Factors Influencing Customers Patronizing Mamak Restaurants – A Survey in Shah Alam

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ABSTRACT
Malaysia is one of the Asian countries with a multi ethnic population. Its population is made of major ethnic groups such as native Malays, Chinese and Indian besides other small ethnic groups. These groups have brought up a magnificent blend of culture in foods, traditions, and others that form a unique Malaysian identity. In foodservice industry, this uniqueness has vitalized the Malaysia economy. Today, the foodservice industry is one of the Malaysia major revenue. As a progressing nation, Malaysia is moving fast towards the trends in this industry especially in the restaurant business, the sub sector of the foodservice industry. The restaurant sector is one of the fastest growing sectors within the context of the Malaysia foodservice economy. Various scenes of restaurant business boost cities and towns throughout Malaysia. Panoramic views of restaurants’ patrons are seen surfing their time from as basic as eating to dining, chatting, mingling around, watching people and up to discussing on serious matters. Here, restaurant is more than just a place to eat. One of the most popular ethnic based restaurants in Malaysia is mamak restaurant. Mamak restaurant is observed continue to flourish and expand over the period. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the attributes that act as the influencing factors, which influence customers’ decision to patronize mamak restaurants. 250 individuals from six (6) major areas in Shah Alam were identified and participated in the survey study. Results of this study show that business operation hour as the most influencing factor. This attribute is followed by location, socialize reasons, parking space, service, ambience, items variations, taste, crowd, pricing, standard hygiene and items presentation.

Keywords: Multi- culture, Mamak restaurant, influencing factors, Shah Alam.

INTRODUCTION
It is widely acknowledged that the tourism industry in Malaysia is moving positively towards healthy economic growth. The unique blend of the natural beauty and a rich diversity of culture, traditions, history, food and lifestyles of the various ethnic groups have evolved into exotic and unique Malaysia special identity presented an appealing theme to promote tourism. In addition, the Malaysian government has identified tourism industry as a high priority growth sector and is aggressively promoting Malaysia worldwide (Saeed, Josiam and Ismail, 2000). From time to time, new and unique culinary inventions are introduced adding more items in the menu to stimulate the eating habits and to provide more choices in the menu list. Hence, many factors have affected the growth of foodservice industry such as its growth and rising status, better socioeconomic conditions, demographic shifts, changing food habits and also the desire of the people. As a modern and developing nation, Malaysia is rapidly moving fast towards inline with the trends in the foodservice industry as other developed and developing nations around the globe. And as lifestyles changes due to modernization and development, more people are eating out. In response to this phenomenon, the local foodservice industry has developed more new food outlets and restaurants around us.

Currently the foodservice industry in Malaysia is moving positively as compared to the previous years. Restaurant business is seen as one of the most developing foodservice sectors in Malaysia. Various scenes of restaurant business boost cities and towns throughout the region. Panoramic views of restaurants’ patrons are seen surfing their time from as basic as eating to
dining, chatting, mingling around, watching people and up to discussing on serious matters. Thus, a foodservice establishment seems to function more than just a place to eat.

Malaysia foodservice industry is also made up of various types of ethnic based restaurants. Ethnic based restaurants in Malaysia are made up of either local based ethnic group such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Punjab, Mamak, etc. to foreign based ethnic group that such as Japan, Irish, German, French, etc. As the foodservice industry grows, so does the number and size of ethnic based restaurants. Choices of restaurants are unlimited with different concepts and identities. One of the most popular choices of foodservice outlets in Malaysia, namely the ethnic based restaurant is the mamak restaurant. Once described ‘mamak’, the first impression is the Indian Muslims identity. Mamak is a term used in Malaysia to describe a person from the origin of India, precisely a person that is an Indian Muslim. They are synonymous with the top of the lists are the favourite teh tarik, various types of roti canai, capati and naan indulge in curry and legume or dhall based gravy and other impressive culinary inventions. Besides the food, other attributes also contribute to the increase in popularity of these ethnic restaurants such as service, business hours, ambience, etc. They are well accepted by the local and foreigners as they provide unique differences in the culinary taste, service, ambience, design, etc.

**NEED FOR THE STUDY**

Hing, McCabe, Lewis and Leiper (1998) cited that many regions have witnessed a boom in ethnic restaurants. While driven in part by changing consumer tastes, changes in ethnic mixes of local populations have been a more important influence.

In Malaysia, choices of restaurants are unlimited with different concepts and identities. One of the most popular choices of foodservice outlets that are made of ethnic based restaurants is known as mamak restaurants.

According to written history, from the beginning of the 18th century, Tamil Muslims traders or Chulias had started settling in Kedah. During the British colonialism, they were also called Malayalee Indian as most of them came from Malayalee, India. Narayanan (2001:5) had described that according to Hussain, (1990:3), the Indian Tamil Muslims who was called Chulia, worked as shopkeepers or coolies. In later years, the Chulias grew in number and were assimilated into the local population through marriage to form the core of the Malays in Georgetown or the Jawi Pekan.

Early evidence made it clears that the early Malayalee Indian immigrants have contributed directly and significantly to the physical development of Penang and its commerce, particularly during the island’s formative years. By assimilating into the local Malay population, Malayalee Muslims contributed indirectly to the enrichment of local culture and as well as religion. They are well known for their involvement in commercial business majoring in various discipline such traders, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, etc. They have branched out into other professions like moneychangers or licensed moneylenders. Some even own bread companies, bookstores catering and foodservice businesses. Narayanan (2001:9) cites as described by Khoo (1993), the entrepreneurship skills have been with the Indian Muslims since they have settled to Tanah Melayu (a name given to Malaysia before Malaya). In Malaysia, these groups of Indian Muslims are recognized and popularly known under the identity of mamak. One of the most significant identities of the mamak is their involvement in the well known local ethnic restaurant known as mamak restaurants. Although no written evidence states on the history of mamak restaurants but through out digging into the roots of the Indian Muslim and its activities for centuries, it is believed that the mamak restaurant began in Penang. However, as the years go by, the mamaks had traveled and settled to various places in Malaysia and started their various commercial activities. Therefore we may find mamak restaurants in most places throughout the countries in Malaysia.
Mamak restaurants are one of the well-known and popular ethnic based restaurants in Malaysia. This may be observed through pack patronage in these restaurants at most of the time. Recognition of its popularity is gained through observation, which is part of this research process. There are assumptions made in reasoning why customers always pack at the mamak restaurants. The purpose of this study is to determine the most important factors that influence customers to patron to mamak restaurants. The findings of this study are important as we may see that many mamak restaurants are mushrooming in the cities. However, this study is the preliminary study on this ethnic based restaurant, focusing primarily on the influencing factors that attract customers to the mamak restaurants in the scope of selected areas in the Shah Alam, the capital city of Selangor.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As mentioned earlier, there have been no specific research treats to highlight the major reasoning why mamak restaurants are always full of customers during the day or night, in wherever part of the cities most of the time. This research is based to dig out the influencing factors that will be put forward in this study as an approach to conceptualize the underpinning rational behind the issue of relevancy. As Soriano (2000) cite that knowing what the customers want and what makes them come back is important for the restaurant sector. One way to find out is to ask the customers.

Objectives

This research has three main objectives, which are:

1. To identify the most important factor that influence customers to patronize to mamak restaurants.
2. To rank other influencing factors according to customers’ opinions.
3. To obtain customers’ general perception towards mamak restaurants.
4. The findings may be used for other entrepreneurs of ethnic based restaurants to flourish their business.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire

In this study the researcher formatted structure questionnaire to be given to the respondents. The data for this research was collected through the use survey questionnaire, which was given to patrons of selected areas of mamak restaurants in the Shah Alam, Selangor. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review.

The questionnaire was developed for the purpose of collecting data on the factors that influence the decision of patrons to dine at selected mamak restaurants in Shah Alam areas. The survey comprised five parts:

a) Section A – demographic data
b) Section B – location
c) Section C – frequency – this section analyzes the patronizing frequency of respondent to mamak restaurants.
d) Section D – Influencing factors – which using a 5 point Likert scale. The points on the Likert scale were: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Slightly Agree = 3, Agree = 4, Very Agree = 5
e) Section E – function – using the ranking scale from one to four to determine the function of mamak restaurants from the customers’ views.
f) Section F – Open ended question – comments on mamak restaurant in general.
Pilot Test
A pilot test was conducted to test for reliability and consumer acceptance at one of the mamak restaurants at Section 3, Shah Alam and the faculty members of Hotel Management and Tourism. Upon completion of the pilot study, the survey was updated and improved.

Data Collection
From the population of Shah Alam areas, 6 areas had been selected. The selected areas of mamak restaurants are Section 3, 7, 9, 18, 19 and 20. These mamak restaurants were selected because of the crowds and location. It was decided to distribute 50 set questionnaire from each restaurant according to the section in Shah Alam areas.

The surveys were conducted during the lunch, afternoon tea and dinner services, at the restaurants. Restaurant patrons were approached by the researcher, requested to complete the survey, and told that their individual responses were anonymous and confidential.

A total of 250 set of questionnaire were distributed and only 230 completed responses were obtained. A 20 set of questionnaire were rendered unusable, due to incomplete or insufficient responses. The usable responses of 230 are considered adequate for arriving at statistically significant results.

Data Analysis
SPPS program will be used to produce frequency, means, and standard deviation to perform descriptive statistic analysis. From here charts and tables score will be obtained. However the open ended answers will be gathered and summarized to the nearest solution.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The result will be analyzed by using the SPSS system. The open-ended questions will be summarizing to the nearest solution. To address the objective of the study, respondents were asked to score on the Likert scale on the important of each characteristic given when deciding to dine at the mamak restaurants. Findings are presented in Tables and discussed in the context of the literature, which mention earlier. Statistical findings are supported by discussions of the responses from open-ended questions on the survey. The findings are presented below in Table and Figure. It also illustrates the results in form of charts to make it more clearly to elaborate and understand.

Section A - Demographics
This section concerns on the respondent’s demography factors that dominate the decision making in patronizing mamak restaurant which includes gender, race, age, status, average salary per month, average spending food per day and average spending food per week.

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, while 230 usable responses were obtained. Out of these 70.4% respondents were male and 29.6% respondents were female. The average respondent was in the 18 – 35 age group. Almost ¾ of respondents were single status, which carry 62.1%.

Section B – Location
This section analyzes factors concerned with distance and location that influence the decisions to patronize mamak restaurant. The location and distance is a factor that influences customers to patronize mamak restaurants. As a result 78.3% from the respondent came from less than 5 km distance. The nearest distances play an important factor to influences customers to go at mamak restaurant.
Table 1: The distance between customers’ favourite mamak restaurant(s) in Shah Alam from their work place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Valid Per cent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 km</td>
<td>78.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 5.01-10 km</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 10.01-15 km</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 15.01-20 km</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 km and above</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: The distance between customers’ favourite mamak restaurant(s) in Shah Alam from their work place.

Section C – Frequency

This section analyzes the patronizing frequency of respondent to mamak restaurants. The above chart shows, 32% of respondent when to dine at mamak restaurant between 2 to 3 times a week. Where as 23.7 % of respondent are more than 7 times patronize at mamak restaurant a week. This shows that how often the customer go to the mamak restaurants.

Table 2: How often the customer(s) dine at mamak restaurant(s) in Shah Alam per day

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Per cent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrice</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four (4) Times</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than four (4) times</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors Influencing Customers Patronizing Mamak Restaurants – A Survey in Shah Alam

Section D – Influencing Factors

This section analyzes the reasons that influence customer to patron to mamak restaurants. The respondents were asked to use Likert scale from each characteristic given. The results show in Table 3 and follow by Figure 3.

Table 3: Means of the influencing factors that make customers patronize to mamak restaurants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Means for Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business operation hours</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialize</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking space</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambience</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items variations</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowd</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pricing</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard hygiene</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items presentation</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors Influencing Customers Patronizing Mamak Restaurants – A Survey in Shah Alam

![Means of influencing factors]

Figure 3: Means of the influencing factors that make customers patronize to mamak restaurants

**Business Operation Hours as Influencing Factor.**
Business hours are very important to the customers. Some customers will have an early breakfast as well as dine until late supper. The only ethnic restaurant that opens as early dawn until wee hours is the mamak restaurant. Some of the mamak restaurants even operate for 24 hours. In fact majority of the mamak restaurants offer longer business operation hours than other restaurants in town. As the community in Shah Alam is not only those who are working but the population is also made up of varsities students. This population prefer to patron to mamak restaurants as it opens for longer hours. The results show that this factor becomes the most priority to the customers in patronizing to mamak restaurants.

**Location and Parking Space as Influencing Factor**
Location and parking space play an important role to customer. An easy assesses of the location and parking space will allow customer to go to the restaurant. Strategic location also influences customers to patron to the restaurants. Accessibility of a restaurant is the strength to the business. Most of the mamak restaurants in Shah Alam are situated in strategic places.

**Socializing as Influencing Factor**
As Ingram (1999) defines hospitality as the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests or strangers. Whether giving or receiving, the hospitality industry has touched the lives of everyone and has developed, over time from a domestic to a commercial activity. In Malaysia restaurants scenario, mamak restaurants are often used more than just a place to dine or eat. The restaurants are often used as a place for socializing or discussion. Due to long business operation hours, most customers take the opportunity to hang out with friends at their favourite mamak restaurants. The results also shows that socialize become customers’ priority that influence them to go to mamak restaurants.

**Service as Influencing Factor**
A key factor that influences customers is customer service. The measurement of service quality is an important link in the cycle of service provision, but it involves assessing customer’s thoughts and feelings. Many customers choose to eat at mamak restaurants, based on the level of quick customer service by the restaurateurs. This aspect of customer service encompasses such as factors as the level responsiveness, friendliness, reliability, and promptness of employees. Shane (1997) emphasizes that the main function, which an organization’s members must performs, is the delivery of quality services to its customers. Being able to provide
services, which customers prefer, is obviously a starting point for providing customer satisfaction.

Moreover, Pedraja et al. (2001) elaborates that services are “experience”, and as such, they are more difficult to evaluate before their purchase. If the consumer has prior experience with the service offered by the restaurant, this will be a credible source of information comes is specific to one particular contact with the service.

**Ambience as Influencing Factor**

Atmosphere or ambience refers to internal environment of a restaurant. It is a fairly important decision factor when people go out to restaurant. Simple décor and comfortable ambience will attract more customers to their restaurants and give competitive edge. Dulen (1998) further explains that the importance of a comfortable atmosphere is increasing with time. Hing et al. (1998) restaurant design has also undergone subtle changes to reflect movement towards regular dining out. From the survey, respondents’ concerned on the ambience of mamak restaurants falls number five. The customers are more likely to dine at a simple décor rather than look to exclusive restaurant. Hing et al. (1998) comment that restaurant design has also undergone subtle changes to reflect movement towards regular dining out. Dining rooms are designed less to create a relaxed or romantic atmosphere conductive to conversation, but more for cleanliness, speed and to build a sense of “being where the action is”.

**Item Variations as Influencing Factor**

In discussing on the item varieties of the mamak restaurants, we are focusing on the list of items available in the menu that offered to customers. As it is known that menu is one of the important aspects for the success of any foodservice establishment. Perhaps it is arguably the soul of the restaurant. Khan (1991) defines that “menus are statements” of the food and beverage items provided by a foodservice establishment, primarily based on consumer needs and/or demands and designed to achieve organizational objectives”. Mooney (1994) and Kreck (1984) note that menu can be interpreted as list of product range that a restaurant offers and the same time it can be a piece of literature or display used to communicate the product range to the customer.

Basically, the mamak restaurant offer limited items in their menu such as teh tarik, roti canai, capati and few other dishes. The table above shows that the items variation does not play an important role to influence the customer to patron the mamak restaurant. As Mooney (1994) remarks “menu serves as a limit on what a foodservice operation is willing and able to prepare and serve”. Mooney further explains that what determines the content of the menu is, of course, operators’ perceptions about public taste. However, recently most of the mamak restaurants in Shah Alam have offer additional items in the menu. Malaysian favourite western and Thai cuisines are added in the list.

**Taste as Influencing Factor**

However, as far as taste is concerned it is a very subjective matter. Martens (1997) quoted that Bourdieu (1984) highlights in his research that there is argument that food tastes differ between occupational class groupings as well as between men and women. According to the findings, taste falls into number eight (8). This shows that taste is not really important as the main reason for customers to patronize mamak restaurants.

**Crowd as Influencing Factor**

According to Davies et al. (1995), the customers who come to a place of business can also form a large group of potential shoppers or crowd. The crowd will attract more customers to dine although the food is not delicious or the price is expensive. When there is a crowd, first impression of the customer is the food must be tasty or the service is good. These influence other customers to go to the mamak restaurants.
Pricing as Influencing Factor

Pedraja et al. (2001) price plays a fundamental role when deciding on a restaurant, then the price variable should be highlighted in the different information sources developed by the company and made variable to their potential customers. According to Josiam et al (1995), South Asians attached greater importance to “value for money” and “price”. Hence, the South Asians are more price-sensitive and they felt that Indian restaurants (inclusive mamak restaurants) were overcharging and serving small portions. Relatively, a customers’ perception towards value must be considered when establishing menu prices (Reid, 1983). Therefore, the concept of value for money is related to price. Although larger portions do not always equate better value in the minds of all consumers, larger portions do enhance perceived value for customers (Grindy, 1999). In the survey, the study finds out that the prices charged by mamak restaurants are higher as compared to other local ethnic based restaurants especially the malay restaurants.

Standard Hygiene as influencing factor.

The introduction of HACCP-type (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) and several hygiene management systems into the foodservice and hospitality industry by the government through its Ministry of Health are the examples of efforts that are required to be practice by food handlers and foodservice providers. However, as far as Malaysia is concerned the awareness of the importance to follow the food hygiene practices is still far from as it should be. Obviously we may witness the poor hygiene practice by them throughout the country. The result shows that the standard hygiene of mamak restaurants does not play an important role for them to dine. Research undertaken by Guerrier et al (1992) showed that managers and supervisors from the catering industry believe that food hygiene is significant only when something goes wrong. This shows that Malaysian peoples do not indicate food hygiene as a major factor when selecting an eating-place.

Items Presentation

The result shows that items presentation is the last priority to them. As we know that the presentation of menu items at mamak restaurants are simple but still the customers go to these restaurants. According to the survey, the customers do not really concerned on menu items presentation but they are rather concerned on the quantity and price charged by restaurateurs.

Table 4: Means of Importance of the Residents Dine at the Restaurant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Means for Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popular among Shah Alam Residents</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular among Shah Alam Nonresidents</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Report shows that population of the Shah Alam residents increase from 1991 - to 2003. Table 4 show that most of the patron who dine at mamak restaurants are from the Shah Alam residents. As the patron in Shah Alam includes different categories and levels that is higher, middle, low income and students.

Section E – Functions

In this section the respondent were asked to rank one to four the most priority functions of mamak restaurants at the categories listed as what they feel. Table 5 shows the result from the means and followed by the pie chart.
Table 5: Means of Function of Mamak Restaurants According to their Importance from Customers’ View

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Means for Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A place to relax mind</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place to fulfill your free time</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place to socialize with friends</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A place for dine</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above result shows that 27% of the respondents said that besides having a meal they also choose mamak restaurants as place to relax their minds. Then follows by 26% of the respondents patronize mamak restaurants as place to fulfill their free time. Then, mamak restaurants as a place for socializing is chosen by 25% of the respondents and lastly 22% of the respondents viewed mamak restaurants as priority for dining or having meal.

Section F – Comments from the Respondents

In this section the respondents were asked to give a comment on the mamak restaurants as what they felt. After gathered and summarizing the comments, the researchers find out that most of the respondents said that due to the fast service and longer business operation hours make the mamak restaurants become popular among customers. However some of the respondents emphasized mamak restaurants owners to be more concern on hygiene practice, not only on the food preparation but also on the premises inclusive the restaurants, rest rooms, and its surroundings. The respondents also suggested that the restaurateurs should train the staffs on the personal hygiene. According to Leach et al (2001), current research generally indicates that food safety is not a factor, which influences the public’s choice when selecting an eating establishment.

A research by Guerrier et al (1992) concluded that the managers in the catering industry deemed food hygiene significant only when something goes wrong. The results of this research raise the question whether managers in the catering sector might underestimate the significance that the public attaches to food safety.

Ingram (1999) highlights Buttle (1986) who defines the hospitality product as a set of those satisfactions and dissatisfactions that make up the hospitality “experience”. One major problem is that the customer judges satisfactions by means of a subjective frame of reference, which, because it is inconsistently and individually applied, presents hospitality operators with a problem. Although facilities may be specified according to established star rating criteria,
customer satisfaction is a function of the match between perceived expectations and actual provision.

Soriano (2002) explains that in restaurant business, knowing what the customers want and what makes them come back is important for the restaurant sector. One way to find out is to ask customers. The high rate of failure in the foodservice industry suggests that management may wish to seek attributes that are responsible for customers’ return business and financial success. Customers may have their own reasons for return patronage to any restaurant. They are constantly seeking quality, value and desirable environment away from the pressures of daily life. According to Zainul Arrifin (2002) the re-invention of mamak restaurants has resulted in it being widely accepted, both by the trendy set and families dining out. They fill the niche between the lower-end food stalls and the pricier joints.

While Malaysia is known for its food heaven, offering delicious food and quality service is not enough to attract and retain customers. Hence, restaurants need to function in a constant state of changes. To gain a competitive advantage in today’s market, restaurants must attempts to offer meals that offer good value in a favourable ambience. In addition to fulfilling the social need for fare outside the home, restaurateurs need to anticipate the expectations of consumers and assess those that would be most profitable in the future. Soriano (2000) comment that customers have their own reasons to want to return to any restaurant. They are constantly seeking quality, value and desirable environment away from the pressures of daily life.

REFERENCES


