

Issues and Challenges Faced by Malaysian Umrah Travel Agencies in Providing Excellent Marketing Mix Services to Umrah Pilgrims

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Abstract

Deregulated and open markets have shaped an increasingly turbulent and uncertain environment especially for the travel agent. Notably, most companies nowadays focus on an effective service marketing mix to enhance the quality of their services. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss issues and challenges faced by Umrah travel agencies in Malaysia, and proposes a newly developed marketing mix to be adopted by the Umrah travel industry. The service marketing mix model extends the current 7Ps marketing mix; by the inclusion of the new P which is Pleasure. The services delivered through 8 Ps will result in a better performance of knowledge and skill enhancements which subsequently will enable the Malaysian Umrah travel industry to compete globally thus producing a high degree of satisfaction among stakeholders. This paper ends by drawing some conclusions and identifying areas for further research.

Keywords: Service marketing mix; Pleasure; Challenges; UMRH travel agents; Malaysia.



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1. Introduction

Every Muslim aspires to visit the holy cities of Mecca and Madinah at least once in his or her lifetime to perform the Hajj. However, the Saudi government has a Hajj quota for each country (Al-Albaanee, 2010). A Muslim who wants to perform the Hajj may have to wait his or her turn, maybe a decade or longer. The Umrah is then the alternative for me to get to these holy cities for the spiritual experience of praying in Masjidil Haram in Mecca and Masjid Nabawi in Madinah before my turn to perform the Hajj. From the perspective of Islam, tourism can be defined as Rehlah, Ziarah, Siyahah, Umrah and Hajj. Umrah and Hajj is the one of main activities to worship that require Muslims to go to Mecca and Medinah (Zulkifli *et al.*, 2011). Differences between Umrah and Hajj concerns the differences about the time and place. Umrah may be held at any time during a given year and only in Mecca, while the Hajj can only be held at specified times among 8 to 12 Dzulhijjah month period and held outside the city of Mecca (Zulkifli *et al.*, 2011).

2. Travel Agency

Travel agency is defined as a company involved in arranging the trip documents, and also intermediaries booking accommodation, transportation, tickets, restaurant, food, tourism facilities, etc. (Thomson and Dinar, 2017). Much of the earlier research focused only on issues covering a wider of range of issues that travel agencies had to deal with, such as measuring service quality (Lobo *et al.*, 2007); (Shahin and Janatyan, 2011), customer satisfaction (Millán and Esteban, 2004), and other factors that impact selection of travel agencies in respective regional settings (Cassiby *et al.*, 2006). Another study focuses on the customer zone of tolerance on travel agencies (Gilbert and Gao, 2005), and relationships of customer expectations, satisfaction, and loyalty to travel agencies (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2006). However, their study does not differentiate between customer's satisfaction of travel packages and satisfaction with the agency. Research on consumer behavior emphasizes how consumers select, buy and consume a given product or service to satisfy his/her need. Verma and Singh (2017) in this respect, consumers may purchase a product or service based on their budget in order to satisfy their basic needs. However, other factors might affect their satisfaction level with the product or services such as product price, quality, emotion, personal factors, and situational factors (Ngo and Nguyen, 2016).

The implementation of Umrah by private travel agents has become an important and popular issue. Umrah means visiting Mecca city to worship with manners namely, to perform a set of religious worship activities according to Islam. According to Tse (2003) travel agents, they can secure their market share by providing a distinctive package, some others have protected their marketplaces through the offering of attractive tour packages, majority tickets and services to governmental and commercial organizations. Umrah travel agents may also develop

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cost effective and qualified programs through maintaining some good flights, accommodations with an emphasis on addressing spiritual perspectives. (Muhammad *et al.*, 2015) investigated the impact of service quality in South Sulawesi Province on pilgrims' satisfaction and image of Hajj in Umrah travel agents. Authors stated that service quality significantly affects pilgrims' satisfaction which in turn significantly affects the image of Hajj and Umrah travel agents. Thus, service quality insignificantly affects the image of Hajj and Umrah travel agents.

3. Umrah Travel Agents in Malaysia

As of November 2017, the Tourism and Culture Ministry has 234 licensed travel agencies which offer Umrah packages, of which 65 are travel agencies accorded with the Muasassah (Umrah special licence) while another 169 travel agencies are not accorded with the Muasassah (Fauziah, 2018). In Malaysia, a travel agency is divided into two: 1) they are general travel agency and 2) Hajj and Umrah travel agency. Almuhrzi and Alsawafi (2017) state that a general travel agency is an agency that serves trips in general such as holidays, while Hajj and Umrah travel agency is an agency which specializes in Umrah, Hajj and spiritual tourism. Umrah is the one type of worship which is almost similar to Hairudin *et al.* (2016). Travel agency is a rapidly growing business which can provide Umrah and Hajj travellers a variety of assistance that includes accommodation, transportation, tickets, tour packages, and much more. In Malaysia, religious tourism is now getting more attention from researchers to explore in-depth areas. This may also be due to the urgent need among travel agents and tour operators to advance their services as well as their tour packages. Lack of research conducted with respect to Umrah and pilgrims is the main purpose to conduct this study (Kamarudin and Ismail, 2014).

4. Historical Facts of the Umrah

Umrah is one of many Islamic rituals among Muslims' living in the world. This religious activity is not compulsory to do as Hajj apart from for those who have the monetary facilities to visit the city of Makkah and perform this ritual. Gannon *et al.* (2017). Umrah is performed at different times during the year according to one's timeframe. Umrah starts when the visitors are looking to purchase an Umrah package that suits them within their financial range. They review the travel agencies in their countries which offer Umrah services (Ashdaq *et al.*, 2015) and then make a decision that meets their schedule. When the expected Umrah travelers decide about the various offered packages (The Umrah package covers air travel (flight), welcome, departure, conveyance, and lodging), they move from Makkah to the city of Madinah to have the honor goes to see the prophet Mohammad' shrine (peace be upon him) to devote their time to prayer in His holy mosque of Madinah (Hajjinformation.com).

The Umrah services were managed long time ago my families as their traditional activity, where they feel the honor to easing the burdens of Umrah travelers by offering many services like transportation, lodgings, and food as well as tour direction for Umrah travelers (Long, 2013). Similarly, these families altered the traditional way of helping Umrah travelers due to the directions and principles of the Ministry of Hajj. Then Ministry started to re-arrange and organize Umrah practices. Later these casual Umrah events were required to take an endorsed and instructed administrating program governed by the government through its appropriate ministry (Eid and El-Gohary, 2015). Automatically, the Umrah field observed an extraordinary development due to the advancement of technology and the Internet shaped a new elegance of information sharing (Şahin *et al.*, 2015). Then, with the increase of International traveling agencies, the companies offering Umrah services started to deal directly with these international travel agencies to organize and manage Umrah tourists' programs (Nizami *et al.*, 2015). By this phase, there was no role for the "Ministry of Hajj" because it was only responsible for Hajj arrangements and organizations. Processes were established and amended more when the "Ministry of Hajj" linked the Umrah services too. The Umrah companies by this phase began to coordinate with the "Ministry of Foreign Affairs" and International agencies concerning Umrah visitors and services. Hashim (2014) subsequently the Ministry of Hajj took part when they had an agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adopt the Umrah field. Next, a reorganization arranged for the Umrah processes and procedures. This became the direct link to "Umrah" travel agencies, International agencies, and Umrah visitors.

5. Challenges Facing Umrah Travel Agents

According to Ibrahim (2011) the travel industry has experienced considerable changes over the years. The majority of travel agencies fall within the category of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) and mostly is private or family run. Very few travel agencies belong to big corporations. As a whole, the SME travel agencies can be considered as weak as they are threatened by the uncertainties in its operating environment, decreasing market share and profit level (Achyar and Oktora, 2014). Crescent Rating, which is a globally recognized independent accreditation and rating standard for Muslim-friendly travel services, has categorized the Muslim traveler needs into three aspects: need to provide Halal food, services, and prayer facilities; good water usage and friendly washroom Ramadhan services & facilities; and Nice Halal activities and recreation services and facilities (Arpaci, 2016). On the other hand, (Zulkifli *et al.*, 2011) has proposed six fundamentals of Halal friendly tourism activities comprise of Halal friendly hotel, Halal standard, Halal food, Islamic travel packages, Halal transports and Islamic finance.

During the deregulation of the airline industry, travel agents faced a more competitive and dynamic environment caused by the loss of control of airline ticket sales. Hassan *et al.* (2015) The zero commission policy adopted by major airlines had reduced revenues for the travel agents. Creative strategies were initiated for the travel agents to survive. The national tourism promotional campaigns to attract tourists into the country only affected certain segments of the travel industry (Lazaridi, 2013). E-ticketing had further eroded the roles of the travel agents.

Operating costs increased with insurance coverage and IATA's requirements. The energy price hikes indirectly affected the livelihood of the travel agents.

It is notable that the Umrah traveling problem has been recognized as a long outstanding issue because the service is in one country and its practical execution is in another country (Achyar and Oktora, 2014); (Hashim, 2014); (Hassan *et al.*, 2016); (Khan and Shambour, 2017). However, studies of customer loyalty in Umrah traveling facilities was very rare and non-conclusive. Past studies claim that there was no comprehensive evaluation from the customer perspective in Umrah travel services (Hassan *et al.*, 2016); (Khan and Shambour, 2017) and mainly concentrated on spiritual and religious travel (Almuhri and Alsawafi, 2017), population on vital statistics, hotel congestion (Eid and El-Gohary, 2015), monitoring system to improve Umrah services (Kumaladewi *et al.*, 2017), e-Umrah System (Hashim, 2014), Knowledge Acquisition in Religious Tourism (Hassan *et al.*, 2015). Little efforts demonstrated to solve persistent issues on loyalty among Umrah performance that will not be a benefit to the Umrah traveling industry and country in terms of economic development, attracting and retaining Umrah customers (Hassan *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, a study on customer loyalty in Umrah traveling services is a serious matter and worthy studies that are able to aid the Umrah traveling agent to understand and address the issues. Without an in depth study, improvement efforts to overcome Umrah traveling issues becomes tougher and development progress in the services sector, particularly to Umrah traveling services as the number of Umrah performers and business activities continue to grow rapidly over time.

In addition to this challenge, high leasing and operational cost factors confronted by Umrah travel operators makes the allocation of resources such as capital investment, human capital and technology investment tougher, but yet very important resources in managing traveling services (Gannon *et al.*, 2017). It had demanded that the Umrah travel operators to utilize resources appropriately and wisely toward providing a best service in Umrah travel service marketing mix and service quality. However, there is lack of empirical evidence in terms of service marketing that support on what are the most influencing service marketing mix elements and service quality to customer loyalty in Umrah travel services (Gannon *et al.*, 2017). The following table summarizes the studies of umrah and hajj:

No	Authors	Title	Types of research	Sector	Country
1	(Gannon <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	"Travelling for Umrah: destination attributes, destination image, and post-travel intentions"	Empirical	travel agents and Muslim travellers	Iran
2	(Kumaladewi <i>et al.</i> , 2017)	"Pilgrimage organizers monitoring system to improve Umrah services (case study: Sub directorate of Umrah development of the ministry of religious affairs of the Republic of Indonesia)"	Case study	Sub directorate of Umrah	Indonesia
3	(Almuhri and Alsawafi, 2017)	"Muslim perspectives on spiritual and religious travel beyond Hajj: Toward understanding motivations for Umrah travel in Oman"	Empirical	Umrah travel	Oman
4	(Khan and Shambour, 2017)	"An analytical study of mobile applications for Hajj and Umrah services"	Empirical	mobile	Indian
5	(Alotaibi, 2016)	"Strategic Practices and Development of the Hotel Sector for Pilgrims in Makkah and Madinah"	Empirical	Hotel	Saudi Arabia
6	(Hassan <i>et al.</i> , 2016)	"A conceptual model of perceived value and consumer satisfaction: a survey of Muslim travellers' loyalty on Umrah tour packages"	Empirical	Umrah tour	Malaysia
7	(Radwan, 2016)	"Evaluating the Effectiveness of Social Media as A Marketing Tool in The Hotel Sector: A Case Study on Four and Five Star Hotels in Makkah, Saudi Arabia"	Empirical	Hotel	Saudi Arabia
8	(Eid and El-Gohary, 2015)	"Muslim Tourist Perceived Value in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry"	Empirical	Tourism	Multiple country
9	(Ashdaq <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	"Analysis Of Service Quality On Pilgrims Satisfaction And Image Of Hajj And Umrah Travel Agents In South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia"	Empirical	Travel Agents	Indonesia
10	(Hassan <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	"Determinants of Destination Knowledge Acquisition in Religious Tourism: Perspective of Umrah Travelers"	Empirical	Religious Tourism	Saudi Arabia
11	(Melorose, Perroy, and Careas, 2015)	"Development of a Service Delivery Framework for South African Pilgrims Travelling to Saudi Arabia"	Empirical	Pilgrims Travel	South African
12	(Achyar and Oktora, 2014)	"The Effect of Post- Purchased Perceived- Value towards the Relationship Quality of"	Empirical	Travel Agencies	Indonesia

		Hajj and Umrah Travel Agencies in Indonesia”			
13	(Muhammad, 2014)	“The significance of partnership as a marketing strategy for Islamic spiritual tourism”	Empirical	spiritual tourism	Australia and Pakistan
14	(Ahmad <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	“A framework for crowd-sourced data collection and context-aware services in Hajj and Umrah”	Empirical	aware services	Saudi Arabia

It's seen a tremendous increase in Muslims each year for performing Umrah and Hajj. In Indonesia there are more the two hundred agencies working for Umrah travel services providing sector (Achyar and Oktora, 2014); Ahmad *et al.* (2014) . Most of the travelling agencies are providing altered services to attract customers and overcome their difficulties (Hassan *et al.*, 2016) Oman Umrah travellers have been reported (Gannon *et al.*, 2017) for decades and religious tourism has played a major part in attracting travellers to sacred sites for the performance of rituals. Within the Muslim World, there are two types of religious related travel: Hajj and non-Hajj (Kumaladewi *et al.*, 2017). This suggests that while the religious physiognomies of the destination remain significant, destination managers cannot disregard the tangential, non-religious attributes of a destination which are crucial in order to satisfy more conventional tourist desires (Khan and Shambour, 2017) . Alotaibi and Radwan, 2016 claimed that social media is a more powerful tool to attract the customer and to overcome their challenges. Some other scholars furthermore explore how to provide best services and address issues like lack of business ethics, poor service standards and malpractice which exists in the Umrah industry (Ashdaq *et al.*, 2015; Eid and El-Gohary, 2015; Hassan *et al.*, 2015).

Most of the people shall go to Umrah via travel packages that are being catered by the travel agency. In Malaysia people have lots of travel agents that can cater for the Umrah service but they must check whether they are reliable or not and what kind of services they are providing. Examples of activities that are normally included in the agency services are: Arrangement in getting the Umrah visa, Flight arrangement, Preparation of the itinerary while in Makkah and Madinah, Preparing the ‘mutawwif’ so that the Jemaah won’t be lost there, food, transportation/logistics and Umrah courses, etc. To survive, travel agency managers will need to develop innovative strategies and marketing programs which will enable them to buffer their organizations from perceived environmental threats and to exploit developing opportunities.

6. Service Marketing Mix

The Service industry is rapidly growing in most countries with a significant contribution to a country’s economy, people’s well-being and life style (Amzad *et al.*, 2012b). Marketing mix elements are control tools in the hands of the organization that lead to customer satisfaction (Shankar and Chin, 2011). Researchers advocate the essential need to understand marketing mix elements offered by service providers due to its impact on probable and existing customers, and converting them to loyal customer and support them to continue their business life (Wahab *et al.*, 2016). Despite the origin of marketing mix concept going back to Borden in 1948, the well-known definition of marketing mix and categorization of its elements to product, price, place and promotion to meet the needs of the target market was presented by McCarthy (1964). The success of the service organization is dependent on an effective combination of marketing elements; interaction of these elements with each other and using them in the marketing process leads to the success of service organizations (Kotler and Lee, 2008). This paper proposes a eight dimension of service marketing mix as follows:

6.1. Product

Providing services to customers should be attempted to make the services tangible through visible features (Al-Dmour *et al.*, 2013). Basically, service is viewed as a combination of both tangible and intangible components (Amzad *et al.*, 2012a). Further, service product was defined as anything an organization offers to potential customers whether it be tangible or intangible (Palmer, 2011). Furthermore, intangible activities and performance intended by collaborative procedure to satisfy customer expectations and needs, influencing them, this process could be done by using physical products (Al-Dmour *et al.*, 2013). In the case of Umrah, money is not the issue for Umrah performers, they would care for maximum satisfaction and normally the price is between RM 9,000 to RM 12,000 per person. This package will provide customers with the nearest hotel which is on a 50m tract in Makkah and around 80-100m in Madinah. Bear in mind that the price of the hotel differs by the distance. The further the hotel from the mosque, the cheaper it will be. Anyways, they are listing 10 tips for customer consideration. There are various airlines that can bring pilgrims to Umrah. Among the famous one at the moment is MAS, Saudi Airlines and also AirAsia. The best airlines are those who provide direct flights from Malaysia to Jeddah or Madinah. If Umrah customers take other airlines, perhaps there will be a stopover which can eat up the number of days. Although the transit won’t be that long, Umrah customers will need to ensure that their time is well spent at Makkah and Madinah instead of the flight alone (Alotaibi, 2016).

6.2. Price

The price dimension involves identifying the level of prices, the pricing method, strategies and methods and terms of payment of services (Kotler and Lee, 2008). The concept of price is defined as the monetary value that are

supposed to pay to obtain the selected service and product (Chamber, 2015); and the value matters which are required for the purchase of a service or product (Al-Dmour *et al.*, 2013). Higher prices entail distinctive brands, high quality and extra benefits to the customer (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012). On the other hand, lower prices are linked with a lower quality standard and limited other service features (Palmer, 2011). If Umrah customers use google, Umrah customers can get an Umrah package as cheap as RM 3,000 and as expensive as RM 12,000 or higher. On average, the package is around RM 5,500 to RM 6,800. Umrah travel agents suggestions are to get a few quotations (at least five). Ask what is provided and not just look at the cheapest price. Better to get all of the issues being covered in Malaysia rather than in Makkah as customers don't want to be swearing there. One trick that the agents will use in Makkah and Madinah is: "this is a test by Allah." Whenever there is an issue they will say that Allah is testing. By saying that, they tend to avoid any misunderstanding from the pilgrims. Umrah packages can be high during peak seasons such as Ramadhan and school holidays.

6.3. Place

Accessible distribution system allows customers to find the required brand, which effects the perceived quality and even its various levels (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Service place is vital for business sustainability, competitiveness and marketing networking as a platform of sales transaction, service delivery and service promotion between service provider and customers. Service place for Umrah traveling service is complex because service offerings and execution of Umrah travel services are at two different regions (even across countries). Without place, the service cannot be offered and sold. Additionally, Umrah traveling services are more tangible in nature and it expects Umrah customers to come to Umrah traveling services for experiencing the service delivery on site. Thus, the Umrah traveling operator should focus more on traveling service rendered in the Umrah traveling services. The (Ahmed and Rahman, 2015) suggest that the Umrah traveling services should be able to ease managing, served with high service quality.

6.4. Promotion

Service promotion comprises all communications that the service provider produces in the market (Ledden *et al.*, 2011). The use of all elements of communication such as advertising, sales promotion, public information and personal selling are important in the awareness and encouragement and persuasion of people to use services requires special strategies (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Promotion is also one of an essential element in Umrah traveling services as today's users expect a high Umrah customer service and service quality (Ahmad *et al.*, 2014). This is concurred by (Amzad *et al.*, 2012b), he stated that traveling services is important as a "front door" to the business or organization it serves. The experience during service process must be captured and express the essence of the service brand. While branding in traveling makes differences and image is extremely important.

6.5. People

Organization's employees communicate (either online, phone or face to face) with customers to provide different services. Therefore, companies need to carefully select, effectively educate, and motivate their staff (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Considering the importance of people in an organization's strategy design, emphasis will be on improving staff. Hence, it is essential to examine the Umrah performer's perception of Umrah travel agent's people against their satisfaction and loyalty with such a travel agent. Although the technology of Umrah traveling is used in many Umrah traveling services, the people element is still needed in Umrah traveling management and plays an important factor to influence Umrah customer satisfaction and business branding. Another aspect such as the appearance of service employees, in travel agent services need to be more professional and require more technical skills.

6.6. Physical Evidence

Service organizations require a variety of physical and material tools and facilities to provide services and actualize potential services. As much as these services are more up to date and more qualitative, they will lead to customer satisfaction (Kotler and Lee, 2008). It can be argued that service physical evidence has the potential to influence Umrah offers satisfaction and loyalty. In the scenario of Umrah travel agents, service physical evidence may involve a detailed explanation and information speech about the details of the Umrah journey. If Umrah customers are first timers, Mutawif service is really crucial as they will be the ones that will guide future customers over there. Some of the Umrah agents engage Mutawif from Indonesia and students who are staying in Makkah and Madinah. Some, they have local (Malaysian) Mutawif who will fly together from Malaysia and come back together. This is better as Umrah customers will have someone to refer to if there is any query (Gannon *et al.*, 2017).

6.7. Processes

Service process is defined as the procedures, mechanisms and activities required to provide a given service (Palmer, 2011). The process of service provision must be based on possibilities, limitations, and supply and demand conditions. The easier the service process, the faster and simpler customers feel comfortable and satisfied (Kotler and Lee, 2008). Explaining and efficiently managing how the Umrah journey will be managed is essential to derive customer satisfaction and loyalty in Umrah service settings. For first timer, it is wise to get a comprehensive course before customers perform their Umrah journey. Umrah customers don't want to go there as a first timer not knowing what to be done. Normally if there is any course, it should be before Umrah customers fly there. Besides that, there

are also agents that bring Ustaz for the Umrah trip and customers can also learn while performing Umrah. In order to avoid any hanky-panky, payment must be made to the Umrah travel agent's account number and not to any personal account number. Please also ensure that if there is additional payment that needs to be made while performing the Umrah, Umrah customers don't want to be shocked with additional payments later. Again ask until customers are assured of this (Gannon *et al.*, 2017).

6.8. Pleasure

Kotler defined pleasure or satisfaction as a satisfactory state felt by a person who has experienced a service that fulfilled his or her expectations. (Qureshi *et al.*, 2010) believed that it would be beneficial if Umrah travel agents used certain methods to determine the level of their customers' satisfaction. Then, the Umrah travel agency can tailor their programs to their customer's needs. This will permit the companies to offer more defined and customer based packages. However, the main problem is to find out what factor their customers desire. (Farris *et al.*, 2010) defined customer pleasure as the number of customers, or percentage of total customers, whose reported experience with a firm, its products, or its services (ratings), exceeding specified satisfaction goals. The type of pleasure differs from customer to customer: some might be pleased with the services, some might be pleased with the infrastructure and some might be pleased with the total price of the package provided by the Umrah travel agent. From the above literature, customer's pleasure is also a very important factor of their travels. This study shows the significance of customer's pleasure related to the Umrah travels. Umrah travel agents are performing various activities and use many pleasure components to keep in touch with its customers (Ahuja, 2016). If any Umrah travel agency has a positive response with its customers they can convert their potential customers into loyal customers by continuing to provide these services.

7. Conclusion

Creating a sustainable Islamic world that provides a safe, secure, healthy, productive, and sustainable life for all peoples should be a first priority for the Malaysian Umrah traveling profession. 8 P's of service marketing mix shall be seen beyond the source of attracting performance Umrah towards retention, relationships, performance & satisfaction of Umrah traveling stakeholders. The efforts shall be extended to make them employable and deliver those results for them. The importance of designing services that can improve service marketing mix which has an effect on pilgrim's satisfaction in the implementation of Umrah organized by travelling agencies in Malaysia is important. Several things that still need attention including the design and arrangement of service spaces that are still not showing Islamic atmosphere, supporting facilities are still inadequate, the effectiveness of service methods, standardization in service, as well as costs incurred during service. The creation of a good image in the implementation of Umrah by travel agencies in Malaysia organizers cannot be done by only improving service marketing mix; it takes a good impression in society regarding this service. Therefore, it requires good understanding and good promotion to society regarding the benefits and success that have been achieved in the implementation of Umrah in Malaysia, because this impression may affect the image of Umrah implementation by travel agencies as a whole.

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