

## Hotel Executive's Perceptions on People with Disabilities Facilities in Malaysian Luxury Hotels

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*Received: February 26, 2015*

*Accepted: April 30, 2015*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of hotel executives in 14 Malaysian luxury hotels towards their hotel-disabled facilities. It draws on in-depth interviews of the hotel executives from either front office or marketing department. The interview sessions were coded and reviewed by using audio visual tapes as well as manual transcripts. The recorded tapes and transcripts were then summarized into categories. Findings of this study revealed that 6 main themes were derived from the study which consists of hotel's responsibility, hotel's policy, staff training, marketing promotion focusing on the disabled group, communication of disabled people with the hotels on their needs as well as public awareness on the disabled facilities. Findings also revealed that some of the themes aligned with what have been discussed heavily in the literatures. Uniquely, some themes extend and contribute to the new body of knowledge in handicapped or disabled facilities literatures. Future research may focus on the lower scale and budget brand types of hotels as well as the disabled group itself. This study provides hoteliers with the niche market group needs that are the disabled people in providing sufficient facilities for this group. It is beneficial for hoteliers in advancing their existing facilities or designing new one for their hotel.

**KEYWORDS:** Hotel Executives, Malaysian Luxury Hotels, People with Disabilities (PwD), Perceptions.

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### INTRODUCTION

In tourism industry, the importance of disabled people was highlighted as part of the tourism market [1]. This is further agreed by other researchers that perceived disabled guest market as a crucial evolving and expanding market over the world [2]. Though this segmented market is important, the facilities and infrastructures as well as services to accommodate their needs are still lacking. Subsequently, it was highlighted that the needs of disabled people were often refrain from being recognized and they normally regarded as the same like non-disabled people [3]. This is indeed a saddened scenario as they express a meaningful yet untapped market. Numerous attempts have been made to investigate issues on disabled people [4, 5], but most studies focused on samples of western regions. While the local study emphasized more on public buildings [6], there is none studied on the hotel scenario. Hence, the finding of this study is worth in assisting hotel managers to upgrade and enhance their services to disabled people.

Realizing the importance of providing safe and adequate service to disabled people, specifically in hotels that should be imposed at any time and any place. Researchers would like to contribute by utilizing the Asian samples. This study explored the perceptions of hotel executives in 14 Malaysian luxury hotels towards their hotel-disabled facilities.

In tourism industry, disability has been disregard as vital subject for many years [7]. In [8] discovered the rise of interests in disabilities studies among tourism scholars in bridging the gap to various 'visibility' issues of these disabled people. Recently, many developed countries have been enlarging on imposing legislation to meet the needs of disabled people [9]. Malaysia can also be seen as responding to the legislation issue by continuously amending Malaysian standards for accessibility. The first right-based legislation for disabled people have been positioned by Malaysia government [6]. The main objectives of People with Disabilities Act in 2002 is "to ensure that persons with disabilities in Malaysia have the same rights to equality before the law as the rest of the community in the country; to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against persons on the ground of disability in various areas of life; and to promote recognition and acceptance within the community of the principle that persons with disabilities be afforded equal opportunities and full participation to enable them to live as a rightful citizen of the country" [10].

In [11] summarized that greater customer's loyalty can be achieved by hotel operators from the people with disabilities guests if they were receiving better services. Additionally, several authors highlighted the importance of catering services to this specific market segmentation [2, 12]. Nevertheless, few researches focused on the lack of attention given to the people with disabilities [13, 14]. Recently, disabled guests' perceptions of their hotel experiences have been identified [5]. On top of that, they identified the feasibility of implementing disabled guests' suggestions in hotel design and service policies. This paper begins by furnishing an overview of Disabilities Act as well as previous studies in hospitality industries. Researchers then stipulated the methodology used for this study which followed by findings and discussion in the next section. Suggestions for future research were available in conclusion section.

## METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews with 14 hotel executives representing each hotel, from either front office or marketing department were conducted to explore on the perceptions of hotel executives' towards their hotel disabled facilities. Researchers scrutinized carefully 14 Malaysian luxury hotels which composed of Hotel A, Hotel B, Hotel C, Hotel D, Hotel E, Hotel F, Hotel G, Hotel H, Intercontinental, Double tree by Hilton, Park Royal, Renaissance, Marriott and Sheraton Imperial Hotel. The terms Hotel A-H will be used in every part of this paper, and will not be disclosed to respect the anonymity policy of these hotel brands. However, managers gave consent to divulge the information regarding to this study for public knowledge cultivation. The hotels were selected which based on few criterions as followed; they were five-star rated hotels, strategically located in Klang Valley area and exhibited among the 45 luxury hotels registered with Malaysian Association of Hotels [15]. All 45 hotels were approached via emails and phone calls to engage in this study. However, most hotels declined to accept researcher's invitation claiming their hotels were running high occupancy, obligated with important functions and events at their hotels as well as staffs training. There were no responses from 8 hotels. While the other 3 hotels mentioned that most of their persons in charged in marketing and front office departments were on leaved during this study duration, though they expressed their interest to participate. Thus, it summed up to a total of 14 hotels studied. About 30% response rate was an adequate percentage, as in this case 14 out of 45 hotels [16].

In search of assembling vital information, researchers choose one-on-one in-depth interviews. In [17] postulated that this qualitative method was time consuming, costly and labour intensive but it can furnish great possessions of data. Researchers employed purposive sampling in selecting the interview participants from marketing or front office departments for this study. These two departments were prioritized based on the assumptions that they have in-depth knowledge with their hotels operation. They were responsible in promoting their hotels to guests. Hence, in-depth knowledge about hotel facilities was required. Moreover, hotel executives in this study consist of those who hold supervisory position or above. The interviewees' profiles were tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: The interviewee's profiles

Position	Number
Front Office Manager	2
Front Office Assistant Manager	5
Front Office Supervisor	3
Marketing Assistant Manager	1
Marketing Executives	3

Researchers spent estimated one to two hours for each interview sessions. These semi-structured interviews were based from a series of questions. The interrogation process were recorded, transcribed verbatim and summarized into categories. Themes, concepts and categories were established after a comprehensive reviewed process took place.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings revealed that there were 6 main themes derived from this study including hotel's responsibility, hotel's policy, staff training, marketing promotion focusing on the disabled group, communication of disabled people with the hotels on their needs as well as public awareness on the disabled facilities. Each theme will now be examined especially in exploring solutions and extending further debates.

### Hotel's Responsibility

Findings indicated that all respondents agreed that the facilities of the room were compliant with the Building Code Malaysia standards for access and mobility. However, the access was not extended to all areas of the hotel such as swimming pools and gymnasiums. As postulated by [4], managers realized the accessibility issues of their general facilities but only a few have addresses on this issue. Additionally, half of the respondents concluded that though they have new buildings on the hotel structure, but the design is still less accessible. Hence, hotel design and layout should be more barrier-free built environment [18]. Moreover, all hotel executives agreed that they do not have any Braille signs and railing in the elevators though they received visual impaired guests checking in their hotel.

### Hotel's Policy

Findings also exhibited that all hotels provide rooms for disabled guests as part of their hotel policy. According to [15], in order to be granted star rating, hotels must have facilities for disabled guests though the demand from this group is very minimal. The disabled room was equipped with telecommunication device for the deaf (TDD), closed-caption televisions which allow individuals to read the audio portion of a television program off the television (TV) screen, vibrating alarm to assist guests in the event of emergency, alarm clocks with large display faces, telephone covers with enlarged numbers, door knocker flashers to alert when someone knocks the door, lower peepholes at the door as well handrails in the bathtub. Additionally, one of the respondents disclosed that due to the limited number of hotel rooms available for disabled people, hence there were cases where the disabled guests were offered a non-disabled room or suggested their own competitors.

### **Staff Training**

This study also revealed that all respondents conducted staff training focused on the disabled people's needs. The training was executed on a regular basis, either every 3 or 6 months. It covers safety issues, dos and don'ts in dealing with this group and right ways of treating this group as well as communication aspects. This is in line with the study done by [19] that highlighted safety and emergency emersion as two main crucial issues to be considered by organizations when handling the disabled people. Hotel executives agreed that the training were beneficial in developing staffs awareness. Providing equal treatments to disabled people seems to govern the mind set of many hotel staffs. It's good to see that staffs were motivated after each training session. Other respondents added that the training was conducted by hotel managers or outside speakers/ subject experts. Normal people may encountered fear of saying or acting the wrong things to disabled people [20]. Hence, having such training is an honourable effort in providing an impeccable service to disabled guests.

### **Marketing Promotion Focusing on Disabled Group**

All respondents agreed that the needs of disabled group shouldn't be taken for granted and differentiated from normal people. In [4] claimed that service providers wished to embrace high quality of customer service delivery to these people. Moreover, findings revealed that a number of executives recognized the contributions from this niche market on hotels revenues but due to low and infrequent demand, the promotion always been forgotten. Minimal efforts can be seen in taking part of compositing disabled group as market segmentation though there were studies supporting economic contributions of disability to tourism [21, 22]. Hotel executives claimed that the scenario of having disabled guests checking in their hotel is very new in Malaysia.

### **Communication of Disabled People with the Hotels on Their Needs**

All respondents conformed that miscommunications were normally occurred between the disabled people and the staffs. Some of the disabled guests did not express that they have a disability upon checking in at the hotel. Most of the time, non-disabled people were accompanying these people. Thus, staffs overlooked on the welfare of this person. Additionally, 6 out of 14 hotels revealed that they received complaints from visual impaired guests on no appropriate signs for public facilities liked hotel lobby, restaurants, washrooms and banquet halls. Looking back on the needs of this market segmentation is crucial to improve the service giving to them.

### **Public Awareness on Disabled Facilities**

Five respondents revealed that during high occupancy period, the disabled room was offered to non-disabled guests on a last sale basis. One of the hotel executive claimed that, the non-disabled guest did not recognize at all that the room that they staying were a disabled room. This is due to the pleasant look as well as high quality facilities of the room. Bathrooms were spacious and it provides support for the movement of the disabled people. It contradicts with [4] findings, where non-disabled guest claimed that disabled room did not have the same facilities as a standard room and aesthetically displeasing look. In conjunction with that, 6 respondents mentioned that many of their hotel guests acknowledged the ramps and curb cuts provided for disabled people on wheelchairs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper explored the perceptions of hotel executives towards their hotel-disabled facilities. Interviews which conducted with these hotel executives have summarized the major findings, where all executives are craving to provide high quality customer service as well as equal treatments to the disabled people. It is so impressive to have such spirits but more efforts need to be exerted to change the mind set of just desiring to meet the disabled guests' needs to commendable service provision. Additionally, in [23] highlighted that the impact of disability awareness training is very powerful. It can be esteem resources in transforming the personal attitudes of non-disabled persons towards people with disabilities. Interacting with people with disabilities should be done in a natural manner where employees participated in simulations using "wheelchairs, walkers, weighted gloves, ankle weights, blindfolds and silencing head phones...designed to stimulate common disabilities" [20].

Future research on hospitality service provision is indeed in need [24]. It can probe into measuring the attitudes of front liner staffs towards disabled persons. A number of scales exist to measure attitudes towards disability [23]. Testing the developed scales in different countries may further enhance the validity and reliability of the scales.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors would like to thank Mr Zairi Ismael Rizman for his guidance and assistance in getting this paper published.

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