Skills Influence on Service Quality Among Tourist Guides

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Abstract

The services provided by tourist guides are based on their professional skills. These individuals are responsible for guiding groups of tourists and ensuring their safety and comfort. Besides having the necessary knowledge about the tourism industry, they also need to develop their skills in dealing with various travel-related issues. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine skills influence the service quality (reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy, responsiveness). The population consists of tourist guides in three districts in Sarawak which are Southwest Sarawak (Kuching), Central Sarawak (Sibu) and Northeast Sarawak (Miri). The data for this study was collected by using the stratified random sampling. A set of questionnaires was used for the data gathering. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling technique using PLS SEM 3.3 version software. The findings showed that skills have influence reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy, responsiveness. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the various aspects of Malaysia's tourism industry to help the country's Ministry of Tourism and its agencies develop effective policies and programs. It also aims to set the stage for future studies related to the industry.

Keywords: Empathy; Skill; Reliability; Responsiveness Assurance; Service Quality Tangible.

1.0 Introduction

Tourist guides play a vital role in the tourism industry, as they are responsible for keeping travel agencies running smoothly (Hwang and Lee, 2019). They are also the individuals who introduce tourists to the various attractions and activities of the country. Due to their contributions to the tourism industry, the role of tour guides has been acknowledged by the industry. The way tour guides perform can influence the perception of a travel agency's business image among tourists. They are considered the key individuals that influence the success of group tours. Their professional skills can also make or break the experiences of tourists (Al Jahwari et al., 2016).

The tourism industry was working toward enhancing the professional capabilities of tour guides in order to improve their performance and attract more tourists (Andersson et al., 2017). These skills can be seen as part of the

travel products that the industry offers. According to Mossberg and colleagues, these kinds of competencies can influence the perceptions of tourists about the quality of tour guiding. Tourist guides are among the most critical human resources in the tourism industry, and they play a vital role in the success of travel agencies. To acquire a competitive edge in today's highly competitive market, firms need to provide innovative services and high-quality products. Besides catering to niche markets, tour guides also need to develop their professional skills in order to enhance the satisfaction of tourists (Kuo et al., 2018). Thus, this current study was proposed to examine skills influence the service quality (reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy, responsiveness).

Skills, on the other hand, refer to the ability to perform tasks, whether mental or physical, with desired outcomes (Marrelli, 1998). Skills can range from highly concrete and easily identifiable tasks, such as filing documents alphabetically, to those that are less tangible and more abstract, such as managing a quality improvement project (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999). These cognitive and physical competencies or capabilities contribute significantly to one's competence in successfully completing tasks with various potential outcomes (Marrelli, 1998). A person's abilities typically consist of a combination of fundamental skills that enable them to function and learn. Developing these skills often requires a significant amount of time and innate potential (Marrelli et al., 2005). For example, some individuals may naturally excel in analytical thinking, while others may find it challenging to develop this skill. This study examines how people utilise the model as a framework to develop their skills. The three dimensions of know-how or skills include learning by doing, existing skills, and instructional leadership.

Learning by doing refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and skills through hands-on experience and practical engagement in tasks rather than through theoretical instruction alone. According to Cherry, K. (2022), this method, also known as experiential learning, emphasizes hands-on activities where learners actively participate in the learning process, reflecting on their experiences to gain deeper understanding and retention of the material.

Existing skills refer to the knowledge and abilities that an individual already possesses, which can be built upon when learning new skills. These skills form the foundation for further development and enhance the ability to acquire new competencies. Recognizing and leveraging existing skills is crucial for effective learning and development, as it helps in tailoring educational programs and training to individual needs, ensuring a more efficient and targeted growth process (Van Dam, N. (2018). Working with individuals who have a deeper understanding of the task at hand oneself often helps employees acquire new skills (Hoffman, 2020). In addition, both knowledge and attitudes encompass the aspect of leadership (Northouse, 2021). Instructional leadership involves guidance and support from guides or leaders who facilitate the learning process and provide direction and feedback.

2.0 Literature Review

The tourism industry is a dynamic and multifaceted sector that plays a crucial role in the global economy, contributing significantly to employment, cultural exchange, and economic growth. At the heart of this industry are tourist guides, who serve as ambassadors of local culture, history, and natural beauty, bridging the gap between visitors and the destinations they explore (World Tourism Organization, 2019). The quality of service provided by tourist guides is a pivotal factor that can greatly influence the overall experience of tourists. It is, therefore, essential to understand the skills that impact service quality among tourist guides (Smith, 2020).

The concept of service quality in tourism encompasses a range of elements, including reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Tourist guides are often the first point of contact for visitors and play a critical role in shaping their perceptions and satisfaction levels. Their ability to deliver high-quality service depends on a diverse set of skills, such as communication, knowledge, interpersonal abilities, problem-solving, and adaptability (Weiler & Black, 2015).

According to Rabotić (2010), effective communication is paramount in guiding, as it ensures that information is accurately conveyed and understood by tourists from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Knowledgeable guides, well-versed in the history, culture, and geography of the area, can provide enriching and insightful experiences that elevate the tourist experience (Ap and Wong, 2001). Interpersonal skills, including empathy and emotional intelligence, enable guides to connect with tourists on a personal level, fostering a welcoming and enjoyable environment (Pond, 1993).

Moreover, problem-solving skills are essential for addressing unexpected issues that may arise during tours, from logistical challenges to personal needs of the tourists. Adaptability, or the ability to adjust to varying situations and diverse groups of tourists, further enhances a guide's effectiveness in delivering quality service (Zhang and Chow, 2004).

This study aims to explore the influence of these critical skills on the service quality provided by tourist guides. By examining the relationship between specific skill sets and the perceived quality of service, we can identify areas for improvement and professional development. The findings will contribute to the broader understanding of service quality in tourism and provide actionable insights for training and enhancing the competencies of tourist guides. This, in turn, will help in fostering positive tourist experiences and sustaining the competitive edge of destinations in the global tourism market.

2.1 Skills and Reliability

In order to perform their duties efficiently in the workplace, employees must develop their specialized skills (Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). This can be done through the acquisition of various skills and the practice of them. Developing

these skills can help employees improve their performance and ensure that their organizations are able to retain their customers (Sao Joao, Spowart, & Taylor, 2019). The ability of employees to provide their customers with timely and accurate services is a key factor that influences their loyalty and satisfaction (Meesala & Paul, 2018). Having a lack of competence can also affect their customers' perceptions of their reliability (Aldubayan, Aljuraiban, & Aldisi, 2019). A poor performance by an employee when it comes to delivering on time can affect their customers' perception of their reliability. This can also lead to a reduction in their loyalty (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). Hence the hypothesis is:

H1:   There is a relationship between skills and reliability of service quality.

2.2 Skills and Assurance

The motivation of employees to improve their skills affects their ability to provide customers with the best possible service (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). In order to win their trust and confidence, an employee's interaction skills should be improved (Garrubba & Yap, 2019). A positive customer experience leads to an increase in the quality of service provided by employees (Rosha & Kaur, 2018). This is also beneficial for the organization's long- term viability (Fredrick & Christopher, 2019). To improve the quality of service, travel and tourism companies can train their personnel in various languages and enhance their knowledge transfer skills (Elbaz, Agag, & Alkathiri, 2018). According to a study conducted by Mohammad Ali, Mojtahaba Fattahi, Hossein, and Amin (2019), employees' ability to earn customers' trust and confidence is linked to their competency. This shows the importance of assuring clients. Hence the hypothesis is:

H2:   There is a relationship between skills and assurance of service quality.

2.3 Skills and Tangibles

The ability to improve an organization's tangibility is a skill that is required to ensure that it can effectively compete in the market (Pakurár, Hadda, Nagy, Popp, & Oláh, 2019). Regular maintenance of the physical appearance of employees and the establishment of effective facilities are also important to ensure that the company can effectively compete. The skills that employees develop in their organizations' physical facilities are also important to their performance (Ajegbomogun & Divaolu, 2018). This is because the level of tangibility of the facility can be influenced by the various factors that affect its effectiveness. Having the necessary skills can help employees provide effective instructions to their customers (Alexiev, Janssen, & Hertog, 2018). In order to improve the customer satisfaction, an organization should provide its employees with new knowledge about the latest equipment (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019).

According to study by Pakurár, Hadda, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh (2019), the lack of training regarding the proper use of facilities can lead to inefficient customer service. Aside from this, the ability to maintain the appearance of

staff members can also improve the company's image. The appearance of staff members can affect how customers feel about the company (Dossinger, Wanberg, Choi, & Leslie, 2019). Having the necessary skills and knowledge can help employees improve their physical appearance and contribute to the company's overall image (Hack-Polay & Qiu, 2017). A poor appearance can negatively affect the company's image and lead to a drop-in growth (Dossinger, Wanberg, Choi, & Leslie, 2019). Being able to present oneself in a proper manner is also a skill that can be acquired through competence. Hence the hypothesis is:

H3:   There is a relationship between skills and tangibles of service quality.

2.4 Skills and Empathy

The skills that employees have in delivering attention to their customers' thoughts and feelings are related to their empathy rates. This finding suggests that employees with these skills are more likely to feel empathy for their customers (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). To improve the skills of their employees, organizations must implement a training program that emphasizes empathy. This can help them enhance their performance and improve the customer experience (Kaplan-Liss, Lantz-Gefroh, Bass, & Killebrew, 2018). Being able to identify the needs of customers using empathy is very important for employees. It can help them develop and implement effective strategies to improve their customer service (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). Unfortunately, lack of empathy can prevent employees from providing the best possible customer care. The training program can also help employees develop their customer empathy skills. This is because they are bound by the company's service protocol when it comes to providing services to customers (Yani-de-Soriano, et al., 2019).

The acquisition of empathy skills is very important for employees as it can help them develop their competencies and improve their performance (Gill et al., 2018). To ensure that the training program is focused on customer empathy, the organization should make sure that the training materials are geared toward this skill (Scheidt & Chung, 2019). According to a study conducted by Huo, Chen, Lam, & Woods (2018), customer service professionals need to have a strong sense of perspective to provide the best possible service. This is because their interpersonal skills can help them improve their performance. To ensure that their employees have the necessary empathy skills, an organization should also make sure that it has a comprehensive training program (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). The study also noted that customer service professionals should focus on developing their empathy skills to improve their performance. These skills can help them obtain high ratings from their customers. Hence the hypothesis is:

H4:   There is a relationship between skills and empathy of service quality.

2.5 Skills and Responsiveness

To improve their skills and responsiveness to customers, employees should regularly undergo training. This can be done through various forms of competency development, such as coaching and mentorship (van Gerwen, Buskens, & van der Lippe, 2018). These programs can help employees maintain their level of responsiveness and improve their organization's performance (Nwulu & Ateke, 2018). According to a study by Harcourt and Ateke (2018), employees who have the necessary skills can perform at a higher level when it comes to responding to customers. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of skilled workers who can provide effective and efficient service to customers (Jebraeily, Rahimi, Fazlollahi, & Afshar, 2019). Due to the regulation around organizational training, certain skills can prevent employees from effectively responding to customers (van Gerwen, Buskens, & van der Lippe, 2018).

The low perception of employees' responsiveness among customers is due to the lack of skills related to soft skills such as empathy and understanding (Vo et al., 2017). These skills are important to enhance an employee's ability to respond effectively to customers. In addition, employees' lack of knowledge about the needs and desires of customers can prevent them from being able to provide effective and efficient service (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). According to Al-Tarawneh and Osam (2019), skills development can help employees improve their responsiveness to customers. It can help them respond efficiently to inquiries. Hence the hypothesis is:

H5:   There is a relationship between skills and responsiveness of service quality.
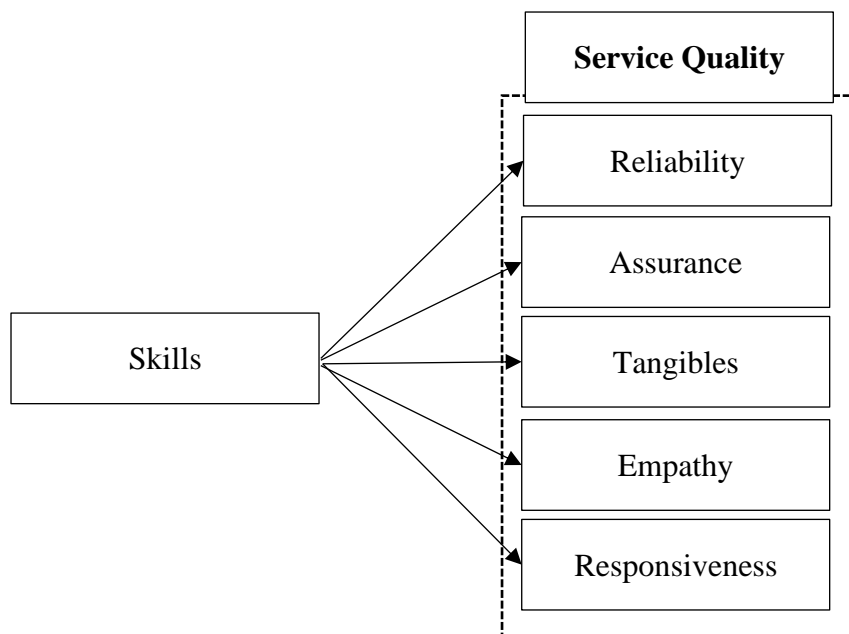

Figure 1. Framework of Study

3.0 Methodology

This study utilizes a survey research and cross-sectional data methodology. The questionnaire is an efficient data collection strategy. It enables researcher to measure the variable of interest and what is required in this study. This research is quantitative in nature for the ease of collecting observable and measurable data on variables. In this study, the population consists of 297 tourist guides in three districts in Sarawak which are Southwest Sarawak (Kuching), Central Sarawak (Sibu) and Northeast Sarawak (Miri). The sampling technique was employed for this research is stratified random sampling which is one of the probability sampling techniques. By demonstrating a priori analysis using G*Power, the calculation of the sample size for this study. The researcher chooses a medium size effect of 0.15, significance level of 0.05 and error probability of rejecting the null hypothesis at 0.95, the minimum total sample size is 213 and the actual number in this study is 186 guides.

In this study, the survey questionnaire is adapted from previous studies. The instrument is relevant for this study because all the measurement items are from credible sources and have been tested in terms of their validity and reliability by previous researchers such as Daniel and Berinyuy (2010) for service quality items; Miller (2002) and Lin and Lin (2017) for customer service competency items. The six measures (skill, responsiveness, tangible, assurance, reliability, empathy) indicate the level to which the respondents agree with each statement by using a 5-point Likert-type scale, where "1" indicate "Strongly Disagree", "2" indicate "Disagree", "3" indicate "Neutral", "4" indicate "Agree", and "5" indicate "Strongly Agree".

4.0 Results and Discussion

The research model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) conducted in Version 3.0 of the SMARTPLS statistics software (Ringle et al., 2015). In this study, the direction of causality between the constructs and their indicators was reflexive, considering that the indicators are the construct manifestation since the measurement is determined by the construct itself (Bagozzi, 2007; Mackenzie et al., 2005). Although PLS simultaneously estimates the measurement and the structural parameters, the proposed analysis took place in two stages: (1) the measurement model and (2) the structural model. Measurement model. The analysis of the measurement model comprises four stages, involving computing: (1) the individual reliability of the indicators, (2) the reliability of the constructs, (3) convergent validity and (4) discriminant validity.
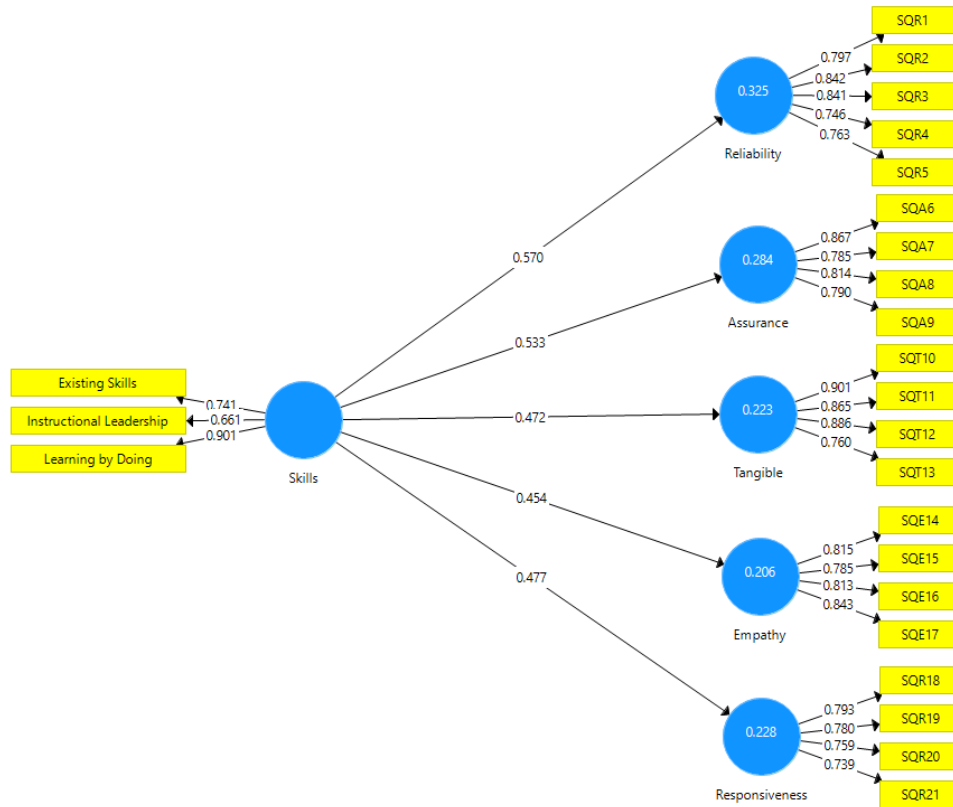
Figure 1. Measurement Model

The reliability of the model was also analysed because the reliability of the indicators should be demonstrated through their loadings (k). In this case, all factor loadings were higher than .40 (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011), so they remained in the model. Altogether items were produced (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Constructs	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
Assurance	SQA6	0.867	0.887	0.664
	SQA7	0.785		
	SQA8	0.814		
	SQA9	0.790		
Empathy	SQE14	0.815	0.887	0.663
	SQE15	0.785		
	SQE16	0.813		
	SQE17	0.843		
Reliability	SQR1	0.797	0.898	0.638
	SQR2	0.842		
	SQR3	0.841		
	SQR4	0.746		
	SQR5	0.763		
Responsiveness	SQR20	0.759	0.852	0.590
	SQR21	0.739		
	SQR18	0.793		

Constructs	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
	SQR19	0.780		
Skills	Existing Skills	0.741	0.815	0.599
	Instructional Leadership	0.661		
	Learning by Doing	0.901		
Tangible	SQT10	0.901	0.915	0.731
	SQT11	0.865		
	SQT12	0.886		
	SQT13	0.760		

Next, the reliability of the constructs was examined using the composite reliability index (CR). Then, the existence of convergent validity was confirmed through the average variance extracted (AVE) as well as the CRI alpha value, which exceeded the critical value of .80 for all variables (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The value of the AVE reached above .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), as shown in Table 1. Finally, the analysis of the measurement model consisted of verifying the existence of discriminant validity. A new approach to evaluating discriminant validity based on variance is the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). No values below .85 were found in the discriminant validity for the correlation between constructs, as shown in Table 2, thus fulfilling the HTMT criterion.

Table 2. HTMT

	Assurance	Empathy	Reliability	Responsiveness	Skills	Tangible
Assurance						
Empathy	0.734					
Reliability	0.724	0.793				
Responsiveness	0.615	0.529	0.737			
Skills	0.659	0.569	0.711	0.600		
Tangible	0.693	0.743	0.764	0.612	0.572	

To determine the statistical significance of the coefficients' path, the bootstrapping technique was employed with 5,000 subsamples (Hair et al., 2011). The five proposed relationships were all significant (see Figure 2). Skills significantly affects reliability (t value = 10.265, p = 0.000), assurance (t value = 10.106, p = 0.000), tangible (t value = 8.161, p = 0.000), empathy (t value = 7.640, p = 0.000), and responsiveness (t value = 9.027, p = 0.000). Therefore, H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 are confirmed.
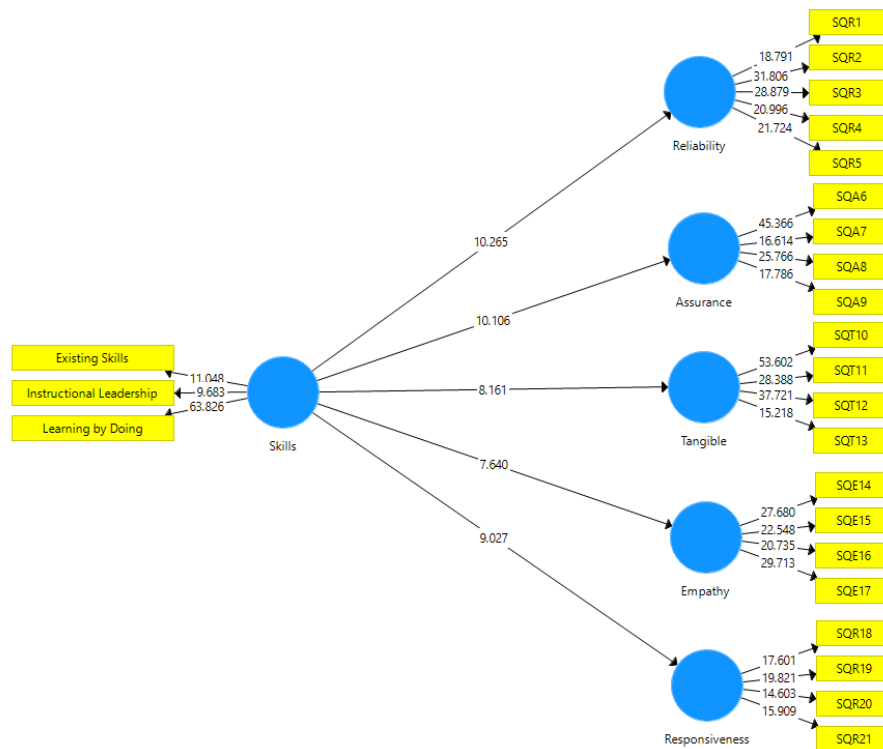
Figure 2. Structural Model

The results of this study allow us to point out that the five hypotheses proposed are fulfilled, which in general terms indicates that the skills influence reliability, assurance, tangible, empathy and responsiveness and that these results are positively significant.

Table 3. Result Hypothesis

	Beta	Standard Deviation	T Value	P Values	Result
H1: Skills → Reliability	0.570	0.056	10.265	0.000	Significant
H2: Skills → Assurance	0.533	0.053	10.106	0.000	Significant
H3: Skills → Tangible	0.472	0.058	8.161	0.000	Significant
H4: Skills → Empathy	0.454	0.059	7.640	0.000	Significant
H5: Skills → Responsiveness	0.477	0.053	9.027	0.000	Significant

Hypothesis H1 suggested that there is a relationship between skill and reliability of service quality. Results of this study showed a significant positive relationship between skill and reliability of service quality. Hence, hypothesis *H1* is supported. This finding aligned with the study by Khalid, Ghadeer, and Dara (2019). To effectively carry out their tasks and responsibilities, employees need to develop certain skills. This can be done through the development of specific abilities and the use of them. Having the necessary skills can help employees improve their customer service skills and help the company succeed. A customer's perception of a staff member's ability to deliver on their promises is influenced by loyalty and their satisfaction with

the company. An employee's incompetence can also have an impact on their ability to contribute to the success of the organization. If an employee fails to deliver on their promise to provide a service on time, it can affect how the customer perceives their ability to be reliable (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019).

Hypothesis H2 suggested that there is a relationship between skill and assurance of service quality. The results of this study show significant relationship between skill and assurance of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis *H2* is supported. This finding aligned with the study by Sharifabad, Ardakani, Bahrami, & Fallahzadeh (2019) found that employees' motivation to improve their skills has an impact on their assurance. Improving the communication and interpersonal skills of employees is one of the most important factors that businesses can consider when it comes to gaining the trust and confidence of their customers (Garrubba & Yap, 2019). This can help them improve their customer satisfaction and increase their profitability. In order to improve the skills of their employees, travel and tourism businesses can also train them in various languages and practical abilities. This can help them build a stronger relationship with their customers. According to a study conducted by Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, and Hossein (2019), the relationship between an organization's competency and civility and its ability to win over its customers is very important. The skills of a tourist agent can help build a stronger relationship with their customers. This can be evidenced by the confidence that the consumers have in the organization's ability to provide them with the best possible service. In addition to training their employees, travel and tourism businesses also need to ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver the best possible service to their customers.

Hypothesis H3 suggested that there is a relationship between skill and tangibles of service quality. The results of this study show significant relationship between skill and tangibles of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis *H3* is supported. This finding aligned with the study by Pakurár, Hadda, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh (2019). Maintaining the physical appearance of employees and the facilities of an organization is very important. Developing the necessary skills in this area can help an organization develop its systems and improve its customer service. The skills of employees in their physical facilities can determine how well they can perform their duties. To improve customer satisfaction, a company should regularly train its workers on the latest equipment (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). The skills of employees must also be updated to represent the organization's tangibility. This can be done by showing consumers how to use the instruments that are available to them. Having a good physical appearance can help a company's customers feel more confident about its employees. According to Dossinger, Wanberg, Choi, & Leslie (2019), a well-designed and attractive appearance can help a company attract and retain more customers. Skill is also important to enhance the physical appearance of an organization's facilities.

Hypothesis H4 suggested that there is a relationship between skill and empathy of service quality. The results of this study show no significant relationship between skill and empathy of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis *H4* is not supported. This finding aligned with the study by Kaplan-Liss, Lantz-Gefroh, Bass, & Killebrew, (2018). Being able to provide effective and efficient services to consumers is very important for an organization, and training that includes the use of organizational instruction can help employees become more empathetic toward them. According to a study by Yani-de-Soriano, et al., (2019), employees who are able to give their customers full attention are more likely to be able to develop a strong empathy for their thoughts and feelings. Being able to understand the needs of customers is very important for organizations, as it allows them to provide their customers with the best possible service. Having a strong empathy for them can help employees make informed decisions and improve their customer satisfaction. To ensure that their service is performed at a high level, it is important that the employees are trained in soft skills related to customer empathy (Scheidt & Chung, 2019). Due to the importance of customer service, it is very important that organizations adopt a culture that values the value of a customer-centric approach (Huo, Chen, Lam, & Woods, 2018). This can be done through the hiring and evaluation of individuals who are capable of developing a strong empathy for others (Singh & Jaykumar, 2019). Developing a strong empathy for others is very important for frontline workers, as it can help them provide their customers with the best possible service.

Hypothesis H5 suggested that there is a relationship between skill and responsiveness of service quality. The results of this study show no significant relationship between skill and responsiveness of service quality. Hence, Hypothesis *H5* is not supported. This finding aligned with the study by Jebraeily, Rahimi, Fazlollahi, and Afshar (2019) found that due to a lack of employees with specialised skills, employees are unable to provide responsiveness when consumers require it. In addition to that, training requirements may make it hard for employees to effectively respond to customers' demands. Moreover, consumers may perceive them as less responsive due to how they lack the necessary skills to meet their needs (Vo et. al., 2017). The responsiveness of employees is affected by their ability to help customers. This is because a lack of understanding of clients' wishes and requirements can make it hard for staff members to respond effectively to them (Mohammad Ali, Mojtaba Fattahi, Mohammad Amin, & Hossein, 2019). Improving the skills of travel agents can help them respond more effectively to consumer inquiries. This is because they are more eager to answer such inquiries (van Gerwen, Buskens, & van der Lippe, 2018). To enhance their responsiveness, employees should undergo training programs that will help them develop their current skills. Doing so can help them maintain their performance while improving their skills (Harcourt & Ateke, 2018).

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study have contributed to the development of a practical framework for addressing the issue of service quality in Malaysia's Sarawak region. It is expected that the recommendations will be used by policymakers in developing programs and policies related to the tourism industry. The findings of this study can provide practitioners with valuable insight into the link between service quality and skills. However, it was limited to the tourism industry, which means future research should look into other industries such as cultural and food. The study used a quantitative method to gather data, which limits the researchers' ability to collect information on the participants' feelings and thoughts. The results indicated that the responses did not reflect the overall findings. It is important that future research on Malaysia's tourism guiding competencies uses quantitative and qualitative methods. The study, which was conducted on an exploratory basis, was able to collect the respondents' opinions at a specific time. Since the study was conducted across a broad cross-sectional area, it precluded the possibility of making causal inferences. It is also important that future research endeavours use a longitudinal study to collect long-term data on the consumers' behaviour.

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Author Contributions

E. Juni: Methodology. Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis and Writing Draft Preparation, Editing; **I. J. Hutasuhut**: Writing-Reviewing and Editing

Conflicts of Interest

The manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration by other journals. All authors have approved the review, agree with its Submission and declare no conflict of interest in the manuscript.

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