpuz, 2011). While Islam is the official religion, Malaysians also practise Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other faiths. Each of the ethnic group has their own cultural practices (Muhammad, Zahari, Othman, Jamaluddin, & Rashdi, 2010). Despite the diverse cultural differences that exist in Malaysia, each ethnic group manages to interact and settle differences amongst each other which the situation is seldom heard off in other countries (Sardar, 2000).

Hence, Malaysia is a unique country with diverse ethnicity and religious beliefs as well as various ethnic festival celebrations. For instance, the Malays celebrate *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, *Hari Raya Aidiladha* and *Maulidur Rasul*, while the Chinese celebrate Chinese New Year and *Chap Goh Mei*. *Deepavali* and *Thaipusam* are celebrated by the Hindus, whereas *Tadau Ka'amatan* and *Gawai Dayak* are the grandest celebration in Sabah and Sarawak (Shuhaimi, 2010). Uniquely, these festivities are not only celebrated by the related ethnic groups and practitioners but have become national celebrations.

In 2001, the Malaysian Cabinet has gazetted that six major ethnic

festivities such as *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, *Deepavali*, Chinese New Year, Christmas, *Gawai Dayak* and *Tadau Ka'amatan* (Parliament, 2001) are regarded as national celebration. During these festive occasions, Malaysians visit each other regardless of race, ethnic group or status. Each of the festivities is celebrated nationwide with the name of *Rumah Terbuka* festival which is being held publicly by the government (Hashim & Mahpuz, 2011; Shuhaimi, 2010). Apart from that, it was also held by politicians, government officials and individuals where they entertain a large crowd (Vinning & Crippen, 1999).

A festival is held to create harmony and better understanding among the citizens (Parliament, 2001). This is in line with Derrett (2008) where celebrations sustained through collaborative effort over long periods can strengthen communities. The significant image of Malaysia as a unique country is projected based on relationship built over time on the thrust of friendship and unity represented by the *Rumah Terbuka* concept (Shuhaimi, 2010). He also added that *Rumah Terbuka* expresses unique culture practices where the Malaysians visit each other on festive occasions of a race or an ethnic group. Apart from that, the *Rumah Terbuka* festivals are also held to give the opportunity for the foreign tourists and visitors to experience and understand better the unique culture of Malaysia (Parliament, 2001). Besides that, foods served in the *Rumah Terbuka* festival are prepared by the hosts (Shuhaimi, 2010).

Even though the celebration of *Rumah Terbuka* festivals have been celebrated a few years ago and were held annually, *Utusan Online* in 2011 has reported that each of the festivals manages to attract huge crowd from different ethnicities and backgrounds. Despite that, people are willing to spend time queuing which sometimes could stretch into long hours before they can be seated and enjoy the *Rumah Terbuka* festivals. Therefore, it is conjectured that festival attributes such as foods, facilities and amenities, entertainment, programme as well as venue are the factors that influenced them to visit the festival. It is also believed that quality foods with various choices may also attract visitors to attend the festivals. With good amenities and facilities provided during the celebrations, it is believed that they may also encourage them to spend time at the festivals. An interesting entertainment, suitable programmes for various age groups and good selection of strategic location for the venue as well as good accessibility are

also major factors that draw the crowd to the festival. Therefore, it raises a question on the factors that influence the visitors' attraction to the festival. Despite growing research on festivals, no published academic study has examined the factors and attributes that influence the visitors to the festival particularly the *Rumah Terbuka* festivals in Malaysia.

Most of the scholars provided numerous satisfaction studies on non-food festivals (Anwar & Sohail, 2004; Lee, Lee, Lee & Babin, 2008) and wine and food festivals (Yuan & Jang, 2008; Nicholson & Pearce, 2001). Festival researches have focused on reporting the profiles and characteristics of visitors (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Cela, Knowles-Lankford & Lankford, 2008) motivations for attending festivals (Yuan & Jang, 2008; Özdemir & Culha, 2009; Axelsen & Swan 2010), consumers' satisfaction and revisit intentions (Axelsen & Swan, 2011; Einarsen & Mykletun, 2011), festival experiences (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001) and ways to organise a successful food or wine festival (Yuan, Cai, Morrison & Linton, 2005). Several other studies have been conducted on the reason for attending festivals and events (Park, Reisinger & Kang, 2008; McDowall, 2010; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Thrane, 2002) and the relationship between festival quality, satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Lee & Beeler, 2010; Thrane, 2002; Park, Reisinger & Kang, 2008). This makes it critical to understand the factors or attributes that affect satisfaction and loyalty towards attending food festivals.

Thus, this study attempts to address the gap by examining the significance of the festival attributes in influencing visitors' attraction. Since there is lack of evidence on the related issue, empirical evidence needs to be obtained.

METHOD

As this study focuses on the *Rumah Terbuka* festival, the celebration of *Rumah Terbuka Hari Raya Aidilfitri* festival was chosen as the survey site. The survey was conducted during the *Rumah Terbuka Hari Raya Aidilfitri* festival which was held in Perak by the Perak state government in September 2012. The questionnaires were distributed to the *Rumah Terbuka* festival visitors or attendees during the one day event which started from 2.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m.

Prospective respondents were observed before they were intercepted at the various locations of the festival ground by the researcher. The purposive sampling was applied and a screening process based on the appearance and age was done among the visitors. A wide range of visitors representing the different age group from 18 years old to 60 years old were selected. Once the potential respondents were identified, the individual was approached by the researcher and asked whether he or she would like to participate in a survey. Screening questions were asked to ensure that the respondent met the criteria set. Those who agreed to take part were given a short briefing about the purpose of the study and also specific instructions in answering the questions regarding the festival with the presence of the researcher. They were also informed that the data would only be used for academic purpose and assured confidentiality of the information given. The respondents were also encouraged to provide honest and truthful responses. During the actual day, only 160 out of 240 visitors approached, agreed to be involved in the survey. The respondents took about 15 to 30 minutes each to complete the questionnaire.

In this study, there were several analyses conducted to gather the information based on the collected data. Based on IBM SPSS Statistics 20, descriptive analysis was used to describe the general profile of the respondents and festival attributes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analyses on the data collected were conducted by using descriptive analysis on the respondents' profile. The findings showed that most of the respondents were those among the age of 18 to 31 years old as compared to the middle aged group. Female respondents offset the male respondents which were consistent with studies conducted by previous researchers (Cole & Chancellor, 2009; Kim, Suh & Eves, 2010). Meanwhile, percentages of visitors who are single were slightly higher as compared to the visitors from the married group.

The data also showed that most of them were Malays followed by the Chinese and Indians. Majority of them were from urban area while

the remaining was living in semi-urban and rural area. Despite that, most of the respondents earned below RM5000 in their monthly income. The respondents were mainly government servants in the public sector when compared to private sector employees, students, retirees, housewife and others. Findings also showed that 52 percent of them were repeat visitors and majority of them had visited the festival more than five times. This is also consistent with the study by Cole & Chancellor (2009) where most of the visitors were repeated visitors.

Programme, food, facilities and amenities, venue as well as entertainment were chosen to represent the festival attributes. Majority of the respondents agreed that the programme was well organised, suited to all ages and unique. As for the food provided, there were varieties of food served that consisted traditional food from different cultures. Respondents also responded that the food and beverages provided were delicious and high in quality.

Meanwhile, the third attribute of the festival were the facilities and amenities provided by the organiser. Findings showed that most respondents agreed that the festival site was clean and comfortable. Basic services such as rubbish bins, places to sit and eat as well as restrooms were provided and sufficient for the visitors. This is in line with the findings found in the study by Wan & Chan (2011). Despite most of them agreed that the venue can be easily accessible, lower score was recorded for the parking space availability and types of transportation that can be used to access the site during the festival. In terms of entertainment, most of them agreed that it was catered to all ages and related to the theme. Cultural performances and interesting shows were performed to the visitors by the organiser. All the findings are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Festival Attributes

Attribute	Item	M	Sd.
Programme	The programme is well organised	3.83	.935
	The programmes/activities are available for all ages	3.74	1.049
	The programme theme is unique	3.76	.915
Food	The food and beverages served are delicious	3.84	.938
	There are variety and unique food served	3.81	.992
Facilities and amenities	The festival site is clean	3.68	1.018
	The festival environment is comfortable	3.66	.978
	Accessibility of facilities for those with special needs provided	3.34	1.081
	Rubbish bins provided are sufficient	3.67	1.092
	Higher quality audio equipment and facilities are provided	3.62	1.045
	Restrooms are available at the festival site	3.41	1.106
	Places to sit and eat are sufficient	3.49	1.034
Venue	The layout of the festival site is effective	3.65	.906
	The space/size of the festival site is large	3.84	.935
	Sufficient parking space are provided for visitors	3.32	1.107
	The festival site can be access by all mode of transportation	3.23	1.138
	The festival site can be easily accessible	3.45	1.039
Entertainment	Interesting shows and entertainment provided for the visitors	3.49	1.076
	The entertainment is suitable with the festival theme	3.66	1.052
	The entertainment provided cater to all ages	3.64	1.000
	Cultural entertainment performed at the festival	3.68	1.030

Most of the respondents suggested that there should be an improvement on the foods provided for the festival especially in terms of the quality, flavor and taste. It is worth mentioning that, despite the free food offered

during this festival, the organiser should be able to provide food that is high in quality to ensure visitor satisfaction. Moreover, the expansion of food options can help to increase the attractiveness of the festival as well as visitor satisfaction over time. Usually, the type of food served in this festival is similar to other festivals. Therefore, it is suggested that the organiser can also provide delicacies native to that particular state or region as well as providing more variations of food served during the festival. This could help to promote the local food and delicacies especially to the visitors from other states as well as for those from other countries. Hence, by improving on the food factor, it can help to increase visitors' satisfaction and encourage them to revisit the festival.

It is also important for the organiser to improve on the areas of weaknesses such as waste management and the filthiness of the facilities as suggested by the respondents in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. The problem can be solved by hiring staff to look upon the facilities cleanliness (for example restrooms, sitting area, and site) as well as scheduling frequent trash pick-up which are the aspects that are often being neglected by the organiser while organising festivals and events. Apart from that, visitors should be encouraged to be more socially responsible and disciplined by cleaning up the tables after using them.

CONCLUSION

Since this study is focused on the *Rumah Terbuka* festival that was held in Perak, it is assumed that the results obtained were only representing those visiting the festival. In relation to that, the findings therefore cannot be generalised and represent the whole population of those attending the same type of festival. As stated earlier, in Malaysia there were six major *Rumah Terbuka* festivals held every year. Thus, the results of the findings might not apply to the other different festival sites especially those held on a large scale either nationally or internationally. Future studies should include festivals from different regions, scales and different ethnic group festivals.

The second limitation is related to the samples of the study. As for preliminary plan, the site chosen was the *Rumah Terbuka Hari Raya Aidilfitri*

Malaysia festival. However, due to the non confirmation available on the festival, the *Rumah Terbuka Hari Raya Aidilfitri* festival organised by the Perak state was selected as the site. Hence, due to the limitation of time constrain as well as lack of participation from the visitors in this study, only 160 samples were obtained. Future research should include a larger sample size and bigger festivals, so that the results would be further validated and generalisable. Apart from that, future research should look into the different perspective between the local visitors and international tourists. This could provide various different views from this study.

In spite of that, some useful insights and information were also gathered during the survey. Regardless of the current limitations, the present study brought some findings which may assist festival organisers and marketers in developing more appealing and successful festivals to visitors as well as to contribute a better understanding on the literature related to organising and management of cultural festivals.

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