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Abstract

Human resource management strategies in the hospitality industry remain critical area of study; nonetheless, it has become an integral part of people's daily lives. ICT and by extension IMT are everywhere with major economic sectors adopting the technique to enhance their operations. The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of hospitality human resource management strategies in enhancing competitiveness through customer satisfaction in Malaysia with a focus on five 5-star hotels in Kuala Lumpur. The study aimed at investigating how IMT enhanced consumer product awareness, service quality, and employee performance toward customer satisfaction. The study mostly used open-ended questionnaires administered to 91 participants who involved employees and customers of the 5 hotels. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively using Excel and presented through charts and narrative form. The response rate was 84%. Findings from the study indicated that product awareness, service quality, and employee performance enhance customer satisfaction within the hotel sector. The study recommended that managers in the hospitality sector design better ways of using IMT to ensure competitive advantage. Suggestions are made on further research should focus on the role played by IMT in enhancing customer preference and buying behaviours, using in-depth approaches in other service sub-sectors like tour operators and travel agents.

Keywords: *Human Resource Management, Employee Satisfaction, Hospitality Industry, HRM Strategies, Malaysia*

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1.0 Introduction

The hospitality sector, specifically the realm of travel and tourism, has undergone significant changes, transforming from an experience reserved for the wealthy elite to a popular activity enjoyed by a broad range of individuals. Historical evidence suggests that travel has been an integral part of human culture since ancient times. For example, in ancient Rome and during the 17th century, traveling across Europe on a grand tour was viewed as a rite of passage for individuals of higher social status. Similarly, in the Middle East, pilgrimage was a popular form of travel, as documented in works of literature such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The term "hospitality" emerged in the 14th century and derives from the Latin word "hospes," which means guest, host, and foreigner (Westcott & Anderson, 2020). The practice of accommodating and hosting these travelers is commonly referred to as hospitality, whereby tourists are provided with accommodations for their exploration activities.

Over the past decade, the hospitality industry has experienced rapid technological advancements, driven by the need to satisfy guests' changing expectations and maintain their loyalty in a highly competitive environment. These innovations have included electricity, hotel telephones, in-room radios, standard hotel rooms, television, and more recently, mobile technology to improve the end-to-end guest experience (Spiller, 2014). The advent of the internet has also had a profound impact on the industry, leading to the launch of online travel agencies such as Expedia, Travelocity, and Priceline. These websites enabled customers to access information on various destinations and compare prices. Kayak.com, launched in 2004, became the most famous metasearch engine and processed one billion queries in one year alone. It is expected that this number will triple by the year 2025 (Morch, 2023).

The industry is rapidly evolving, with technology playing a major role in shaping its development. Human resource management strategies (IMT) has become increasingly important in this sector as it allows for more efficient communication, organization, and analysis of data. As mentioned by Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015), IMT can help to enhance customer experiences by providing personalized and targeted services based on their preferences and behaviors. In addition, recent research by Xiang et al. (2020) highlights how IMT can improve operational efficiency and reduce costs in the hospitality industry.

However, the implementation of IMT is not without its challenges. Hospitality organizations face numerous obstacles in adopting IMT systems, including issues related to data security, privacy, and the need for skilled personnel. For instance, ensuring the security and confidentiality of customer data is critical in the hospitality sector, as a breach of trust can severely damage a hotel's reputation and lead to legal consequences. Additionally, the implementation of IMT systems may require significant investment in training staff to use new technologies effectively. Nevertheless, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in hospitality organizations, particularly in areas such as contactless check-ins and digital menu ordering systems, which have become essential in maintaining social distancing measures and ensuring the safety of guests and staff.

This paper aims to explore the current state of IMT in the hospitality industry in Malaysia, and its influence on customer satisfaction. Specifically, the paper examines how product awareness, service quality, and employee performance would catalyze customer satisfaction.

1.1 Research Problem

With increased globalization and competition in the hospitality industry, players are working hard to find better ways of winning customer loyalty; quality service as well operates in a cost-efficient manner. IMT have become important in companies becoming competitive. According to Pearlson et al. (2016), the use of IMT enables organizations to save time as well as money, for example, there are reduced travel requirements which in exchange leads to effectiveness and efficiency. The exchange of information at every stage of the sales cycle in the tourism product or service is significant. The information must be able to flow quickly and accurately between the client, intermediaries, and the tourism suppliers involved in meeting the client's needs. As a result IMT has become a universal feature of tourism. IMT makes it possible for the information to be managed more effectively and exchanged globally (Law et al., 2014). Increased completion and rising customer competition drive players in the industry to design means to achieve competitive advantage. To cope with rapidly changing environments, hotels have adopted various technologies in room booking, procurement, electronic transactions, inventory systems, wireless internet as well as emails and websites. Managers in the hotel industry believe that technology is essential in enhancing business performance. Improving operation productivity as well as customer satisfaction is an essential issue for good business and success in the long run (Eason, 2014). Despite the positive contribution of IMT in the industry, there is limited research on its role in enhancing competitive advantage through customer satisfaction in a developing country context like Malaysia. It is against this discovery that the research sought to investigate the role of hospitality IMT in enhancing competitive advantage through customer satisfaction.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Hospitality Human Resource Management

Information management in the hospitality industry involves compiling information received from one or various sources and then redistributing it efficiently to audiences (Law et al., 2013). The process has its history from post-industrial society and the end of an era set on production and the onset of the corporate era. The latter era changed its focus on service delivery and more specifically on the exchange of information. The corporate era paved the way for men in a suit who took over from working-class heroes and small-town boys. The corporate era began in the 1970s, and at this time information management was at the germ stage still bearing the meaning of file management.

During the germ phase, the world was not so digitized and was still relying on paper but did not last for long. The coming of computers occurred gradually, and offices got stuffed with computers while the writing machines got phased out. The introduction of computers and their use meant a significant change in what was called information management. During this time information was stored in boxes, managed and sent to boxes. Companies realized the importance of having information managers qualified and able to utilize computers. The use of these devices increased the speed and simplicity of doing things. Before this stage information could be managed by anybody and was categorized as file management. The 1990s paved the way for highly qualified information managers. From 2000 to date, information management has been well structured, and it is a service by itself offered by specialists.

2.2 Quality of Service

According to Chahal and Kumar (2014), improving client satisfaction is the motto of the hospitality industry. The industry is keen on investing in technology to meet this demand by

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guests. Creativity and innovation remain critical factors in the hotel sector if they were to achieve a competitive edge. The issue is on raising hotel standards to at least win the loyalty of the majority of clients. Hotel rooms are sold in urgency, and this is because they are perishable, therefore more guests translate to higher profits. Luxury hotels have invested in high-end technology, for example, high definition televisions, mirror televisions, and high-speed Wi-Fi among others. Some have adopted the use of fingerprint scanners to pay for everything as well as access the rooms. There has been a positive relationship between investment in technology and successful hotel business. All successful hotels or chains tend to first invest in technology before entering the market, in essence, they are trying to sell experiences and not rooms. Small, medium and large hotels are working hard to incorporate different technologies. Apart from satisfying guests, hospitality technology benefits organizations, especially with the changing lifestyles where it has made lives very convenient.

2.3 Customer Product Awareness

Technology has increased at an unprecedented rate in hospitality and tourism. The hospitality sector is using technology to raise customer awareness, create realistic promises as well as deliver complete service. Managers are therefore required to adopt technology in running the day-to-day activities of the business, for example ensuring that information on their websites aligns and focuses with clients' needs and demands; nonetheless, it should maintain a high search engine ranking. According to Stark (2015), IMT can change the nature of the hospitality business, products, processes, as well as competition. Consequently, organizations slow in mastering the right technology would find it hard to direct and manage their organization. According to Ozturk et al. (2016), many hotels have introduced mobile phone-enabled room booking and reservations. Today there are systems like e-distribution that comprise yield management, a central reservation system as well as website room booking services. These technologies are used in selling services to guests.

2.4 Employee Performance

Human resource is a critical partner in ensuring competitiveness within the hospitality industry. Employees are significantly impacted by technological innovations, as they are expected to possess specialized information systems knowledge and technical skills. Organizations are therefore required to offer training to avoid failure in the adoption stage (Camisón & Villar-López, 2014). Employees with a better understanding of IMT will propel the hospitality business to high levels of competitiveness. Well-equipped personnel concerning IMT help the business respond to changes as well as offer necessary connectivity and modularity that paves the way for rapid organizational response to changes. Nevertheless, they ensure successful technology implementation. According to Camisón and Villar-López (2014), unfamiliarity with IT and computer operations stood out as the most significant impediment to the adoption of the technology in the initial transition stage. Lack of skills is likely to cause work inefficiency and frustration over foreign technology. This happening might cause a negative attitude towards the new system, and which has been proven to be detrimental to the assimilation of IMT and may result in system adoption failure.

2.5 Underpinning Theory

Diffusion of Innovation theory is a theoretical framework that explains how new ideas, products, or technologies are adopted by individuals and organizations over time. The theory suggests that there are different categories of individuals based on their willingness to adopt an innovation,

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ranging from innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, to laggards. The rate of adoption is influenced by various factors, including the perceived relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability of the innovation (Rogers, 2003). In the context of the hospitality industry's adoption of IMT, the Diffusion of Innovation theory provides insights into how and why hospitality organizations adopt IMT systems. For instance, the theory suggests that early adopters of IMT systems are likely to be organizations that perceive a relative advantage of the technology in enhancing customer experiences and improving operational efficiency. The early majority is likely to adopt the technology once they see the early adopters' success, while the late majority and laggards may require more persuasion to adopt the technology. The theory can also help to identify potential barriers to adoption, such as concerns about data security and the need for skilled personnel, which can be addressed to facilitate IMT adoption in the hospitality industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Target Population

The study applied a quantitative research design, whereby it focused on obtaining quantitative data from the respondents. Target population refers to all members or a hypothetical set of people, events or objects that the researcher wishes to generalize results (Babin & Zikmund, 2015). The target population was the 5 five-star hotels located in Kuala Lumpur: Intercontinental Hotel, Hilton, Serena, Norfolk, and Laico hotels. The choice of the hotels was informed by their strategies for adopting IMT. The target respondents were the workers in the various departments; human resources, public relations and customer service. The study's sample size comprised 108 respondents from the four departments. Respondents for the study were collected from all five hotels, whereby a simple random sampling technique was used. The hotels allowed the researcher access to their employee database and chose respondents randomly from the three departments. A total of 96 respondents completed answering the questionnaire which represents 89% of the sample size.

3.3 Data Collection, Analysis, and Ethical Considerations

The study used open-ended questionnaires in the collection of data. Participants in the study were issued questionnaires. The choice of the method was informed by its ability to collect information that is not directly observable through inquiries into feelings, motivations, attitudes as well as accomplishments (McNabb, 2015). The collected data was cleaned, entered and analyzed. Excel software was used because it is faster and more flexible; nevertheless, it provides a more accurate analysis resulting in reliable conclusions. The data was analyzed based on the variables and objectives of the study. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze, present and interpret the collected data. Data was presented in form of charts. During the research process, the researcher observed study ethics. Participating in the research was voluntary; nevertheless, privacy and confidentiality were observed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Participants were briefed on the objectives of the study with an assurance that the data collected was solely for academic purposes.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Product Awareness

The study requested respondents to indicate whether IMT enhances customer awareness of hospitality products offered in their hotels. From the findings majority (68) (75 percent) of respondents thought that IMT enhanced product awareness among customers. The rest of the

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respondents 23 (25 percent), believe that IMT does not enhance consumer product awareness. These findings confirm that indeed IMT among Malaysian hotels has been critical in promoting product awareness to its customers. As noted by Habri and Sonawane (2016), IMT provides the management with information that is used to assess risks and make critical decisions based on analysis, which helps a hotel to present its product in a creative way. This scenario manifests itself even through the awareness of consumer confidentiality, where the IMT systems can be maintained, and consumers can trust again to buy products via the internet (Mgunda, 2019).

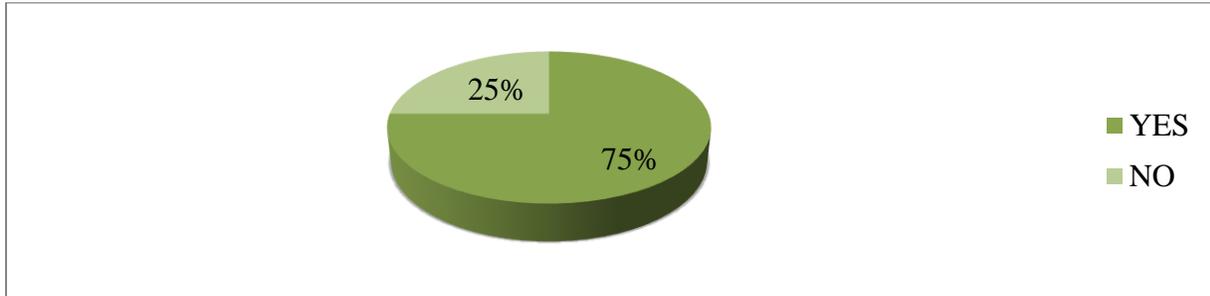


Figure 1: Opinion on IMT’s Capability to Influence Product/Service Awareness

Regarding the main sources of information for customers, a question was posed to the customers, whereby 73(80 percent) recorded to have used a mix of various communication technologies to research a hospitality product, 18 (20 percent) were adamant to stick to same source of information for their searches. Of the involved employees, 56(77 percent) recorded using IMT to reach customers, design content on their website as well as get feedback from clients on various products and services (see Figure 2). Social media platforms were the most used sources of selling and data collection on hospitality products, followed by mainstream media and then agents at 63%, 21%, and 16% respectively. This indicates that no matter the size of the hotel or workforce type, IMT is an important asset for data collection, which later is tailored to lure even more customers. Some respondents felt that although social media and word of mouth is huge, newbies in the online markets, like the vlogs and bloggs have create a niche base for online product reviews (OPRs).

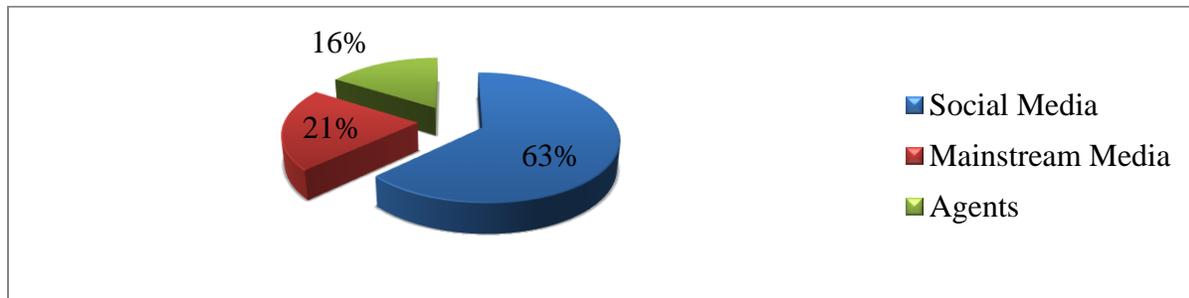


Figure 2: Sources of Information for Employees and Customers

OPRs have gained traction as a common source of for customers planning to travel or purchase a product online (Lee & Choeh, 2018). OPRs are also generally found on platforms that present an extensive range of information, such as blogs (Yu, 2017). OPRs should in no way be connected with firms (to avoid ethical conflict); however, many studies have reported that firms can influence OPRs in an indirect manner. This calls into question the impartiality and credibility of OPRs (Tsao & Mau, 2019). Many hotels are operating under the belief that the voluntary disclosure of sponsorships would undermine the effectiveness of OPRs, prompting them to devise methods to

hide the sponsorship information (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2018). Therefore, hotels are hiding on the guise of social media, while secretly sponsoring OPRs.

4.2 Quality of Services

The question requested respondents to indicate whether IMT enhanced the quality of services in the hospitality industry. From the findings a majority of respondents 83% indicated that IMT improved the quality of service, 11% recorded not sure while 6% thought there was no change.

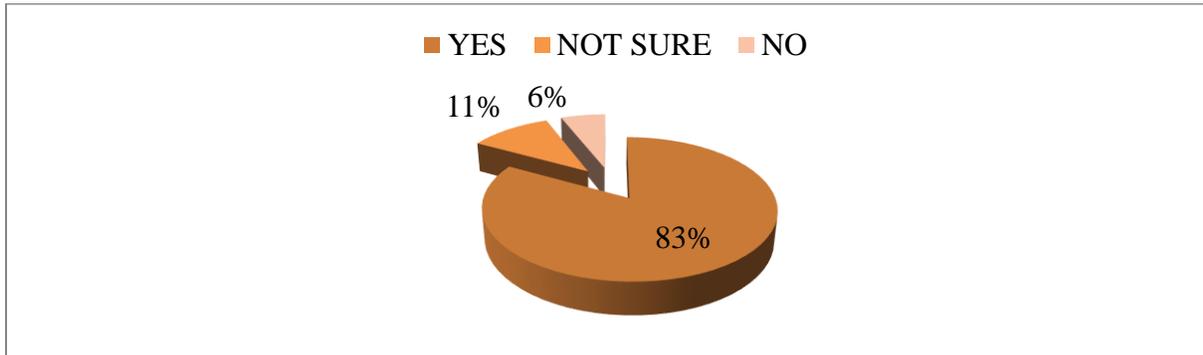


Figure 3: Views on the Impact of IMT on the Quality of Services

These findings confirm that IMT is critical in enhancing service quality within the hospitality sector. Aspects of IMT that improved the quality of service included prompt customer care service, transparency on service costs, online reservation and bookings, websites, customized services, online payment methods, as well as smart and automated room appliances. The quality of service was assessed from the time the customer wishes to buy the service, information search, booking, staying and leaving the hospitality product. In the entire process, IMT was found to play a critical role in ensuring that the customer was satisfied.

Clearly, the findings identifies that hotel managers’ emphasize on the application of IMT to sustain hotel operations is the next logical and practical step they can take in making sustainable hotels a workable reality for their businesses. According to (Rana et al., 2022) this novel technology has great potential to revolutionize the hotel sector; to help little economies to strengthen and shift towards the level of developed countries; and to support pure countries in the elimination of corruption, in the creation of a trusted system, and to stimulate equality between small and big entities. Nevertheless, the adoption of IMT, besides numerous benefits on service quality, causes some issues in terms of the process, data, and infrastructure levels (Leng et al., 2020). Moreover, the technology is not able to differentiate true and false data, and so it cannot check the content, but its authorship and immutability are ensured (Islam et al., 2021).

4.3 Customer Performance

The question requested respondents to indicate whether IMT enhanced the performance of employees working in the hospitality sector. Of the employee participants, (81) (89 percent) said that IMT had made their job more comfortable and practical while (10) (11 percent) thought otherwise (see Figure 5).

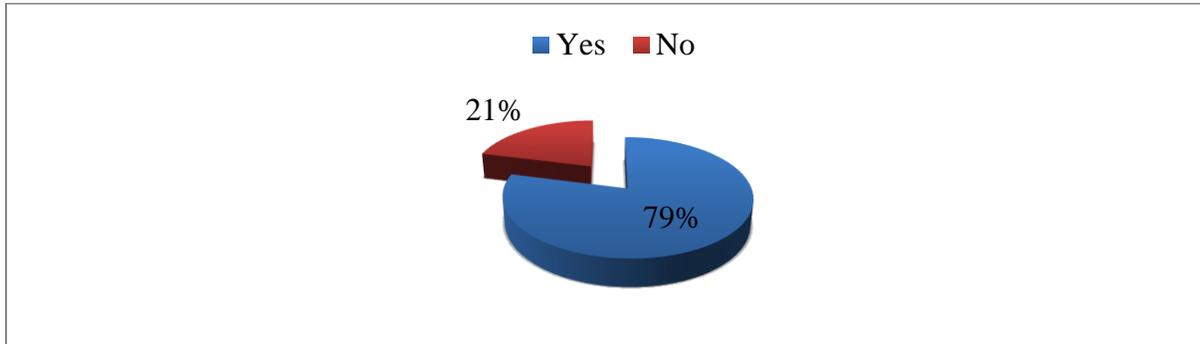


Figure 4: Impact of IMT on Employee Performance: Employee Perspective

From the findings, a majority of customers (72) (79 percent) recorded that IMT helped enhance employee performance, while 13 respondents (21 percent) were of the contrary opinion (see Figure 6). Of the participants involved 93% of customers recorded that employees with a mastery of IMT served them better as opposed to those who didn't 7% did not think so.

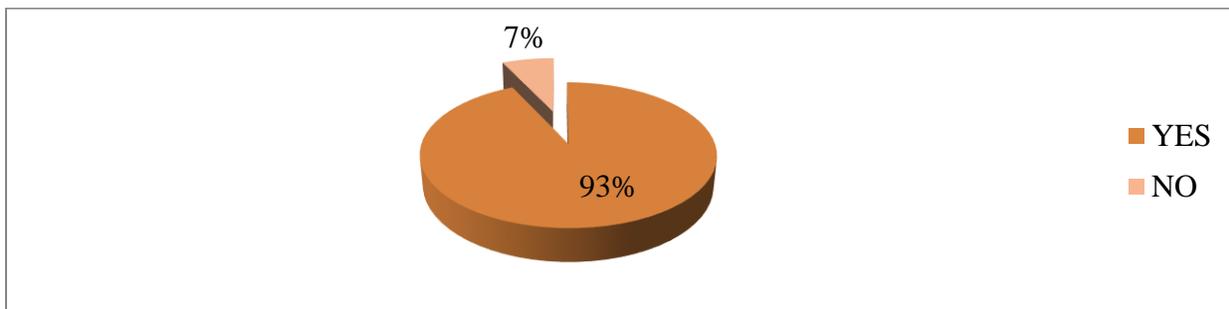


Figure 5: Impact of IMT on Employee performance: Customer Perspective

Customer satisfaction is tied to employee performance, whereby there is a positive relationship between the two. IMT has to be understood and embraced by employees if customers were to enjoy the technology, for example, when creating content for websites, use of smart and automatic room appliances, data analysis and interpretation as well as the use of social media. This conforms with a study by Mim and Ferdous (2020) which found that customer satisfaction is the best indicator of how the business would look like in the future. In addition, customer satisfaction could help to develop a hotel's business through service quality, food quality, price, behaviour intention, atmosphere and environment in an advance and in a systematic way.

5.0 Conclusion

The primary purpose of the study was to investigate the role of hospitality IMT in enhancing competitive advantage through customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector in Malaysia. Findings from the study confirm that indeed product awareness, quality of service, and human resources are valuable ingredients if hotels are to achieve their operational goals. The three elements working together and guided by IMT place a hospitality business above its rivals as well as attain above market-margins in terms of profits. It would therefore mean that hotels adopting IMT should endeavour to offer quality services, quality food with moderate prices, and employees exhibit hospitable traits which make customers satisfied.

6.0 Recommendation for Practice and Future Studies

Managers need to understand that customer satisfaction is based on product awareness, the quality of the product as well as employee performance. The use of IMT is a catalyst for efficiency in a fast-changing volatile service industry. Hotel owners and managers should, therefore, work to integrate IMT in a bid to remain competitive and relevant, in a sector with a massive competition for market share and resources. This study was mainly based on the hotel industry. Future studies, using a mixture of in-depth analysis, should investigate the application of IMT in tourism and tourism related businesses like travel agents and tour operators, on their performance. Further, since customer preferences keep changing, future studies should focus on the role played by IMT in enhancing customer preferences and buying behaviours.

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