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## Service quality and previous experience as a moderator in determining tourists' satisfaction with rural tourism destinations in Malaysia: A partial least squares approach

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### Abstract

This paper examined tourists' perception of service quality in rural tourism destinations on satisfaction as well as the moderating effect of previous experience on this relationship. Data from 309 valid questionnaires was analyzed using variance-based Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) method. Perceived service quality has a significant positive influence on tourist satisfaction. Moreover, previous experience moderates the relationship between perceived service quality and satisfaction. The findings of this study offer some interesting implications for practitioners and researchers.

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### 1. Introduction

Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) is gearing the nation to become a fully developed nation by 2020 with a bullish target set to achieve 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion (US\$48 billion) in tourism receipt by the targeted period (PEMANDU, 2010). Hence, the quality of all forms of tourism in Malaysia has to achieve the minimum standards of tourist satisfaction if repeat visitation is expected to help the nation achieve its target. As a nation rich with its multicultural and biodiversity, the Malaysian rural tourism sector is growing to

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become an important segment for the tourism industry (Lo, Mohamad, Songan, & Yeo, 2012). Both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Borneo Island that consist of Sabah and Sarawak) have one of the best ecotourism destinations in the region (Lifestyle Asia, 2012). Most of these world class destinations are set in the rural landscape of Malaysia.

Rural tourism includes a wide range of attractions and activities that usually take place in agricultural or non-urban settings (Lanea, 1994; Frochot, 2005). Rural tourism is defined by the OECD (as cited in Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000), as tourism taking place in the countryside. This concept was introduced as a new form of tourism by the Malaysian Government during the Seventh Malaysia Plan period (1996 – 2000). In 2001, the Rural Tourism Master Plan was established which defined rural tourism as:

*“tourism that provides opportunities to visitors to visit rural areas and rural attractions, and to experience the culture and heritage of Malaysia, thereby providing socio-economic benefits for local communities...the proximity of many of these rural areas to the hinterland and rainforest also offers visitors an opportunity to extend their holiday and enjoy those unique natural resources”* (as cited in Hamzah, 2004, p. 9).

Further to this rural tourism was redefined for the Malaysian context by Nair, Uma Thevi, Sushila Devi, and King (2014). In principal, rural tourism destinations essentially have distinct characteristics - wide-open spaces, low levels of tourism development, and opportunities for visitors to directly experience agricultural and/or natural environments (Irshad, 2010). Hence, rural tourism is growing at a phenomenal rate in Malaysia as the nation continues to attract high tourist arrival and is expected to be a major contributor to the nation’s tourism receipt (Siow, Abidin, Nair, & Ramachandran, 2011).

For rural tourism to be sustainable and make a significant contribution to the national agenda, tourists’ satisfaction is critical. An assessment of tourists’ satisfaction of the rural destinations visited can assist rural tourism players to have a better understanding of tourists’ perceptions and focus their efforts to enhance tourists’ positive experiences in the rural destinations. The level of satisfaction attained by an individual may influence their future intentions, in terms of revisiting a destination and/or recommending it to other people (Naidoo, Ramseook, & Seegoolam, 2011). In the context of rural tourism, the quality of service offered by rural tourism providers is an essential factor in attracting customers (Rozman et. al, 2009) and as destinations are one of the products of rural tourism, it is necessary to assess the quality of these destinations. Furthermore, it is the customer who decides on whether a service is of quality or not. Hence, tourists’ evaluation of service quality is of prime importance (Lopez-Toro, Diaz-Muno, & Perez-Moreno, 2010).

### *1.1. Service Quality and Tourist Satisfaction*

The SERVQUAL model has been extensively used to measure perceived service quality across many service sectors including tourism (Albacete-Saez, Fuentes-Fuentes, & Llorens-Montes, 2007). However, there is criticism regarding its dimensionality (Lopez-Toro et al., 2010) and inadequacy to measure service quality in the tourism sector (Augustyn & Seakhoa-King, 2004). As a result, researchers have either modified the SERVQUAL to suit their research context or developed alternative scales to assess service quality in tourism, including tourist destinations. Narayan, Rajendran, Sai, and Gopalan (2009) developed a scale to measure service quality in tourism in India. The scale developed through a detailed review of literature and exploratory research had ten dimensions, namely core-tourism experience, information, hospitality, fairness of price, hygiene, amenities, value for money, logistics, food and security. Meanwhile, Lopez-Toro et al. (2010) assessed service quality of a sun and beach tourist destination in Spain by modifying the SERVQUAL.

In addition to evaluating service quality, assessing tourists’ satisfaction with destination is important because it influences the choice of destination, the decision to return (Huh, Uysal, & McCleary, 2006) and word-of-mouth recommendation (Ozdemir et al., 2012). A destination has been defined as the location of a group of attractions as well as tourists’ facilities and services (Kim & Brown, 2012). Consequently, tourist satisfaction with tourism destinations has been extensively investigated (Chen, Lee, Chen, & Huang, 2011; Eusebio & Vieira, 2013; Huh, & Uysal, 2003; Huh et al., 2006; Kim & Brown, 2012; Kozak, 2001; Lo, Songan, Mohamad, & Yeo, 2011). Despite numerous studies on tourist satisfaction with tourism destinations, limited research attention has focused on rural tourism destinations.

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