

# WHAT REALLY MATTERS WHEN CHOOSING A HOTEL? THE CASE OF MIDDLE EAST TOURISTS IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify Middle East tourists' hotel selection attributes in Kuala Lumpur. Hotel selection dimensions identified from previous researches were used to help develop the framework of this descriptive study. Four important hotel attribute variables identified were location, services, cleanliness and facilities. Pilot test was conducted before the questionnaires were distributed to the Middle East tourists staying at the five star hotels within the Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle area. Data obtained was analyzed using Statistical Packages of Social Science (SPSS) and descriptive analysis was used to determine the most significant Middle East tourists' hotel selection attributes in Kuala Lumpur. Findings of the study will help hotel operators to understand and serve Middle East tourists better.

**Keywords:** hotel attributes, hotel selection, Middle East tourists in Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

Hotel industry trends have always been volatile and fluctuate around the year. Dube and Renaghan (1999) stated that due to the market complexity and the nature of the hotel products, internal factors such as hotel attributes are crucial element in sustaining and maintaining its performance. Furthermore, failure to pay attention to hotel attributes in selection intention could reduce the opportunity of repeat patronage by the customers to stay in the hotel. Hence, hotel attributes such as cleanliness, location price, services and facilities to name a few need to be stressed to help hotel operators better understand their customers' hotel selection behavior. (Chu and Choi,2000).

Year 2009 has given Malaysia a positive note for tourism industry. The amount of tourist receipts for the year 2009 was RM53,400 million, which was 55% increased from the year 2005 (M. Ariffin and Hasim, 2009; Tourism Malaysia, 2009). This particular year witnessed the highest increase of tourist arrivals at 60.9%, from Iran (Tourism Malaysia, 2010). One of the main reasons to this

phenomenon is the impact from the September 11th attacks which has led Middle Eastern tourists to switch their travelling destinations from Europe and United States of America to Asia (WTO, 2008). Indeed, this has been a blessing for the Malaysian economy. Most of the Middle East tourists had shifted their summer holiday vacation destination to Malaysia and other Asian countries. Furthermore, the fact that Malaysia is a Muslim country that shares a common Islamic culture and tradition has contributed to that factor as well (Zakariya, 2006). The Middle East tourists felt safer in terms of security, food, shopping and religious obligation (Ibrahim, Zahari, Sulaiman, Othman and Jusoff, 2009). Tourist arrivals from West Asians in Table 1.0 shows the highest growth rate was from Iran specifically as was recorded by Tourism Malaysia (2010) from 2005 until 2009.

**Table 1:** Tourist arrivals from West Asia 2005 until 2009.

West Asia	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Saudi Arabia	53,682	67,679	78,297	74,632	77,082
United Arab Emirates	29,606	35,118	38,170	34,994	22,108
Iran	12,309	18,753	27,215	63,165	101,664
Others	57,685	64,632	101,620	91,547	84,036
TOTAL	153,282	186,182	245,302	264,338	284,890

Source: Tourism Malaysia (2010)

The tourism industry and hotel operators should be aware of increment prospects in terms of profit and revenue that could be produced by Middle East tourists throughout their stay in Malaysia. This is because such development on Middle East tourists' market growth rate is expected to be a major market to Malaysian tourism in the future. Thus, it is rational to conduct a study regarding the particular market with an aim to develop strategies which can help enhance the growth rate as well as the satisfaction of this segment. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify and determine the most significant hotel selection attributes of Middle East tourists in Kuala Lumpur.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Hotel Attributes

The hotel industry basically is highly competitive and homogenous in terms of services and facilities. Thus, the availability of alternatives to the travelers can be regarded as important attributes for customer's future purchase behavior (Knutson, 1988). In order to be successful in business, one must understand how customers perceive the product or service attributes (Chu and Choi, 2000).

Customer that perceives an attribute that is important believes that the particular attribute will attempt a significant role in influencing the selection of a product or service (MacKenzie, 1986). By identifying the most influential hotel attributes in influencing tourist's hotel selection, hoteliers will be at an advantageous position to come up with strategies which meet the needs and expectations of tourists (Qu, Ryan and Chu, 2000). Hotel attributes are known as the services and facilities offered by the hotel hence, features of the attributes could lead towards customer selection process (Lewis, 1983)

### **Hotel Attributes Determinants**

A study by Atkinson (1988) showed that the most important attribute for travellers in hotel selection was cleanliness. It was followed by security, pricing and services offered. Wilensky and Buttle (1988) highlighted the significant elements evaluated by travellers which were personal service, physical attractiveness, opportunities for relaxation, standard of services, appealing image, and value for money. Mehta and Vera (1990) surveyed 194 guests in a Singapore hotel and compared 26 attributes across several market segments. They concluded that the key attributes used in selecting a hotel differed by market segment. Whereas Barsky and Labagh (1992) examined the three attributes that had been considered by travellers as important in choosing a hotel and leads to loyalty. They were (a) employee attitude; (b) location and (c) rooms condition. Meanwhile, Ananth et. al (1992) surveyed on 510 travelers and results showed that price and quality were rated as the most important attributes, followed by security and convenience of location. Lewis (1984b) discovered the main features in choosing hotel for business travellers were (a) location which had a majority of 88.5%, followed by (b) price, 44.4%, and finally (c) level of service accommodations which achieved 28.4% according to the findings. However, research findings by McCleary, Weaver and Lan (1994) argued that the top five business travellers attributes includes business facilities, basic facilities, personal services, free extras and convenient eating facilities. Cobanoglu et al. (2003) examined Turkish business travellers' hotel selection attributes. Their findings revealed that there were twelve major factors of hotel selection components which were service, price and value, security, extra amenities, technology, room comfort, food and beverage, complimentary goods, parking, location, health sensitivity, and single sensitivity. In addition, both leisure and business travellers had chosen general amenities to be the most significant determinants for hotel selection in a study conducted by Yavas and Babakus (2005).

Based on the literature review four main important hotel attributes by previous researches (Lee, 1992; Callan, 1998; Dube and Renaghan, 2000; Cobanoglu, 2001; Lockyer, 2005; Ibrahim et al., 2009) had been identified for this study which were 1) location, 2) services, 3) cleanliness and 4) facilities.

## **Important Hotel Selection Attributes of Middle East Tourists in Malaysia**

Middle East tourists in Malaysia demanded a very high level of service during their travel experiences (M.Ariffin and Hasim, 2009). They prefer five-star hotels and high quality service apartment even amongst young people. Moreover, they prefer to stay in suites or inter-connecting rooms which allow convenient access to their other family members (Visit Britain, 2009). They were more detailed and emphasized more on services and facilities attributes offered by hotel. Che Mat et al. (2009) highlighted that the Arabic language and translation for the West Asian tourists became commercialized and important among both hotel management and tourists. This is because the language is important to serve as a major medium to communicate and understand their wants and needs. M.Ariffin and Hasim (2009) claimed there were very few studies which examined the travel behavior of Middle Eastern tourists in Malaysia). Findings from their study indicated that 78 percent of Middle East tourists stayed in five-star city hotels. Thus, strategic location of a particular hotel was an important attribute in hotel selection for Middle East tourists. Ibrahim et al. (2009) identified that majority of Middle East tourists emphasized on front office service provided by the hotel as a main attribute. They found that Middle East tourists preferred fast check-in service and expected to be allocated to their rooms as fast as possible, after an extensive and long-haul journey.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As this study focused on identifying the hotel selection attributes of Middle East tourists in Kuala Lumpur, a quantitative approach was used for this study as the data collected are measurements in which numbers are used directly to represent the characteristic of research interest (Hair et. al, 2008). Nevertheless, descriptive study was applied throughout the study to describe the characteristics of Middle East tourists and their hotel selection considerations. This is in line with the other previous hotel attributes studies, which were mostly descriptive in nature (Lewis 1984a; Dube and Renaghan, 1999; Dolnicar and Otter, 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2009; Fawzy et al., 2010). Corresponding to that, questionnaires were adapted from previous researches in obtaining the required information from Middle East tourist stayed in five-star hotels at Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle area.

## **RESULTS**

### **Demographic profile**

A total of 289 usable questionnaires were collected for this study. The highest

age group distribution was 20 to 29 years old with a total of 172 respondents (59.5%). In terms of the country of origin, Iran and Saudi Arabia corresponds the majority of the respondents for the study which was a total of 75 (26.0%) and 74 (25.6%) respectively. Positively, the highest frequency in terms of times visited Malaysia was two times, with a total of 40.5% Middle East tourists stayed in the hotel between four to six nights. Furthermore, main purpose of visit for this study was holiday (79.6%) and the top respondents were from Iran, followed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In addition, 31.49% of the respondents traveled with family consisting of spouse and children. Interestingly the demographic and travelling pattern from this study revealed that the Middle East tourists intend to visit Malaysia again are notably the young married families.

### **Important Hotel Attributes**

Among the location attribute items, “convenient location” scored the highest mean which was  $M= 4.83(SD= 0.385)$ . This finding was supported by a study conducted by Rivers, Toh and Alaoui (1991) in which hotel selection decisions were examined and convenience of location received the highest rating. However, Annanth et al. (1992) argued that “price and quality” was rated the most important attribute across all age categories, followed by attributes related to “security” and “convenience of location”.

Meanwhile, among the functional service attributes, the highest rated by respondents was “speed of service” which received a mean score of  $M= 4.61(SD=0.489)$ . Taken further, a good service relationship is a valuable competitive advantage for the business (Wei, Ruys and Muller, 1999). Fawzy (2010) amended that “accuracy of wake-up call” was the most important factor in hotel selection according to the business travelers who stayed at five-star hotel in Cairo. Carev (2008) determined that services have become an integral component of lifestyle and such hotel attribute element should be monitored at all time.

The highest ranked cleanliness attribute item by respondents was “hotel room” which recorded a mean of  $M= 4.70$  and standard deviation of  $SD= 0.468$ . Knutson (1988) argued that both business and leisure travellers considered cleanliness as important in selecting a hotel for the first time and revisits. Lockyer (2002, 2005) noted that cleanliness was highly rated by hotel guests as the main hotel selection determinant. Callan (1998) stressed that cleanliness of hotel room has been identified as the most important factor. Dolnicar (2002) further argued that hygiene and cleanliness was one very critical factor for business travellers.

Furthermore, among all facilities attribute items “bathroom, furniture and amenities” were found to be most significant with a mean score of  $M= 4.43$  and standard deviation  $SD= 0.747$ . This could be explained by the travel pattern of most Middle East tourist in Malaysia as they preferred to stay at five-star city hotels and probably expected to receive five-star facilities. Yavas and Babakus (2005) emphasized that general amenities and facilities were the main aspects in choosing a hotel for both leisure and business travellers. However, result from Qu

et al. (2000) argued that quality of room facilities contributed most to international travellers' satisfaction level with hotel.

### **Important Hotel Selection Attribute of Middle East Tourists in Kuala Lumpur**

The most significant hotel selection attribute of Middle East tourists in Kuala Lumpur was cleanliness which recorded a mean score (M) of 4.4830 (SD=0.278), followed by service attribute, location attribute and facilities attribute which was the least important hotel selection attribute of Middle East tourists in Kuala Lumpur. The importance of cleanliness was also evident in a study in the same region conducted by Lee (1992) in which the Japanese hotel guests in Taiwan chose cleanliness as the most important hotel selection attribute. Moreover, Saleh and Ryan (1992) concluded that, of the 30 hotel attributes identified in their study, cleanliness was a determining factor for guests' selection of hotels. This was supported by Lockyer (2003) who identified cleanliness as a strong indicator in the selection of accommodation.

### **IMPLICATION**

Due to the high growth rates in both tourist arrivals and tourist receipts in Malaysia as stated earlier, Middle East tourists have great prospective and high potential for the tourism industry in the country, as they tend to stay longer and spend more than other tourists based on findings from previous studies. This study contributed to enhance the knowledge on Middle East tourists' hotel selection attributes in Kuala Lumpur. The results from this study is valuable in creating awareness and understanding of Middle East tourists' hotel selections attributes which could be useful for both hotel and tourism industry in Malaysia. Hotel and tour operators play a central role in ensuring that the hotel selection attributes identified from this study are at least well maintained if not improved. It would be advantageous for hotels, in terms of financial performance, to deliver what exactly is needed and wanted to the Middle East segment, a fast growing market in Malaysia. It is hoped that findings from this study may offer some insights for Malaysian hotel and tourism organizations to better understand the hotel selection attributes of Middle East tourists. As a result, loyalty of Middle East tourists towards Malaysia may contribute to achieving high tourism earnings for the country. Since Malaysia, known as a Muslim country, offers Islamic culture and tradition, the Muslim Middle East tourists feel safer as regard to food, security and religious obligation (Ibrahim et al., 2009). Furthermore, one of the greatest challenges hotel organizations face today is to overcome the unpredictable traveling pattern by tourists worldwide (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000). It is worth noticing that the hotel attributes identified in this study play a major role in predicting the hotel selection behaviors of Middle East market which is rapidly growing in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION

This study has made a significant contribution to determine the hotel attributes and identify the most significant hotel selection attribute of Middle East tourists in Kuala Lumpur. However, there were some limitations which need to be addressed for the benefits of future researches. Firstly, limitation relates to the geographical aspect of this study. This study initially intended to identify the hotel attributes of Middle East tourist in five-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur Golden Triangle as it was noted from previous researches that this particular area recorded the highest number of Middle East tourists (Zakariya, 2006; Ibrahim et al., 2009; M. Arrifin and Hasim, 2009; Che Mat et al., 2009). Results and findings from this study could not represent the whole Malaysia regarding hotel selection attributes of Middle East tourists. Hence, further research on Middle East tourists should be conducted in a broader view to represent hotel selection attributes for this particular market segment in Malaysia as a whole. Second limitation was regarding the scope of the study. This study identified four main dominant variables of hotel attributes based on previous researches which were location, services, cleanliness and facilities. Due to time constraints, other hotel attributes were not considered in this study. Future research are suggested to determine all possible hotel attributes of Middle East tourists' who visit Malaysia in order to attain and increase tourism performance in terms of their arrivals, receipts and the average length of stay in the future.

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