Factors that Influence Guest Satisfaction with the Hospitality Establishments: Evidence from Hospitality Industry in Eastern Cape, South Africa

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The management of guests' satisfaction is imperative for the sustainability of hospitality establishments. The guests' satisfaction is a lifeblood of a thriving hospitality establishment such as the hotel, guest house, lodge and Bed and Breakfast to mention but a few. The purpose of this paper was to examine the influence of the five dimensional factors of service quality on guest expectations and experiences in hotels in Eastern Cape, South Africa. Furthermore, the paper sought to analyse the factors among the five dimensions that have a main role in driving overall guest expectations and experiences. A purposive sampling method was employed in the data collection process. Primary data was collected through interviews with hotel managers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) among factor was undertaken in order to analyse the five factors. The findings elucidate that tangibles, responsiveness and assurance play a significant role in driving guest expectations and experiences in the South African hotel industry. The paper further underscores that reliability and empathy are an integral part in providing memorable experience for the guests in hotels. Furthermore, service quality is one of the key aspects to guest expectations and experiences. Conversely, the tangible variable is deemed to be the most important factor driving guest expectations and experiences in the context of the South African hotel industry. It is evident from the findings of the paper improve guest expectations and experiences hoteliers should emphasise the following attributes: 'reliability', 'empathy' and 'assurance. The findings of this paper makes a meaningful contribution to a better understanding of the main factors that

influence guest expectations and experiences. The results of this paper have implications from a managerial point of view in the highly competitive South African hotel industry.

Key words: *Service quality, Guest Expectations and Experiences, Hotel industry, Dimensions.*

Introduction

Tourism and Hospitality are the world's biggest economic drivers in both developing and developed economies. World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2019) reports that these sectors are responsible for every 5 out of 10 employment opportunities created across the globe. As such, these sectors inject the much need foreign exchange towards tourism receipts. Furthermore, the economic development is achieved through these sector due to their contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country. Tourism and Hospitality sector is well poised in enabling the people to establish entrepreneurial ventures.

Over the last couple of decades, hospitality and tourism have been recognised as playing a significant role in global and national economies (Jason 2014) and scholars around the world has indicated that guest satisfaction and service quality have become a major area of attention to practitioners and academic researchers. Hoteliers emerge from the recent economic downturn and start developing strategies for the next decade, it is critically important to think ahead and understand the key external drivers of change and emerging opportunities that could be shaping the agenda for the hotel sector (Mtshokotshe and Mxunyelwa, 2020).

It is clear that the decade ahead will be characterized by megatrends that promise economic uncertainty, a potentially massive shift in wealth from the West to the East, transformational advances in science and technology and rapidly evolving needs and expectations of the individual guest. Guest service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of guest satisfaction – that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the guest expectation (Turban et al., 2002). Jason (2014) indicates that South African hotels place a great deal of importance on meeting guests' needs and expectations.

Al-Ibrahim (2014) posit that guest anticipate their expectations to be met, but this may seem complicated, and yet simple. guests' frustration stems from a discontinuity between the expectation of a service interaction, and what's actually delivered. Excellent guest service and high guest satisfaction must start with understanding our guests' expectations. One needs to know who their guests are and what they want.

When measuring guest satisfaction, hoteliers generally ask customers whether their product or service has met or exceeded their expectations. This is an important question to ask and is a key factor behind satisfaction (Beard, 2013). When guests have high expectations and the

reality fall short, they will be disappointed and will likely rate their experience as less than satisfying (Al-Ibrahim, 2014).

For this reason, luxury hotel, for example, might receive a lower satisfaction rating than a budget hotel—even though its facilities and service would be deemed superior in 'absolute' terms (Marketing Matrics, 2010). Guest expectations set the bar for guest satisfaction which also affects repurchase decisions and guest loyalty. If guests feel that the service they have expected has not been delivered, they won't come back and buy again. On the contrary, if they feel that a service that exceeds guest expectations has been delivered, one can be assured that they will return, and tell all their families and friends about the outstanding experience. These enterprises create employment opportunities within the local economies (Mxunyelwa, 2019). Furthermore, (Mxunyelwa, 2019) quotes the global economic and employment impact of Travel & Tourism that in 185 countries and 25 regions is insurmountable.

As hospitality and tourism becomes an important foreign currency earner for South Africa, improving the level of service quality will become a critical issue to the success of the hotel industry in South Africa in the new millennium. Hotels are embarking on various quality management programmes to improve the quality of service and meet with international hotel standards (Estepon, 2011). While searching to enhance service quality in the hotel industry, studies have demonstrated the need to focus on guest' expectations and perceptions based on gender perspectives (Yavas and Yasin, 1999; Catteral, Maclaran and Stevens, 2000). Therefore, this study sought to investigate the impact of the five dimensional factors of service quality on guest expectations and experiences in hotels in Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Research methodology

A mixed research design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) was followed. An exploratory discussion meeting (qualitative) was held with eight (8) of the hoteliers, the hotel manager and the marketing manager to explore their views on the study. The purpose and extent of the study were discussed with the managers and restaurateurs during the scheduled meeting. They were also given the opportunity to raise their expectations and concerns about the study. Based on the outcomes of the meeting, the research design needed to be guided by three overriding concerns.

Firstly, the hoteliers and managers of the hotel stipulated that the questions had to cover the most important attributes that might have impacted on customer satisfaction and return patronage. Secondly, limited questions on the demographics of the respondents had to be included. Thirdly, the hoteliers prescribed that the data collection should not have a disruptive effect on the customers' stay experience.

Literature review

Service Quality Concept

Quality construct has been variously defined as value (Feigenbaum, 1951), conformance to requirements (Crosby, 1979), fitness for use (Juran, Gryna and Bingham, 1974) and meeting guests' expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985). However due to the increased importance of quality in the service sector, researchers are defining quality from a guests's perspective. Therefore, the hotel managers and hospitality practioners must understand the needs of the guests in order to deliver service quality.

Within the realm of services marketing literature, the widely used definition of service quality is to meet customers' expectations defined by Parasuraman et al., (1985). In their review of service quality, Parasuraman et al., (1991) found that service quality could neither be conceptualized nor evaluated by traditional methods of goods quality because services possess four characteristics: intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability.

In this context, they have defined and conceptualized service quality as a form of attitude, which results from a comparison of customers' expectations with perceptions of performance. They have also developed an instrument called SERVQUAL to measure service quality. Service quality is not easy to define and measure since it is an elusive and indistinct construct (Barber and Goodman, 2011). However, there has been an attempt to critically define and assess the service quality concepts for over 30 years by several scholars (Cronin and Tailor 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1984; Tribe and Snaith, 1998).

Hossain and Suchy (2013) postulate that various service quality researches in the literature can be classified into two contradicting paradigms of service quality assessment. The disconfirmation paradigm of perceptions-minus-expectations; and the performance-based paradigm of a perceptions-only version of service quality. Although there are critics, this research pays more attention on the disconfirmation paradigm as the mainstream of service quality research.

Hossain and Suchy (2013) argued that customers evaluate the service quality by comparing expectations with the service experiences received. The higher the service quality, the better the service level delivered matches customer expectations. This means that providing the service was in line the expectations of the customer in service quality delivery (Bansal, 2015).

Guest Expectation of Service

Expectations vary from individuals always, and are generally considered as desires or needs of customers. Guest expectations play a significant role in service quality and customer

satisfaction literatures. For both disciplines' literatures, expectations are used to form evaluations or judgements with respect to the likely performance of a product or service (Boulding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml, 1993; Robledo, 2001; Reid, 2011). Such expectations are from various sources such as word-of-mouth, communications, promotion, price, personal needs, and past experience (Zeithaml, Parasumaran and Berry, 1990).

Robledo (2001), moreover, added reputation as a source of expectation since a good corporate image shapes positively the expectations of the customers. With criticisms regarding the use of expectations as a comparison standard (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Carman, 1990; Teas, 1993; Brady, Cronin and Brand, 2002), two levels of expectations -desired and adequate expectations - are proposed as the extension of the SERVQUAL scale (Zeithaml et al., 1994). Since customers have a tolerance would be bounded by "desired service", the level that customers believe can and should be delivered, and "adequate service", the minimum service level customers are willing to accept (Berry, 2004).

There is no common agreement on which category of service expectations should be used in service quality measurement. For this research, the desired service expectation is chosen. It is the same as the level of performance the customer ought to receive, or deserves, given a perceived set of costs purposed by Churchill (1982). According to Walker and Baker (2000), the desired expectations are relatively more stable over time than adequate expectations.

Tourism and Hospitality Service Quality Context

Alongside the other fields of business, the hospitality industry, and particularly the hotel sector, has extensively implemented the service quality measurement, which diverges according to employed methods and research approach along a qualitative and quantitative continuum. Since the hospitality industry has distinct characteristics such as imprecise standards, fluctuating demand, and an experience of certain elements of product. Ekinci (2002) postulate that the service quality measures in hospitality need industry-specific customization to fit a unique conceptualization and operationalization. There are numerous service quality measurement studies in the hospitality industry utilizing different methodologies and research techniques, which can be qualitative or quantitative paradigms in order to understand the dynamics of the industry.

However, Zeglat, Ekinci and Lockwood (2008) indicate that the SERVQUAL scale is the most preferred instrument applied to measure service quality in the hospitality industry, although there are criticisms in terms of methodology and conceptualization. Parasuraman et al., (1993) suggested that the SERVQUAL instrument is the basic skeleton that can be supplemented with context-specific items when necessary.

There have been a number of studies introducing industry-specific scales for the hospitality industry modified from the SERVQUAL, such as HOLSERV (Mei, 1999), Lodging Quality Index (LQI) (Getty, 2003), and DINESERV (Knutson, 1996). However, the use of this scale in the hospitality setting has limited success in replicating and has failed to confirm the original SERVQUAL dimensions (Huang, 2006).

The scale specifically assessing hotel customer expectation only is LODGSERV (Knutson, 1991). Based on SERVQUAL and industry-specific context, LODGSERV's five service dimensions have emerged from Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Expectations of service quality measurement in the hospitality industry were also investigated in cross-cultural settings such as in Japan, Australia, and Taiwan (Seo, 2012), but not in South Africa. Therefore, this paper is significant for the South African hospitality industry.

SERVQUAL Theory

The SERVQUAL model was developed by A. 'Parsu' Parasuraman and colleagues in North America. It is also based on the expectations disconfirmation approach (Buttle, 2004). The model's authors identified five core components of service quality, namely; reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness, (Valarie et al., 2006)

• **Reliability:** delivering on promises: is defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Reliability means the firm delivers on its promises of delivery, service provision, problem resolution and pricing. Customers want to do business with firms that keep their promises, particularly their promises about the service outcomes and core service attributes.

• **Responsiveness**: being willing to help: is the willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. This involves attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customer requests or questions, complaints and problems. Responsiveness is communicated to customers by the length of time they have to wait for assistance, answers to questions, or attention to problems. Responsiveness also captures the notion of flexibility and ability to customize the service to customer needs. To truly distinguish themselves on responsiveness, firms need well-trained staff in customer service departments as well as responsive front-line people in all contact positions.

• **Assurance**: is defined as employees' knowledge and courtesy and the ability of an organization and its employees to inspire trust and confidence. This dimension is likely to be particularly important for services that customers perceive as highly risky or for services of which they feel uncertain about their ability to evaluate outcomes.

• **Empathy**: is defined as the caring, individualized attention that an organization provides to its customers. The essence of empathy is conveying through personalized or customized service

that customers are unique and special and that their needs are understood. Customers want to feel understood by and important to organization that provides service to them.

• **Tangibles**: are defined as the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. Tangibles provide physical presentations or images of the service that customers, particularly new customers will use to evaluate quality.

This paper focused on the five factors that influence the guest expectations and experiences in hotels in the EC.SA.

Results and discussions

This section presents the findings of the study. In an endeavour to understand the impact of the five dimensional factors of service quality on guest expectations and experiences in hotels in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study conducted a comparison of service perceptions and expectation of guests.

Reliability

Table 1. Reliability Dimension Statements

Descriptive Statistics			**ANOVA between groups**
	Mean (SD) rating		p-value
	Expectation	Satisfaction	
Statements in the Reliability Dimension			
Staff will provide service as promised	6.2 (1.55)	5.7(1.73)	0.484
Staff will be dependable in handling customer service problems	6.1(1.38)	5.7(1.53)	0.615
An excellent hotel will perform theright service the first time	6.1(1.32)	5.7(1.39)	0.673
An excellent hotel will keep error-free records	5.9(1.30)	5.8(1.40)	0.869
An excellent hotel will keep customer informed of the performance of services	6.0(1.37)	5.9(1.31)	0.516

As shown in Table 1 in relation to this factor focused on the willingness of staff to provide services as promised. In terms of actual perceptions, the guests rated the item 'staff provided

services as promised' (M=5.7) less than the other two items in this factor. In other words, compared with other reliability items, guests were less satisfied with the way staff provided services as promised. Keeping customer informed of the performance of services was rated the highest (M=5.9), in terms of perception though the guests' expectation (M = 6.0) was just higher than theirperception. The largest gap in this factor related to the item 'keeps customers informed of the performance of services' (M=-0.34), while the item 'keeps error-free records'(M=0.12) had a positive gap which indicates that the hotels managed to meet the expectations of guests in terms of maintaining error free records. A large gap in the item 'staff will provide service as promised' shows that guests were disappointed the lack of service provided.

Empathy

Table 2. Empathy Statements Dimension

Descriptive Statistics			ANOVA between groups
	Mean (SD) rating		p-value
	Expectation	Satisfaction	
Statements in the Empathy Dimension			
Staff give its customers personal attention	5.9(1.52)	5.7(1.54)	0.266
Staff understand the specific needsof their customers	5.8(1.67)	5.6(1.46)	0.975
Staff have customers' best interestsat heart	5.7(1.74)	5.8(1.42)	0.924

Table 2. shows the average expectations and satisfaction as perceived by guests interms of empathy. With regard to expectations, guests regarded the statement 'staff have customers' best interest at heart' (M = 5.80) as the most important indicator of empathy. However, the guests indicated that "staff give customers personal attention" (M=5.90) was least important. In terms of perceptions, guests believed that employees had their best interests at heart as they rated this statement as high (M = 5.80). This indicates the role of both genders in the formation of customer service expectations in the hotel sector. It shows that even though there may be shortcomings in other areas, but the employees are going a little bit extra mile in certain areas and this impact positively on the hotel. Guests gave a low rating their perception on both aspects that 'staffgive customers personal attention (M = 5.70)' and 'staff understand the

specific needs of their customers'. This is an indication that as far as empathy is concerned, the guests are more satisfied with the fact that staff had customers' best interest at heart.

Assurance

Table 3. Assurance Statements Dimension

Descriptive Statistics			ANOVA between groups
	Mean (SD) rating		p-value
	Expectation	Satisfaction	
Statements in the Assurance Dimension			
Staff is consistently courteous and friendly towards customers	6.1(1.34)	5.8(1.54)	0.707
Hotel provides safe environment	6.0(1.41)	5.8(1.40)	0.215
Staff have the knowledge to answer customers' requests	5.9(1.53)	5.8(1.42)	0.153

With regard to assurance, guests had the highest expectations on the statement 'staff is consistently courteous and friendly towards customers' (M = 6.1), followed by the statement 'hotel provides safe environment to stay in for customers' (M = 6.0). These results are supported by findings of numerous researchers who indicate that the element of safety and security, whether generally at the destination or specifically at the hotels highlight that they are important destination choice behaviour determinants (Groenenboom and Jones, 2003:15-16; Som, Marzuki, Yousefi and AbuKhalifeh, 2012:39-50).

This indicates that guests had higher expectations when it came to these aspects. The lowest expectations were for 'staff should have knowledge to answer customers' requests' (M = 5.9). The perceptions are shown on table above. Guests perceived that they did not get what they were expecting in all three aspects with regard to assurance (M = 5.8).

The largest gap was associated with the statement 'staff should be courteous and friendly with customers' (M = -0.3), followed by 'hotel provides safe environment for their guests' (M = -0.2). The smallest gap was noticeable on the ratings for 'staff have the knowledge to answer customers' requests' (M = -0.1). This is an indication that the guests were happy with the knowledge of staff to answer their requests and this obviously impact positively on the hotel.

Responsiveness

Table 4 Responsiveness Statements Dimension

Descriptive Statistics			ANOVA between groups
	Mean (SD) rating		p-value
	Expectation	Satisfaction	
Statements in the Responsiveness Dimension			
Staff give prompt service to customers	5.8(1.59)	5.7(1.39)	0.532
Staff is ready to respond to customers' requests	6.1(1.22)	5.4(1.58)	0.894
Staff is always be willing to help customers	6.1(1.33)	5.5(1.53)	0.649

As presented in table 4, the expectations of guests' ratings were high for 'staff are always willing to help customers' (M = 6.1) and for the statement 'staff are ready to respond to customers' requests' (M = 6.1). Guests regarded the statement 'staff will give prompt service to customers' (M = 5.8) as the least important measure of responsiveness.

On the perceptions, guests were satisfied with the fact that employees were giving prompt service to customers (M = 5.7), followed by staff was willing to help customers (M = 5.5). The lowest perceptions were for 'staff are ready to respond to customers' requests (M = 5.4). The largest gap in this factor was associated with 'staff are ready to respond to customers' requests (M = -0.7). This is an indication that guests did not receive what they expected. The smallest gap was for 'staff will give prompt service to customers' (M = -0.1) which indicates that guests were happy with the way employees provided quick service.

Tangibles

Table 5. Tangibles Statements Dimension

Descriptive Statistics			ANOVA between groups
	Mean (SD) rating		p-value
	Expectation	Satisfaction	
Statements in the Tangible Dimensions			
Staff appear neat	5.7(1.66)	5.8(1.40)	0.152
Hotel have up-to-date equipment	6.1(1.35)	5.7(1.53)	0.511
Hotel has appealing physical facilities	6.2(1.16)	5.9(1.26)	0.783
Materials associated with the service,are visually appealing	5.9(1.31)	5.8(1.44)	0.876
Hotel have adequate fire safety facilities & instructions	5.8(1.62	5.7(1.45)	0.896
Hotel have swimming pool, saunaand health club	5.4(1.80)	5.3(1.84)	0.853
Easily accessible reservation system	5.9(1.43)	5.6(1.53)	0.914
Provide clean comfortable room	6.0(1.25)	5.5(1.35)	0.792
Situated clean convenient access location	5.7(1.64)	5.5(1.74)	0.728

As shown in Table 5, items relating to the tangibles factor statements described, tangibles in hotels required to allow staff to interact successfully with guests. In terms of service expectations, the guests deemed the hotel's appealing physical appearance (M=6.2) to be the most important item in this factor, as well the hotel having up-to-date equipment (M=6.1), and the hotel providing clean comfortable rooms. The guests though felt that the availability of a swimming pool, sauna and health club (M=5.4) was the least important.

Conclusion

It is evident from the findings of this study that the five factors of service quality influence the customer expectation and satisfaction levels. Therefore, the hoteliers must make it a point that they prioritise the guest expectation and satisfaction in order to retain the guests. Furthermore, the hotel staff must be provided with some training with regard to making sure that the employees keep the mission, vision and objectives of the hotel because this can impact negatively on the customer-retention strategy and profit maximizing. If anything changes

according to the promises made before to the customers, they need to be informed well in advance.

Recommendations

In light of the findings employee satisfaction, reasons for visiting the hotel, safety, parking, and location of the hotel could be considered to explain overall guest satisfaction and return patronage in hotel. Secondly, future studies could compare the important of attributes for guest satisfaction and return patronage in South African hoteliers. Thirdly, further research is required to explore the impact of loyalty schemes and switching barriers on hotel guests' return patronage. Fourthly, the research could be expanded to malls situated in other cities, although it is not expected that the findings would be significantly different. Lastly, triangulation requirements could be considered by applying multiple methods (e.g. surveys, individual interviews and focus group discussions) and multiple data and data sources (e.g. data obtained from mystery guests, hoteliers and hotel management) in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the research.

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