

**Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)**

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Journal home page:
www.msocsciences.com**Tourists Perceptions of Kota Bharu Islamic City****Cheam Chai Li¹, Nurul Amanina Bt Othman², Faten Noor Saadah Bt Ahmad Khir Johari²**¹Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM Kelantan²Faculty of Business and Management, UiTM KelantanCorrespondence: Cheam Chai Li (clcheamnet@yahoo.com)**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to determine tourists' perceptions on spiritual experience, brand image, cultural attributes and service quality they experienced in Kota Bharu, the capital and administration centre of Kelantan, Malaysia. Kota Bharu was declared an Islamic City in 2005. It has many mosques, various museums, unique architectural old buildings and palaces. As the number of tourist arrivals to Kelantan is encouraging and contributing to the state income; it is important to examine what these tourists perceive during their stays in Kota Bharu Islamic City. Variance Based Structural Equation Modelling technique of Partial Least Square (PLS) was employed. The findings show that all the variables are significantly influencing tourists' perception except for service quality. In other words, tourists' perceptions of Kota Bharu are positively related to spirituality, brand destination and cultural attributes. Tourists' perceptions play a crucial role as this will affect the future tourist arrivals in the state. Thus, the findings of the study will be useful in helping policy planners to understand how tourists perceived Kota Bharu and design policies to increase tourism receipts and to preserve tourism attributes.

Keywords: Islamic city, perceptions, spirituality, brand, cultural attributes, service quality**Introduction**

Malaysia has a warm and humid climate all year round. It is a federation of 13 states and three federal territories. It consists of Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and East Malaysia. Its economy has shifted from agriculture to manufacturing and to services. One of the major contributing services in the country is tourism. According to UNWTO, tourism is the largest industry in the world, with an estimated 11.5% of the world GDP and 12.5% world employment (Halter & Randle, 2012); besides being the world fastest growing industry. Many countries are focusing on tourism because as a non-traditional export, tourism affects long run economic growth. It does not only stimulate growth in the same industry but it also leads to the spill over effect in other industries which would generate greater economic growth and create higher employment opportunities.

As at today, tourism is still Malaysia's second largest economic activities contributor in foreign earnings after manufacturing. As shown in Figure 1 below, Tourist arrivals in Malaysia grew rapidly from around 1.16 million in 1974 to 2.94 million in 1984. The arrivals have increased from a modest figure of 7.20 million in 1994 to 15.7 million in 2004 and in 2013, it has reached 25.7 million arrivals. It further increased in 2014 to 27.44 million but was slightly reduced by 1.72 million to 25.72 million

in 2015. However, it bounced back again in 2016 to 26.72 million arrivals. Malaysia's long term planning for tourism is outlined in the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020. Malaysia plans for 36 million tourist arrivals and RM168 billion in tourism receipts by 2020.

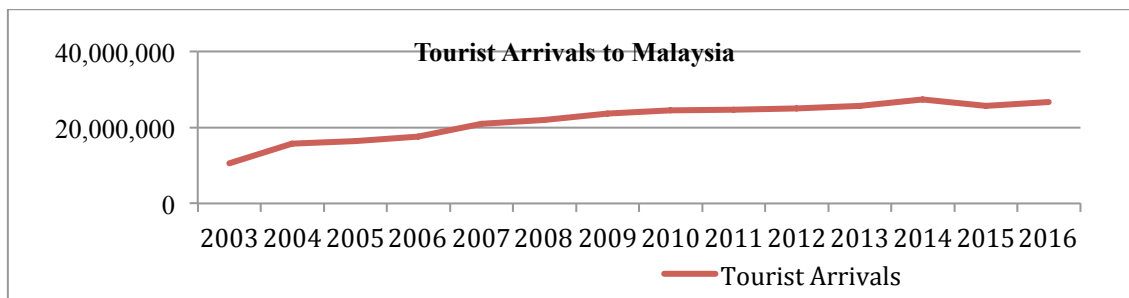


Figure 1: International Tourist Arrivals in Malaysia
(Source: Tourism Malaysia various reports)

The state of Kelantan is located in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The name Kelantan means 'Land of Lightning'. It is known as a 'cradle of Malay culture'. This is where the history of Malay culture began. Kelantan has 10 main districts and its capital, Kota Bharu, which is also the royal seat, is where the state administration is. It has very rich architectural, social and cultural heritages. Kelantanese strongly hold to their culture and preserving their heritage identity is portrayed in their daily life. Among the traditional performances in Kelantan are: dikir barat, silat, shadow puppet (wayang kulit), makyong, menorah, etc. Kite flying and top spinning are the traditional games. Batik printing, songket wearing, wood carving and wau making are the traditional crafts. Kelantan is also renowned for its tourist attraction from natures to the unique buildings and cultural societies. Its nature parks include Kelantan River Front, Cahaya Bulan Beach. Caves at Gua Ikan (Dabong); Stong Waterfall and Mount Stong State Park, etc. Its traditional buildings are: Merdeka Square, Jahar Palace, Batu Palace, War Museum, Balai Besar Palace, Muhammadi Mosque, etc. It is a heaven of traditional foods from its multicultural societies. Due to its uniqueness, it has attracted many tourists from far and near. The number of tourist arrivals to Kelantan in recent years is shown in Figure 2. Tourist arrivals to Kelantan in 2003 numbered 4.5 million and approaching 6 million in 2007. However, the number decreased slightly in 2008 and 2009 to 4.9 million and 4.8 million respectively. It bounced back a year later to 5.38 million and in 2012 the arrivals were around 5 million. In 2013 and 2014, the arrivals were slightly reduced to 4.84 million and 4.96 million respectively. It was above 5.13 million in 2015 and 2016. Looking at the encouraging number of tourist arrivals in Kelantan, more attractions could make them contribute more to the state's income. To continuously boost up tourism in the state, the government agencies, private enterprises as well as the local community should seek the tourists views of their interests and what they hope to experience in their visits.

Tourist perception is important to a host country. Hofstede (2001) and Kaplanidou (2009) suggest that people from different countries have different destination's perceptions, levels of satisfactions and intentional behaviours. Empirical studies show that what and how tourists perceive a destination can affect them positively or negatively towards the destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chheang, 2011; D'Silva and D'Silva, 2008; Woodside and Lysonski, 1990). There will be word of mouth about a destination spreading to friends and relatives or via social media. If positive perceptions are passed on to potential tourists, intending to visit similar place as their next travelling destination will be high. For instance, Reisinger and Turner (2003) find that if perceptions are favourable, there is greater tendency of choosing a product from similar alternatives.

Empirically, there are limited studies found on the perceptions of tourists in Malaysia such as Jalis et al. (2009) on gastronomic products, Kamil (2010) on knowledge, education level and income; Lee and Scott (2012) on Australia tourists in Malaysia, etc. Other studies found pertaining to tourism were tourist satisfaction (Hamidi et al., 2014; Muhamed et al., 2011, etc.); international tourist behaviour towards tourism in Kelantan (Sufahani, et al. 2013); impact of Islamic tourism to Malaysian tourism (Lina and Hairul, 2013); the concept of new cultural product by Mohd Nasir and Salleh (2014); factors affecting Islamic tourists destination royalty in Malaysia (Rahman, 2014); impact of tourism towards

quality of life in Kota Bharu by Cheam and Nurul Syazni (2015); Malaysia's branding as an Islamic tourism hub by Fatemeh and Badaruddin (2015); etc. However, there are no studies related to the tourists' perceptions of Kota Bharu, Kelantan as an Islamic city.

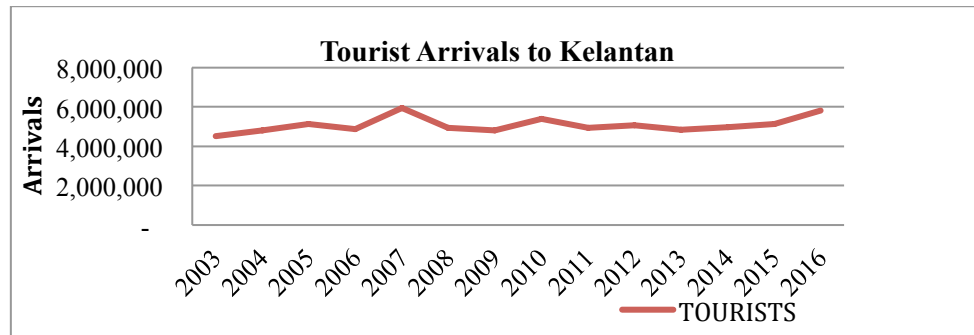


Figure 2: Tourist Arrivals to Kelantan
(Source: Kelantan Tourist Information Centre, various reports)

Islamic based Tourism is a recent tourism destination in the world today. There are 54 Muslim countries in the world that will potentially increase the scope of Islamic tourism day by day. Based on the Islamic Tourism Center, this tourism is defined as any activity, event, experience or indulgence, undertaken in a state of travel that is Islamic compliant, with the purpose to interface within an Islamic framework, with one or all of the following: history, arts, culture, heritage, way of life, economy, health, education and any other human interests (ITC, Malaysia). In 2005 the local government decided to rebrand Kota Bharu as an Islamic City by introducing Islamic concept in the state. According to Antaniou (1981), elements of Islamic town reflect that mosque, palace and market are situated at a strategic location near to one another. Thus, Kota Bharu can be said to meet such criteria and is considered as an Islamic township. As rebranded in 2005, Kota Bharu city has since practicing Islamic principles in every aspect of daily life. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2012), with the existence of new tourism products such as Islamic based tourism, the expected job employment for travel and tourism which accounted for 120,470,000 jobs in 2022 will likely be achieved. This would also help to contribute to the development of the local economy and poverty reduction in the destination country (UNEP, 2011).

With the increase of tourist arrivals and by looking at the contribution of tourism to the state, it is important to examine what these tourists think about Kota Bharu as an Islamic City when they are here. For these purposes both the domestic and international tourists are approached to determine their perceptions on Kota Bharu Islamic City. Specifically, the study is interested in finding: 1) whether the tourists feel a sense of peace, purpose, and beliefs about the meaning of life; 2) what is their perception on destination brand of Kota Bharu; 3) what do they perceive of the cultural components or attributes of people living in Kota Bharu; And 4) tourist perceptions on the extent of services in accommodation and food and beverages that fulfil their needs and expectations. With that, it is hope that the findings of the study will be useful in helping policy makers to understand how tourists perceive Kota Bharu as a tourist destination. They then could improve tourists' perception by formulating effective strategies to increase revenue from this sector and at the same time to preserve Kota Bharu as a cultural and Islamic City.

Literature Review

Tourism, according to Burkart and Medlik (1981), involves travel to the destinations and the activities at the destinations. Destination perception is a psychological concept which means that an individual receives, selects, organizes and interprets data to give image to the destination (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981). This is normally created by a set of attributes that identified a destination such as cultural, social, natural contexts, and tourist infrastructure (Gao and Zhang, 2009). Empirical studies in this area show that what tourists perceived as important for a destination, and how they perceive it, can affect

them positively or negatively towards a destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chheang, 2011; D'Silva and D'Silva, 2008; Woodside and Lysons, 1990).

There are only a few studies pertaining to tourist perception in the Malaysian context. For instance, Kamil (2010) seeks to understand what tourists know about Malaysia and what they think about Malaysia based on their knowledge, education level and income. Using purposive and stratified (including demographic quotas) sampling, respondents from Singapore, Bali, Bangkok and Hong Kong's findings show that there is a strong association between their level of education and knowledge about Malaysia and the likelihood of them visiting Malaysia. Another research conducted by Jalis et al. (2009) is about western tourists' perception on Malaysia's gastronomic (food, beverages and food cultures) during their vacation in Malaysia. The results revealed that the majority of western tourists perceived that Malaysia offered great choices of tasty and freshly prepared food and beverages. Lee and Scott (2012), on the other hand, examine the perception of Australian tourists towards Malaysia as a holiday destination by identifying Australian tourists post trip perceptions of the various destination attributes of Malaysia.

However, so far as we know, there is no study related to perception of Kota Bharu Islamic City being published yet. According to Skanavis and Giannoulis (2010) it is the various elements in destination attributes that form the tourist perceptions on their destination. When visiting a place, tourist could enjoy various travelling experience from tangible to intangible factors. This might indirectly form their perception throughout the visit. The most popular ones are perception on quality service (Lewis and Mitchell, 1990; Asubonteng et al., 1996; Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996; Parasurama, Berry and Zeithan, 1988), destination brand (Goodrich, 1977; Holloway, 1986; Shih, 1986; Van Raaij, 1986), and cultural attractiveness of the destination (Crompton 2004; Chheang, 2011). Other than that, according to Ambrož and Ovsenik (2011), there are several motives which persuade travellers to go on holidays and one of them is spiritual regeneration. Based on Timothy and Olsen (2006), religion and spirituality are very common motivators for travellers. Spiritual experiences are important but not easy to measure and control (Fuller, 2001). It is the interest of this study to determine whether tourists, based on their perception, indulge in this experience when they are in Kota Bharu. Therefore this study focuses on tourists and their perceptions on spirituality, brand image, cultural attributes and service quality towards Kota Bharu Islamic City.

Spiritual tourism is defined as tourism characterised by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment (Norman, 2012). It is often related to leisure travelling. Spirituality means deep, (often religious) feelings and beliefs. This includes a person's sense of peace, purpose, connection to others, and beliefs about the meaning of life. The center of spirituality is inner feeling through love. It puts a human being on the highest pedestal of life (Aggarwal, et al. 2008). Nowadays, spirituality seems to be an important purpose of travelling especially for city folks to get away from the hectic, routine life and to improve their health and identity. Many people see this type of travelling as an effective way to find their true selves. Thus, the demand of such tourism might have potential. Through spiritual tourism and interaction with the surrounding, tourists could enhance their personal growth; deepens their experience and accelerates their spiritual healing. At present, researchers are increasingly recognising that travel experiences include more than just physical travel to a place, it can be in the form of spirituality that involve psychological and physical benefits, unselfishness, personal development and life change (Wilson and Harris 2006). It is found that spirituality in tourism is becoming essential focus of interest to researchers globally (Nicolaidis and Grobler, 2017). This is evidently shown in their research findings that spirituality is indeed a very important consideration for most people for a tranquil existence. It is not known what will be the tourists' perception on spirituality when they travel to Kota Bharu. Thus it is hypothesized that:- H1a: There is a significant relationship between spiritual experience and tourist perception of Kota Bharu Islamic City.

Destination can be referred to a country, a region, a city, a hotel, an event or an attraction. A country's image results from its geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens, and other features. Destination brand is a tangible or intangible aspect associated with a destination, can either be visible or felt by customers and can distinguish one destination with another (Morgan and Pride, 2004). It shows the way a destination exists in people's minds and hearts as well as its position in relations to

other countries (Simonin 2008). Destination branding aims to support the uniqueness of a tourist destination, show positive images to target markets, and support forming and developing positive images (Jalilv et al., 2011; Baker and Cameron, 2008). King et al (2012) argue that the majority of the management administrations of The World Heritage fail to use this brand in its full potential, presenting them in an inconsistent way, which make it harder for tourists to perceive. If the tourist constructs a favourable destination image on their mind then it is probable that they will visit the desired tourist place (Beerli and Martins, 2004; Bonn et al, 2005). Thus, it is important to know what is the tourist perception of Kota Bharu, therefore it is hypothesized that:- H2a: There is a significant relationship between brand destination and tourist perception of Kota Bharu Islamic City.

Culture has a complex and different definitions from the way of life to historical inheritance, knowledge, values transmission or other descriptions. In simple words, culture can be described as the way of life of a country or society (Gyekye,1998). According to Poria et al (2003), in the context of tourism, cultural attributes mean tourists can learn about the history and the lives of the people in a destination. Cultural attributes are usually man made rather than natural. Chheang (2011) added that they involve the development process of history, lifestyle, arts, as well as human creative achievements. In other words, cultural attributes refer to the history, traditional festivals, historical sites, beautiful scenic heritage, architecture, folk arts, folk villages, museums, multicultural regions, linguistic diversity, local people, and food (Chheang, 2011). Kota Bharu is rich in various culture attributes but it is not cleared what is the tourist perception about it. Thus, it is hypothesized that:- H3a: There is a significant relationship between cultural attributes and tourists perception of Kota Bharu Islamic City.

Research of tourist perception on service quality is an important criteria for the success and survival in today's modern environment (Fynes and Voss, 2001). Service quality refers to the extent where the service fulfils the needs or expectation of the customers (Lewis and Mitchell, 1990). Zeithaml et al. (1996) have conceptualized service quality as the overall impression of customers towards the service weaknesses or strength. These qualities influenced the image that customers had and it had an effect on the process from expected quality to perceived quality (Prabaharan et al. 2008). Oliver (1997) described service quality as the result from customer comparing the expectations about the service they would use and their perceptions about the service company. If the perception is higher than the expectations, then the service will be considered as excellent and vice versa. Thus, service quality is necessary for creating positive customer perceptions especially in hotel and food and beverage industries. The attitudes and expectations of consumers are very important and have to be followed continuously by the service providers. Thus, it is hypothesized that:- H4a: There is a significant relationship between service quality and tourist perception of Kota Bharu Islamic City.

Methodology

Data Collection

Five-point Likert scale questionnaires are used in the study. All instruments are adapted from previous literatures and are modified to fit into the research. The questionnaires are divided into 6 sections: Section A – demographics, Section B – Perceptions of Tourists, Section C – Spiritual Experience, Section D –Brands Destination, Section E – Cultural Attributes and Section F – Service Quality. Section B to F are based on five scales from strongly disagree (1), somewhat disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), somewhat agree (4) and strongly agree (5).

The questionnaire is distributed based on convenient sampling targeted at both the domestic and international tourists at several popular tourist spots in Kota Bharu in May 2014. The venues of the distribution are: The Sultan Ismail Arch areas and various museums. The operational definition of tourist in this study is that the tourist travelling away from home for 24 hours and using leisure time to engage in the activities of the destination. The tourists approached are briefed on the aims of the study. They are then asked to answer the questions in the questionnaire.

The number of respondents necessary for this study is identified using G-power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, and Lang, 2009). This method has suggested that a minimum of 85 respondents is required for a medium effect size of 0.15, a significance level of 0.05, and a statistical power of 0.80 with four numbers of predictive factors for multiple regression analysis. With a total of 120 questionnaires distributed, 100 are usable and included in the final analysis.

Empirical Findings

The profiles of the respondents are shown in Table 1. It is found that 58% of the respondents are female and the remaining male. Out of these, 41% of the respondents are between 31-39 years old, followed by 31% between 21-30 years old. The majority of the respondents are married (68%). 75% are Malay respondents, followed by others (foreigners) at 18% and Chinese and Indian 4% and 3% each. Most of the respondents are from the private sectors (52%), followed by self-employed (16%), and government servants (14%). About 35% of the respondents' incomes are below RM2000, while 20% with income of RM2001-RM3000 and another 20% of RM3001-RM4000, and 25% above RM4000. 80% are local and the remaining 20% are foreigners. The majority of the tourists have tertiary education (76%).

Table 1: Demographic of Respondents

Demographic Factors	Frequency (%)	
Gender	Male	42
	Female	58
Age	20 and below	11
	21-30	31
	31-39	41
	40-49	11
	50-59	3
	60 and above	3
Marital status	Married	68
	Non-married	26
	Others	6
Race	Malay	75
	Indian	3
	Chinese	4
	Others	18
Religion	Islam	76
	Christian	4
	Buddhism	2
	Others	18
Occupation	Government servant	14
	Private worker	52
	Self employed	16
	Others	18
Income	RM 2000 and below	35
	RM 2001- RM 3000	20
	RM 3001 – RM 4000	20
	RM4001- RM 5000	7
	RM5001 – RM 6000	8
Origin	RM 6001 and above	10
	Malaysian – outside Kelantan	80
Frequency of travel in a year	Foreigners	20
	1-3 times	60
	4-6 times	26
	7-9 times	9

Education level:	10 times and above	5
	Elementary school	3
	High school	11
	College	76
	Others	10

The following discussion is about reliability measure and factor loadings on the items in each of the construct. Table 2 shows the constructs, measurement items and cronbach alpha. Tourist perception's Cronbach Alpha shows 0.858, spirituality reliability is 0.877, destination brand is 0.707, service quality is 0.928 and cultural is 0.908. Overall, all the variables are valued at above 0.7 indicating that the items in the constructs are consistent and acceptable.

Table 2: Loadings and Cronbach's Alpha

Constructs	Indicators	Factor Loadings*	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Initial
Brands	brand3	0.773	0.707	4	8
	brand4	0.815			
	brand5	0.787			
	brand7	0.532			
cultural	cul1	0.733	0.908	8	9
	cul3	0.682			
	cul4	0.838			
	cul5	0.795			
	cul6	0.791			
	cul7	0.809			
	cul8	0.811			
	cul9	0.783			
	Service quality	serQ2			
serQ3		0.817			
serQ4		0.755			
serQ5		0.856			
serQ6		0.832			
serQ7		0.856			
serQ8		0.788			
serQ9		0.848			
spirituality		spi1	0.826	0.877	5
	spi2	0.820			
	spi3	0.811			
	spi4	0.794			
	spi5	0.842			
Tourist perception	per4	0.819	0.858	5	8
	per5	0.719			
	per6	0.847			
	per7	0.805			
	per8	0.799			

*value in bold are loadings above 0.5 as recommended

To determine whether the instrument taps the concept as in theory, cross loadings are checked using a cut off value at 0.5 as significant (Hair et al. 2010). Any items with loading higher than 0.5 on two or more factors are said to have significant cross loadings. Table 2 shows the study's loadings of the constructs. The constructs validity of the study is confirmed where all the items measuring a specific construct have higher loading on its construct but shows lower loading on the other constructs. For instance, the 1st construct is brand. The loadings for brand are 0.773, 0.815, 0.787 and 0.532 for items brand3, brand4, brand5 and brand7 respectively. All these items show loadings above 0.5. When cross

loading are conducted, the items on the other constructs show loading lower than the items in the 1st construct.

Next, convergent validity is tested. This is to determine the degree to which multiple items to measure the same construct are in agreement. Hair et al. (2010) suggested the use of factor loadings, composite reliability and average variance extracted for the testing. As shown in Table 3, the loadings for all the items is greater than 0.50 (Hair et al. 2010). Composite reliability shows how much the construct indicators explain the latent and it is recommended to have value greater than 0.70 (Hair et al. 2010). The study's construct for composite reliability range from 0.821 – 0.941, thus fulfilling the criteria. The average variance extracted (AVE) quantify the variance captured by the indicators relative to measurement error. It is suggested by Barclay et al. (1995) to have the value higher than 0.50. The study's AVE range is from 0.541 to 0.670. Again, it meets the condition.

Table 3: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Convergent Validity (CR)

Construct	Items	Loadings	AVE	CR
tourist perception	per4	0.819	0.638	0.898
	per5	0.719		
	per6	0.847		
	per7	0.805		
	spi1	0.826		
spirituality	spi2	0.820	0.670	0.910
	spi3	0.811		
	spi4	0.794		
	spi5	0.842		
	brand	brand3		
brand4		0.815		
brand5		0.787		
brand7		0.532		
cultural	cul1	0.733	0.611	0.926
	cul3	0.682		
	cul4	0.838		
	cul5	0.795		
	cul6	0.791		
	cul7	0.809		
	cul8	0.811		
	cul9	0.783		
	per8	0.799		
Service Quality	serQ2	0.769	0.666	0.941
	serQ3	0.817		
	serQ4	0.755		
	serQ5	0.856		
	serQ6	0.832		
	serQ7	0.856		
	serQ8	0.788		
	serQ9	0.848		

The discriminant validity shows the extent to which items differentiate among constructs. This test is examined based on the correlations between the measure of potentially overlapping constructs. According to Compeau et al, (1999), the reading should be higher on its own construct in the model. Table 4 shows the results have adequate discriminant validity. The correlations for each construct are less than the square root of the AVE (shown in diagonal bold values) measuring that construct. The overall results show that the model has adequate convergent validity and discriminate validity.

Table 4: Discriminate Validity

Constructs	Brand	Cultural	Service Quality	Spirituality	Tourist Perception
Brand	0.736				
cultural	0.554	0.782			
Service Quality	0.499	0.624	0.816		
spiritual	0.561	0.667	0.775	0.819	
tourist perception	0.606	0.688	0.577	0.766	0.799

- Diagonals values represent the square root of the average variance extracted and the other loading represent the correlations.

Hypotheses testing are conducted in the path analysis. Figure 3 and Table 6 show the results. R² in the path analysis is 0.674 suggesting that 67.4 per cent of the variance in tourists’ satisfaction can be explained by spirituality, brand, cultural and service quality. All the independence variables show positive coefficients except for service quality. The coefficients for spirituality, brand and cultural are 0.585, 0.198 and 0.283 respectively at 5 per cent confidence level while service quality is not significant. This suggests that H1a, H2a and H3a are supported but not H4a.

Table 6: Hypotheses Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Standard Error	t-stats	Decision
H1a	spirituality ->tourist perception	0.582	0.093	6.231**	supported
H2a	brand ->tourist perception	0.198	0.080	2.465**	supported
H3a	cultural ->tourist perception	0.283	0.086	3.279**	supported
H4a	Service quality ->tourist perception	-0.150	0.099	1.509	not supported

** 5 % confidence level

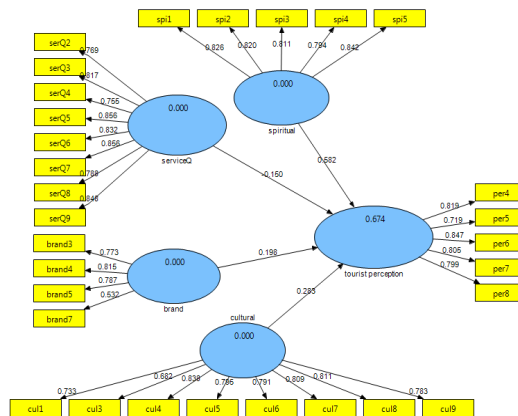


Figure 3: Path Analysis Results

Discussion and Conclusion

Tourist perception is important for a tourism destination (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chheang, 2011; D'Silva and D'Silva, 2008; Woodside and Lysonski, 1990). Chi and Qu (2008) found that tourist’s experience and other resources provide by tourism destination could produce repeat visits. Thus positive perception lead to tourist satisfaction is essential for tourism industry as there would be more tourist arrivals that could generate greater foreign earnings to the host. Kota Bharu has been rebranded

as Islamic city by introducing Islamic concept in the state. As the number of tourist arrivals to Kelantan is encouraging and contributing to the state income, it is important to examine what these tourists think and experience in Kota Bharu Islamic City. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to determine tourists' perceptions on spiritual experience besides brand destination, cultural attributes and service quality. Variance Based Structural Equation Modelling Technique of Partial Least Square (PLS) is employed. It is found that all the variables are significantly influencing tourists' perception except for service quality. In other words, tourists' perceptions of Kota Bharu are positively related to spirituality, brand destination and cultural attributes. There is a high tendency for them to spread good words about the city to friends and relatives when they return home. They might even come back to the city and bring along others with them. Thus, it is important to give the tourists a good impression the very first time. This study also contributes to the local authority in the sense that effective tourism marketing products and services are essential to sustain future tourism growth.

Among all the criteria used to measure perception, spirituality turn out to be the highest coefficient in determining tourist perceptions. This shows that tourists not only show favourable view on Kota Bharu Islamic City, they also feel mental and spiritual peace of mind when in the city. Consistence to Wilson and Harris (2006), this implies that tourists not only travel for physical sightseeing or cultural experience in Kota Bharu, but also travel to experience their true selves. The finding of the study shows that this is the new potential of tourism in Kelantan that the policy planner needs to tap on by formulating strategies to facilitate the process.

Destination branding is one of the most powerful tools that differentiates one destination from its competitors. The finding shows that destination brand and tourists perception are positively related. This implies that Kota Bharu Islamic City has successfully provided its tourists excellent destination brand during the visit. As argued by Jalilvet al. (2010) and Baker and Cameron (2008), destination branding is able not only to support the uniqueness of a tourist destination, but also show and develop positive images to target markets. Advertising and other means of marketing communications should continuously focus on the beauty of Kelantan's cultures, friendly people, good and delicious food and simple but pleasant lifestyle to attract more domestic and international arrivals. Kelantan Tourism Board needs to play its part by organizing many programmes and events to promote the state domestically and internationally.

The findings also show positive relationship between cultural attributes and tourists perceptions and this is consistent with the study done by Yasami (2013). Prior to the declaration of Kota Bharu as an Islamic City, Kelantan is known as the Cradle of Malay Culture. Kelantan itself is rich in traditional cultures, buildings, dances, arts, games and food. Tourists place favourable positive perception towards these attributes. Not only that, due to geographical factor, Kelantan is also exposed to many influences from Thai customs and traditions that help to make the state's culture distinct and unique from the other states in Malaysia. This has given Kelantan additional attribute to attract tourists. In order to revitalizing the cultures, it is necessary to perform them continuously to the tourists. The finding also suggests that the cultural attributes in Kelantan need to be conserved so that it can be passed on to future generations to enjoy besides contributing to the country's income through tourism receipts.

Tourists do not have favourable perception on Kota Bharu service providers' service quality. This probably is due to the different backgrounds of the tourists to have different perceptions of quality provided by the services sectors (Tsang and John, 2007). It is important for the service providers to improve in this area. The managers in services sector especially in the hotel industry need to acquire knowledge of tourists' preferences to enable them to identify the various perceptions from different tourists' backgrounds around the world. To cope with the wide gap in the perception, they might have to come out with the standard agreeable services across the world pertaining to service quality. This is also consistent with Laws (1995) where majority of tourists have experiences with destinations and their perceptions are influenced by facilities, attractions, and service standards. Since tourists will always make decision and act on the decision on what they perceived, there is a need for the authority to make an effort to understand those in order to provide better quality services (Ukwayi et al. 2012).

Despite the factors discussed above, internal factors are very important for future research. Besides external factors, tourists' perception of a destination might be affected by internal factors too such as tourists' socio-demographics, values, motive (Um and Crompton, 1990) and knowledge. These are another set of factors that shape the perceptions of tourists that the future researchers should consider. Comparison between the perception of domestic and international tourists on Kota Bharu Islamic city is another interesting area to look into.

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