

Exploring Guests' Service Experience of Boutique Backpacker Hostels: A Critical Incident Technique (CIT) Approach

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Jasmine Zea Raziah Radha Rashid-Radha*

School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
jasmine@uum.edu.my

Mohd Fadil Mohd Yusof

Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia

Noor Azimin Zainol

School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

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Abstract

This conceptual paper aims to investigate the extent to which current services and facilities provided by boutique hostels influence guests' evaluation of the service experience. The boutique hostel is a fairly new concept that is being introduced to fulfil the expectations of a more heterogenous backpacker market. These hostels have distinct features, such as stylish interior decoration and unique building architecture, that set them apart from the more basic, no-frills hostels. Demands from the more affluent group of backpackers, commonly referred to as flashpackers, have resulted in sophisticated room designs and extra facilities being offered by boutique hostels. Since this is an exploratory research, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is being proposed to explore which aspects of their stay are considered memorable in terms of positive experiences. This study is expected to provide an understanding of the different dimensions of the hostel environment that can be enhanced to contribute towards a positive service experience. In terms of managerial implications, findings from this research could provide initial insight into how boutique hostels could be better managed to attract more guests and increase occupancy levels.

Keywords:

Backpacker tourism; service experience; backpacker hostels; boutique hostels

1 Introduction

Backpacker tourism has grown substantially over the last few years and is receiving increased importance in the tourism and hospitality literature (Cro & Martins, 2017; Martins et al., 2018; Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2011; Oliviera-Brochado & Gameiro, 2013; Rashid-Radha et al., 2016; Verissimo & Costa, 2019). In the context of Malaysia, backpackers as a tourism market was firstly recognized by the government when a 2008 study was commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism (Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2011). A total of GBP50,000 grant was awarded to Universiti Teknologi Malaysia to examine the contribution and potential of backpacker tourism in Malaysia and to make recommendations for strategic policy development and the management of backpacker tourism across Malaysia. The commissioning of such large-scale studies marks the first major interest shown by the government of a less developing country (Hampton, 2009). A more recent study by Johnes and Mapjabil (2020) also highlighted the potential for backpacker tourism to be further developed in Malaysia as Malaysia has beautiful natural attractions and cultural diversity that could attract the backpacker market.

It is now acknowledged that the backpacker market is an important component of the tourism industry. However, there is limited research regarding the level of service and facilities in this type of accommodation (Cro & Martins, 2017; Hecht & Martin, 2006; Martins et al., 2018; Musa and Thirumoorthi, 2011; Rashid-Radha et al., 2016; Verissimo & Costa, 2018). It is important to understand how hostel businesses are trying to fulfil the needs of their guests and enhance the overall hostelling experience. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to identify the underlying dimensions of the hostel environment that influences how guests evaluate their experience. The research focus is on boutique backpacker hostels, as this new innovative hostel concept has just been recently introduced in Malaysia. Its unique features are designed to appeal to a sub-segment of the backpacker market who choose hostels when travelling, but want more than the basic, utilitarian environment.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Backpacker characteristics

In the past, the backpacker market has consisted of primarily male, middle class, white youths from Northern European countries (Martins et al., 2018). At present, the group is more diverse in terms of socio-demographic profiles such as nationality, age and gender, as well as purpose of travelling, motivations, organisation of their trips and lifecycle status (Larsen et al., 2011; Martins et al., 2018; Rashid-Radha et al., 2016). Present-day backpackers have included young people taking a year out before study or work, often called 'gap years' in the UK and 'overseas experience' in New Zealand, as well as those in their 30s and 40s, taking a career break to travel long-term.

Pearce (1990) first introduced the term 'backpacker' into academic literature whereby the backpacker is defined as an independent traveller who prefers budget accommodation, enjoys meeting other people, have longer holidays, and look for

informal recreational activities. A more updated definition was proposed by Paris (2012), suggesting that a backpacker is someone who:

1. Seeks out experiences associated with budget travel
2. Puts emphasis on social interaction with local people and fellow travellers
3. Is independently organised and
4. Is flexible within constraints of time.

Although the motivation for backpacker travels remains fairly similar, research has shown that this market is no longer considered homogeneous (Cohen, 2018; Hecht & Martin, 2006; O'Reilly, 2006; Rashid-Radha et al., 2015). In the past, backpackers used to travel on a tight budget and do not mind giving up the right to privacy in the exchange for basic accommodation. However, the current backpacker market has more disposable income and prefer to travel in comfort instead of choosing basic budget accommodations. Due to the differences among sub-segments of the backpacker market, there are conflicting demands in terms of facilities and services expected within hostel accommodation.

One of the key developments in backpacker tourism has been in terms of the notion of 'flashpackers'. Hannam and Diekmann (2010) suggests that this sub-segment of the backpacker market, also known as the 'backpacker-plus' market, exemplifies the changing demographics in Western societies where people get married at an older age, have children at an older age, are more affluent, experience new technological developments as well as have the luxury of increased holiday and leisure time. For the flashpackers, travelling as a backpacker has been a deliberate decision rather than due to budget constraints (Paris, 2012). Jarvis and Peel (2010) further elaborate that flashpacking is considered 'upmarket backpacking' in which older travellers on career breaks can afford to spend more money on luxury experiences while on the road. The characteristics of flashpackers, as stated by Paris (2012), are listed below:

1. The older twenty to thirty-something backpacker
2. Who travels with an expensive backpack or trolley-type case
3. Stays in a variety of accommodation depending on the location
4. Has greater disposable income
5. Visits more 'off the beaten track' locations
6. Carries a laptop
7. Engages with mainstream backpacker culture

Referring specifically to backpackers' preferences in accommodation, several studies have drawn attention to the different aspects of hostel facilities and services that influence guests' evaluation of the service experience. According to Verissimo and Costa (2018), hostel guests expected to meet new people during their stay, engage in activities, have local experiences, feel comfortable/at home, get good value for money and enjoy the convenience. Additionally, Musa and Thirumoorthi (2011) also highlighted that besides the tangible aspects of hostel operations such as equipment, facilities and cleanliness, the hostel's social ambience also contributes towards a positive service

experience. Their studies indicated that the social ambience is created not only by the physical aspect of the hostel, but also by the way staff and guests interact with each other. Cro and Martins's (2017) study of hostels in Europe also highlighted the importance of security, location, cleanliness and price.

2.2 History of backpacker hostels

Historically, hostels were referred to as youth hostels. The idea of youth hostels was born in 1909 by a German school teacher, Richard Schirrmann, who recognized the lack of accommodation that would enable school classes to undertake excursions and study tours into the countryside (McCulloch, 1992). He tried persuading his fellow teachers to allow their schools to be used as simple dormitories during the holiday season. In 1910 he persuaded the local authorities to establish the world's first permanent youth hostel, equipped with two dormitories containing large triple-tier wooden bunks, a kitchen and washrooms. By 1919 the German Youth Hostel Association was formally established and from this point, the Youth Hostels Movement flourished throughout the world to countries such as Switzerland, Poland, New Zealand, Canada and USA. Today, the Youth Hostel Association (YHA) is the world's largest accommodation chain with more than 3,000 hostels in 77 countries (Hostelling International, 2021).

Essentially, the most defining characteristic of a hostel is the provision of dormitory-type rooms. Thus, an accommodation provider that only offers private rooms is not considered a hostel. Nevertheless, more and more hostels are offering shared dormitory rooms as well as single or double ensuite rooms to its guests. A list of communal areas typically offered in hostel accommodation is presented below:

1. Kitchen
2. Dining area
3. Lounge / living room
4. Bars
5. Reading rooms

Besides the term hostel, other terms such as 'backpacker hostel' and 'youth hostel' are also adopted by researchers as well as hostel operators to refer to hostel accommodation. It is noted that in most countries, the term 'youth hostel' is becoming obsolete as hostels no longer restrict their use only to young people.

For the purpose of this research, the term hostel will specifically refer to commercially-let properties where guests can rent either a bed in a dormitory-style room or a private room, and share hostel facilities, such as kitchens and lounges, with other guests (Timothy & Teye, 2009; Verissimo & Costa, 2019). Hostels differ from hotels mainly because of their price, communal areas and their social atmosphere. Beds are usually bunk beds, though some hostels have free-standing units too. In most cases, guests share a bathroom, kitchen, reading lounge, Internet desks and television area.

While the shared dormitory space and common areas provided in a commercially-let hostel is what sets it apart from other accommodation types such as hotels and

guesthouses, the term hostel has been adopted by several other accommodation providers that do not traditionally meet the basic hostel defining criteria. According to Timothy and Teye (2009), some hotels have reportedly even converted one of their private rooms into a five or six-bed dormitory, so they will qualify and be able to join a hostel association and get listed on the association's reservations systems. Furthermore, since the term hostel is not copyrighted or owned by any one individual or company, its use has become even more widespread. Timothy and Teye (2009) highlighted that lodging specialists have often debated about what exactly is a hostel and it is suggested that the meaning of hostel should be definitely set to preclude non-hostels from claiming to be hostels. For instance, some proponents suggest that a lodging facility can call itself a hostel only if it has:

“at least fifty per cent of its beds in dorm rooms, provide traveller facilities such as kitchenettes, Internet, common areas, laundry facilities, be low-budget oriented, provide a personal atmosphere conducive to meeting other travellers and accept individual walk-ins” (Timothy & Teye, 2009, p.220).

Hostels are most commonly associated with the backpacking youth and independent tourists who travel on a budget and might want to associate with other travellers in their own social-economic and age category (Timothy & Teye, 2009; Rashid-Radha et al., 2016; Verissimo & Costa, 2018). Although the hostel sector forms only a small part of the accommodation industry, it has a clearly targeted market segment which are the backpackers and other youth travellers. Such strong focus on niche market areas can successfully contribute towards high occupancy levels (Chitty, Ward & Chua, 2007; Oliviera-Brochado & Gameiro, 2013).

Due to global demand, the hostel sector is also attracting not only young, independent travellers but also tourists with families as well as business travellers who are travelling on a budget. Studies by Cave's (2007), Oliviera-Brochado and Gameiro (2013), Rashid-Radha et al., (2016) showed that recent trends indicate that the different market segments staying in youth hostels have competing demands. Thus, some aspects of the current core service may now be redundant. Their empirical investigation of hostel guests revealed that younger backpackers still value dormitory-style rooms at budget prices but would also like to have the option of private accommodation if they so choose.

2.3 Development of Boutique Hostels

Independent boutique hostels have entered the market to satisfy the more image conscious, brand-savvy consumers who are looking for the backpacking experience but expect better and increased services than in typical hostels. Hostels with character, stylish interior designs in interesting locations have drawn huge draw interest from this market segment, as reported by Landers (2009). Some boutique hostels have also been marketed as 'poshtels', 'upscale hostels' and 'flashpacker hostels' to appeal to discerning young travellers looking for a unique social experience while still being pampered in luxury surroundings. The key features of boutique hostels include trendy

lounge areas, stylish restaurants, 24-hour bars, free Internet connections and flat screen televisions (Wills, 2011). Boutique hostels in the UK and across the globe have gone further upmarket by providing guests with room service, a rooftop Jacuzzi and sauna, individually designed bedrooms and its own nightclub, cinema room and swimming pool. Akin to boutique hotels, these hostels have unique elements of architecture, design, and authenticity that attract guests who are drawn to a more exclusive environment.

The demand from the more affluent flashpacker market has prompted international hotel companies to cater to this profitable market. Accor Hotel Group, for example has been expanding its chain of hostels across Australia and New Zealand (Izon, 2003). Their chain of hostels, called Base Backpackers offer luxury Egyptian cotton sheets, fluffy towels, entertainment and media rooms and stainless-steel kitchen to its guests. Guests can also enjoy on-site Internet terminals, guest laundries, barbeque areas and in-house travel agents. Each hostel also has its own bar and restaurant which create a vibrant social scene for their guests. Dormitories are also offered to guests, but the request for double-rooms have had a much stronger demand. Their marketing strategies are to attract a broader age bracket of travellers who are looking for the backpacker experience but still like their luxuries.

Existing research has mostly focused on hostels but failed to explore guests' service experience within the specific context of boutique hostels. Studies of boutique hostels were mostly based in Portugal (Martins et al., 2018), Europe and Latin America (Verissimo & Costa, 2019). In Martins et al.'s (2018) study of Tattva Design Hostel, a boutique hostel in Portugal, findings showed that guests evaluated their hostelling experience based on staff friendliness, quality of customer service, location and basic cleanliness. Verissimo and Costa's (2019) study of Europe and Latin American boutique hostels indicated that a hostel stay was positively enhanced by ten key features, namely staff, supplementary services (e.g. social activities), facilities, location, atmosphere, guests' interactions, cleanliness, design and decoration, value for money and safety. Another study of boutique hostel was conducted in Vienna by Mylocopos and Dickinger (2021). Their findings highlighted that atmosphere, facilities, location and staff are the main accommodation attributes that guests appreciate during their stay.

In 2002, the HOSCAR Award (Hostelworld Customer Annual Ratings) was introduced by Hostelworld, a leading Online Travel Agent focused on the hostel market. The award acknowledges hostels with the highest customer reviews and ratings (Hostelworld, 2021). Awards are given annually to the world's best hostels based on guests' evaluation of cleanliness, comfort, location, Wi-Fi, amenities, employees and price/quality ratio (Martins et al., 2018). Some of the categories for the HOSCAR awards include Best Hostel in Europe, Best in Asia, Best Small Hostel, Best for Solo Travellers, Best for Female Solo Travellers, Best Graduate Gap-Yearers, Best for Career Breakers and Best Atmosphere. Such categorisations highlight the varied sub-segment of the backpacker market who choose to stay in hostels. Over the years, the majority of HOSCAR winners have been boutique hostels operating all over the world. Also referred to as the HOSCARs, the

award is based on more than one million reviews of hostel properties across 170 countries.

Based on the above studies on the historical development of hostel accommodation as well as the growth of boutique hostels, the present research suggests that hostels have to keep up with the demands and expectations of their guests in order to remain competitive in the marketplace. Changes have to be made in accordance with the preferences of their target market in order to ensure that they enjoy their hostelling experience. Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that generally hostel guests not only expect higher standards of hostel facilities, akin to hotel-type accommodation, they are also more demanding in terms of the quality of service offered in hostels. The present study therefore aims to investigate guests' current perception of their experience in boutique hostels so that practical, managerial recommendations could be offered in terms of meeting their expectations.

3 Methodology

3.1 The Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

In order to address the research question of this study, qualitative data will be collected using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). CIT involves asking respondents to narrate incidents that had an impact on their overall hostel experience. CIT provides an "empirical starting point for generating new research evidence about the phenomenon of interest" (Gremier, 2004, p.67). The essence of the technique is based on allowing consumers to describe in detail their experiences (Ardic Yetis & Yilmaz, 2019).

Historically, CIT was developed by Flanagan (1954) to establish procedures for the selection and classification of aircrews in the United States Army Air Forces back in World War II. According to Flanagan (1954, p.327),

"The CIT outlines procedures for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria. By an incident, is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and prediction to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects."

CIT is being used widely in the services marketing literature and has been a key method for recording service failures and successes, providing relevant data for improving management practices (Lockwood, 1994, Rashid-Radha et al., 2015; Zainol & Lockwood, 2014; Zhang, Beatty & Mothersbaugh, 2010). CIT was also adopted in studies within the tourism and hospitality context such as hotels (Zainol & Lockwood, 2014), airline services (Hu et al., 2013), cruise tourism (Petrick, Tonner & Quinn, 2006) and tour groups (Levy, Getz & Hudson, 2011; Ardic Yetis & Yilmaz, 2019).

In Zainol and Lockwood's (2014) study, CIT was utilized to investigate the perception of Langkawi resort hotel guests towards their service experiences during their stay. Their research focused on negative incidents and the findings showed that by identifying causes of failures, service providers are better equipped to anticipate these failures. By removing dissatisfying encounters beforehand, management can create a more memorable hotel experience for their guests.

As for the airline service, qualitative CIT research among passengers of Taiwanese international airlines was conducted by Hu et al., (2013). They also focused on negative incidents such as dissatisfying experiences and service failures. It was discovered that inappropriate policies and poor service attitude contributed to some of the service failures. Recommendations were made to modify certain policies and restrictions that caused passenger dissatisfaction. Additionally, training of service personnel was also needed to improve customer service standards.

In Ardic Yetis and Yilmaz's (2019) study, the focus of their CIT research was on both positive and negative experiences. They interviewed tourists who were part of a tour group in Nevsehir, Turkey. The tourists narrated that they were not satisfied with the punctuality of the tours, tour package prices, interaction with tour guides as well as how the travel agents over-promised their services. It was reported that tourists felt deceived by the travel agents because they were unreliable and were promoting activities that were not part of the actual tour programme.

CIT offers several advantages because it can be used for both quantitative and qualitative research (Grove & Fisk, 1997; Gremler, 2004; Gilbert & Lockwood, 1999). Furthermore, CIT allows respondents to share their personal experience in a natural manner (Bitner et al.,1990). The technique allows the interviewer to probe and extract the required information in a fairly structured approach. In this research, the critical incidents shared by respondents will point towards how they evaluate their service experience when staying in hostels.

In defining the term 'critical incident', Bitner et al. (1990) describes it as "one that makes a significant contribution, either positively or negatively, to an activity or phenomenon". Therefore, by adopting this definition in the context of hostel experiences, a critical incident is defined as an incident where the guests' experience of certain service and/or facilities within the hostel environment had a significant impact upon their service experience. Since the research will be carried out within the context of hostel settings and will only investigate hostel guests, for an incident to be included in the study, it must meet two criteria. Firstly, incidents must involve guests' recollection of the use of the hostel facilities and services being offered. Secondly, the service experience being evaluated as positive is based on these facilities and/or services. Negative incidents may also be probed and recorded as this also forms part of the service experience. The guests will be encouraged to list factors that influence their service experience evaluations according to their own personal experience. The critical backpacker requirements such as cleanliness, comfort, good location, Wi-Fi

connectivity, amenities, good price, friendly employees and guests will serve as an interview guide.

Before choosing the hostel guests to be interviewed, potential respondents will be asked if they could take a few minutes to be asked about their hostelling experience. In order to ensure the right person is interviewed for this study, two filter questions will be asked before the interview takes place – whether the respondents are guests at the hostel and whether they spent at least a night at the hostel. Next, demographic profiles will be collected at the beginning of the session to gather the overall background of the respondent and to establish good rapport. This will be followed by a statement asking the respondents to state a specific situation/incident where they felt that their hostel experience was a positive and memorable experience. An interview protocol will be used to outline a set of questions relating to the research topic. A semi-structured interview will be conducted whereby the interviewer has a series of questions in the form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of question and ask further questions in response. The interview questions will be developed based on extensive literature reviews which looked at the theoretical constructs. For example, respondents will be asked the following question:

“We are interested in finding out what guests enjoy about their experiences at the hostel. Based on your own personal feelings, think of a time when you had a particularly positive and memorable experience when you stayed at the hostel recently. Could you describe the situation and tell me what happened?”

Following the respondent’s recall of the incident, probing questions will then be asked to find out more about the details of the incident, such as what actually happened, where it happened and what did they experience that made the hostel experience a memorable and positive one. The interviews will be conducted until a saturation level is reached, where further interviewing did not yield any information that was not shared by previous respondents (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders & Lewis, 2012). It was proposed by Saunders and Lewis (2012, p.158) that for heterogeneous populations, which in this case are the hostel guests, the sample size should be between 15 and 25.

In terms of data analysis, procedures suggested by the CIT method (Flanagan, 1954) will be adopted whereby respondents’ narratives will be examined using content analysis to uncover common themes and potential categories. A deductive approach to qualitative data analysis will be adopted, in which a coding schema derived from the literature will be developed (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008). As this research is still at the preliminary stage, the initial themes will be identified based on previous literature (Martins, 2018, Rashid-Radha et al., 2015; Mylocopos & Dickinger, 2021) and may include layout and design, atmospherics, cleanliness, Wi-fi availability, location, staff and other guests. It is acknowledged that interview data may produce answers that reflect other themes.

To collect data, it is proposed that the scope of this research focuses on boutique hostels in Penang, Malaysia. According to Lonelyplanet.com (2021), which is the go-to website for backpackers, Penang is among Malaysia’s most popular backpacker

destination. Other destinations include Malacca, Sabah and Kuala Lumpur. Penang is very popular due to its rich cultural, heritage and natural attractions. Several hostels have been built on the island, especially along backpacker routes such as Georgetown and Batu Feringghi. It is also a key stopover in the backpackers' South East Asia circuit, especially for travellers who are heading North to Thailand and down South to Singapore. However, it is acknowledged that the sample of backpackers from one destination might differ from that in another part of Malaysia. Findings may therefore be generalized only within the context of the destination being chosen for the research.

The population in this research is defined as individuals who have had the experience of staying in these hostels. As hostels are considered the main form of accommodation for backpackers, the researcher had to determine the most effective research strategy to reach this population. The mobility of this group, travelling between different locations across the globe, makes it difficult to obtain a representative sample. Therefore, as with previous studies involving backpackers and hostel guests (Murphy, 2001; Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2011; Obenour et al., 2006), the present research focuses on only one particular backpacker destination, which in this case is Penang, Malaysia. Data collection is therefore limited to guests who have previously stayed in these hostels within Penang.

The sampling procedure will involve selecting hostels and individual guests for inclusion in the research. Since there is no official record of the number of hostels operating in Penang, the key criteria for hostel selection is a website search of all hostels in Penang. Popular Internet hostel booking portals such as Hostelworld.com, Hostels.com, Hostelbookers.com, Hihostels.com and Hostelz.com will be referred to in order to produce a list of hostels to be included in this research. Based on this list, boutique hostels will be identified based on the following attributes; (1) stylish architecture, (2) interior design of public space, (3) room configuration, (4) room rates (5) and well-designed rooms.

For example, guests staying at Penang's Ryokan Muntri Boutique Hostel, located Georgetown, will be invited to take part in the study as this hostel markets itself as a boutique hostel and fulfils the abovementioned attributes. The hostel has Peranakan-style exteriors and offers a contemporary feel through its lighting, use of bean bags and no-frills bunk beds. Another example of a boutique hostel in Penang is Chateau One Guesthouse, which consists of a 100-year-old row of shophouses. This hostel uses existing features to form part of its interiors and has retained the exposed beams, brickwork and aged door.

Purposive judgement sampling will be used to recruit participants for data collection. The criteria set by the researcher is that, participants must be guests of Penang boutique hostels and have stayed for at least one night during their most recent trip. This method is considered appropriate due to the deficiency in research focusing on service experiences within the context of boutique hostels. The flexibility of interviews as one of the qualitative research methods also permits the exploration of research issues that arise as the research progresses.

4 Conclusion

This study has theoretical contributions as it reinforces the need to study service experience beyond the typical hotel accommodation perspective. Hostel accommodation is an emerging niche that has been largely neglected in tourism and hospitality research. From a practical standpoint, the findings of this research are expected to have direct managerial implications in terms of the physical design and operation of hostels, especially boutique hostels. The design and placement of tangible items such as rooms, equipment, furniture, fixtures and fittings may well influence customers' evaluation of the service experience. For instance, kitchens designed to be large can provide a more conducive area for socialisation, which could lead to a positive service experience. Results of this research could therefore offer guidelines for hostel operators in terms of optimising space utilisation in order to maximise and enhance the comfort of the guests.

In conclusion, this research has presented a deeper understanding of the backpacking market segment and recent hostel trends. The backpacker market is no longer homogenous. The differences in backpackers' socio-demographic profiles, travel motivations and behaviours could mean that current core services typically offered to this market segment may now be redundant. Furthermore, the evolution of backpacking from a form of budget travel to a more mainstream tourist experience has meant that there is currently a strong demand for higher standards of accommodation services and facilities. As this paper is currently conceptual in nature, it is suggested that further research should be conducted to provide empirical evidence that clarifies all the different aspects of the service experience within the boutique hostel context.

5 About the author

Jasmine Zea Raziah Radha Rashid Radha is a senior lecturer at the Hospitality Department, School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia. She holds a PhD in hospitality management from the University of Surrey, UK. Her research interest lies in the areas of consumer behaviour, backpacker tourism, services marketing and hospitality operations management.

Mohd Fadil Mohd Yusof is currently a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Hospitality, Tourism and Wellness, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). He completed a PhD at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in urban and regional planning focusing on tourism destination branding. His research interests are hospitality management, tourism marketing and tourism and hospitality entrepreneurship.

Noor Azimin Zainol is an Associate Professor at the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). She is also a Research Fellow at the Langkawi International Research Centre for Tourism and Hospitality (LITH). She obtained her PhD from the University of Surrey, United Kingdom (Hospitality Management). Dr Noor Azimin's research interest is in the areas of services management in general, with specialization in Muslim friendly hospitality services, Islamic tourism, and service failure and recovery.

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