

The Critical Success Factors Towards Homestay Development in Penang

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Abstract

Since its introduction in 1988, the Homestay Programme in Malaysia has become an iconic rural tourism product. Tourists pay a reasonable price to stay with a host family and experience daily life alongside the local community. The pandemic outbreak in February 2020 severely impacted the tourism industry, causing many homestays to cease operations. In the post-pandemic period, the tourism industry, including homestays, is striving to regain momentum. Studies have been conducted to identify critical success factors influencing homestays' success. This study focuses on identifying these factors for homestays in Penang, Malaysia, considering perspectives from tourists, government agencies, institutions, industry players, and the community. A semi-structured interview and thematic analysis were used to process data collected from eleven informants with varying levels of involvement in homestays, ranging from those directly engaged in their development to those with little or no experience in visiting them. The interviews were conducted mainly in Bahasa Melayu, with the input translated into English. The data was then classified into several themes for further discussion.

Keywords: *Penang Homestay, Critical Success Factors, Focus Group Discussion, Qualitative, Thematic Analysis.*

Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus, globally known as COVID-19, in late December 2019, has severely impacted many sectors worldwide. For example, the Malaysian government has enforced a Movement Control Order (MCO) restricting Malaysians movement mainly on essential activities such as buying groceries, medical treatments, and essential work. Even schools were closed and replaced with online teaching and learning sessions, and many businesses had to implement work-from-home options. Travelling was restricted, with both domestic and international borders strictly closed. The pandemic has also affected healthcare, education, manufacturing, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), construction, transportation, agriculture, and particularly a direct impact on Malaysia's tourism and hospitality industry.

According to the Tourism Malaysia, tourism had generated over RM80 billion annually for four consecutive years before the outbreak. This figure dropped to RM12.7 billion in 2020 and RM0.24 billion in 2021 due to the pandemic (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). Ironically, Malaysia launched a "Visit Truly Asia Malaysia 2020," campaign targeting 30 million visitors with the expectation of generating RM100 billion in tourism revenue. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has resulted to substantial losses instead of the anticipated returns where homestays were among the hardest to be hit. Homestay operators had to endure losses in terms of reduced income and bearing maintenance and operating costs such as lawn mowing, facility cleaning, internal and external repairs, and maintaining common facilities like community halls (Kumaran et al., 2023). Apparently, a homestay coordinator and head of a village in Langkawi informed that he had to advise his community to venture into areas such as bakeries, small-scale flower nurseries, cooking, or other areas requiring minimal capital to offset the reduced income from homestays (Kamaluddin et al., 2022). Additionally, homestay operators also plagued with mental health issues, including frustration, anxiety, and discouragement,

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alongside experiencing weight loss due to movement restrictions and the pressure to maintain their businesses (Kumaran et al., 2023). As of 31 March 2024, the Statistical Report on the MOTAC website indicated that the number of homestay entrepreneurs in Pulau Pinang significantly dropped from 246 to 138 in 2022. This decline suggested that the pandemic can be attributed to the reduction in homestay operators (Mansoor and Paul, 2022).

Recognising the adverse effects of the pandemic on homestay operators, a deeper exploration into the factors that can help these businesses recover and thrive was therefore imperative. This research aimed to provide valuable insights into factors that can contribute to the resilience and success of homestay programmes in Penang, by investigating the critical success factors (CSFs) post-pandemic that influence the success of homestay programmes in Penang, providing additional perspectives for homestay owners to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. Additionally, this research sought to identify and understand the different perspectives on critical success factors from tourists, government agencies, industry players, and the community, on top of exploring the market potential of Penang Homestay from Medan, Indonesia. According to Caralli et al. (2004), critical success factors (CSFs) are explicit key areas of performance crucial for an organisation to achieve its mission. CSFs describe the underlying or guiding principles essential for the success of a target (Caralli et al., 2004). In this context, CSFs were the factors that homestay owners, industry stakeholders, and government institutions should consider to ensure continuous growth and longevity of homestay programmes in Penang. This aligned with the Tourism Master Plan (PGTMP) produced by the Penang State Government through Penang State EXCO Office for Tourism and Creative Economy (PETACE), which aimed to set goals for sustainable development and strengthen Penang's competitive positioning in tourism, heritage, culture, and art by 2030 (PETACE, 2021).

Literature Review

Globally, the homestay concept has been recognised and implemented in various countries. In Thailand, Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2015) highlighted the steady growth of community-based tourism over the past 15 years. Initially, the reception of homestay programmes in Thailand encountered challenges such as inadequate marketing, unequal distribution of opportunities, communication issues between hosts and guests, insufficient facilities, and lack of government support (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Wongtapim, 2003). To address these issues, the Thai government established the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS) in 2005 to manage tourism marketing and promotion. The Office of Tourism Development within MOTS introduced rural standards for homestays to obtain official government certification. The similarity can be observed for homestays in Indonesia. The homestay programme in the Ubud area of Bali, Indonesia was noted for its traditional Balinese architecture and simple construction styles (Solihin & Sumawidari, 2021). The integration of homestay buildings with the rural surroundings of Ubud has attracted both domestic and international tourists. These initiatives have adhered to Community-Based Tourism principles, upholding traditional Balinese values and architecture, and thus preserving local culture.

In Malaysia, the homestay concept can be traced back to the early 1970s in Kg. Cherating Lama, Pahang, when a local lady named Mak Long started providing breakfast, dinner, and lodging to long-staying wanderers in her modest home (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013; Amran, 1997). This informal arrangement laid the foundation for what would later become a structured tourism initiative. In 1988, the first formal homestay programme in Malaysia was established at Desa Murni Homestay. This programme comprised five villages: Desa Murni Sanggang, Desa Murni Sonsang, Desa Murni Kerbau, Desa Murni Ketam, and Desa Murni Perangap (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). The collaboration among these villages had a notable positive impact on the local economy (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013; Kalsom, 2007; 2009). By 1995, Desa Murni in Temerloh, Pahang, was officially recognised as a community-based tourism (CBT) programme under the National Plan for Rural Development (Muslim et al., 2017; Yusnita et al., 2013).

That same year, the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism launched the Malaysia Homestay Experience Programme to encourage rural community involvement in tourism (MOTAC, 2024). This initiative aimed to improve the socioeconomic status of rural communities, allowing both local and foreign tourists to experience the unique Malaysian lifestyle and culture. It also fostered networking between local

communities, homestay operators, industry players, tourists, and government institutions, ultimately empowering CBT managed by homestay operators. Following this initiative, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) outlined various activities for homestay programmes in Penang. These activities included experiencing local wedding receptions, immersing in the local lifestyle, participating in traditional games, enjoying cultural performances, and sampling traditional foods. Economic activities such as fishing, paddy cultivation, cocoa orchard visits, and rubber tapping were also introduced. Additionally, homestay operators organised recreational activities like exploring surrounding forests, visiting local tourism sites, and engaging in rafting experiences.

In Kota Aur, Penang, the homestay programme offered visitors a variety of cultural and experiential activities (Talib & Suleiman, 2017). These included cycling through paddy fields and villages, visiting a tsunami museum, trying on traditional Malay and Kedah attire, sampling coconut juice, cooking traditional cuisine, and exploring the local culinary. The programme also showcased traditional Malay timber houses, providing tourists with insights into the local culture and lifestyle. A study conducted in Pulau Gaya, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah by Hairal & Hussin (2021) revealed a high potential for homestay programme development with strong community participation. Factors contributing to this potential included the community's experience in the tourism sector, the opportunity for additional income through homestay programmes, the creation of employment opportunities, and the availability of individuals to provide accommodation and tourism activities (Hairal & Hussin, 2021).

The promising potential identified in Pulau Gaya highlighted the importance of understanding the critical success factors underpinning successful homestay programmes. Recognising these key factors can help ensure that such programmes are sustainable and beneficial for the community. The critical success factors (CSFs) contributing to the success of homestay programmes in Malaysia have been extensively researched. Daud, Ramli, Kasim, and Kayat (2015) utilised an arithmetic method to identify key success criteria, listing several factors as critical, including organisational management, leadership, capacity and ability, community benefit, collaboration and networking, product and service quality, community participation, conservation of community resources, marketing and promotion, maintenance, independence, and safety. These criteria were analysed based on their importance in developing successful homestay programmes.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to identify the critical success factors affecting the success of homestay programmes in Penang. Qualitative research was used to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviours, experiences, attitudes, intentions, and motivations, based on observation and interpretation, to find out the way people think and feel (Ahmad et al., 2019). FGDs is a qualitative method often used to deeply explore social issues by gathering insights from a deliberately chosen group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of the larger population (Nyumba et al., 2018).

The combination of interviewing, participant observation, and group interaction makes FGDs especially useful for investigating people's thoughts, as interactions between participants can reveal data and ideas that might not emerge in one-on-one questioning (Plummer, 2008). FGDs allow a naturalistic inquiry process that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in their natural context, focusing on the "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena (Ahmad et al., 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding the subtle perspectives of stakeholders involved in homestay programmes, making it an appropriate choice for this research.

In addition to FGDs, semi-in-depth interviews were conducted to gather views and perspectives from homestay operators, government agencies, industry players, and tourists regarding the critical success factors affecting the homestay programme in Penang. Semi-structured interviews are designed to determine people's subjective reactions to specific situations or phenomena (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This method

provides the flexibility to explore diverse viewpoints in-depth, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing homestay success.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interviews began with a briefing on the research purpose, as recommended in social science research (Hanafiah et al., 2021; Veal, 2011). Interviews were conducted in English, Malay, or Indonesian, based on the participants' preferences. A total of thirteen respondents were interviewed through various methods, including online via Google Meet, physical group discussions, and one-on-one sessions. Their responses were based on their thoughts, experiences, and personal knowledge. The interview lasted approximately 20-25 minutes, with all participants assured of privacy and confidentiality.

The respondents included: (i) homestay operators in Penang, (ii) government officers involved in homestay development in Penang, (iii) industry players in the travel agency business, (iv) domestic and international tourists with or without experience in visiting Penang homestays, and (v) researchers who have studied community-based tourism (Table 1). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English when necessary.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Respondents

Respondents	Profiles	Characteristics
Informant 1	Coordinator of homestay Mengkuang Titi, Penang.	Involved directly with homestay programme activities.
Informant 2	MOTAC Penang government officer.	Local government officer involved with homestay development.
Informant 3	Travel agency entrepreneur.	Offered travel packages of homestay programme in Penang.
Informant 4	Researcher.	Previously conducted studies related to community-based tourism (CBT) in Malaysia.
Informant 5	Domestic tourist.	Experienced visiting Penang Homestay.
Informant 6	Lecturer, USU Faculty of Law.	Experienced visiting Penang Homestay in March 2023.
Informant 7	Lecturer, USU Faculty of Law.	Experienced visiting Penang Homestay.
Informant 8	Staff, Raz Hotel	Has not visited Penang or Penang Homestay.
Informant 9	Finance Professor, USU Fakultas Vokasi.	No experience in visiting Penang Homestay but has visited Penang.
Informant 10	Professor, Research Institute, USU.	No experience in visiting Penang Homestay.
Informant 11	Town Planning Professor, USU Faculty of Technic Department of Architecture.	No experience in visiting Penang Homestay.
Informant 12	Tour leader/Tour Guide, Himpunan Parawisata Indonesia.	No experience in visiting Penang Homestay but has visited Penang and been involved in homestay development
Informant 13	Tunas Kebudayaan Parawisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif Komuniti Sumatera Utara.	No experience in visiting Penang Homestay but has visited Penang and been involved in homestay development

The thematic analysis method was used to analyse the collected data. Thematic analysis, as explained by Braun & Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. Following the data transcription, inductive coding techniques were used to create the scheme. Patterns were coded

and further classified according to themes, respectively. The output of these themes constituted the findings and eventually be reported per research questions.

Research Findings

Based on the findings of the thematic analysis, the study identified seven critical success factors (CSFs) essential for the success of homestay businesses in Penang. These factors include authenticity, marketing and promotion, pricing, accessibility, service and hospitality, leadership and management, and support from government and industry players. Additionally, the study delineated several sub-themes underlying these critical factors. These sub-themes included the serene ambience, local heritage exposures, leveraging social media platforms, the role of travel agents and agencies in attracting guests, ensuring affordability in pricing, strategic location considerations, accessible transportation options, effective communication with guests, maintaining cleanliness and comfort standards, the impact of inspirational leadership, efficient management practices, government financial support mechanisms, and opportunities for continuous education and skill development (Table 2).

Table 2. Result of Thematic Analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes
Authenticity	Serene ambience Local heritage
Marketing and Promotion	Social media platforms Travel agent/Agencies' roles
Pricing Accessibility	Affordability Location Transportation
Service and Hospitality	Effective communication Cleanliness and comfort
Leadership and Management	Inspiring leader Management efficiency
Government and Industry Players' Support	Financial support Educational opportunities

Critical Success Factors by Themes

Theme 1: Authenticity

Authenticity is a topic explored in both psychology and existentialist philosophy which relates to an individual's capacity to stay faithful to their unique personality, spirit, or character, despite facing external challenges (Terziyska, 2012). Since it was raised within the tourism industry following mass tourism during the 1950s, the focus has primarily been on two key aspects – how significant it is as a driving force for travel, and how it is expressed within tourism experiences (Terziyska, 2012). From the perspective of homestay tourism, authenticity is considered one of the critical success factors for the success of homestay development in Penang. According to Mura (2015), homestays in Malaysia promise tourists 'authentic' experiences that go beyond the mere provision of a type of accommodation by promoting 'traditional' and 'genuine' ways of life.

Based on the interviews, Informant 4 highlighted that the Penang homestays' authenticity in their environment and lifestyle attracted tourists the most. The homestays in Penang were unique because of their authentic village lifestyle and peaceful geographical location. They offered various traditional activities

such as preparing food with traditional methods, going to durian orchards, feeding animals on the farm, fishing with traditional methods, participating in traditional games such as "congkak", top spinning, kite flying, "silat" (the art of self-defence of the Malay people) demonstration, traditional performances, and even mock Malay weddings. All these activities provided tourists with a Malay cultural experience, especially those who came from urban cities.

"It is the main element in attracting tourists to join the homestay programme. And it can be seen that the uniqueness of various factors has encouraged the arrival of many tourists to Penang" (Informant 4).

However, the experiences offered may differ from homestay to homestay. Informant 3 stated that combining various homestay features would create a unique and valuable experience.

"Penang homestay is very unique. Each village has its own speciality when combined it becomes a different good experience in each homestay. Penang homestay can be said very successful" (Informant 3).

Informant 5 shared that staying at a homestay in Penang gave them a nostalgic village experience. They enjoyed participating in the activities, which they found to be expensive as city dwellers. Besides this, Informant 6 and Informant 12 also shared similar perspectives on homestay authenticity.

"I enjoyed staying there. I can feel the real experiences to stay at villages and I feel calm and relax rather than stay at city. This experience is really valuable for me." (Informant 5).

"If asked if I want to visit again, of course, I want to visit again, because the experience we felt was extraordinary. Yes, even though it was only for a short time then. Um... I remember when we got off the bus until walking to the homestay, I remembered my grandmother's village. Stilt houses, right? Rice fields that are still very serene. The cleanliness of the homestay was very impressive. Then when the cakes were served, I was very happy. Because it reminded me of my grandmother's cakes." (Informant 6)

"Ah, so if there are activities for everyone living there, and they can provide good hospitality and then create memories, automatically, people will want to come back." (Informant 12)

On the other hand, Informant 7 stated the hopes of experiencing local cultures not only through food and lifestyles but also through a creative community.

"It would be good if, for example, when I visit there, it turns out there is a dance studio created by one village or one homestay in that village. So that I can participate, besides participating in daily activities there, I also get an experience about the creative community there, such as dancing or acting according to local wisdom." (Informant 7)

On top of that, Informant 11 mentioned that the word "authenticity" itself was subjective and varied among homestay guests.

"The authenticity of homestay programme can vary from one experience to another. It can also be influenced by the interactions and involvement of participants in the programme. For homestay participants, it is important to have an open-minded attitude, curiosity, and active engagement in the culture and life of the host family to maximize the authenticity of their homestay experience." (Informant 11)

Theme 2: Marketing and Promotion

Marketing and promotion, though often being used interchangeably, varied in terms of their meanings and purposes. It was also important to note that rather than being used alternately, they should be working hand-in-hand to be fully effective (Julia, 2022). The main target of marketing is to build and nurture long-term customer relationships by understanding and meeting their needs. On the other hand, promotions focusing on the last stage to push potential customers into actual buyers, commonly done through targeted tactics like advertising, sales promotions, and personal selling.

Essentially, marketing and promotion as the critical success factors for homestays in Penang can be concluded as the process of building awareness and relationships with potentially marvelling clients and eventually converting them to homestay guests, respectively. Understanding the importance of marketing and promotion, the government highly encouraged homestay owners to promote their products through various marketing means. This is shared by Informant 2:

“As agencies that monitor and control the programme, we always ask the operators to always upgrade their products such as online marketing” (Informant 2).

Informant 2 further shared that MOTAC has made a great effort to promote homestays through multiple platforms, launch an online platform www.jomhomestay.com making it easier for tourists to access homestays directly. Additionally, cooperation between other statutory organisations has also boosted this promotional activity.

“We have agencies such as Tourism Malaysia to promote our Homestay. They have come out with jomhomestay.com online platform. Homestay Penang also has links with other agencies such as PERDA and ICU to market their products and services” (Informant 2).

Additionally, Informant 1 and Informant 2 simultaneously shared that homestay owners must take the initiative to perform marketing and promotions on their own, rather than relying on government institutions. They have also included that they have established their own cooperate organisation to promote and manage their homestay reflecting its success.

“We have support from MOTAC, and we also have our cooperatives where we will promote all our homestay activities. So, we are not too dependent on the government.” (Informant 1).

“At the Penang state level, there are homestay associations where they promote their own homestays. There are also cooperatives that are established by themselves to promote homestays. So this promotional homestay needs to be carried out continuously without depending on the government” (Informant 3).

This proactive approach aligned well with the current trends in social media marketing, which allow businesses to present their services to a broad audience and engage with the community effectively. Social media marketing is defined as a process that allows individuals to present their websites, products, or services through online social channels to communicate in a large community and to listen to that community (Yong & Ali Hassan, 2019). In this era of technology, businesses must take advantage of these online platforms to introduce their business, create and nurture connections with their respective unique ideas, and escalate their sales figures by converting interested individuals into buyers. It is a vital move to ensure the sustainability of their business.

Informant 8, who has never visited Penang homestay before, shared that there should be more marketing and promotion especially utilizing social media platforms and influencers to raise awareness of the existence of Penang homestays.

“My hope is that homestays in Penang should be further promoted, perhaps through the internet or influencers from Penang or in Medan. Because there are still many people who are not familiar with homestays outside of Indonesia.” (Informant 8)

Informants 10 and 11 shared that marketing and promotion are necessary to attract potential customers. How the information is being presented including texts and graphics, the platforms used, and attractive offers will help to attract and turn potential customers into guests.

“The second one is information, yes. He immediately sent written information so we could copy it and send it to people about the homestay view.” (Informant 10)

“Comprehensive, clear, and concise information will be one of the reasons a customer chooses a homestay. Examples include having a valid and easily accessible website with attractive graphic design and quality information, as well as high-resolution Instagram content with attractive offers that will excite potential customers to choose the homestay.” (Informant 11)

Theme 3: Pricing

Price is the amount that customers are paying in exchange for a product or service. Pricing, just like any other business, is a crucial factor that must be carefully considered by those offering such products as the right pricing strategy can significantly influence business success. In terms of Penang homestay pricing, Informant 1 claimed that the amount paid by guests includes the whole package, which is more reasonable than staying in other lodgings. Informants 2 and 5 also shared that the price is reasonable and affordable.

“In terms of price, I think it's ok to compare it with other homestays and accommodations. It has a package where if tourists pay, they get accommodation and experience” (Informant 1).

“The price is very reasonable and affordable to all” (Informant 2, 5).

Many aspects, especially the perceived value received by customers, branding, and the ability of the price to cover costs related to producing the product, and profit margin must be in balance. Informant 4 suggested that homestay owners should practice costing carefully to minimise losses due to excluded items such as promotional costs, administrative costs, and management costs.

“The price is cheap as compared to the effort they put in. The price sometimes that they charge maybe they do not include like electricity, food, and others. They need to learn to do costing” (Informant 4).

This careful approach to pricing aligns with the concept of price primacy, which underscores the importance of early price consideration in consumer decision-making. Price primacy, or early attention to price, has effects on decision-making (Karmarkar, 2011). Specifically for homestay businesses, price primacy may highly influence the decision to subscribe homestay service, based on the analysis results. This factor is agreed upon by Informants 9, 10, 12, and 13 respectively.

“Competitive pricing, cheaper than hotels.” (Informant 9,10)

“So, all the activities within the homestay make people more interested in staying there rather than in a hotel, especially with slightly cheaper prices. Don't let the price, not to be too much higher than a hotel.” (Informant 12)

“Also, with affordable prices and also more interesting programmes that can be experienced and enjoyed by tourists. Because in my opinion as a tourist, maybe with higher prices, we would rather stay in a hotel than in a homestay.” (Informant 13)

These responses suggest close relationships between pricing and authenticity itself. As pricing also depends on the perceived value received by customers, potential homestay guests would rather choose to stay in a hotel if the price is higher compared to commercial hotels, even though they would be able to experience something that hotels do not offer, hence the price primacy. Even so, Informant 11 suggested that homestay owners must not hesitate to offer a slightly higher price if they can match customers' expectations.

“The price of a homestay should match the quality of the facilities offered. Don't hesitate to offer a slightly higher price if prioritizing customer comfort. However, the pricing level should be adjusted by looking at the prevailing market prices to remain competitive with other homestays.” (Informant 11)

Theme 4: Accessibility

According to Litman (2024), The goal of most transport activities is to enable people to access desired services and activities, which is what accessibility refers to. Various factors impact accessibility, such as physical mobility, the quality and cost-effectiveness of available transportation options, the connectivity of the transport system, alternatives to mobility, and land use patterns (Litman, 2024). Accessibility is one of the critical success factors for the success of Penang homestays. Above all, tourists do have concerns about the location of the homestays as this will affect their access to food, transportation, and local attraction centres. Transport and tourism synergies can improve visitors' mobility to and within locations, increase visitor satisfaction, and help maintain the economic viability of public transport systems and services by serving both residents and visitors. Informants 2,3,7 and 11 highlight the importance of having good accessibility for Penang homestays.

"Location is more about how tourists want to go to a homestay. We can see in every tourism industry, airlines are very important and with the availability of flight facilities to Penang, tourists can get to a homestay" (Informant 3).

"It's important in all tourism industry. It involved the accessibility and it how people will arrive to homestay" (Informants 2, 4)

"The third one is transportation access. Um, I really hope that because usually when I go to Malaysia, people who visit Malaysia will definitely look around the city. However, when there is integrated transportation, it will make it easier for tourists. And I hope that maybe someday, accessibility for transportation will be something that can be improved together for the homestays in Penang." (Informant 7)

"The location of a homestay is a key factor in its success, such as the accessibility of the building near tourist destinations, which is a draw for the homestay. Also, the availability of food. Some people may prefer quiet and secluded homestays, while others may seek city life or quick access to tourist attractions. Perceptions of the geographical location of a homestay can also be influenced by travel destinations and personal preferences." (Informant 11)

On another note, Informant 5 shared that the homestays in Penang have strategic locations which serve the purpose of having real village experiences.

"The strategic location of the homestay allows us to experience living in a village. Many village activities that we participated in such as seeing the paddy fields, seeing the mountain scenery, drinking coconut water, and many more." (Informant 5).

Theme 5: Service and Hospitality

According to Glion (2023), service and hospitality are two separate aspects that work together to ensure a positive customer experience for guests. Service describes a broad range of responsibilities such as customer relations and managing issues, while hospitality focuses on creating a comfortable and welcoming environment and experience for the guests. Informant 13 suggests that this is the top critical success factor for homestay success.

"In my opinion, the most important factor for the um success of a homestay is providing excellent facilities." (Informant 13)

Other than that, other informants also shared their perspectives which collectively suggested that service and hospitality must be observed from the angles of effective communication between hosts and guests, friendliness of the community, cleanliness and safety, and facilities and amenities. Informant 6 shared that the previous experience at Penang homestay was extraordinary as there was a good balance between traditional settings and a little bit of modernization.

“The hospitality of the homestay managers and the locals was extraordinary. When visiting the homestay, we also see clean room conditions. The surroundings of the homestay are also very clean. Then behind the traditional shape of the room and the house, there was modernization, air conditioning, bed. The toilet, making it not squatting like before anymore.” (Informant 6)

Informant 7 mentioned that this factor is so crucial as it will increase the probability of the next visit from tourists.

“I felt very satisfied there when visiting the homestay, and it became a good memory for me to possibly invite my family or other close people to visit there again. Because I believe that good quality and service will have a positive impact, good memories, and will also provide good feedback to the homestay entrepreneurs there”

This idea is also shared by Informants 11 and 12.

“Cleanliness and security will provide comfort to customers, thereby building a good image for a homestay. And the ability of a homestay to meet guest needs such as dietary restrictions, transportation, or other requests can provide a good experience for the homestay, making customers feel comfortable and willing to return to the place.” (Informant 11)

“So if there are activities for everyone living there, and they can provide good hospitality and then create memories, automatically, people will want to come back.” (Informant 12)

Theme 6: Leadership and Management

Leadership is an important factor in the success of the homestay programme in Penang. According to Luke in 1997, a good leader is someone who takes the initiative to ensure that the local community is engaged, and collaborative efforts are supported to achieve goals and build trust (Abas & Halim, 2018). Leaders are responsible for giving instructions and making plans to ensure the sustainability of homestays in the future. To manage the homestay professionally and achieve clear goals, having an inspiring leader is essential. The leader must also have good people management skills, to encourage participation from the community. Informant 3 identified Homestay Mengkuang Titi as an example of a homestay that has been well-managed by an inspiring leader based on observation.

“Homestay needs to have a leader who can manage professionally and see homestay as a business. The homestay that I see has a good leader is Mengkuang Titi. Their leader knows how to plan and manage their homestay” (Informant 3).

In the hospitality industry, effective management is crucial for ensuring the smooth functioning of an organization. Management activities such as planning, organizing, monitoring, commanding, and controlling are all essential elements (Pryor & Taneja, 2010). Proper management is crucial in coordinating the administration of homestays, developing plans, maintaining records of important details, and more.

Informants 2 and 4 pointed out that the success of homestay in Penang was highly influenced by good planning in homestay programmes, depending on how the leaders manage and organize people and jobs to meet their respective goals.

“Good planning is important. Planning involved the way to manage their business income, how they do their costing and how they coordinate the homestay administration otherwise the homestay programme will fail” (Informants 2, 4).

Informant 10 mentioned that effective communication and management led to his repetitive visits to Penang homestay.

“When I arrived, the homestay had already contacted me. Then they said, they already had pick-up arrangements from the airport. Everything was complete. He showed the homestay with its merits and provided options for transport from the airport to the homestay.” (Informant 10)

Additionally, Informant 7 mentioned that it is vital to get the vision and mission across the hearts of those involved with the management of the homestays.

“By aligning the concept with the vision and mission of the homestay itself so that it can run according to what is expected. Then, all the people in the village are empowered, by empowered it means they are involved in all the activities within the homestay or in one village. Because if you look at the concept earlier, in Penang, the entire village becomes a homestay.” (Informant 7)

Theme 7: Government and Industry Players’ Support

In 1995, the Malaysian Government implemented the National Plan for Rural Development, which was successful in developing the tourism sector with the participation of rural communities (Liu, 2006). Pusiran and Xiao (2013) stated that to aid in the growth and expansion of the Homestay programme, the Malaysian Government allocated a dedicated fund through the Ministry of Culture, Art, and Tourism. The government’s increased focus on the development of homestays is noteworthy, as it is considered a promising product in promoting the country and involving the community in the tourism industry through rural tourism (Pusiran & Xiao, 2013). Utilizing the existing natural resources, and cultural and heritage assets within the community, the homestay product development has been feasible for communities without requiring significant infrastructure changes.

Informants 6 and 11 shared that the government and industry players’ support has been critical to ensure the success of the homestay programme.

“Support from the Malaysian government through the Ministry of Tourism is a factor that influences the success of this.” (Informant 6)

“Collaborating with local homestay associations, Penang tourism, and other stakeholders can help garner useful support for the success of homestays in Penang.” (Informant 11)

Other than that, Informants 6, 12, and 13 mentioned their interest in learning opportunities to utilize Penang homestays as a model to be adopted within homestay options provided in Medan, Indonesia.

“Hopefully, by visiting, there will be ideas to build homestays in a similar or almost similar way for the development of tourism in Indonesia.” (Informant 6)

“The homestay programme here in Penang can be used as a model for Indonesia, especially in Medan. Because as far as I know, the homestay programme in Medan is very different from what’s here in Penang that has just been explained. Perhaps there will be a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) later between Malaysia and the homestay owners in Medan so that we can collaborate and exchange knowledge.” (Informant 12)

“But at the same time, I also hope that they can provide learning opportunities for North Sumatra. So that we can learn more to follow the programmes available in Penang.” (Informant 13)

Prospective Market from Medan, Indonesia.

Based on the analysis, all participants expressed a strong desire to visit or revisit Penang homestays. They unanimously wished that others who haven't experienced staying in Penang homestays should also have the opportunity. Informants 13 and 9 specifically highlighted their eagerness to experience the authenticity of Penang homestays. They cited several reasons for this interest, including the affordable pricing, the frequency of their visits to Penang, and the cultural similarities between Penang and Medan. These factors enhance their appreciation and anticipation of what Penang homestays offer, making them enthusiastic

about the prospect of future visits. This collective enthusiasm underscores the appeal and potential of Penang homestays as a desirable destination for both first-time visitors and returning guests.

“Because my family and I often go to Penang, I hope the prices are much cheaper than hotels. The culture of Medan is not much different from Malay culture. We hope Malay culture is offered through this homestay in Penang.” (Informant 9)

“For me, I personally really want, really want to experience a homestay from Penang, especially if we are invited for free or picked up for free so that we can understand the homestay in Penang and what its concept is like.” (Informant 13)

Informants 6 and 7, who have visited Penang homestays before, expressed their intentions to re-visit with family and friends.

“I would like to stay overnight at Penang homestay and bring family and friends.” (Informant 6)

“I’ve visited a homestay before and I want to visit again, but with family, relatives, or maybe friends. Might have a different experience when they’re with family there.” (Informant 7)

Discussion

This study has revealed significant potential for homestays in Penang. In 2022, MOTAC Penang nominated two clusters of Penang Homestays for the ASEAN Homestay Standard Award, with most of the candidates being local homestay operators. The key factors contributing to the success of homestay programmes in Penang have been identified and analysed from various perspectives. Thirteen respondents participated in this study, including those who have developed homestays, those who have experienced homestays in Penang, and those who have yet to do so. The research also drew on previous studies of community-based tourism (CBT) programmes. Through thematic analysis of the collected data, seven critical success factors for homestays in Penang were identified: authenticity, marketing and promotion, pricing, accessibility, service and hospitality, leadership and management, and government and stakeholder support. This section presents diverse perspectives on these critical success factors, incorporating viewpoints from homestay operators, government officials, travel agencies, and domestic tourists to define what makes a successful homestay programme in Penang.

Tourists: Travel Experience

Tourists perceive the homestay programme as successful when it provides a satisfying travel experience. Wang and Fesenmaier (2013) have discussed the topic of travel experience as an integration of activities, interpretations, and sensations within space and time. In this study, the travel experience may be translated as the satisfaction perceived from the travellers’ point of view for the specific travelling experience. It covers the points of getting to know the homestay, its background, and what it has to offer up to the point of booking, travelling to the location, experiencing the activities performed at the homestay and its serene ambience, and returning home. Even though travel experience is subjective, from tourists’ perspective, the rate of their travel experience will be elevated when higher numbers of critical success factors, as discussed before, are met. Informant 11 shared that tourists are likely to value their travel experience more when it meets their expectations.

“Tourists may perceive factors such as unique experiences, timeliness, and personal satisfaction as determinants of success. They may value tourist destinations that meet their expectations.” (Informant 11)

Government Institutions: Tourism Revenue

The definition of success from the government institution's perspective would be the growth of tourism revenue. The tourism sector contributed around 6.8% to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in

2019 before going down to 2.7% in 2022, mainly due to the movement restrictions order (MCO) to mitigate COVID-19 threats beginning in early 2020 (Statista, 2023).

As the sector slowly recovered from the pandemic's impact, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced that the Visit Malaysia campaign would make a comeback in 2026, with an allocation of RM350 million in its 2024 budget to promote the country's tourism industry aggressively. This funding showed how vital tourism revenue is to the country as Malaysia puts effort into boosting and restoring Malaysia's tourism sector to be a Muslim-friendly travel destination. Informant 11 shared similar thoughts suggesting the importance of the tourism industry as one of the government's streams of income.

"Governments often regard the revenue generated from the tourism sector as a determinant of success, as it can boost the local or national economy." (Informant 11)

Tourism Industry Players: Customer Satisfaction & Economic Profit

From the standpoint of the tourism industry players, which are the travel agents or agencies who offer travel packages and transportation arrangements, the success of homestay programmes is evaluated by customers' satisfaction and, eventually, economic profit. As previously discussed, customer satisfaction has been highly related to travel experience. Informants 6 and 7 shared similar perspectives on this area.

"I define the success of the homestay in Penang, as I mentioned earlier, there are experiences that cannot be obtained elsewhere. The hospitality of the homestay managers, the locals is extraordinary." (Informant 6)

"Because, as I mentioned earlier, the reason for wanting to visit there is to get a different experience that I haven't found elsewhere where I've stayed." (Informant 7)

Ultimately, customer satisfaction will lead to positive reviews, available by word of mouth and in written or graphical forms on various platforms, including social media. This good feedback will encourage returning customers, create good images for the service provider, and directly impact their business's sustainability and goodwill. This is mentioned by Informant 11.

"For industry players, success factors may primarily revolve around the economic benefits derived from tourism, such as revenue from hotels, restaurants, and other tourism services." (Informant 11)

Community: Economic Booster & Cultural Preservation

According to Ann Selvaranee and Jamil (2019), the government's agenda for the tourism industry and rural communities was to eradicate poverty and create job opportunities for the local rural communities, hence establishing homestay programmes. From the community's perspective, the Penang homestay programme's success has been viewed from its possibilities as a local economic booster. Residents considered homestay programmes to generate revenue for themselves, improve the local community's income, and create job opportunities for villagers (Kapri et al., 2023). This standpoint was shared by informant 12.

"Communities may view the social impact of tourism, such as increased job opportunities, local business prospects, and economic growth, as determining factors for success." (Informant 12)

In addition to providing an opportunity for economic rewards to the community, homestay tourism in Penang also conserves local culture and the environment (Kapri et al., 2023). Tourists generally visit homestays to experience local culture, including the lifestyles, the architecture, the calm and serene surroundings, the unique food, and the artistic activities. Therefore, the establishment of homestays may help to preserve this local heritage, keeping the identity of the local community and country.

Conclusion

The homestay programme is one of the branches of tourism that offers an exclusive experience to domestic and international tourists. The pandemic has greatly affected the operations of the homestays, especially in Penang, leading to the purpose of this study. This research has explored and identified seven critical success factors (CSFs) essential for the success of homestay businesses in Penang. These factors include authenticity, marketing and promotion, pricing, accessibility, service and hospitality, leadership and management, and government and industry players' support. Through thematic analysis, various sub-themes have been outlined, highlighting the details within each critical factor.

Authenticity emerged as a key factor, driving tourist interest through unique cultural experiences and traditional activities. Marketing and promotion were highlighted as crucial in raising awareness and attracting visitors, leveraging platforms like social media effectively. Pricing strategies were found to influence visitor decisions, with affordability enhancing competitiveness against other available lodging options. Accessibility, which includes transport links and proximity to attractions, significantly impacted visitor satisfaction and convenience. Service and hospitality were important in ensuring positive guest experiences, emphasising effective communication, cleanliness, and personalised services. Effective leadership and management practices were identified as instrumental in the operational success of homestays, fostering community engagement, and ensuring sustainable growth. Government and industry players' support played a significant role, providing financial backing, infrastructure, and promotional platforms crucial for homestay development.

From the perspective of tourists, success depends on the quality of their travel experience. This encompasses everything from pre-visit expectations to the immersive activities and serene ambience encountered during their stay. Unique experiences, personal satisfaction, and meeting expectations are critical indicators of success for tourists. For government institutions, particularly in Malaysia, success is closely tied to tourism revenue. As a significant contributor to the national economy, tourism revenue growth signifies success. Initiatives like the revival of the Visit Malaysia campaign emphasise the government's commitment to support tourism as a vital economic stream. Within the tourism industry, success is measured by customer satisfaction and economic profitability. Positive feedback and repeat business from satisfied customers drive the sustainability and reputation of homestay operators and travel agencies alike. From the community's standpoint, homestay success is defined as an economic booster and cultural preserver. Homestay programmes not only generate income and create job opportunities for local residents but also play a crucial role in preserving Penang's rich cultural heritage and environmental integrity. Ultimately, the success of Penang's homestay programme is intertwined with economic benefits, cultural preservation, customer satisfaction, and tourism revenue growth. Balancing these diverse perspectives ensures that the programme continues to thrive as a sustainable and enriching experience for all stakeholders involved.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size and geographic focus may limit general applicability to broader contexts beyond Penang. Moving forward, it is imperative to build upon these findings to further enhance the homestay experience in Penang. Future studies should seek deeper into specific sub-themes identified, such as the role of digital technologies in marketing, innovative pricing strategies, and sustainable tourism practices. Collaboration among stakeholders, including government bodies, industry players, and local communities, will be vital in implementing recommendations derived from this research. Additionally, future research could also expand to include comparative studies across different regions or countries to validate findings and explore cultural variations in homestay experiences. On the other hand, longitudinal studies could track the evolution of homestay practices over time, considering changing consumer preferences and economic conditions.

In conclusion, this research highlights the complex nature of factors influencing the success of homestay businesses in Penang. By addressing these critical factors and leveraging collaborative efforts, stakeholders can foster sustainable growth and enhance the overall tourism landscape in the region.

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