

# Shopping in Malaysia: A Study of International Tourists' Experience and Expectation

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The globalisation of tourism as a major activity has produced increasing demands for new tourist experiences, including the growing importance of shopping. As part of this trend, tourists have a strong interest in enjoying shopping, particularly for luxury items in major retail complexes or purpose-built shopping malls. Increasingly, this link between tourism and retailing is becoming important as a competitive advantage in the international competition of different global tourism destinations. However, few detailed studies have been directed at such experiences as part of the global tourism experience. This qualitative study sought to explore shopping experiences among international tourists in Malaysian shopping malls. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with international tourists visiting several states in Malaysia. The international tourists were interviewed using a mall intercept survey in major shopping complexes in around Malaysia. They were asked to describe their shopping experiences as well as their expectations of visiting the mall. Their experiences and expectations provide a perspective on how international tourists perceive the nature of such shopping experiences. The data were analysed using content analysis. The findings disclose the item suggested for quantitative analysis relating to the shopping experiences of international tourists. This study can be beneficial for mall retailers wishing to capitalize on the international tourist market.

**Key words:** *Tourism, Retailing, Shopping tourism, Shopping experience, Shopping expectations, Tourist behaviour.*

## Introduction

In the past, shopping was not a major reason for taking a trip. However, as more people gain economic prosperity, shopping has become a motive for travelling. A modern travel itinerary will not be complete without shopping as one of its activities (Yuksel, 2004) – for instance, buying souvenirs from local stores as memorabilia is becoming a must for many tourists. In 2014, the introduction of the World Tourist Organization's *Global Report on Shopping Tourism* (UNWTO, 2014) signified the importance and recognition of shopping in international tourism. The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) also published a bulletin on 'The Future of Shopping Tourism', which highlighted the world's shopping hot-spot in January 2018. Academics realised that the importance of shopping preceded the world's institutions, like the UNWTO; their studies described how holiday-makers spend more money on shopping than on hotels, restaurants or other leisure activities (Turner & Reisinger, 2001). It is therefore a vital activity that contributes significantly to a local economy (Cook, 1995; Di Matteo & Di Matteo, 1996; Timothy, 2005).

The 2016 and 2017 statistics from Malaysia Tourism (2018) indicate tourists' expenditure was RM82.1 billion, an increase of 15.8 per cent from RM69.1 billion in 2015. Tourism is second only to manufacturing as the largest foreign exchange earner for Malaysia. As mentioned above, shopping is the biggest part of tourists' spending, hence it is categorically an attraction in itself (Law & Au, 2000), and Timothy and Butler (1995) argue that lower prices for goods in developing countries may make it appealing for tourist to visit a particular destination. In Malaysia, shopping ranked in first place in tourist expenditure from the first quarter of 2015 to 2016, toppling lodging with an increase of 10.8 per cent higher than for 2014 (Tourism Malaysia, 2016). Appreciating the economic development brought by the industry, the government includes shopping as one of the strategic pillars in the Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020. Annual events like Malaysia Mega Sale Carnival and the Malaysia Year End Sale are not only endorsed by the Tourism Malaysia but also listed in the Malaysia Calendar of Events.

Despite rapid development of the retail sector in the tourism industry, little research has been undertaken on how international tourists perceive shopping in Malaysia. The industry's strength to satisfy and attract overseas shoppers depends on a deeper understanding of various factors such as international visitor perceptions and expectations. Therefore, this article explores the underlying characteristics of international tourists' shopping experiences in Malaysia. The aim of this study is to analyse the tourists' impressions and their expectations of the retail industry in shopping centres around Malaysia. The following research questions are used to achieve this aim:

1. How convenient and customer oriented are the shopping centres in the sense of location and other attributes?
2. Are the prices and the quality of the goods satisfactory?
3. What can be expected when shopping in Malaysian shopping centres?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Malaysia the Evolving Retail Landscape***

Over the few last decades, the number of shopping centres in Malaysia has been steadily growing at 7 per cent annually (Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development and International Data Corporation, Ninth Malaysian Plan, 2006–2010). In the 1980s, there were approximately 100 complexes; that number has now grown to 360, with an estimated value of RM100 billion. Most of the shopping centres are in the Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor). Based on certain qualities determined by Tourism Malaysia, the office named eight clusters of shopping district: (1) Klang Valley, (2) Penang, (3) Johor, (4) Malacca, (5) Kota Kinabalu, (6) Labuan, (7) Kuching and Miri, and (8) Langkawi. Each cluster has its own unique characteristics, and operates as an attraction as well as branding Malaysia as a premium destination for shopping.

Historically, retailers in Malaysia started off as neighbourhood grocery stores, mini markets, night markets and wet markets. Although these traditional businesses are still in demand in both urban and rural areas, department stores and supermarkets are gaining in popularity. Today, many Malaysian shopping centres have transformed beyond conventional transactions; they serve as integrated lifestyle hubs where living, working and public spaces are all under one roof. This evolution, together with efforts from the government, placed Kuala Lumpur as the second-best shopping destination in Asia Pacific in 2012 according to Gloe Shopping Index, and the fourth best shopping city in the world according to CNN Travel.

### **Experiencing the Shopping Centre**

Management of shopping centres has several techniques to draw visitors' attention; but to truly provide pleasing shopping experience to the people, the management must 'score' certain aspects like emotional and psychological needs (Distribución Actualidad, 2009). The traditional settings of shopping centres as a group of stores deliver basic retail experiences with little emotional fulfilment. Injecting some creative atmosphere, like festive decorations and music, helps to boost positive sentiments among shoppers (Abrudan, 2011). Consistent with Abrudan's notion, Kotler (1973) argues that customer behaviour and experience are driven to a large extent by the centre's ambience. As discussed above, modern shopping centres are a destination and an attraction in their own right; these two combinations exist due

to the interaction between shoppers and the retail environment. A psychometric study revealed that visitors to shopping centres are willing to spend more on parking with shady trees (Wolf, 2003). This suggests that consumers' preferences about the surroundings of the centre consequently influence their behaviour and experience in a shopping centre. Malaysian shopping centres were once labelled 'sick buildings'; the nickname was an indictment of management's failure to satisfy intricate visitor preferences and expectations. Increasingly, people are preferring their shopping areas to be architecturally organic, flavoured with a touch of nature like water features and greenery (Hami et al., 2018). Apart from the physical look, shopping centres should be complete public spaces where cultural and social events can be hosted, and most importantly there should be a guarantee of security for shoppers. These aesthetic aspects can outweigh the products offered, especially with regard to shaping shoppers' behaviour and overall experience in a specific shopping centre.

### **Tourists and Shopping Activities**

Tourists may have different shopping behaviours from ordinary domestic shoppers. Some tourist shoppers initially have a pure shopping motivation (Timothy & Butler, 1995). Such enthusiasm is normally triggered by the elements of relaxation, taking off from their daily routine while enjoying the shopping experience while travelling (Law & Au, 2000). Turner and Reisinger (2001) argue that travelling changes shopping motives and purchasing behaviours. Although not everyone is driven to travel for shopping, travellers often buy souvenirs and unique goods; however, their decisions are influenced by prices, store location, product characteristics (i.e. design) and even brand names. Apart from purchasing goods, tourists also seek to explore shopping districts by socialising with fellow shoppers and talking to store employees without having the intention of purchasing. Such exploration fulfils their desire to experience the uniqueness of other habitats while learning about local traditions and novel fashions and styles (Jones, 1999).

The shopping experience, as discussed above, is linked to the emotional and observational values that are activated by shopping-related activities (Singh & Sahay, 2012). A pleasurable shopping experience that deeply engages in psychological satisfaction results in increased spending and unplanned purchases (Jones, 1999). Buying a product is not the fundamental factor in determining a gratifying shopping experience; rather, it is the fun of enjoying the shopping process (Yuksel, 2004). However, Peritz (1993) claims that the fun is limited to certain evaluations, such as prices and a store's physical characteristics. Retail assistants also play a role: whether they are welcoming or speak the language of the customers can either add to or detract from a tourist's shopping experience (Reisinger & Waryszak, 1994). Nevertheless, shopping as a travel program may be viewed as entertaining and recreational.

Tourist behaviours and experience are divided into three stages: pre-travel, during travel and post-travel (Kastenholz & Lima, 2013). As a part of travelling, shopping commitments are usually involved in all three stages. Pre-trip is the process of planning of activities, and tourist expectations are usually established in this stage. Psychologically, having a preconception of the planned activities is typical for most tourists; however, such expectation may shape the travelling experience (Mossberg, 2007). In the second stage, travellers create assessments based on their expectations and the reality in which they find themselves. The third stage will conclude their overall experience from the first two phases. This last stage will become the defining factor for them to revisit the destination. Thus, attempts to realise tourists' expectations are highly regarded in tourism promotion. Previous studies provide solid background on dimensions for tourist expectations and experience; the authors compiled three relevant factors of tourist shopping expectations and experience:

1. *Products*: Unique local products like souvenirs can add to the shopping and travelling experience (Moosbern, 2007; Wong & Law, 2003). The variety of goods, selection and prices are equally vital (Kruger & Saayman, 2012).
1. *Personnel*: This aspect covers engagement and relationship between tourists and store assistants. Urry (2002) emphasises the importance of service delivery in treating tourists well.
1. *Environment*: Surroundings of the shopping centre, such as layout, ambience and facilities, are at the core of tourists' shopping comfort and pleasure (Kotler, 2001; Reisinger & Turner, 2002). Safety, cleanliness, parking, location, ease of access and opening times add to the final verdict about the shopping experience (Hami et al., 2018; Heung & Cheng, 2000).

## Methodology

As this study explores the shopping experience of international tourists in Malaysia and aims to determine their expectation of the malls, a qualitative study has been chosen. The qualitative study has been recognised as an approach suitable for understanding individual experiences and people's reflections of those experiences (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). This is what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as using humans as an instrument. Qualitative research has also been acknowledged as an ideal method for exploring individuals' feelings, thoughts, emotions and perceptions (Creswell, 2009). In this study, we allowed the visitors to express their thoughts freely without using a set of finite questions, as in qualitative research respondents are allowed to respond to the questions in depth and promote dense descriptive data. In light of the purpose of this study, convenience sampling was applied because the respondents were approached in several shopping malls to describe their shopping experiences and their shopping expectation in Malaysia.

To tap into the respondents' views, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted among international tourists visiting several states in Malaysia. The data-collection process started with the participation observation, and was followed by walking alongside the tourists as they shopped. Following the shopping session, 38 international visitors were approached using a mall intercept survey in several selected tourist-oriented shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. Questions included in the interview were about the visitors' demographics – for example, age, gender, country of origin and their purpose of visits. After that, they were asked to respond to the questions related to their shopping experiences – for example, 'How was your experience today?' and 'What are your expectations when visiting a mall?' A consent letter was provided prior to the interview with each respondent for their consent to participate in the study and they agreed for the interview to be audiotaped. Semi-structured interviews were used; these lasted on average between 15 and 20 minutes.

After finishing the interviews, a simple analysis was conducted to indicate any replication of ideas among the respondents. When there is a sign of replications, the sampling will stop as it reaches the saturation point. In this study, the sampling stopped at 38 respondents. This sample number is considered acceptable in qualitative research as, according to Bertaux (1981), the smallest acceptable sample for qualitative study is 15; however, since the semi-structured interviews were used in this study, a larger number of respondents (between 30 to 60) was needed to ensure the richness of data (Morse, 2000). The interviews were carried out to ascertain whether the tourist's experience and expectations were similar to the attributes listed in the literature. The data were then analysed using content analysis. The reported data in this study were supported with direct quotes from the respondents.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Respondents' Data Analysis***

The interviewee data are listed in Table 1. A total of 38 tourists was interviewed, consisting of 21 males (55.3%) and 17 females. Over 55 per cent were between 31 and 40 years of age (55.3%); others were either between 20 and 30 years or between 41 and 50 years. Samples were neither younger than 20 nor older than 50 years. Most tourists came from the Asia-Pacific region, with neighbouring Singapore having the highest number of participants (11 individuals, or 29% of the sample) while Indonesia came second with eight interviewees (21.1%). The other respondents were from Thailand (7.9%), South Korea (5.3%), Saudi Arabia (5.3%), Pakistan (5.3%), Australia (5.3%), India (2.6%), Uzbekistan (2.6%), the United Kingdom (7.8%), Germany (2.6%), Switzerland (2.6%) and Canada (2.6%) across three regions (Asia-Pacific, Europe, America). The majority of the respondents (39.4%) came to Malaysia for leisure. Visiting Malaysia for shopping came second at 31.6% and the rest had travelled to the country for business purposes. Although they travelled for business, they also did some shopping while in Malaysia.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics**

<b>By demographics</b>				
<b>Demographics</b>		<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	
<b>Gender</b>				
	Male	21	55.3	
	Female	17	45.7	
	<i>Total</i>	38	100.0	
<b>Age</b>				
	20–30	9	23.7	
	31–40	21	55.3	
	41–50	8	21.0	
	<i>Total</i>	38	100.0	
<b>By country of origin</b>				
<b>Region</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>% by region</b>
<b>Asia – Pacific</b>				
	Singapore	11	29.0	34.4
	Indonesia	8	21.1	25.0
	Thailand	3	7.9	9.4
	South Korea	2	5.3	6.3
	Saudi Arabia	2	5.3	6.3
	Pakistan	2	5.3	6.3
	Australia	2	5.3	6.3
	India	1	2.6	3.0
	Uzbekistan	1	2.6	3.0
<b>Europe</b>				
	United Kingdom	3	7.8	60.0
	Germany	1	2.6	20.0
	Switzerland	1	2.6	20.0
<b>America</b>				
	Canada	1	2.6	100.0
<i>Total</i>		38	100.0	-
<b>By purpose of visit</b>				
<b>Purpose of visit</b>		<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	
Shopping		12	31.6	
Business		11	28.0	
Leisure		15	39.4	
<i>Total</i>		38	100.0	

## Product Expectations and Experience

In the script, the respondents are asked to describe their mall expectations and later to elaborate their mall experience. Tables 2, 3 and 4 list the following common categories that emerged from the interviews. The sample quotes that emerged from the interviews are also presented in the tables. The categories are as follows:

### *Product*

The first dimension was products. Tourist-shoppers were generally satisfied, and prices seemed to be the biggest influencer here. Despite some limitations of luxury products in Malaysia, most of the international tourists did not visit Malaysia for this category of goods. As mentioned above, the majority of tourists were seeking special items that may not be available in their home countries.

**Table 2:** Respondent impression of product in a mall

<b>Quotes on expectations</b>	<b>Quotes on experience</b>
<b>Good value.</b>	The products are affordable. Compared with other international shopping destinations, the prices in Malaysia are considerably lower. One can get more for the money. The goods have a very good price.
<b>Wide selection of goods.</b>	One can find everything in a shopping centre. There is no need to go to other places for shopping. Affordable, but also branded and luxury products can be found, and even for a good price. Unlike in other places, there is no need to go to another shopping complex, as everything can be found here.
<b>The stores in the complex always have full inventory.</b>	The stores stocked up on their products well.
<b>There must be the latest designs.</b>	Malaysian shopping centres offered standard designs from international brands and designers. Some luxury brands stores did not have the latest designs, unlike their European counterparts.

### ***Personnel***

For personnel (the second aspect), the majority of respondents (31) agreed that a professional and welcoming attitude of salespersons had positive impact on their shopping experience. According to Mak and colleagues (1999), employees' friendliness can help to boost an organisation's reputation, and may influence the tourists' decisions about a shopping destination.

**Table 3:** Respondent impression of personnel in a mall

<b>Quotes on expectations</b>	<b>Quotes on experience</b>
<b>Sales personnel are courteous and helpful.</b>	The staff assisted in finding the right product. They were attentive and approachable.
<b>The staff are knowledgeable.</b>	They explained the products in detail and well.
<b>They have high conversation skills.</b>	Polite yet communicative.

### ***Environment***

The third category, which discusses the environment, is the longest. This provides evidence that people are psychologically connected to their destinations. Tourists with different cultural backgrounds may have contrasting notions about certain facilities provided by Malaysian shopping centres. For instance, the wet and dry toilets can be a funny yet unappealing experience for some tourists. The same goes for parking and driving cars to shopping malls; many tourists from developed countries, who are used to public transport, do not find this as issue. An opposite reaction came from visitors from Southeast Asian countries. These two pressing matters are likely linked to cultural differences. Other than that, surroundings in Malaysia shopping complexes were well received, and the innovative shopping-lifestyle hybrid in some centres really entertained the tourists who were interviewed. Consistent with several arguments above, greenery, safety and seating areas unquestionably added up a positive tourist shopping experience.

**Table 4:** Respondent impression of environment in a mall

<b>Quotes on expectations</b>	<b>Quotes on experience</b>
<b>Expectations</b>	<b>Experience</b>
<b>The complex should be roomy.</b>	Shopping centres outside of Kuala Lumpur had fewer people, hence less queue time and more relaxing. The complexes around Bukit Bintang area in Kuala Lumpur were crowded and could be stressful.
<b>Shopping centres are accessible and easily reachable.</b>	Centres outside of densely populated areas were well located and easily accessible from main roads, and sufficient parking was provided. Parking could be a problem in retail complexes in Kuala Lumpur, but public transport can be a good choice.
<b>Shopping centres are architecturally developed.</b>	The architecture and the interior design of newly renovated or newer centres were bold and unique.
<b>International-standard facilities.</b>	In almost every shopping centre, facilities such as food outlets, resting areas and clean toilets are well taken care of. Most of them provided free parking. Most provided interactive screens to assist visitors to find their way. Certain details like broken tiling and no soap in the toilet were sometimes neglected.
<b>Every mall is unique by itself.</b>	Outside of Kuala Lumpur, most shopping centres shared similar layouts and offered similar products. Shopping centres in Kuala Lumpur were built with character and their own unique themed identity, which can be very entertaining.
<b>The interior structure is easy to navigate for visitors.</b>	Newly renovated and built shopping centres were massive and could be puzzling to navigate, but worth spending time there. Smaller or older centres were designed with the same principle, almost repetitive and can be boring but easily understood by visitors.
<b>Nice and relaxing ambience.</b>	Music in shopping centres was suitable and could be calming for some people. Indoor gardens and plants smoothed the shopping experience.

## Conclusions

This study was carried out to investigate the shopping experience of international tourists visiting Malaysia. The study has produced empirical evidence that assists in explaining the behaviour of international tourists visiting shopping complexes in several states in Malaysia.

This result highlights several important implications for mall retailers and management. In particular, the findings in this study reveal the shopping experience as well as the shopping expectations of international tourists in Malaysia. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on tourism and retailing from the perspective of international visitors in Malaysia. Their experience and expectations of visiting a shopping mall outside their home environment served as a background to the literature. The interviews were conducted in various shopping centres with different characteristics.

Through the narrative analysis, the answers were analysed and put into two categories: expectations and experiences (as listed in Tables 2, 3 and 4). Twelve individuals randomly mentioned that shopping centres in Malaysia were convenient. Convenience of shopping experience has diverse readings, but according to Reimers (2014), the convenient environment has the ability to enhance the shopping experience and influence shopping behaviour.

Among the three most common attributes in Reimers' (2014) study that assist in operationalising store convenience were 'parking, car access and payment options'. In contrast with the present study, it was found that describing shopping in Malaysia shopping centres as 'convenient' referred to the idea that almost all shopping centres are well located or within reach with public transport, and family friendly, making them appealing to the international tourist.

Although some faced conflicts (as addressed above), the overall experience was balanced out with an entertaining atmosphere and services provided by the shopping centres. The affordable price tags, huge options from which to choose and quality products met the expectations of the tourists. Nevertheless, physical attributes play a lesser role than emotions and psychology in determining a positive shopping experience; in Malaysian shopping malls, well-trained and well-mannered salespeople, together with the favourable environment of these centres, left the tourists with good memories. The retailer as well as mall management should pay more attention to meeting tourists' expectations. The first impression the tourists had while in the stores did influence them to stay longer.

The fulfilled experience indicates that most tourist expectations were met, hence this article concludes that a trip to a Malaysian shopping centre is enjoyable and will provide visitors with a satisfying shopping experience.



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