

## Visible but Scarce: Frontline Warmth and Soft-Service Readiness in Malaysian Hotel Reviews

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysia's ambitious targets for Visit Malaysia 2026 risk being undermined by a structural soft-service gap that remains invisible in macro-level tourism metrics. Analysing 350,557 Ctrip reviews across 990 Malaysian hotels, this study operationalises frontline warmth as a diagnostic of Malaysia's soft-service readiness. The findings reveal that interpersonal warmth is not a routine service baseline but a scarce experiential resource, appearing in only 10.3% of guest narratives. This scarcity is compounded by a near-total vacuum in communication-related warmth (0.1%), suggesting a service culture that is functionally adequate but emotionally thin. The study also identifies a critical language-market mismatch: whereas English reviews recognise warmth through spontaneous friendliness, Chinese-language reviews evaluate warmth more strongly through disciplined courtesy and service attitude. Most critically, the rating premium for warmth (0.455) is effectively double that of operational competence (0.221), indicating that guests reward being treated well far more than being processed efficiently. The study concludes that frontline warmth, cultural courtesy, and emotional labour should be treated not as decorative traits, but as essential tourism infrastructure. A tired smile cannot sustain a national tourism campaign.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by developing a bilingual, review-based diagnosis of frontline warmth in Malaysian hotels. Analyzing 350,557 Ctrip reviews, it demonstrates that warmth is visible yet scarce, culturally filtered across linguistic markets, and carries distinct rating relevance that extends beyond competence-related praise.

## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is preparing for a tourism campaign built on large numbers. Tourism Malaysia (2025) frames Visit Malaysia 2026 around 35.6 million tourist arrivals and RM147.1 billion in tourism receipts. These figures signal confidence, but they also rest on a quieter assumption: that the country's service system can absorb more visitors without turning hospitality into routine processing. Rooms, airports, digital platforms, and campaigns can bring visitors into destinations, but they do not guarantee that guests feel welcomed once they arrive. The harder test happens in smaller places: a reception desk conversation, a request for help, a staff member's tone, or the feeling that one is being handled rather than genuinely received.

The National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 is useful here as a benchmark for this softer service problem. Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC, 2020) places competitiveness, human capital, inclusiveness, and service culture within Malaysia's tourism transformation agenda. That language matters because warmth cannot be scaled as easily as infrastructure. A hotel can refurbish a lobby faster than it can rebuild a service habit. In this sense, Visit Malaysia 2026 is also a question of whether everyday service encounters can still carry emotional weight under growth pressure.

Hotel reviews offer a useful, if imperfect, way to examine this question. Guests do not write like policy officers. They write about staff who are friendly, rude, helpful, cold, polite, slow, attentive, or unwilling to help. Earlier hospitality research has shown that online reviews shape hotel reputation, booking decisions, and managerial learning (Filiari, 2016; Schuckert et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2015). More recent work uses artificial intelligence, machine learning, and large-scale experience mining to extract service signals from digital feedback (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2024; Le et al., 2025; To & Yu, 2025). Still, broad sentiment, ratings, topics, and complaints can blur the difference between a hotel that performs competently and one that feels genuinely hospitable.

That difference matters. Service-quality theory has long treated service as more than technical delivery (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1988), while service encounter research reminds us that customer evaluations are formed through contact with employees, not only through the core product (Bitner et al., 1990; Solomon et al., 1985). Hospitality adds another layer because service workers are often expected to perform warmth as part of the job. Hochschild (1983) called this emotional labour, and later work shows how repeated emotional display can affect both employees and customers (Grandey, 2000; Shani et al., 2014). A smile may look small. Repeated hundreds of times a day, it is labour.

This paper calls that review-visible labour frontline warmth. It refers to signs that staff are welcoming, helpful, courteous, responsive, or emotionally approachable. It is narrower than general satisfaction and broader than a single politeness cue. It is also not the same as competence. A guest may praise a clean room, a fast check-in, or a convenient location without feeling much warmth. Another guest may remember that a receptionist listened carefully or solved a problem with patience. Both experiences can produce good ratings, but they do not carry the same meaning.

Our starting observation is uncomfortable. In our final analytical sample of 350,557 Malaysian hotel reviews covering 990 hotels, explicit positive warmth cues appear in only 10.3% of reviews. Negative warmth cues are rarer, at 0.7%, and the average net

warmth gap is 9.6%. Nearly nine out of ten reviews do not explicitly mention warmth. That silence should not be exaggerated, but it should not be ignored. It suggests that many hotel encounters are remembered as functional rather than emotionally distinctive. Warmth is visible enough to be measured, but scarce enough to matter.

The internal shape of this warmth is also revealing. Welcoming is the largest positive dimension, while helpfulness, courtesy, and especially communication appear less often. Guests seem to recognise warmth most frequently through a general sense of friendliness or welcome, rather than through a fuller service chain of explanation, responsiveness, and follow-through. This imbalance hints at warmth as surface recognition more than an embedded service routine.

Hotel classification adds another warning. Premium properties show stronger net warmth than lower and mid-market segments, but this should not be read simply as a luxury effect. If warmth is concentrated in higher-class hotels, then soft-service readiness is uneven from the start. Visit Malaysia 2026 will pass through three-star properties, airport-area hotels, budget rooms, family trips, short business stays, and crowded destination corridors. Earlier Malaysian hotel studies have noted service-quality gaps in the local hospitality sector (Mey et al., 2006). Our concern is more specific: whether warmth is becoming a premium service feature instead of a shared baseline.

Language makes the issue sharper. Malaysia's visitor market is multilingual, and warmth is not read through one cultural lens. In our sample, English reviews form the largest language group, while Chinese reviews account for roughly one quarter. English reviews express warmth most visibly through welcoming cues, whereas Chinese reviews show stronger relative attention to courtesy and service attitude. This does not mean that one market is more demanding. It means that language carries expectation. Hall (1976), Hofstede (2001), and Mattila (1999) remind us that service cues are interpreted through learned communication norms. If Visit Malaysia 2026 brings more diverse visitors, one-size-fits-all service training will miss part of the problem.

To examine this problem, we develop a bilingual review-based diagnostic of frontline warmth rather than a general sentiment score. We do not claim to capture every emotional nuance in a hotel review. We focus on small service signals that ratings often smooth over: being welcomed, being helped, being treated politely, being answered clearly, or being met with coldness and poor attitude. The modelling results later in the paper are used as validation rather than causal proof. They support the distinction between getting things done and making guests feel welcomed while things are being done.

The argument is therefore not that Malaysia needs another technical review-mining exercise. It needs a sharper language for soft-service readiness. Existing analytics can classify sentiment and complaints, but they may miss the scarcity of warmth as a national service problem. Malaysia's tourism position cannot rest only on rooms, price, connectivity, and campaigns. Those are necessary, but they are not enough. If Visit Malaysia 2026 is to mean more than a one-year traffic surge, emotional labour has to be treated as tourism infrastructure.

## 1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to examine frontline warmth in Malaysian hotel reviews as a review-based indicator of soft-service readiness. The first objective is to identify how visible frontline warmth is in Malaysian hotel reviews and which forms of warmth are most often expressed. The second objective is to examine whether warmth is uneven across hotel classification, destination, language market, travel purpose, and time. The third objective is to assess whether review-derived warmth carries rating relevance beyond competence-related praise. Together, these objectives move the paper from technical review mining to a practical diagnosis of whether warmth functions as a shared service baseline or a scarce experiential premium in Malaysian hospitality.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Online reviews as service evidence, not just digital feedback

Hotel reviews are useful not only because they are large and accessible. They matter because they preserve small service moments that formal satisfaction scores often compress. A guest may give a good rating because the room was clean, the location worked, or the price was acceptable. Another guest may remember that a receptionist was patient, that a staff member helped with luggage, or that the reception felt cold. The numerical rating flattens these differences. The text keeps some of them alive.

Early studies established the influence of online reviews on hotel choice, trust, and booking behaviour (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye et al., 2009). Later work moved inside the review text itself, extracting hotel attributes such as location, room quality, cleanliness, staff, service failure, and value (Banerjee & Chua, 2016; Guo et al., 2017; Xu & Li, 2016). This shift matters because it treats reviews not simply as electronic word of mouth, but as traces of service experience.

The scale of review data has changed the method. With hundreds of thousands of comments, manual reading is no longer enough. Big data and business-intelligence research in hospitality has shown how digital traces can reshape what researchers and managers are able to observe (Mariani et al., 2018). More recent studies use topic modelling, machine learning, and aspect-based sentiment analysis to identify guest experience patterns from online reviews (Ahani et al., 2019; Wąsowicz-Zaborek, 2023). These tools make service attributes visible at scale, but scale also brings a danger. Once reviews become topics or polarity scores, the human texture of hospitality can disappear.

Broad sentiment is therefore not enough for this paper. “The room was clean” and “the staff were warm and helpful” are both positive, but they describe different kinds of value. One is closer to operational competence. The other is closer to human recognition. Recent review-based work continues to show that large-scale hotel review data can reveal service attributes that ratings alone often compress (Le et al., 2025). The sharper question is whether reviews can reveal the part of hospitality that feels human.

### 2.2. Frontline warmth beyond competence

Service quality research has long recognised that hotels are not judged only by physical output. Rooms, facilities, and location matter, but guests also respond to interaction. Recent service-quality studies still return to empathy, responsiveness, assurance,

reliability, and perceived professionalism as central to hotel satisfaction and service management (Perdomo-Verdecia et al., 2024). Malaysian hotel research points in the same direction. Aminudin et al. (2021) identified reception promptness and courtesy as frequently examined satisfaction attributes in Malaysian hotel studies, while Mohamed Idris et al. (2017) highlighted personnel treatment and staff communication as part of hotel guest satisfaction. The “soft” side of hotel service has never been peripheral. It has simply been difficult to isolate.

The problem is that service quality can become too broad. If room condition, staff attitude, speed, empathy, and complaint handling sit under the same umbrella, the interpersonal layer becomes blurred. The warmth–competence distinction offers a cleaner theoretical handle. In social cognition research, warmth and competence are treated as two basic dimensions of evaluation (Fiske et al., 2002; Fiske et al., 2007). Competence asks whether an actor can perform. Warmth asks whether the actor’s intentions feel friendly, caring, or trustworthy. In hotel terms, a fast check-in is competent. A patient and respectful check-in feels warm.

Hospitality experience research supports this distinction even when it uses different vocabulary. Kandampully et al. (2018) argued that customer experience in hospitality depends heavily on interactions with service personnel, not only the accommodation product. Wang et al. (2016) treated enjoyable interaction, attentiveness, and personalised service as elements of delightful service. Cross-cultural service research similarly suggests that culturally aligned interaction can shape how guests interpret hospitality encounters (Mattila, 1999; Weiermair, 2000). Warmth is not decorative. It is part of how hospitality becomes memorable.

This paper therefore treats warmth as related to competence but not reducible to it. If guests reward warmth differently from competence, then hotels that focus only on operational delivery may be missing part of the value chain. A hotel can do things correctly and still leave little emotional trace. That is the quiet cost of competence-centred thinking.

### **2.3. Emotional labour and service fatigue**

Warmth is easy to ask from employees and difficult to sustain. Service organisations often expect frontline staff to display friendliness, patience, and courtesy even when the work is repetitive or the guest is difficult. Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) described emotional expression as part of organisational life, while Pugh (2001) showed that employee displays can shape customer affect during service encounters. In hotels, reception staff, housekeeping teams, restaurant workers, and service agents may perform warmth across long shifts and uneven guest demands.

Hospitality research has paid closer attention to this labour in recent years. Lee and Madera (2019) reviewed emotional labour research in hospitality and tourism and showed that organisational display rules, emotional intelligence, and employee strain are central to the field. Chen (2019) examined how passion, emotional labour strategies, and emotional exhaustion interact among frontline hotel employees, while Xiong et al. (2023) showed that emotional labour can have longitudinal consequences for hotel employees’ mental health. Warmth is not just personality. It is work.

This changes how weak warmth should be read. If a hotel category or destination shows low warmth, the easiest explanation is poor training. Sometimes that may be true. But emotional labour research suggests a less comfortable possibility: service fatigue. High visitor turnover, repeated complaints, staff shortages, low autonomy, and pressure to remain pleasant can thin the emotional quality of service. Simillidou et al. (2020) showed how hotel employees manage emotional labour during difficult guest interactions. Du Plessis and Rabie (2025) further linked workplace wellness initiatives to service quality outcomes in customer-facing industries. A tired service system may still function. It may not feel warm.

This matters in an increasingly technology-mediated hospitality sector. Automation and AI can improve efficiency, but they can also reshape frontline work without protecting the human side of service (Spektor et al., 2023). Recent discussions of AI-enabled service encounters raise similar questions about whether technological efficiency can preserve the human side of hospitality (Li et al., 2021). High-tech service may reduce some operational burden. It does not remove the need for high-touch hospitality. In many encounters, the worker is the infrastructure.

#### **2.4. Language markets and the cultural filtering of warmth**

Warmth is not recognised in exactly the same way across visitor markets. Cross-cultural tourism research has long argued that service expectations vary across cultural groups, communication norms, and travel experience (Reisinger & Turner, 2003; Weiermair, 2000). A smile, a greeting, a delayed reply, or a formal apology may not carry the same weight for every language group.

Research on Chinese tourists is relevant here, but it must be used carefully. Studies have shown that Chinese outbound tourists often attach importance to respect, service attitude, practical assistance, and culturally appropriate communication (Li et al., 2011; Tsang & Ap, 2007). Used badly, this literature becomes stereotype. Used carefully, it helps explain why courtesy may be a stronger marker of warmth in Chinese-language reviews than in English-language ones. The difference is not that one group is more difficult. It is that warmth may be recognised through different service grammars.

This point is practical for Malaysia. The visitor market is multilingual, and hospitality workers need more than basic vocabulary; cultural intelligence and emotional labour also shape how frontline service is performed and sustained (Lam et al., 2022). Communication after the pandemic has become an important skill demand for hospitality graduates and service workers, including in Malaysia (Dzia-Uddin et al., 2023). Yet communication is not only about translation. It involves tone, explanation, responsiveness, and the ability to make service intention recognisable to the guest. Patterson et al. (2006) showed that intercultural service encounters can produce different satisfaction outcomes when expectations are mismatched. A generic friendliness script may therefore miss the point.

The bilingual approach in this study follows from that problem. English and Chinese reviews are not treated as interchangeable containers of the same sentiment. They are read as partially different windows into service expectation. English-language warmth may cluster around welcoming and approachability. Chinese-language warmth may attach more strongly to courtesy, attitude, and respectful conduct. This is not a cultural ranking. It is a warning against one-size-fits-all service readiness.

## 2.5. Towards a soft-service readiness diagnosis

The literature leaves a clear opening. Online review studies have shown that guest text can reveal service attributes at scale (Mariani et al., 2018). Service-quality and customer-experience research has shown that hospitality depends on interaction and customer touchpoints, not only facilities (Kandampully et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2024). Emotional labour research explains why warmth requires work and may erode under pressure (Lee & Madera, 2019; Simillidou et al., 2020), while cross-cultural service studies show why warmth may be recognised differently across visitor markets (Patterson et al., 2006; Reisinger & Turner, 2003). What remains less developed is a review-based diagnosis of warmth as a scarce and uneven service resource.

This study uses frontline warmth to build that link. It does not claim that warmth is the only thing that matters in hotels. Cleanliness, safety, price, location, and reliability remain central. The claim is narrower. Warmth captures whether service feels human rather than merely functional. When warmth is rare, uneven, or concentrated in certain hotel categories and destinations, it becomes a soft-service readiness issue.

That framing is important for Malaysia. Tourism growth can be pursued through arrivals, receipts, rooms, flights, and campaigns, but those indicators cannot tell us whether service encounters feel welcoming. Review data cannot solve that problem by itself. It can, however, show where warmth appears and where it is thin. This is why the present study uses text mining as a diagnostic tool rather than as the contribution itself. The real question is not whether we can process 350,557 reviews. We can. The question is what those reviews reveal about the emotional capacity of Malaysian hospitality.

## 3. Research Methods

### 3.1. Data source and analytical sample

The data were collected from Ctrip through Python-based web scraping and then processed in R. Ctrip provides a large corpus of hotel reviews, hotel metadata, and multilingual user-generated content, but it is not treated as a full representation of all Malaysian hotel guests. It offers a platform-specific view, especially relevant to Chinese-speaking and Asia-facing travel markets.

After collection, the scraped records were organised into two linked datasets. The review-level dataset contained hotel identifiers, review identifiers, user region, travel type, room type, rating, stay time, language, and review text. The hotel-level dataset contained hotel identifiers, hotel names, star rating, platform score, number of reviews, location, service tags, price indicators, latitude, longitude, and nearby-distance information. These two datasets were cleaned separately and then merged through hotel identifiers.

The final analytical sample contains 350,557 reviews from 990 Malaysian hotels, covering stays from September 2022 to December 2025. The review is the unit of analysis because frontline warmth is expressed, or left unexpressed, in individual guest narratives.

### 3.2. Data preparation

Data cleaning was conducted in R (R Core Team, 2024), using tidyverse for data manipulation (Wickham et al., 2019), readxl for Excel import, lubridate for dates (Grolemund & Wickham, 2011), stringr and stringi for text processing, lme4 for model estimation (Bates et al., 2015), broom.mixed and modelsummary for model output (Arel-Bundock, 2022), and ggplot2, scales, and patchwork for visualisation (Wickham, 2016). The rule-based text design follows computational text analysis and content analysis traditions that value transparency and reproducibility (Grimmer et al., 2022).

The preparation involved four steps. First, review and hotel fields were renamed and standardised. Hotel and review identifiers were converted into character format, review text was cleaned for line breaks and repeated spaces, ratings and price variables were converted into numeric form, and review length was measured by character count. Second, stay time was parsed from Chinese year-month expressions into monthly date format, producing stay\_month, year, month, and ym. Third, destination and hotel classification variables were constructed. Star ratings were grouped into 1–2 star, 3 star, 4 star, and 5 star categories. Fourth, language and travel-purpose labels were standardised into broader groups, including English, Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Other, and Business, Family, Couple, Friends/Group, Solo, Booked for others, and Other/Unknown. Records without valid hotel identifier, review identifier, review text, rating, or stay month were removed, as were reviews below 20 characters.

### 3.3. Bilingual operationalisation of frontline warmth

The study uses a bilingual lexicon rather than a black-box classifier. This choice is deliberate. The aim is not to maximise prediction, but to build a transparent diagnostic of frontline warmth. Lexicon-based approaches remain useful when the categories must be interpretable, auditable, and closely tied to theory (Liu, 2012; Taboada, 2016).

The lexicon was developed in English and Chinese. Positive warmth includes welcoming, helpfulness, courtesy, and communication. Negative warmth includes welcoming deficit, helpfulness deficit, courtesy deficit, communication deficit, and broader service deficit. English detection used staff-proximity rules, where staff terms such as “staff”, “reception”, “receptionist”, “customer service”, or “team” had to appear near attribute terms such as “friendly”, “helpful”, “polite”, “warm”, “rude”, “cold”, or “hard to communicate”. This reduces false matches, such as coding “cold room” as cold service.

Chinese detection combined proximity matching and direct-expression rules. Chinese reviews often express service attitude through compact phrases such as “服务热情”, “前台热情”, “服务态度好”, “态度差”, “前台冷漠”, and “沟通不畅”. Some phrases include explicit staff references; others operate as direct service-attitude expressions. The bilingual lexicon therefore recognises that warmth is not written in the same grammatical form across languages.

For review  $i$ , positive and negative warmth were defined as:

$$W^+i = 1(\text{welcoming}^+i \vee \text{helpfulness}^+i \vee \text{courtesy}^+i \vee \text{communication}_i^+), \quad (1)$$

$$W^-i = 1(\text{welcoming}^-i \vee \text{helpfulness}^-i \vee \text{courtesy}^-i \vee \text{communication}^-i \vee \text{service deficit}_i). \quad (2)$$

The net warmth gap is:

$$NW_i = W^+i - W^-i. \quad (3)$$

A separate competence-related praise indicator was constructed for operational effectiveness, including expressions such as efficient, professional, smooth, prompt, reliable, problem solved, 高效, 办理快, 处理得当, and 很专业. The lexicon was refined through iterative inspection, and sampled positive and negative matches were exported for manual checking.

### 3.4. Descriptive analysis

The first stage of analysis is descriptive. It reports the overall share of positive warmth, negative warmth, and average net warmth, then decomposes warmth into welcoming, helpfulness, courtesy, communication, and service deficit. Communication-related warmth is retained even though it appears rarely, because its low visibility is part of the empirical story rather than a technical failure.

The analysis then compares warmth across hotel classification, destination, language market, travel purpose, and month. These comparisons organise the paper's diagnostic sequence: overall warmth profile, destination unevenness, language-market differences, travel-purpose differences, monthly stability, and warmth-competence alignment.

### 3.5. Model-based validation

The second stage uses regression models as validation tools rather than causal identification. Review data are observational, and guests self-select into hotels, destinations, and review writing. The models therefore ask whether review-derived warmth remains associated with relevant outcomes after accounting for competence-related praise and standard controls.

The first model uses net warmth gap as the dependent variable:

$$NW_i = \alpha + \beta C_i + \gamma X_i + \delta_d + \tau_m + \varepsilon_i, \quad (4)$$

where  $C_i$  is competence-related praise,  $X_i$  includes review length, hotel classification, language group, and travel purpose,  $\delta_d$  denotes destination fixed effects, and  $\tau_m$  denotes month fixed effects.

The second model uses guest rating as the dependent variable:

$$Rating_i = \alpha + \theta NW_i + \beta C_i + \gamma X_i + \delta_d + \tau_m + \varepsilon_i. \quad (5)$$

This specification tests whether warmth has rating relevance beyond competence-related praise. Standard errors are clustered at the hotel level because reviews from the same hotel may share unobserved service routines, management practices, or location effects. The reference categories are 4-star hotels, English-language reviews, and business travel. City and month fixed effects are included in the fuller specifications.

### 3.6. Methodological boundaries

Three boundaries should be stated plainly. First, Ctrip provides a platform-specific view, not a complete census of Malaysian hotel guests. Its size is useful, but its platform and market orientation mean that the findings should be read as review-based evidence rather than a national population estimate.

Second, the lexicon identifies explicit warmth cues. It may miss irony, indirect praise, subtle disappointment, or warmth expressed without target terms. This limitation is acceptable because the object of the study is review-visible warmth, not unexpressed satisfaction.

Third, the models show association under controls, not causality. The chapter builds a review-based diagnostic of soft-service readiness, rather than a causal theory of individual staff behaviour.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Warmth is visible, but still scarce

The first result is not that Malaysian hotel reviews are negative. They are not. As reported in Table 1, the mean rating is 4.29, and negative warmth appears in only 0.7% of reviews. The sharper result is that explicit positive warmth appears in only 10.3% of 350,557 reviews from 990 hotels. Nearly nine out of ten reviews say nothing directly about being welcomed, helped, treated politely, or answered clearly. That silence is not proof of poor service, but it is not empty either. It suggests a hotel sector that often works functionally, yet leaves little emotional trace in guest language.

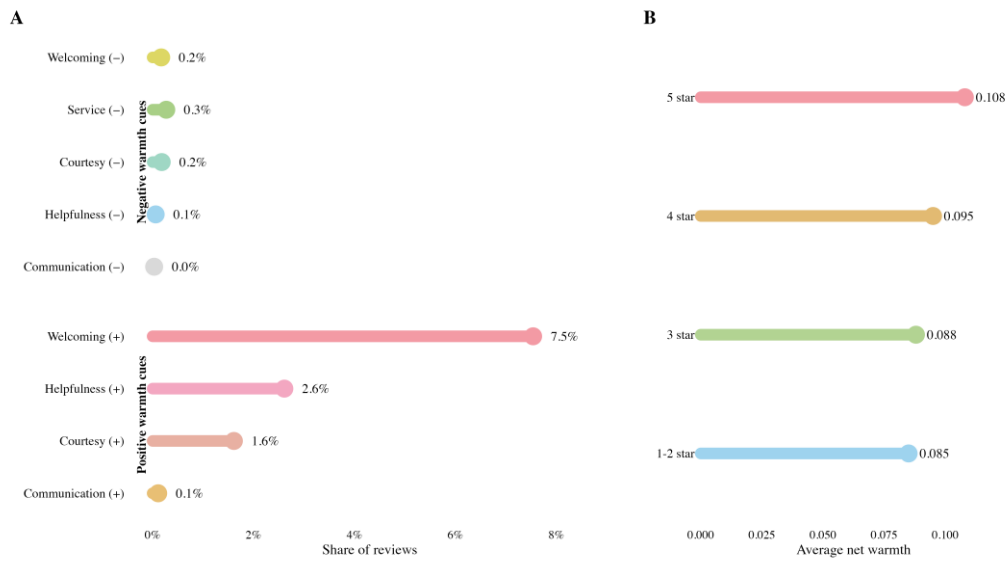
Table 1: Overall Sample Profile and Warmth Indicators

Indicator	Value
Reviews	350,557
Hotels	990
Positive warmth share	0.103
Negative warmth share	0.007
Average net warmth	0.096
Mean rating	4.29
SD of rating	0.888
Mean review length	154.8
Median review length	89
Start month	2022-09-01
End month	2025-12-01

**Note:** Warmth positive and warmth negative are review-level binary indicators. Net warmth gap is calculated as warmth positive minus warmth negative. Review length is measured by character count.

This is the soft-service gap at the centre of the paper. Hospitality experience has long been understood as more than a transaction. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that memorable experience can become part of economic value, while Meyer and Schwager (2007) and Verhoef et al. (2009) place affective and interactional cues inside the customer-experience process. Oliver (1997) also reminds us that satisfaction is not only a technical judgement but an evaluative response to an experience. The Malaysian data fit that logic in an uncomfortable way. Guests appear broadly satisfied, yet explicit warmth remains scarce. Service is often efficient, but emotionally thin.

Figure 1: Overall Frontline Warmth Profile by Dimension and Hotel Classification



**Note:** Panel A reports the share of reviews containing each warmth-related cue. Panel B reports average net warmth by hotel classification. Net warmth is calculated as warmth positive minus warmth negative.

Table 2: Distribution of Frontline Warmth Dimensions

dimension	share	share_pct
Welcoming (+)	0.0754	7.5%
Helpfulness (+)	0.0261	2.6%
Courtesy (+)	0.0161	1.6%
Communication (+)	0.0011	0.1%
Welcoming (-)	0.0017	0.2%
Service (-)	0.0027	0.3%
Courtesy (-)	0.0018	0.2%
Helpfulness (-)	0.0006	0.1%
Communication (-)	0.0003	0.0%

**Note:** Shares indicate the proportion of reviews in which each warmth-related cue is detected. Positive dimensions capture welcoming, helpfulness, courtesy, and communication; negative dimensions capture coldness, weak assistance, poor courtesy, communication difficulty, and broader service deficit.

The structure of this thinness becomes clearer once the warmth dimensions are separated in Figure 1 and Table 2. Welcoming is the largest positive dimension at 7.5%, followed by helpfulness at 2.6% and courtesy at 1.6%. Communication warmth appears in only 0.1% of reviews. This is almost a communication vacuum. Staff may be recognised as friendly or pleasant, but rarely as clear, responsive, or explanatory. In practice, warmth is visible mainly at the surface of welcome. It is not yet strongly embedded in the fuller service chain.

That distinction explains why ratings alone are insufficient. Review studies have shown that rating scores and textual content do not always carry the same information (Kwok & Xie, 2016). A high score may record satisfaction, but the text tells us what kind of satisfaction it was. In this sample, much of that satisfaction appears to be functional. Warmth is present, but thin.

## 4.2. Hotel classification exposes a temperature gap

The first sign of a temperature gap appears across hotel classification. In Table 3, five-star hotels record the highest positive warmth share at 11.5%, the highest average net warmth at 0.108, and the highest mean rating at 4.455. Four-star hotels follow, while 3-star and 1–2 star hotels remain lower. This pattern is expected. Premium properties usually have more staff, stronger service routines, and more reputational pressure. Yet even in five-star hotels, explicit warmth appears in only slightly more than one in ten reviews.

Table 3: Frontline Warmth by Hotel Classification

Hotel classification	Reviews	Hotels	Positive warmth (%)	Negative warmth (%)	Net warmth gap (%)	Mean rating
1–2 star	18,349	104	9.1	0.6	8.5	4.152
3 star	89,376	334	9.4	0.7	8.8	4.145
4 star	150,142	362	10.2	0.7	9.5	4.292
5 star	92,690	190	11.5	0.8	10.8	4.455

**Note:** Hotel classification is based on platform-reported star ratings. Warmth values are reported as percentages of reviews within each hotel classification. Net warmth gap is calculated as positive warmth minus negative warmth.

That result should make us cautious about treating star rating as a shortcut for service readiness. In social cognition, warmth and competence are separate judgement dimensions (Fiske et al., 2007). Hospitality studies on delight and memorable experiences make a similar point: technically correct service does not automatically become emotionally memorable (Torres & Kline, 2013). Service evidence also shows that employee behaviour can shape perceived quality and customer loyalty beyond the tangible product itself. The Malaysian pattern suggests that warmth is becoming a premium layer rather than a shared baseline.

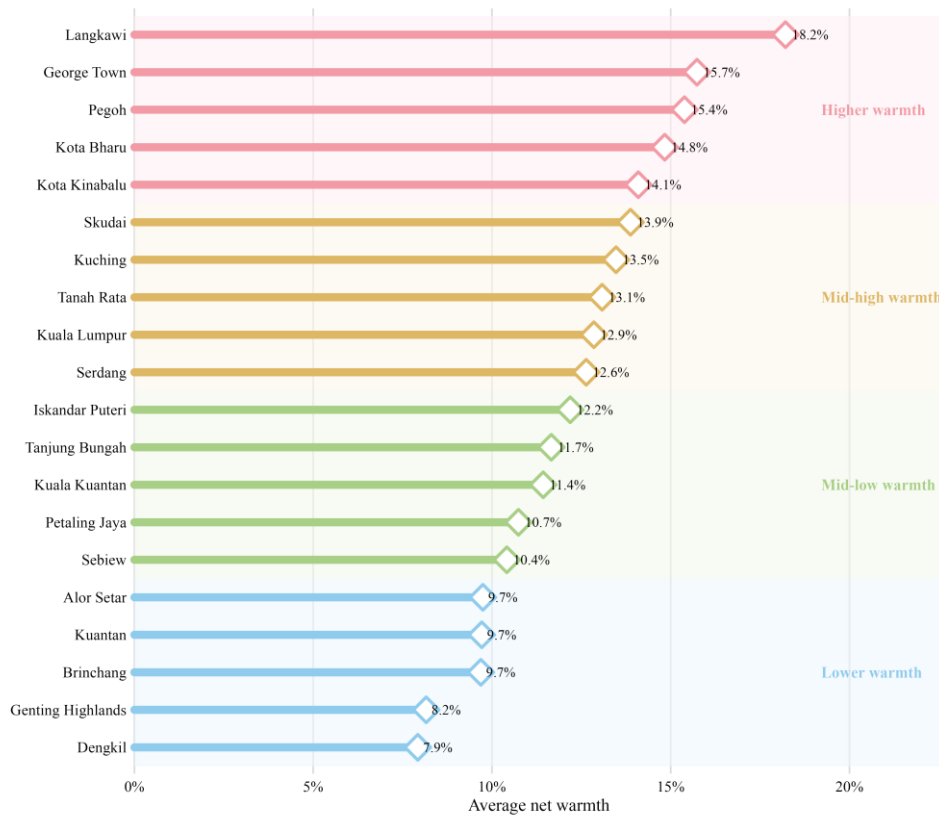
The sample structure sharpens this concern. Four-star hotels account for 42.8% of the review corpus, and five-star hotels account for 26.4%, while 1–2 star hotels account for only 5.2%. This distribution is partly a platform and review-availability issue. It also points to a wider visibility problem: lower-end service conditions are less visible in large platform data. A national tourism campaign, however, cannot be carried only by premium hotels. It will pass through transit hotels, mid-market chains, budget properties, family stays, and crowded tourism corridors. If warmth is priced into the upper segment, Visit Malaysia 2026 inherits a structural temperature gap.

## 4.3. Destination unevenness exposes service fatigue

The destination map in Figure 2 does not produce a smooth national service pattern. Some destinations sit comfortably above the average, while others fall below it. The lower-warmth cases are not simply “bad places” on a chart. They often resemble locations where service may become transactional: transit-linked areas, high-volume corridors, or mass-tourism nodes. A place can process many guests and still fail to make them feel received.

This is where emotional labour theory gives the result a sharper reading. Hochschild (1983) treats emotional display as work, not personality. Rafaeli and Sutton (1987) and Pugh (2001) also show that employee emotional display is part of the service encounter and can shape customer affect. In hotels, these displays are repeated under pressure. Reception staff, housekeeping teams, and service agents are expected to remain pleasant across long shifts, crowding, complaints, and unpredictable requests.

Figure 2: Destination-Level Differences in Frontline Warmth



**Note:** Values report average net warmth by destination. Destinations are grouped visually into higher, mid-high, mid-low, and lower warmth bands.

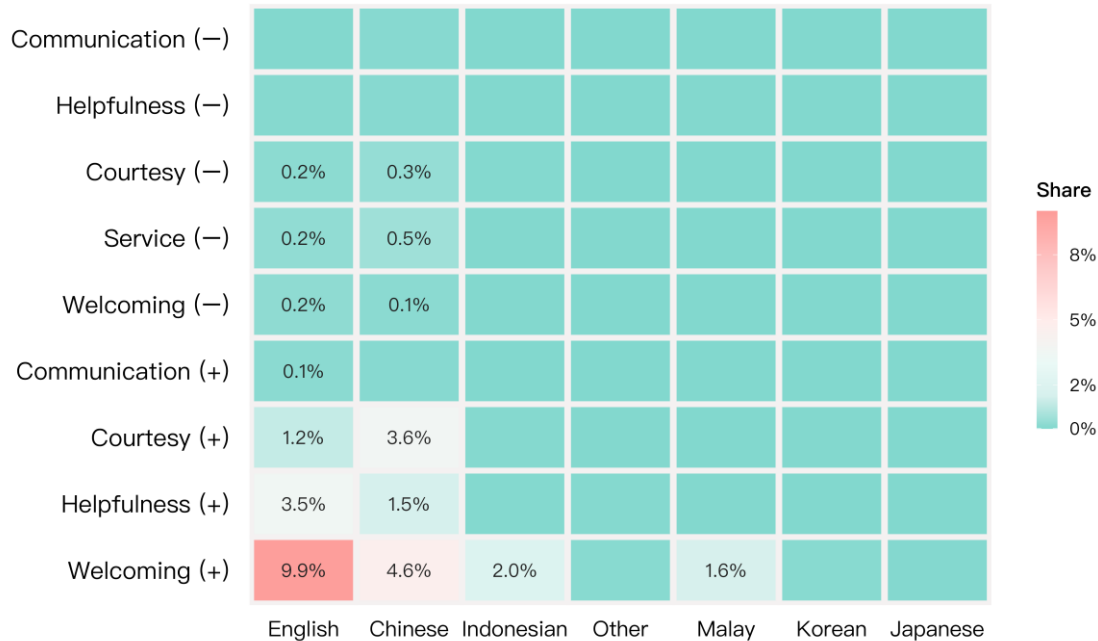
A colder destination signal may therefore expose service fatigue rather than individual hostility. Hospitality research has linked emotional labour, difficult customer encounters, emotional exhaustion, and service outcomes (Simillidou et al., 2020). Work on service climate and frontline performance also suggests that employees do not deliver service quality in a vacuum; organisational support, role clarity, and internal conditions matter. Put plainly, a tired system may still function. It may not feel warm. More visitors do not only test room supply or transport flow. They test the emotional capacity of the frontline.

#### 4.4. Language markets read warmth through different service grammars

The language heatmap in Figure 3 makes the cultural filtering of warmth visible. English reviews form the largest language group, accounting for 63.8% of the sample, while Chinese reviews account for 24.1%. This distribution matters because the two largest language markets do not interpret warmth through the same service cues. English reviews express warmth most strongly through welcoming cues, especially visible friendliness and approachability. Chinese reviews show a lower welcoming share but a relatively stronger emphasis on courtesy and service attitude. Rather than suggesting

that one language group is easier or harder to satisfy, this pattern shows that warmth is evaluated through different service grammars.

Figure 3: Language-Market Differences in Frontline Warmth Dimensions



**Note:** Values represent the share of reviews within each language group containing the corresponding warmth-related cue. Language groups are based on standardised platform language labels.

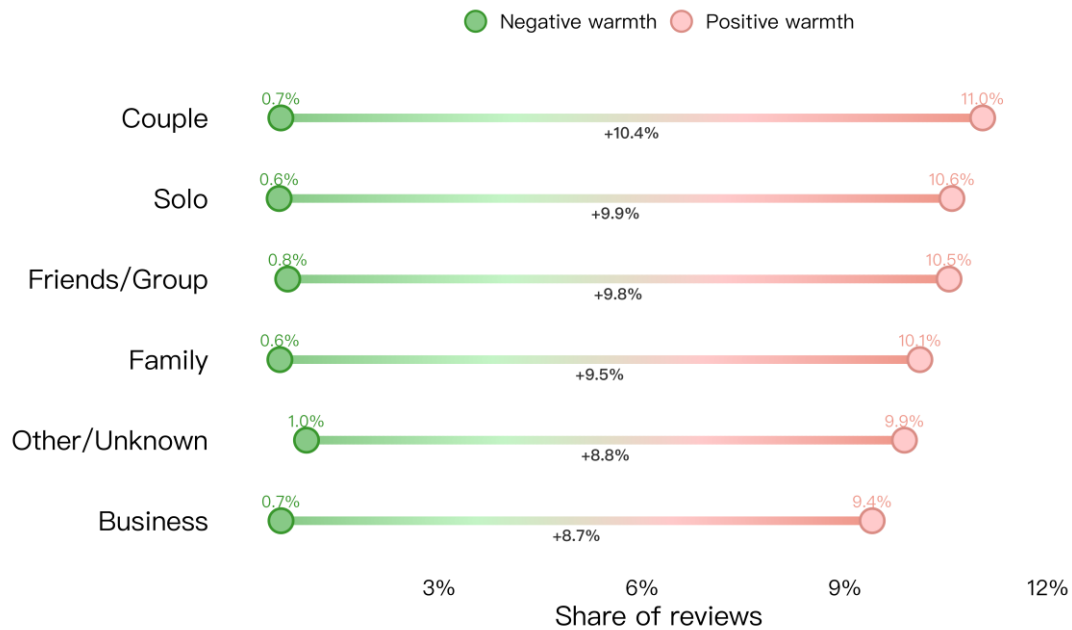
For English-language reviewers, warmth seems closer to spontaneous friendliness: friendly, welcoming, kind, warm, nice. For Chinese-language reviewers, warmth is more tied to disciplined courtesy: attitude, respect, politeness, and proper conduct. Cross-cultural tourism and service research has long warned that guests interpret service encounters through different norms (Patterson et al., 2006). Studies of Chinese outbound tourists also point to the importance of respect, practical assistance, and service attitude in hospitality evaluation (Li et al., 2011). This is not a cultural ranking. It is a warning that service meanings do not travel untouched across languages.

These findings carry a clear practical implication. Language is not only a communication tool; it is an expectation filter. A standardised smile script may resonate with some markets but fail to register in others. Research on intercultural service encounters and multilingual tourism points to the same alignment problem: mismatched service cues can turn apparently adequate service into a weak experience. The bilingual lexicon used in this study reflects this distinction. English detection relies strongly on staff-proximity expressions, while Chinese detection also captures compact service-attitude phrases such as 服务热情, 服务态度好, 态度差, 前台冷漠, and 沟通不畅. A multilingual destination cannot treat warmth as one universal script.

#### 4.5. Travel purpose changes the emotional register

The travel-purpose comparison in Figure 4 adds a quieter but useful layer. Couples record the highest positive warmth share and the strongest net warmth gap, followed by solo travellers and friends or groups. Business travellers sit at the lower end. The differences are not dramatic, but they are consistent.

Figure 4: Positive and Negative Warmth by Travel Purpose



**Note:** Values report the share of reviews containing positive or negative warmth cues within each travel-purpose group. The labelled gap represents positive warmth minus negative warmth.

This pattern makes sense if service experience is read through travel situation. Business stays are often shorter and more functional. Guests may prioritise speed, location, and frictionless check-in. Leisure guests may be more open to staff tone, welcome, and small acts of help. Customer-experience research has shown that value depends on situation, journey stage, and interaction context, not only the provider's service attributes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Work on memorable tourism experiences also suggests that emotional and social cues shape what visitors carry away from a trip (Kim et al., 2012).

The result does not mean that business travel needs less warmth. It means the emotional register is different. In business stays, competence may be more visible. In leisure stays, warmth may have more room to be noticed. A single hotel-wide service score can therefore hide the difference between a frictionless stay and a felt stay.

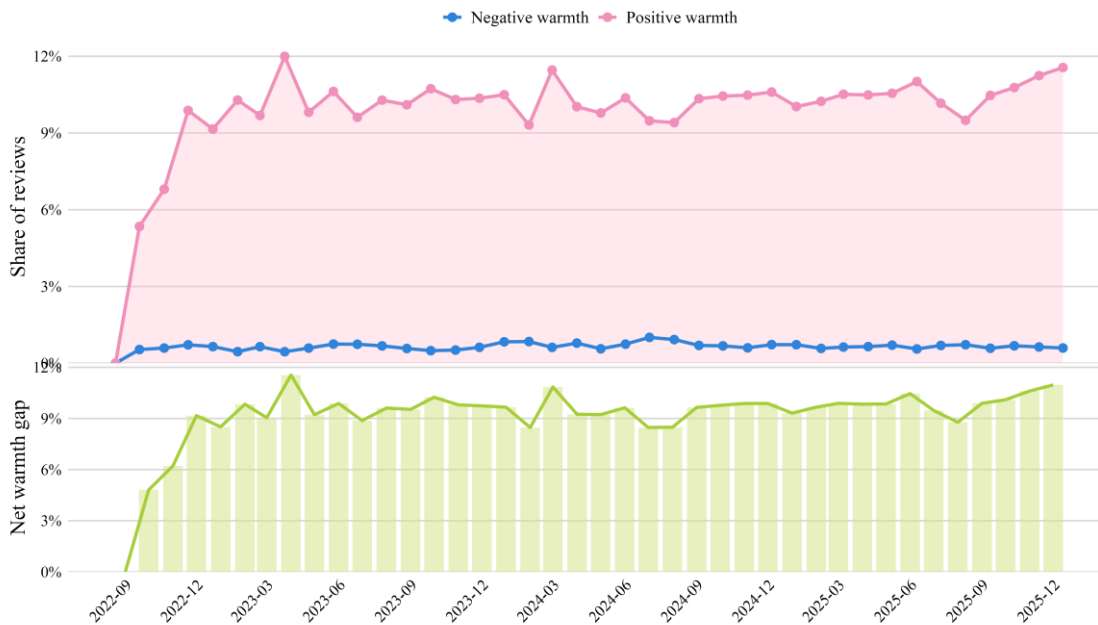
#### 4.6. Monthly patterns show monitoring potential

The monthly profile in Figure 5 suggests that warmth is not a one-month anomaly. Positive warmth rises after the early part of the observation window and then remains mostly within a stable band, while negative warmth stays low. The net warmth gap closely follows positive warmth, which is expected because negative warmth is rare. Month-by-month fluctuations should not be over-read. Platform coverage, review volume, and post-pandemic recovery may all affect the early pattern.

Still, the signal is stable enough to monitor. Online reviews have long been treated as electronic word of mouth and managerial feedback (O'Connor, 2010). Smart tourism research also argues that digital traces can support more responsive tourism intelligence (Mariani et al., 2018). Work on hospitality analytics makes a similar point: digital guest feedback becomes useful when it is translated into managerial signals rather than left as

raw text (Phillips et al., 2017). The present study narrows that logic. Warmth can be monitored not as general sentiment, but as a soft-service indicator.

Figure 5: Monthly Trend of Review-Derived Frontline Warmth



**Note:** Monthly values are calculated by stay month. Net warmth gap is calculated as positive warmth minus negative warmth.

For Visit Malaysia 2026, such monitoring is practical. A national campaign should not wait for a post-event survey to discover that service warmth has thinned under demand pressure. Review text cannot replace field audits, but it can send earlier signals. That is the value of making warmth measurable.

#### 4.7. Warmth carries rating relevance beyond competence

Table 4 validates the main distinction between warmth and competence. In Panel A, competence-related praise is positively associated with net warmth, with a coefficient of about 0.205 in the fuller specifications. This is sensible. Good service execution and warm descriptions often travel together. Longer reviews also show more warmth, probably because guests have more space to describe service encounters.

Table 4: Determinants and Rating Implications of Frontline Warmth

Panel A. Determinants of Net Warmth			
Variable	A1	A2	A3
Constant	0.104*** (0.003)	-0.073*** (0.005)	
Competence-related praise		0.205*** (0.006)	0.205*** (0.006)
Log(1 + review length)		0.037*** (0.001)	0.037*** (0.001)
1-2 star	-0.007 (0.005)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.006)

<b>Panel A. Determinants of Net Warmth</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>A3</b>
3 star	-0.008** (0.003)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.003)
5 star	0.014*** (0.003)	0.010*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Chinese	-0.045*** (0.002)	-0.016*** (0.002)	-0.021*** (0.002)
Indonesian	-0.097*** (0.002)	-0.083*** (0.002)	-0.083*** (0.002)
Malay	-0.101*** (0.003)	-0.090*** (0.002)	-0.089*** (0.003)
Japanese	-0.124*** (0.002)	-0.108*** (0.002)	-0.110*** (0.002)
Korean	-0.122*** (0.002)	-0.103*** (0.002)	-0.106*** (0.002)
Other languages	-0.121*** (0.002)	-0.118*** (0.002)	-0.122*** (0.002)
Couple	0.020*** (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)
Family	0.014*** (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Friends/Group	0.021*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.002)
Solo	0.024*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.003)
Other/Unknown	0.011** (0.005)	0.005 (0.005)	0.005 (0.004)
Observations	350,557	350,557	350,557
R-squared	0.015	0.040	0.042
Adj. R-squared	0.015	0.040	0.042
RMSE	0.310	0.306	0.306

<b>Panel B. Rating Implications of Warmth</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>B1</b>	<b>B2</b>	<b>B3</b>
Constant	4.250*** (0.010)	5.252*** (0.021)	
Net warmth gap	0.404*** (0.009)	0.464*** (0.009)	0.455*** (0.009)
Competence-related praise	0.059*** (0.010)	0.222*** (0.010)	0.221*** (0.010)
Log(1 + review length)		-0.226*** (0.004)	-0.227*** (0.004)
1-2 star		-0.165*** (0.036)	-0.195*** (0.039)
3 star		-0.169*** (0.023)	-0.184*** (0.025)
5 star		0.187*** (0.022)	0.176*** (0.022)
Chinese		-0.208*** (0.017)	-0.239*** (0.014)
Indonesian		0.223*** (0.011)	0.238*** (0.009)

Panel A. Determinants of Net Warmth			
Variable	A1	A2	A3
Malay		0.071*** (0.017)	0.094*** (0.014)
Japanese		-0.158*** (0.026)	-0.182*** (0.025)
Korean		-0.106*** (0.025)	-0.150*** (0.024)
Other languages		0.143*** (0.017)	0.112*** (0.015)
Couple		0.083*** (0.009)	0.085*** (0.007)
Family		0.094*** (0.009)	0.104*** (0.008)
Friends/Group		0.091*** (0.011)	0.090*** (0.009)
Solo		0.053*** (0.011)	0.051*** (0.010)
Other/Unknown		-0.143*** (0.035)	-0.138*** (0.033)
Observations	350,557	350,557	350,557
R-squared	0.021	0.089	0.101
Adj. R-squared	0.021	0.089	0.100
RMSE	0.879	0.848	0.842

**Note:** Clustered standard errors at the hotel level are reported in parentheses. Reference categories are 4-star hotels, English-language reviews, and business travel. Panel A uses net warmth gap as the dependent variable. Panel B uses rating as the dependent variable. City and month fixed effects are included in the fullest specifications. \*  $p < .10$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

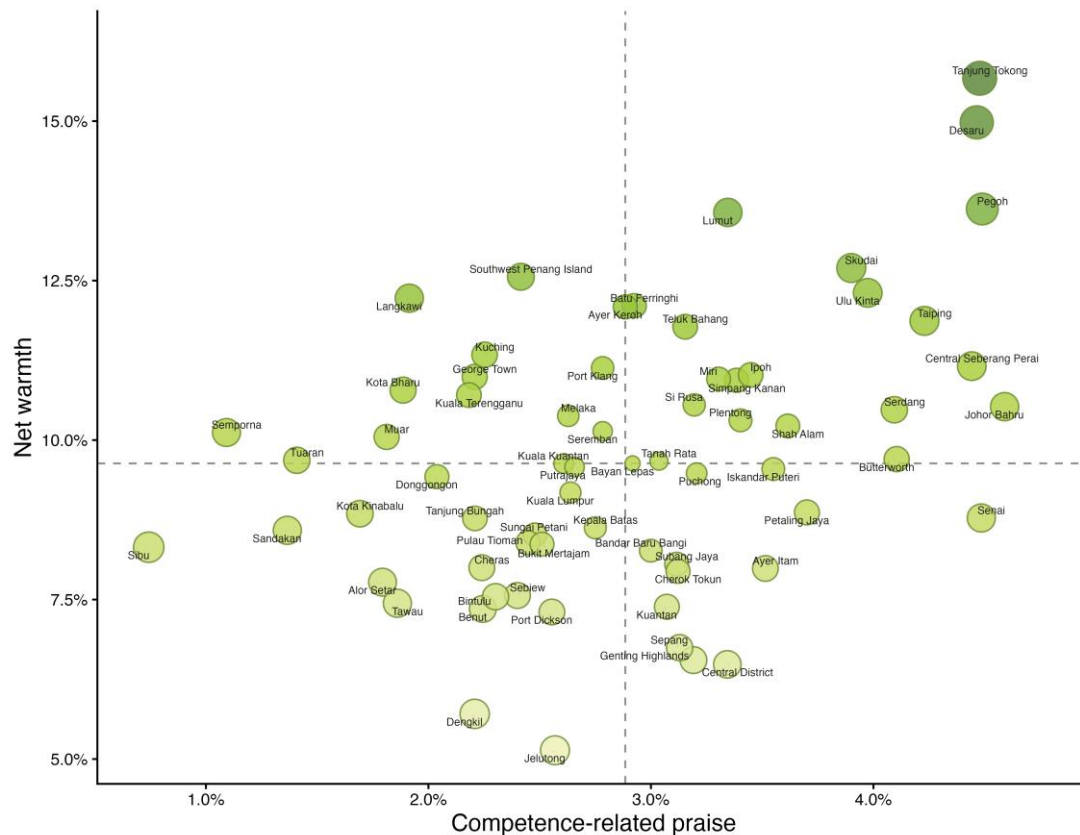
Panel B is the real test. In the fully adjusted rating model in Table 4, net warmth gap has a coefficient of 0.455, while competence-related praise has a coefficient of 0.221. Both are statistically significant. The size difference is the point. What is striking here is not merely the presence of warmth, but its disproportionate rating relevance. At 0.455, the warmth premium is roughly double that of operational competence. Guests reward being treated well, not only being processed efficiently.

Figure 6 places this relationship visually. Destinations with stronger competence-related praise do not always show equally strong net warmth. This matters because hotel managers often invest in what can be standardised: rooms, facilities, SOPs, platforms, speed, and recovery scripts. Those things matter. But service-dominant logic argues that value is co-created in use and interaction rather than delivered as a finished product (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Service encounter research reaches the same conclusion from another angle: interpersonal contact can determine whether a service feels merely completed or genuinely valued. The Malaysian data add a direct empirical edge. Knowing how to do the job is not the same as making guests feel recognised while the job is done.

The language coefficients in the rating models should be read carefully. Chinese reviews show lower adjusted ratings relative to English reviews, while Indonesian and Malay reviews show positive coefficients. These differences may reflect expectation standards, review norms, platform use, traveller mix, or destination choice. They should not be

turned into cultural stereotypes. They do, however, reinforce the need for language-sensitive analytics. A single sentiment score is too blunt for multilingual hospitality.

Figure 6: Destination-Level Alignment between Frontline Warmth and Competence-Related Praise



**Note:** Each point represents a destination-level average. Net warmth captures review-derived frontline warmth, while competence-related praise captures text-derived references to efficient, professional, smooth, or problem-solving service.

#### 4.8. Soft-service readiness is the real policy issue

The combined results move the paper beyond technical review mining. Positive warmth is measurable but scarce. Communication warmth is almost invisible. Premium hotels perform better, yet do not make warmth routine. Destinations vary. Language markets read warmth differently. Travel purposes shift the emotional register. Most importantly, warmth has stronger rating relevance than competence-related praise.

This pattern matters because Visit Malaysia 2026 cannot be judged only through arrivals, receipts, hotel supply, or promotional visibility. Those indicators are necessary, but they do not tell us whether visitors feel welcomed in ordinary encounters. Tourism Malaysia (2025) gives the campaign its scale; the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 gives it a service-culture benchmark (MOTAC, 2020). The review data show why that benchmark matters. Growth without warmth risks becoming a traffic achievement rather than a hospitality achievement.

The practical implication is not simply another call to “train staff better”. Training helps, but the results point to a wider service system. Weak warmth may reflect workload, staffing pressure, employee recovery, multilingual communication, and supervision. Human-resource research in hospitality similarly shows that employee involvement,

service climate, and supportive practices affect service-oriented behaviour (Bavik, 2020). A frontline worker close to emotional exhaustion can still complete the transaction. The review may not remember that worker warmly.

For MOTAC, Tourism Malaysia, destination managers, and hotel operators, review-based warmth monitoring could become a low-cost soft-service monitoring tool. It would not replace visitor surveys or field audits. It would complement them by making the emotional side of service visible at scale. The point is sharper than a dashboard, though. A tired smile cannot sustain a national tourism campaign. If Malaysia wants Visit Malaysia 2026 to mean more than a one-year surge in traffic, emotional labour has to be treated as tourism infrastructure. Roads, rooms, airports, and platforms bring visitors in. Warmth helps decide whether Malaysia is remembered as merely efficient or genuinely hospitable.

## 5. Conclusion

This study began from a practical discomfort. Malaysia is preparing for Visit Malaysia 2026 with large arrival and revenue ambitions, yet the emotional quality of everyday hotel service remains difficult to see in official tourism indicators. Rooms can be counted. Campaigns can be funded. Visitor flows can be projected. Warmth is harder to count, but the evidence in this paper suggests that it is a scarce service resource rather than a routine condition of the hotel encounter. This scarcity is not a small stylistic issue. If most reviews do not explicitly describe being welcomed, helped, respected, or clearly attended to, then hospitality cannot be assumed as a system-wide capacity. It appears unevenly, and in some settings too thinly, to carry the emotional promise attached to national tourism growth.

The contribution of the paper is threefold, but it works as one argument. Conceptually, it separates frontline warmth from general satisfaction and operational competence. Review ratings, sentiment, topics, and complaint categories remain useful, but they can flatten the difference between getting the job done and making guests feel recognised. Empirically, the study shows that warmth is scarce, uneven, and culturally filtered across hotel classification, destination, travel purpose, and language market. English-language reviews tend to register warmth through welcoming and approachability, while Chinese-language reviews place greater relative weight on courtesy and service attitude, extending cross-cultural service research into actual review language. Methodologically, the bilingual lexicon demonstrates that review analytics can be used as an interpretable diagnostic tool, not merely as a black-box sentiment device. Its value lies in making a soft-service problem visible at scale.

The strongest empirical message is the rating relevance of warmth. The association between net warmth and guest rating is effectively double that of competence-related praise. That difference challenges a hardware-centred view of hotel competitiveness. Standard operating procedures, digital systems, room upgrades, and faster service recovery may improve functional delivery, but they do not automatically create the feeling of being welcomed. If managers invest mainly in what can be standardised, they may be improving the easier part of service while leaving the more valuable interpersonal layer underdeveloped. Service-dominant logic has long argued that value is co-created through use and interaction rather than delivered as a finished product. The present study gives that argument a Malaysian tourism setting. Guests reward being treated well, not only being processed efficiently.

The policy implication is not simply to train staff to smile more. That would miss the point. Weak warmth may reflect staffing pressure, emotional exhaustion, multilingual communication gaps, and service fatigue. Emotional labour is work, not personality. The job demands–resources perspective also reminds us that service performance depends on whether workers have enough organisational resources to absorb emotional and workload demands. If frontline staff are expected to carry rising visitor flows while maintaining friendliness, courtesy, and patience, then service culture cannot be separated from labour conditions. Tourism Malaysia (2025) gives Visit Malaysia 2026 its scale, while the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030 gives it a service-culture benchmark (MOTAC, 2020). The review evidence suggests that this benchmark needs to be managed deliberately, not treated as a slogan.

For hotel operators, warmth should be monitored separately from competence. A hotel may solve problems quickly and still leave little emotional trace. It may maintain good ratings and still fail to generate a sense of welcome. Review-based warmth monitoring can therefore complement satisfaction scores, especially in multilingual markets where friendliness, courtesy, explanation, and respect are not read in the same way. For policymakers and destination managers, the same logic applies at destination level. Soft-service readiness should be tracked alongside rooms, routes, promotional reach, and visitor volume. Places that move tourists efficiently but feel emotionally tired are not fully ready.

The study has limits. Ctrip provides a large multilingual review corpus, but it remains a platform-specific view rather than a complete national picture of Malaysian hotel guests. The sample is also uneven across hotel classifications, with stronger visibility for four- and five-star properties than for lower-star hotels. The lexicon captures explicit warmth cues and may miss irony, indirect praise, subtle dissatisfaction, or warmth expressed without target terms. The models show association under controls; they do not prove that warmth mechanically causes higher ratings.

Future research should not only add more platforms for the sake of a larger dataset. Cross-platform comparison would be useful if it tests whether the same scarcity of warmth appears on Booking.com, Agoda, Google Reviews, TripAdvisor, or domestic Malaysian platforms. Staff-side research is even more important. Reviews reveal where warmth appears thin, but they cannot fully explain workload, staffing conditions, emotional exhaustion, or service climate behind the counter. Recent work on hospitality employee well-being points to the need to connect stressors, resources, and organisational practices more directly with service outcomes. Methodologically, large language models may help detect subtler forms of warmth, but they should be used with transparent validation rather than as a substitute for theory-led measurement. Recent text-analysis reviews in tourism and hospitality make the same warning in another form: more sophisticated text methods are useful only when they sharpen the research question rather than bury it under technical display.

The conclusion is not that Malaysian hotels lack hospitality. The evidence says something more precise. Warmth exists, but it is scarce, uneven, culturally filtered, and not yet routine. Efficiency can move guests through a service system, but it cannot by itself carry the emotional promise of a national tourism campaign. A tired smile cannot sustain a national tourism campaign. Soft-service readiness has to be built with the same seriousness as rooms, routes, and promotion.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was based on secondary online hotel review data and did not involve direct recruitment, intervention, or interaction with human participants. The analysis used anonymised review-level information, and no personally identifiable information was reported. Therefore, formal ethics approval and informed consent were not applicable.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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