

## SERVICE QUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN MALAYSIA

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### *Abstract*

*Any service organisation's success hinges on the quality of its services. The Malaysian tourism industry's rapid growth has forced travel firms to recognise the necessity of service enhancement to achieve a competitive advantage. The study adopted experimental techniques in achieving its aim to completely comprehend the processes and systems that relate to travel agency service and quality management practices. From a list of travel agencies in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city, 100 were chosen. Primary data was gathered through a survey questionnaire, while secondary data was gathered through websites and brochures from organisations. The result of the study shows that the monitoring infrastructure was ranked first among the four functions tested to determine the level of infrastructure support for delivering quality service in a travel agency, followed by the design function, the marketing function, and the customer service function. The study findings will be helpful to travel agencies and other tourism-related businesses to determine service quality and develop acceptable quality perception metrics in the context of services.*

**Keywords:** *Service Quality, Travel Agency, Tourism Management*

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) welcomed the presentation of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021-2025, themed Malaysian Family - Prosperous, Inclusive, Sustainable by the YAB Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri bin Yaakob, in the Dewan Rakyat. In the 12MP Outlines Strategies to Revitalise Tourism Industry, 2021, initiated by the YAB prime minister, MOTAC will ensure the government's intention to restore tourist confidence, provide better quality products and

services, enhance the sustainability of tourism products, strengthen brand positioning and promotion, instituting governance reforms and intensifying domestic tourism, is met. The tourism industry in Malaysia is one of the most important contributions to the country's economic prosperity.<sup>1</sup> The sector has achieved numerous notable milestones, both locally and internationally, over the years. In addition to being ranked <sup>fourth</sup> in Southeast Asia as a top tourist destination, US-based online travel guide Travel Lemming has placed Malaysia 27<sup>th</sup> in its "Best Places to Travel in the World in 2022", ranking among 50 countries.

On top of that, Malaysia has been recognised as first in the list of best Muslim-friendly holiday destinations, according to the MasterCard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2021. However, the National Tourism Policy for 2020-2030 issued by MOTAC states that Malaysia remains in its comfort zone and fails to leverage its service culture, resulting in an actual decline in service quality compared to ASEAN countries, or is perceived to be declining. Hence, a severe issue that needs to be curbed in the tourism industry for the success of our country.

Service quality management is essential for business survival since it is the most effective strategy to meet consumer expectations, especially for travel agencies. Managing quality necessitates the organisation's awareness of changes in the environment, both internal and external. These include having a proper mechanism to monitor trends and variability in customer preferences and expectations, keeping up with technological advancements, being aware of political and economic changes, being aware of competitors' tactical moves, and changes in employee and workplace needs and requirements.

Every business entity must examine its ability to offer quality and the stage at which it has progressed in its pursuit of overall quality. Total Quality Management (TQM) is a control process, approach, strategy, and change management process, among others. Abu Khalifeh (2016) viewed total quality service management as the management of an entire organisation so that the organisation excels in all dimensions of service that are important to the customers. According to them, attention to quality must extend throughout the organisation, and the customers should be the ultimate judge of quality elements. Oakland (2014) focused on TQM to improve the effectiveness of business as a whole, essentially as organising and involving the whole organisation, every department, every activity, and every single employee at every level. Markovic added that TQM is a strategy for defining, designing, measuring, and continuously improving organisational

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<sup>1</sup> Rasool, H., Maqbool, S., & Tarique, M., The relationship between tourism and economic growth among BRICS countries: a panel cointegration analysis. *Future Business Journal*, 7 (1), 2021, p. 1-11.

work processes, products, and services to deliver perceived quality value to its customers.<sup>2</sup> Aristides and Efi stated that TQM is a general business management philosophy about the continuous improvement of customer satisfaction by quality-led companywide management.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of TQM is reasonably well-grounded with numerous empirical studies that have been conducted, especially in the manufacturing sector, but few in the service sector. As a result, this study focuses on TQM practises in travel businesses in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. TQM practices relevant to the service industry's operational performance was identified. A survey was done to see how well TQM practices are implemented and how they relate to the operational performance of travel agencies. The research questions were based on two core issues: (1) Have service quality management procedures been integrated into the organisation's infrastructure? and (2) how strong the organisation's quality service culture is?

Purpose of the study:

1. To determine the extent to which quality management concepts and fundamentals are woven into the organisational structure and processes

The quality management concepts to be examined focus on the management functions of planning, designing, implementing, and monitoring service quality.

2. To investigate the degree of commitment the organisation has towards service quality.

The degree of commitment should be reflected in identifying customers' needs analysis, followed by the scanning of the environment, competitive analysis, and the analysis of customers' satisfaction levels.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses experimental techniques to understand better the processes and systems associated with travel agency service quality control procedures. As part of the preliminary survey, 100 travel agencies were selected from the list of travel agencies in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Primary data was collected through poster survey

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<sup>2</sup> Markovic, S., *Perceived service quality measurement in tourism higher education: A case study of Croatia*. (*Tourism Today* *Tourism Today*. 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Aristides, K., & Efi, P., Philoxenia as a Component of the Tourism Experience in Culture and Total Quality Management in the Hotel Sector. In *Smart Tourism as a Driver for Culture and Sustainability* Springer, Cham: 2019), p. 207-221.

surveys and secondary data was collected through websites and organisation pamphlets. The ten elements of the overall quality control principle as suggested by Stansbie and Nash are divided into four categories given by Brown using the Fried and Richardson model.<sup>4</sup>

- (1) Planning Function: Action Planning; Strategic Planning
- (2) Design Function: Mission Statements; Performance Standards; Designing Customer Surveys; Designing Employee Surveys
- (3) Implementation Function; Group Dynamics; Team Problem Solving
- (4) Monitoring Function: Guest Feedback Analysis; Cost-Benefit Analysis

Likert-like 5-point scale, as indicated below, will be used to measure the extent of the mean score on each of the items in the ten elements.

1.00 – 1.79	1.80 – 2.59	2.60 – 3.40	3.41 – 4.21	4.22 – 5.00
Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High

Qualitative analysis will be presented by (1) the profile of the organisations, (2) Service quality components by the functions of planning, design, implementation, and monitoring, (3) Overall priority in the service quality practices, (4) Most valued factor, and (5) Areas requiring immediate attention. The quantitative analysis will focus on the mean scores on each item in the service quality components and the priority ranking in the service quality practices.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Literature Review*

The unique characteristics of service demand that the tools and measurements used to determine quality level be different from those used for products. The four distinct characteristics: intangible, simultaneous product and consumption, heterogeneity of the service product, and perishability of the service product; requires different handling of demand, performance effectiveness measurements, and tools for ensuring service delivery

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<sup>4</sup> Stansbie, P., & Nash, R., Customising internship experiences by emphasis area: The key to increased satisfaction and motivation in hospitality and tourism management students. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 28 (2), 2016, p. 71-84.

effectiveness. Customer service and quality had become the focus of the corporate strategy, the tools for competitive advantage. Thus, service organisations need to pay special attention to their employee's skills and abilities as they are instrumental in ensuring service quality delivery.

Gronroos suggested that the dimensions of service quality are multifarious. They relate to both a basic business package and an augmented service offering.<sup>5</sup> Varsanis added that the service product contained a primary or core service product with its associated services.<sup>6</sup> These associated or augmented offerings are not required to facilitate consumption or use, but they may enhance the service and differentiate the service product from the competitor's products. The augmented service offering includes service delivered (the process) and the interaction between the organisation and its customers. Hence would include factors such as the accessibility of the service, customer participation process, nature of interactions between employees and the customers, between the systems and customers, and the physical environment and the customers.

Brown suggested a methodology called REACH: Research, Empowerment, Acknowledgement, Communication, and Help; to help organisations sustain their competitive advantage. This methodology is called the EDGE process which stands for Evaluate, Design, Guide, and Encourages Excellence. The EDGE represented an interactive process implying the requirements for the complete involvement of everyone in the organisation to sustain a service culture. Brown with Price Waterhouse Management Consultations, developed the PULSE (A program to Understand the Level of Service Excellence) to assess the organisation's service quality progress using the EDGE process. The Price Waterhouse PULSE research used the questionnaire, which was conducted across North America with approximately 1,500 respondents. The questionnaire was organised into three sections: organisational service practices, related service practices, and customer service issues.<sup>7</sup>

In the organisational service practices, the study instrument was designed to determine the extent to which quality service is woven into the organisation's fabric. It

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Grönroos, service marketing research priorities: service and marketing. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Varsanis, K., Belias, D., Kakkos, N., Chondrogiannis, M., Rossidis, I., & Mantas, C., The Relationship Between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction on Luxurious Hotels So to Produce Error-Free Service. In *Strategic Innovative Marketing and Tourism*, (Springer, Cham: 2019), p. 67-76.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, J. R., Kasrai, M., Bancroft, G. M., Tan, K. H., & Ghen, J. M., Direct identification of organic sulphur species in Rasa coal from sulphur L-edge X-ray absorption near-edge spectra. *Fuel*, 71 (6), 1992, p. 649-653.

includes questions on the degree of organisational commitment to quality service, whether it used some delivery mechanism to reinforce commitment, and how the organisation structured itself to deliver quality service. The related service practices segment is designed to probe the respondent's knowledge of the competitive environment and the customers' perception of the organisation. It includes questions on how the organisation monitors its competitors and its customers. It also investigates compensation, training, recruitment, and performance measurement practices. The third segment, customer service issues, is customer feedback regarding the quality of services in other organisation sectors.

In their study on the basic components of total quality management, suggested ten elements that make up the total quality management concepts. They were: (1) Action Planning, (2) Cost-Benefit Analysis, (3) Designing Customer Surveys, (4) Designing Employee Surveys, (5) Group Dynamics, (6) Guest Feedback Management, (7) Mission Statements, (8) Performance Standards, (9) Strategic Planning, and (10) Team Problem-Solving. These elements will be used to construct the instruments for this study.<sup>8</sup>

**Response Rate:** A total of 100 travel agencies were contacted, and 28 agencies responded. This represented a response rate of 28%.

**Profile of Respondents:** Out of 28 respondents, 82% (23) were either the Chief Executive Officer or the General Manager. The other 18% (5) were holding the positions of directors or department heads.

**Table 1**  
*Profile of Respondents*

Positions	Number	Per cent
First level – CEO or General Manager	23	82
Second level – Directors or Department Heads	5	18
Total	28	100

**Profile of responding organisations by number of employees:** Of the 28 travel agencies participating in this study, 7% (2) agencies had a minimum of 50 employees.

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<sup>8</sup> Stansbie, P., & Nash, R., Customising internship experiences by emphasis area: The key to increased satisfaction and motivation in hospitality and tourism management students. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education*, 28 (2), 2016, p. 71-84.

25% (7) had 30 to 49 employees, another 14% (4) had 15 to 29 employees., 32% (9) had from 7 to 14 employees, and 21% (6) had under seven employees.

**Table 2**  
*Profile of Responding Organizations*

Number of Employees	Number	Percent
50 and over	2	7
30 to 49	7	25
15 to 29	4	14
7 to 14	9	32
6 and less	6	22
Total	28	100

### Functions Supporting Service Quality

The four functions measured to indicate the extent of infrastructure support for the delivery of quality service that should be woven into the hotel organisation's infrastructure were planning, design, implementation, and monitoring.

The planning function comprises of two areas which were action planning, and strategic planning. Table 3 indicated the degree of support on those two areas as itemised in the following five aspects. The highest mean score of 4.20 was on the level of employee's dedication towards service quality, followed by the second highest mean score at 3.51 on the availability of a formal system for monitoring competitors. Moderately low (2.10) and low (2.12) levels were extended on the degree of importance placed on attitude towards customers when recruiting management-level employees, on the availability of formal environmental scanning activities and on conducting strategic planning on service quality (1.68). Thus, a low focus of 2.72 overall was given on the overall planning function.

**Table 3**  
*Planning Function*

No	Factors	Mean Score	Level
1	Availability of a formal general environment scanning activities	2.10	Moderately Low – minimal scanning activities
2	Availability of a formal system to monitor competition	3.51	Somewhat high with proper system

3	Level of employees' dedication towards service quality	4.20	Quite a high level of dedication
4	Degree of importance as reflected in the emphasis on attitude towards customers in recruiting management-level employees	2.12	Quite low- focus mainly on competency and skill
5	Conduct of strategic planning on service quality	1.68	Very low with hardly any strategic planning
Overall Mean Score		2.72	Quite low- focus mainly on competency and skill

The design function was measured on four factors which were mission statement, performance standards, designing customer surveys, and designing employee surveys. A total of seven items were used to find out the overall level of emphasis on the design function. As indicated in Table 4, 3 items were rated very high and they were: the existent of evident and specific performance standards to ensure consistency in the delivery of service quality (4.45); clearly stated department or division or individual responsible for ensuring delivery of quality service (4.32), and the availability of customer surveys to get feedback on their satisfaction on service quality (4.13). Two items were noted at a high level: the availability of the concept of quality service indicated in the strategy (3.62); and the existence of a statement on employees' roles in achieving quality service (3.56). Only one item was indicated at a moderate level (2.81) which referred to whether quality service is stated in the mission statement. Overall, the design function received a 3.61 rating, indicating that some components were apparent and specific.

**Table 4**  
*Design Function*

No	Factors	Mean Score	Level
1	Quality service is stated in the agency's mission statement	2.81	Mentioned generally
2	The concept of quality service is indicated in the agency's strategy	3.62	Specifically indicated in the strategy
3	Existence of performance standards to ensure consistency in the service quality delivered	4.45	Very clear and specifically stated
4	Existence of a statement on employees' roles in achieving quality service	3.56	Quite a clear statement on employees' roles
5	Availability of employee surveys with specific feedback on satisfaction with teamwork	2.38	Hardly used
6	Existence of a department or individual responsible for ensuring the delivery of quality service	4.32	Indicated that each employee is responsible

7	Availability customer surveys designed to get feedback on their satisfaction with service quality.	4.13	Quite high and regularly used
Overall Mean Score		3.61	Quite clear and somewhat specific in the design

The implementation function includes factors of group dynamics and team problem-solving. Altogether, six items were used to gauge the overall strength of implementing the infrastructure function. As shown in Table 5, only one item was emphasised heavily at 4.67, which was the importance of attitude towards guests as a criterion in the recruitment of front-line employees. Two items were indicated at high levels: on the availability of reward or compensation for quality service delivered to external customers at 3.39 and on the use of employee work teams to solve work-related problems (3.02). The other three items were recorded at a minimal to low emphasis, which referred to the use of methods to encourage employees' creativity (2.34), on the availability of budget allocation for quality initiatives (2.47), and the availability of reward provisions for quality service for internal customers (2.29). Thus, the implementation function was given an overall mean score of 3.03, which indicated the availability of a relatively moderate emphasis.

**Table 5**  
*Implementation Function*

No	Factors	Mean Score	Level
1	Availability of reward or compensation for the performance of quality service for external guests	3.39	Stated as a key performance measurement
2	Availability of budget allocation for quality initiatives	2.47	No allocation, monetary reward directly by customers
3	Availability of reward provisions for quality service for internal customers	2.29	No formal system or procedure
4	Use of methods (for example suggestion box) to encourage employees' creativity	2.34	Moderately low – seldom use
5	The importance of attitude towards guests as a criterion in the recruitment of front-line employees	4.67	Very high emphasis
6	Use of employee work team to solve work-related problems	3.02	Moderate use – work in small group
Overall Mean Score		3.03	The relatively moderate emphasis with clear guidelines

In the monitoring function, two factors were emphasised: guest feedback and cost-benefit analysis. A total of eight items were used to gauge the overall extent of monitoring infrastructure function, as indicated in Table 6. Two items were given very high mean scores, on the management level of commitment to service quality with a mean of 4.62, and on the agency's dedication to service quality (4.60). Another two items had a slightly lower level which was on the effectiveness of the use of customer feedback on the quality of service delivered (3.78), and on the level of management effectiveness in communicating commitment on service quality to employees (3.42). The following three items were noted at a moderate level, and they referred to the rewards employee received for long-term commitment to service quality(3.30), the use of feedback analysis in decision-making (2.98), and the extent of management effectiveness in communicating the successes and failures in delivering quality service which was recorded with a mean score of 2,78. The only low score for conducting an overall cost-benefit analysis in delivering quality service was noted at 2.10 mean score. The overall level of monitoring infrastructure function was at 3.45, which meant that a relatively high level of dedication and communication effectiveness was provided.

**Table 6**  
*Monitoring Function*

No	Factors	Mean Score	Level
1	Level of senior management commitment to service quality	4.62	Very high level of commitment
2	Agency's overall dedication to service quality	4.60	Very high level of dedication
3	Management effectiveness in communicating commitment on service quality to employees	3.42	Relatively effective with regular communication
4	Management effectiveness in communicating the successes and failures in delivering quality service	2.78	Moderately effective – no standard guidelines
5	The employee gains monetarily from a long-term commitment to the delivery of quality service	3.30	Moderately – monetary gain mainly from the field
6	Effectiveness use of guest feedback on the delivery of service quality	3.78	Somewhat high–standard procedure
7	Use of feedback analysis in decision making	2.98	Moderately use
8	Conduct of overall cost-benefit analysis in delivery of quality service	2.10	Low level – not specific on service quality delivered
	Overall Mean Score	3.45	Relatively high with dedication and

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communication  
effectiveness

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### Overall Priority in Service Quality Infrastructure

In combining the four functions of planning, design, implementation, and monitoring, the overall mean score was 3.20, as shown in Table 7, indicating that the overall priority in service quality infrastructure was moderate. In terms of the priority level of the overall infrastructure available, the monitoring infrastructure was ranked as the top, followed by the design function, the implementation function, and lastly, the planning function.

**Table 7**  
*Overall Priority in Service Quality Infrastructure*

Factors	Overall Rating	Mean Score	Ranking
Planning	Quite low- focus mainly on competency and skill	2.72	4
Design	Quite clear and somewhat specific in the design	3.61	2
Implementation	The relatively moderate emphasis with clear guidelines	3.03	3
Monitoring	Relatively high with dedication and communication effectiveness	3.45	1
Overall Mean Score		3.20	Moderate Level of Priority

### Service Quality Tools

The service quality tools referred explicitly to the data collection methods used to solicit guest feedback on service quality. As indicated in Table 8, a large number of travel agencies (68%) indicated that they had a meeting with customers to get feedback information. This is followed by 43% using phone calls, 35% also using email and another 30% using a website. The agencies used the other two methods, comment cards (21%), and questionnaire (15%) at a low level. The agencies seldom-used blogs (7%) and suggestion boxes (2%) to solicit feedback information.

**Table 8**  
*Data Collection Methods*

No	Factors	Percent	Level
1	Comment card	21	Low usage by agencies
2	Questionnaire	15	Low usage by agencies
3	Phone Calls	43	Moderate - use in some agencies
4	Meeting with customers	68	Very High - use in most agencies
5	Suggestion box	2	Very Low - seldom use by agencies
6	Email	35	Moderate - use in some agencies
7	Website	30	Moderate - use in some agencies
8	Blog	7	Very Low - seldom used by agencies

On the number of data collection methods used to collect customer feedback, 47% of the total respondent used four methods, and 40% used three methods. In comparison, 5% used two methods, another 5% used 5 methods, and the remaining 2% used one method, and 1% used six methods.

**Table 9**  
*Number of Data Collection Methods Used*

No	Factors	Percent	Level
1	1 method	2	Very Low - use by very few agencies
2	2 methods	5	Very Low - use by very few agencies
3	3 methods	40	Moderate - use by some agencies
4	4 methods	47	Moderate - use by some agencies
5	5 methods	5	Very Low - use by very few agencies
6	6 methods	1	Very Low - use by very few agencies

In the ranking of importance in quality component, the 10 elements embedded in the 4 infrastructure functions were rated and ranked from 1 as the most important factors. At the same time, 10 would be considered as the least important. Table 10 revealed the rank order of the elements, and the top three highest factors with a high level of mean scores were: performance standards (4.45), designing customer surveys (4.13), and guest feedback analysis (3.78). The following four factors were rated at a moderate level: action planning (3.23), team problem solving (3.20), group dynamics (3.03), and a mission statement (2.81). The following two factors were rated at a low level, designing employee surveys at 2.38, and cost-benefit analysis at 2.38 mean score. The last element, strategic planning, was ranked at the bottom and rated a mean deficient score of 1.68.

**Table 10**  
*Ranking of Importance in Quality Component*

RANKING	VARIABLES	CUMULATIVE SCORE
1	Performance Standards	4.45
2	Designing Customer Surveys	4.13
3	Guest Feedback Analysis	3.78
4	Action Planning	3.23
5	Team Problem Solving	3.20
6	Group Dynamics	3.03
7	Mission Statement	2.81
8	Designing Employee Surveys	2.38
9	Cost-Benefit Analysis	2.10
10	Strategic Planning	1.68

Ranking of Importance in Quality Infrastructure Component (1=Most Important; 10=Least Importance)

## CONCLUSION

Service quality and customer satisfaction are recognised as the critical factors for a successful marketing strategy in a travel agency. This study aims to understand more fully the processes and systems that relate to the service quality management practices in the travel agency organisations in Kuala Lumpur's capital.

From the findings, the four functions measured to indicate the extent of infrastructure support for delivering quality service that should be woven into the hotel organisation's infrastructure were: planning, design, implementation, and monitoring. In the planning function, it comprises of two areas: action planning and strategic planning. Based on the findings, it is indicated that the degree of support on those two areas were itemised in five aspects. The highest result was 4.20, emphasising the employee's dedication toward service quality.

The design function was measured on four factors, namely a mission statement, performance standards, designing customer surveys, and designing employee surveys, and seven items. Of the seven items, the highest mean score was 4.45, on the existence of performance standards to ensure consistency in the service quality delivered.

The implementation function includes factors of group dynamics and team problem-solving. Altogether, six items were used to gauge the overall strength of the implementation of the infrastructure function. Only one item was emphasised heavily at 4.67: the importance of attitude towards customers as a criterion in recruiting front-line employees.

In the monitoring function, two factors were emphasised which were guest feedback and cost-benefit analysis. A total of eight items were used to gauge the overall extent of monitoring infrastructure. Two items were given very high mean scores and they were on the management level of commitment to service quality with the mean at 4.62, and on the agency's level of dedication to service quality (4.60).

In combining the four functions of planning, design, implementation, and monitoring, the overall mean score was 3.20, indicating that the overall priority in service quality infrastructure was moderate. In ranking the extent of overall infrastructure provided, the monitoring infrastructure was ranked as the top, followed by the design function, the implementation function, and the planning function.

The service quality tools referred explicitly to the data collection methods used to solicit guest feedback on service quality. From the findings, a large number of travel agencies (68%) indicated that they had a meeting with customers to get feedback information. On the number of data collection methods used, the most used was either 4 (47%) or 3 methods used by 40% of the agencies.

In the ranking of importance in quality components, the 10 components on the 4 infrastructure functions were rated and ranked from 1 as the most important factors while 10 would be considered as the least important. The rank order of the components and the top three highest factors with a high level of mean scores were: performance standards (4.45).

The study's results are valuable to tourism organisations and businesses in evaluating their service quality management practices. The instrument used are a strategic tool for determining a company's weaknesses and strengths in infrastructure to promote a quality service delivery culture. The quality of travel agency services has a positive impact on the level of tourist satisfaction. Therefore, in this study, all travel agency managers surveyed their organizational infrastructure for planning, designing, implementing, and monitoring to enable their employees to continuously deliver quality service to their customers. It suggests that we need to see if a quality service culture is embedded in our practices to ensure Enable companies achieve high levels of customer satisfaction.

To confirm the study's survey, another study can be conducted among other tourism business organisations in other parts of the country or abroad.

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