

Service quality and tourist satisfaction at homestays

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism has been increasingly investing for the development of homestay destinations, which have a deeply positive and sustainable socio-economic impact on rural communities. Tourists who visit these less-trodden areas of the country in turn have an opportunity to experience its diverse cultural heritage in a more intimate and personable way. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that contribute to tourists' satisfaction with the service they received at Homestay Banghuris in Sepang, Selangor, Malaysia. A total of 80 tourists willingly participated in a research questionnaire distributed at the homestay. They were selected by the simple random sampling method. The study examined the relationship between service quality and tourist satisfaction and realize that there were positive and meaningful relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry is defined by its association with travel and leisure (Cunha & Cunha, 2005) and is considered as one of the fastest-growing and most lucrative areas of economic growth (Baldinger & Rubinson, 1996). During the past few decades, the number of people worldwide leaving their home cities or countries in pursuit of tourist vacationing has increased dramatically, perhaps in direct correlation with the ever-increasing stresses of modern life. Rural tourism has recently begun to attract more attention from governments, non-governmental organizations, and industry stakeholders due to its role in providing profit not only to a nation's central bank, but also to its citizens who live outside the city. As previous studies (e.g., Akbar & Parvez, 2009) have asserted, one of the primary goals of tourism should be to raise the quality of life for local people through more job opportunities. However, the fact that mass development tends to negatively impact the environment (e.g., through deforestation, pollution, depletion of natural resources, etc.) means rural communities are often double-minded about tourism in their backyard.

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When plans for tourism development are implemented in rural areas, those in charge rarely take into account the perspectives and needs of locals, thus further alienating them. Rural tourism works best when it conserves indigenous resources and culture and earns the sincere support of community members while, at the same time, benefiting tourists and industry players. As an alternative to hotels or hostels, homestays provide tourists with the unique opportunity to see and experience first-hand the life of a typical Malaysian family. In Malaysia, homestays date back to the early 1970s when a local lady from Kampung Cherating Lama, Pahang by the name of Mak Long turned her humble home into a “drifter enclave” for travellers looking for breakfast, dinner, and accommodation. In the beginning, most of the pioneers in the homestay market had their establishments along the beaches. The idea of what a homestay could offer visitors expanded in the late 1980s with a program designed by the current President of the Homestay Association of Malaysia Tuan Haji Shariman to host Japanese youths with “adopted” families and have them participate in communal activities designed to teach them about rural and pastoral life.

A similar model has been used ever since by Malaysia’s Ministry of Agriculture to promote rural development. The name “Banghuris” is an abbreviation representing a cluster of three villages with a total population of 3,000: Kampung Bukit Bangkong, Kampung Hulu Chuchuh and Kampung Hulu Teris (i.e., Bang-hu-ris). They are near to each other and located in Sepang District, Selangor, around a twenty-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Agro-tourism is one of Banghuris’s major selling points. Visitors can go on educational and interactive tours of coconut, star fruit, and guava orchards along with coffee farms and rubber and palm oil plantations. There are also excursions to historical sites in Bukit Bangkong as well as opportunities to participate in local cultural traditions, for example, making handicrafts. Homestay Banghuris began with only 18 guest houses, but has since expanded to 87, making it one of the largest homestays in the country. Its reputation was bolstered after Kampung Hulu Chuchuh won the Selangor State-Level Best Village Competition in 1992. This paved the way for several more recognitions and awards over the years such as Malaysia’s Best Homestay Award in 2004, the national-level Ilham Desa Competition in 2005, and the sixth Ministry of Tourism Award. All this has motivated local villagers to take the initiative in developing their area for tourists.

Outside parties that have also invested in sustaining and expanding the homestay program there include the Sepang District Municipal Council, the Ministry of Tourism, and a number of travel agencies. Homestay operators must deal with a variety of external and internal challenges in managing their establishments. These include, for example, making sure employees understand how to interact with foreign tourists and make their stay as enjoyable as possible, communicating to visitors the meaning of local cultural practices and beliefs in an accessible way, and promoting the sharing as well as preserving of indigenous heritage and traditions. The objectives of this study are to identify the sources of tourist satisfaction with service quality and explore areas for improvement at the homestay with regard to accommodations, activities, excursions, and promotional initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Rural Tourism

Rural tourism, often a variant of ecotourism, is designed to offer tourists a glimpse into the lifestyle, food, and arts of people in the countryside. It generates local jobs and incomes and contributes valuably to the rural economy, particularly in the sale of locally made products. The selling opportunities of rural tourism destinations – with their focus on showcasing traditional cultures that are often at risk of being eroded away – is aided immensely by a growing consciousness worldwide about the negative impacts of modernization with regard to indigenous peoples. By the same token, increased awareness about climate change and environmentalism has helped to promote interest among tourists in visiting localities which are considered more pristine and less tainted by industrial externalities.

2.2. Service Quality

Service in the context of a business or industry is largely intangible and not necessarily easy to measure, yet researchers have come up with several useful definitions. Quinn et al. (1987) described services as economic activities which are in general consumed at the time they are “produced” and provide added value in the form of amusement, comfort, healthiness, convenience and other customer needs and wants. Some studies refer to service quality as what the consumer gains from the product along with the amount he or she is willing to pay for it. The more widely accepted conceptualization of service quality is more comparative in nature and focuses on the difference between a customer’s expectations of service performance and his or her actual experience of service performance (Lewis & Mitchell, 1990; Dotchin & Oakland, 1994; Bloemer et al., 1999; Kara et al., 2005). The five-fold SERVQUAL criteria of responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles are reliable and commonly used measure of service quality in tourism studies (Gowan et al., 2001; Straughan & Cooper, 2002; Zhao et al., 2002).

2.3. Customer Satisfaction

Due to its integralness to the success of the industry, customer satisfaction is one of the most researched topics in tourism studies (Gursoy et al., 2007). It has been commonly defined as the emotional state or sense of overall enjoyment experienced by a customer after he or she has purchased or interacted with a particular product (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Sanchez et al., 2006; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991; Um et al., 2006; AlBattat & Romli, 2017). Others have added that this feeling of happiness or contentment is relative to the customer’s initial perception of the product’s ability to fulfil his or her expectations (Choi & Chu, 2001; Wbjaj et al., 2018, Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kotler, 2008). That customer satisfaction is highly correlated with customer loyalty means companies that invest in analysing how customers feel about their product or experience are likely to remain more competitive (Taylor et al., 2004; Homburg et al., 2008).

2.4. Customer Loyalty

Loyalty is the industry term for a customer’s level of commitment to a certain store, service provider or brand in a market of other available alternatives (Shankar et al., 2003). Previous research has delineated customer loyalty as either behavioural or attitudinal in nature (Zeithaml, 2000). The behavioural aspect is reflected in a customer’s continued desire to purchase and use a company’s products (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Perhaps the greatest proof of this kind of loyalty is a customer’s willingness to enthusiastically recommend said company to others. The attitudinal aspect speaks to a customer’s sense of affiliation or belonging to a particular business. Both aspects work in tandem to promote loyalty and in turn repeat purchases, which are the bedrock of profitability over time.

3. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to find the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The study designs a questionnaire and distributes it among the people who visited the tourist destination. Quantitative research methods were used to conduct this study. 80 respondents selected via simple random sampling participated in the filling out of the questionnaire, which was collected on site at Homestay Banghuris. Questions were adopted from the previous literature and collected using the simple random sampling. The data were analysed using SPSS20 software. The questionnaire was designed with SERVQUAL criteria in mind. Fig. 1 demonstrates personal characteristics of the participants. As Fig. 1 shows, 46.3% of research participants were male and 53.8% were female and most of them were less than 30 years of age. Moreover, nearly 73% of the participants were either from Malay or Chinese backgrounds while 96% of the participants were from Malaysia. In our survey, 65% of the participants were single and 35% of them were married. The vast majority of them had a tertiary education with 20 working in the public sector, 56 in the private sector, and 4 in other occupations. 33 respondents reported incomes between RM3001-RM5000 while the RM1000-RM3000 and less-than-RM1000 brackets each had 23 respondents.

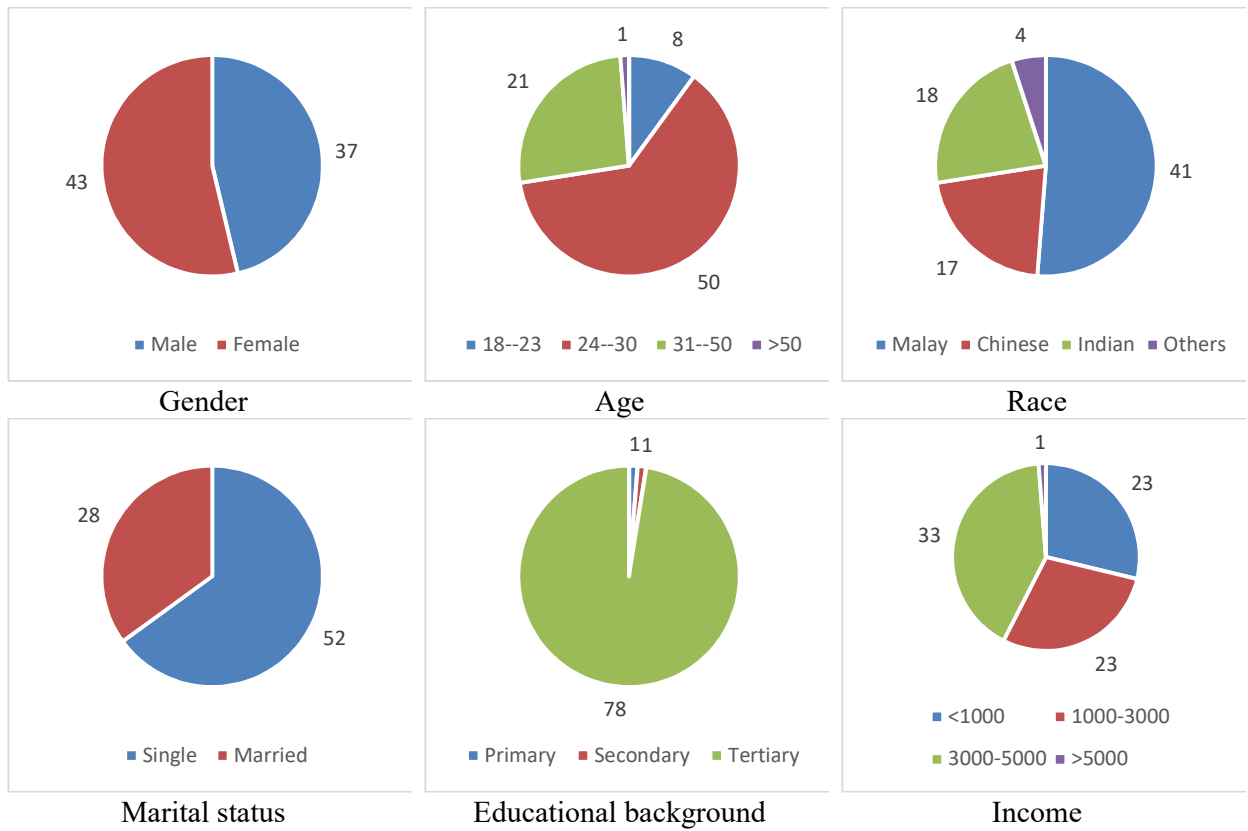


Fig. 1. Personal characteristics of the participants

Fig. 2 also shows the methods and the reason the participants found information.

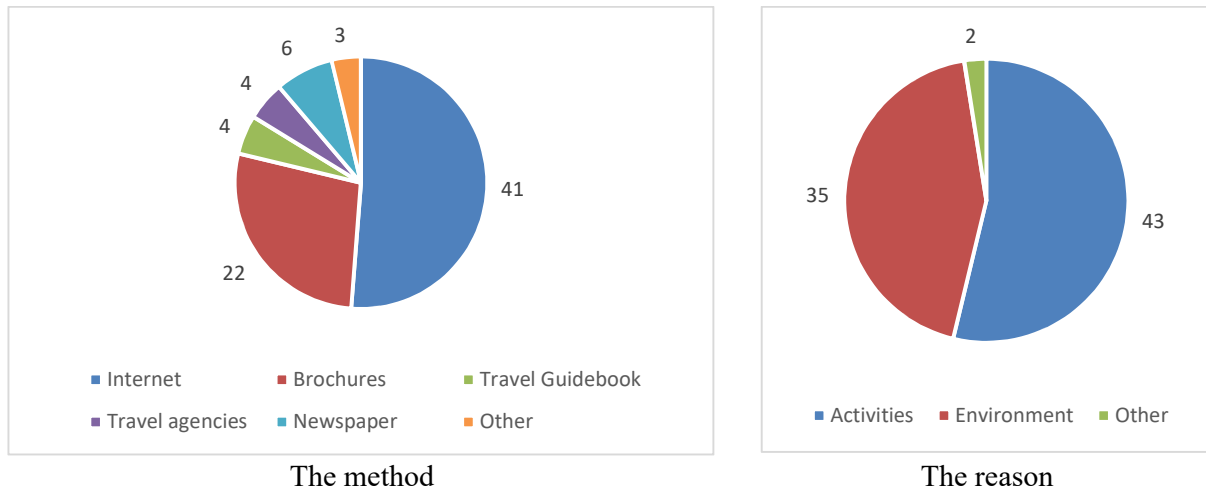


Fig. 2. Reason and method of finding information about Homestay Banghurus

As we can observe from Fig. 2, most participants found their information through Internet and Brochures and the main reason was associated with either activities or the environment. In our survey, 95% of the participants believed the information they found was correct and nearly all of them believed that promotional materials persuade them to choose to visit this place. The implementation of Kolmogorov Smirnov test indicates that all data are normally distributed. Therefore, the survey uses Pearson correlation to examine the hypotheses of the survey.

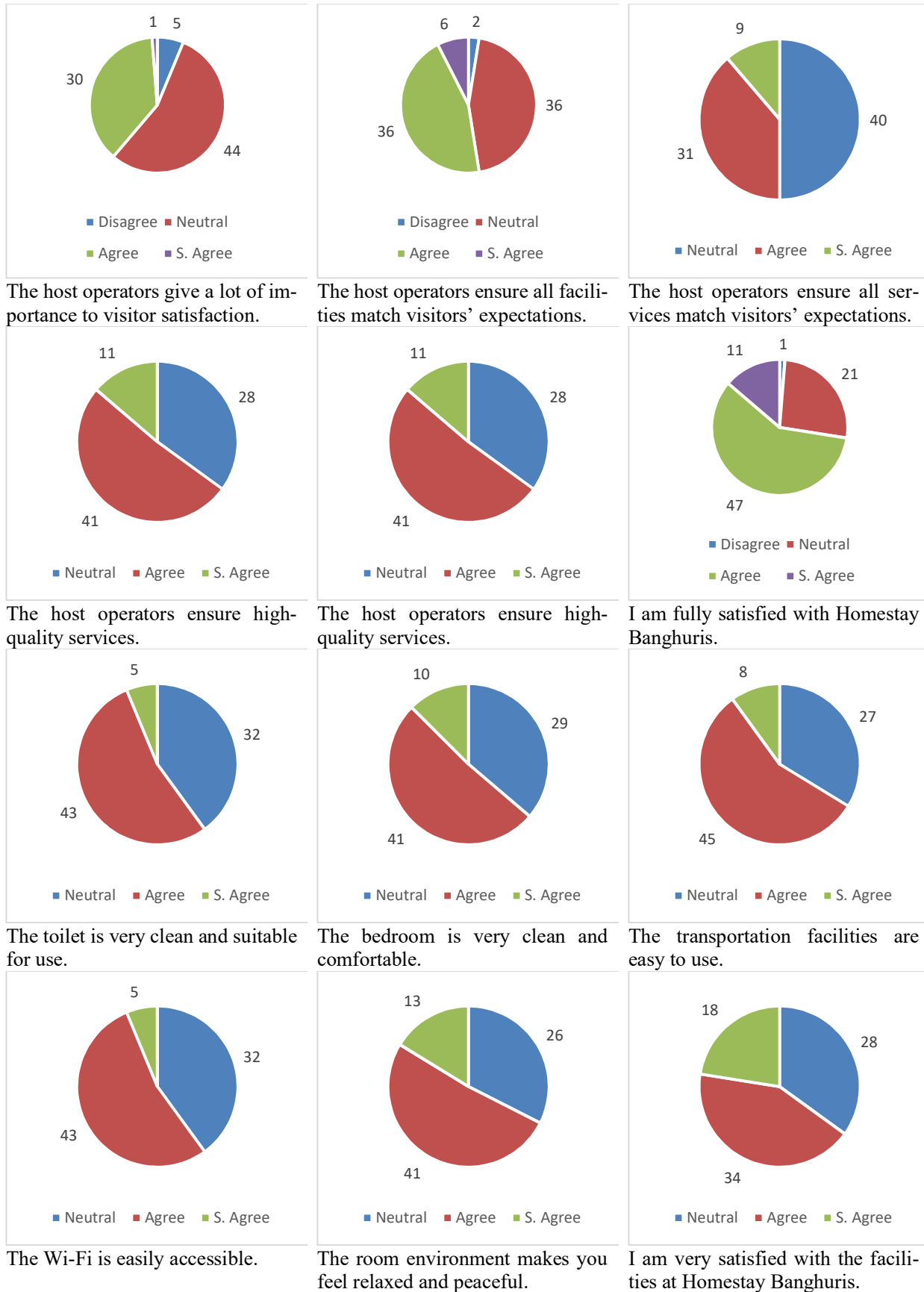


Fig. 3. The level of customer satisfaction

On all accounts, respondents were satisfied with the cleanliness of the bathrooms, comfort of the rooms, convenience of the transportation facilities and accessibility of the Wi-Fi. Reliability statistical analysis resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.770. Table 1 demonstrates the Pearson correlation ratios among different components of service quality. As we can observe, there are positive and meaningful relationship between different components of the service quality.

Table 1

The results of Pearson correlation

		Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy
Tangibles	Pearson Correlation	1	.654(**)	.595(**)	.537(**)	.474(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
Reliability	Pearson Correlation	.616(**)	1	.546(**)	.543(**)	.605(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	.570(**)	.624(**)	1	.635(**)	.639(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
Assurance	Pearson Correlation	.584(**)	.587(**)	.509(**)	1	.689(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	.496(**)	.493(**)	.523(**)	.610(**)	1
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	80	80	80	80	80

** (P<0.01)

Table 2

The results of the Pearson correlation among questions associated with Host Operators

		The host operators give a lot of importance to visitor satisfaction.	The host operators ensure all facilities match visitors' expectations.	The host operators ensure all services match visitors' expectations.	The host operators ensure high-quality services.	I am fully satisfied with Homestay Banghurus.
The host operators give a lot of importance to visitor satisfaction.	Pearson Correlation	1	.654(**)	.595(**)	.537(**)	.474(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
The host operators ensure all facilities match visitors' expectations.	Pearson Correlation	.616(**)	1	.546(**)	.543(**)	.605(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
The host operators ensure all services match visitors' expectations.	Pearson Correlation	.570(**)	.624(**)	1	.635(**)	.639(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
The host operators ensure high-quality services.	Pearson Correlation	.584(**)	.587(**)	.509(**)	1	.689(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80
I am fully satisfied with Homestay Banghurus.	Pearson Correlation	.496(**)	.493(**)	.523(**)	.610(**)	1
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	80	80	80	80	80

** (P<0.01)

The results of Table 2 also show that there were strong and positive correlations between the questions of the survey. The highest correlation is between the level of satisfaction and the high-quality services. In addition, there was a positive and relatively high correlation between the level of customer satisfaction and their expectations. Next, we examine the Pearson correlation between different components of the survey associated with accommodation. Table 3 summarizes the results of our survey. As we can

observe from the results, there are some positive and meaningful relationships between different components of the survey.

Table 3

The results of Pearson correlation between different components of accommodation services

		The toilet is very clean and suitable for use.	The bedroom is very clean and comfortable.	The transportation facilities are easy to use.	The Wi-Fi is easily accessible.	The room environment makes you feel relaxed and peaceful.	I am very satisfied with the facilities at Homestay Banghuris.
The toilet is very clean and suitable for use.	Pearson Correlation	1	.725(**)	.689(**)	.562(**)	.484(**)	.521(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
The bedroom is very clean and comfortable.	Pearson Correlation	.624(**)	1	.484(**)	.487(**)	.409(**)	.491(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
The transportation facilities are easy to use.	Pearson Correlation	.562(**)	.416(**)	1	.409(**)	.491(**)	.573(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
The Wi-Fi is easily accessible.	Pearson Correlation	.512(**)	.496(**)	.493(**)	1	.689(**)	.585(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
The room environment makes you feel relaxed and peaceful.	Pearson Correlation	.708(**)	.623(**)	.600(**)	.605(**)	1	.658(**)
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
I am very satisfied with the facilities at Homestay Banghuris.	Pearson Correlation	.470(**)	.458(**)	.600(**)	.605(**)	.623(**)	1
	Sig. (2tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80

** (P<0.01)

In summary, we can come to conclusion that there were strong and positive correlations between service quality and tourist satisfaction. In fact, most correlation ratios were found to be positive and meaningful when the level of significance was one percent.

4. Conclusion

In this study, quality factors at Homestay Banghuris in Sepang were analysed with the goal of better understanding the dependent variable of tourist satisfaction. Overall, customer expectations were met with regard to the quality of facilities and services provided. Nonetheless, significantly fewer respondents marked “strongly agree” than marked “agree” on the questionnaire. Findings have revealed that one of the main concerns at the Homestay was the lack of paved or well-maintained roads linking each of the three villages to each other. An infrastructure upgrade is thus recommended in addition to alternative transportation routes to avoid traffic congestion. Stronger cooperation between homestay owners, authorities, and local community members will facilitate this and other future development initiatives to make Homestay Banghuris and even more attractive and robust rural tourist destination.

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