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A STUDY OF GUEST'S EXPECTATION AND PERCEPTION OF HOTEL SERVICE QUALITY: CASE OF KHAJURAHO, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of customers' perception and satisfaction of service quality is widely acknowledged as being a favourable strategy in the hotel industry. In recent years, the hotels in India have encountered difficult times due to the increasing customer demands, and due to the strong internal industry competition development. However, the hospitality industry's main concern around the globe is to cater for its customer needs and their desires, which are mostly addressed through personal services. Present research paper aims to provide an assessment of service quality suggested by Grönroos (1982; 1990) by empirically examining hotel guests' perception of process quality and outcome quality; and the relationships between the perceived service quality, customer satisfaction in the hotel industry of the study area.

Therefore, the hotel businesses that are able to provide quality services to its ever demanding customers in a warm and efficient manner, are those businesses which will be more likely to obtain a long term competitive advantage over their rivals. The present paper will highlight the behaviour of the hotel guests from hospitality products and services in the study area. The study will be helpful in identification of GAP's in service delivery process and measures adopted to bridge those GAP's.

KEYWORDS

Service Quality; Perception; Expectation; Satisfaction; Hospitality industry.

ECONLIT KEYS

M310; L660; L830; D840

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality of a product (or service) may be observed as its features by means of which certain needs of customers are satisfied. Theory and practice of marketing introduce various approaches to quality rating of certain products and service that mainly depend on the subject of analysis of that complex problem. The fact is that consumers observe and rate the same product differently, based mainly on their own motives and attitudes. According to the fact, that consumer's attitude on the quality is a key issue of quality level; measurements must be based on field investigation of the consumer population. Evaluation of customers' perception and satisfaction of service quality is widely acknowledged as being a favourable strategy in the hotel industry. In recent years, the hotels in India have encountered difficult times due to the increasing customer demands, and due to the strong internal industry competition development. Therefore, the hotel businesses that are able to provide quality services to its ever demanding customers in a warm and efficient manner, are those businesses which will be more likely to obtain a long term competitive advantage over their rivals. However, since the hotels are offering intangible and perishable personal service encounters, managing these services in terms of offering quality experience to their guests, it must be of a paramount concern of any hotel business, and the way which personalized services are provided.

Hotels that chose the application of quality concept as a key factor of success should experience the growth in the satisfaction of guests, i.e. successfully position on the market and thus gain larger profit. However, trying to reach the high level of the quality of hotel services, hotel managers very often meet with problems of an adequate measuring of the service quality. Firstly, hotel managers do not know what their guests consider as important when evaluating the quality of hotel products and very often do not have reliable methods for determining the expectations and perception of hotel guests when the service quality is concerned (Blešiš, Ivkov-Džigurski et al, 2011). As a solution to this problem, many authors suggest different methods for measurement of service quality and guest satisfaction. Thus Nitin et al (2005) gave detailed evaluation of 19 models of quality created in the period between 1984-2003. Although the research results did not lead us to one universally accepted model, the biggest support and the best complements were given to GAP

model of quality and dimensions of quality presented in SERVQUAL model. Since it was introduced, SERVQUAL model has served as basis for quality measurement of hotel services in numerous researches. However, most researchers who deal with quality measurement modify and adapt these models to the service features in hotel industry.

An individual's satisfaction with outcomes received from a hospitality experience results from a comparison of these outcomes with expectations. Expectations can be described as a mutable internal standard which is based on a multitude of factors including needs, objectives; past personal or vicarious experiences with the same establishment restaurant, with similar establishments, and the availability of alternatives (i.e. are there any other establishments in town?). Taking into account the aforementioned, the main objective of this paper is to assess the expectations and perceptions of the guests staying in the hotels, to calculate the discrepancy between the experienced and expected service quality and estimate which determiners are considered the most significant by the consumers.

1.1) GAP MODEL:

In order to comprehend the service quality better, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry developed Gap model of service quality. The model was first introduced in 1985 (Parasuraman et al, 1985). Its purpose was to analyse the source of problems in quality and to give support to management to simply understand the ways of improving the service quality. Key features of this model are recognized in emphasizing the errors in quality. The errors emerge between the guest and the service provider, regarding the perceptions and expectations. This model primarily demonstrates the process of the emergence of service quality (Ljubojeviš, 2004). The basic gap is the Consumer gap, which emerges as the discrepancy between customer expectation regarding service and customers perception of the service delivery in the hotel. Customer gap is the outcome of one of 4 gaps of a service company, which emerge as certain discrepancies within the design and delivery phases of service to the consumers. Five key discrepancies were identified (Parasuraman et al, 1985):

Gap 1 - the gap between customer expectations and management's perceptions of those expectations;

Gap 2 - the gap between management's perception of what the customer wants and specifications of service quality;

Gap 3 - the gap between service managerial quality specifications (quality, standards, forms of delivery) and the actual delivery of the service;

Gap 4 - the gap between service delivery and what the company promises to the customer through external communication. All four influence the total perception of service quality and customer satisfaction;

Gap 5 – Represents difference between customers' expectations regarding the service and their perception about the specific service. The last gap is the result of all the previous gaps.

1.2) SERVQUAL MODEL:

As result of the research conducted in companies which provide service (banking, telecommunication, insurance company, maintenance and repair of apparatuses), the authors of Gap model developed SERVQUAL model for measuring service quality (Parasuraman et al, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1991a, 1994). Parasuraman et al (1985) within the original SERVQUAL model defined service quality using 10 determinants of quality: reliability, responsiveness, competence, credibility, access, courtesy, communication, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Parasuraman et al (1988) reduced those into the following five dimensions and further into 22 categories:

A. TANGIBLES - Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials;

B. RELIABILITY - Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

C. RESPONSIVENESS - Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

D. ASSURANCE – Knowledge, courtesy and trustworthiness of the personnel;

E. EMPATHY (UNDERSTANDING THE CUSTOMER) - Making the effort to know customers and their needs.

SERVQUAL model became the model with the most widespread application in the process of then measurement of service quality. However, the model as well meets

criticism when observed from conceptual and methodological aspect (Buttle, 1996; Asubonteng et al, 1996). Despite this criticism, the model served as a base for a number of researches of the quality on the service activities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Guest satisfaction is a psychological concept that involves the feeling of wellbeing and pleasure that results from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product and/or service (WTO, 1985). While there are a variety of approaches to the explanation of guest satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the most widely used is the one proposed by Richard Oliver who has developed the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980). According to this theory, which has been tested and confirmed in several studies (Oliver and DeSarbo, 1988; Tse and Wilton, 1988), guests purchase goods and services with pre-purchase expectations about anticipated performance. Once the product or service has been purchased and used, outcomes are compared against expectations. When outcome matches expectations, confirmation occurs. Disconfirmation occurs when there are differences between expectations and outcomes. Negative disconfirmation occurs when product/service performance is less than expected. Positive disconfirmation occurs when product/service performance is better than expected. Satisfaction is caused by confirmation or positive disconfirmation of guest expectations, and dissatisfaction is caused by negative disconfirmation of guest expectations.

When we take into consideration research of service quality in the sector of tourism and hotel management, most authors modify SERVQUAL model adapting it to the specific needs of these two fields. Ekinci et al (1998) tested SERVQUAL model based on the research carried out in the Turkish sea coast hotels. Their model is based on tangible and intangible determinants of quality. Getty and Thompson developed a scale called LODGQUAL (from lodging quality) for measuring quality of hotel accommodation (Getty and Thompson, 1994). Soriano (2002) conducted the research on service quality in restaurants in Spain, where he evaluated: quality of food, quality of service, quality of ambience and price/quality ratio. Stevens et al. (1995), basing it on SERVQUAL model, developed a model called DINESERV, which consists of 29 questions, arranged according to 5 determinants of quality in SERVQUAL model. Snoj and Mumel (2002) carried out the research on service

quality in spas in Slovenia in 1991 and 1999. The authors wrote 23 questions arranged in 5 determinants of SERVQUAL model.

Parasuraman et al. (1991) concluded that customer satisfaction is distinct from service quality. Satisfaction is thought to result from the comparison between predicted service and perceived service, whereas service quality refers to the comparison between desired service and perceived service (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Another distinction between service quality and satisfaction has been suggested. The evaluation of individual service transactions has been termed satisfaction judgements. In contrast, the perceived service quality would be similar to an individual's general attitude towards the service firm (Bitner et al., 1990). Also, similar direct determinants have been suggested for both customer satisfaction (Liljander and Strandvik, 1992) and service quality (Boulding et al., 1993). This implies a close relationship between service encounter satisfaction and perceived service quality. Parasuraman define service quality as guests' overall judgment or attitude concerning high-quality service (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1988). Their model treats service quality not as an absolute, but as a relative concept determined by the gap between consumers' expectations and their perceptions. On the basis of the above discussion, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_0 : There will be a significant SERVQUAL GAP between guests' perceptions and the expectations with relation to hospitality products & services.

H_a : There will not be any significant SERVQUAL GAP between guests' perceptions and the expectations with relation to hospitality products & services.

Service quality is seen as a multidimensional concept, and different service quality dimensions bridge the gap between specific characteristics and abstract concepts of quality. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) five service quality dimensions which are most widely used in the lodging industry are Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy and Tangibles. In this study, it is proposed that hotel guests judge the quality of hotel products and services by the various dimensions. Taken together, these arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

H_b : Reliability is the most important service quality dimension for the hotel guests of Khajuraho.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary data was collected from the study area by stratified sampling procedure using star category, budget and unclassified hospitality units as various strata. Out of total 200 questionnaires, distributed among the hotel guests in the above mentioned areas, 192 were useable. The questionnaire was framed from the previous questionnaires earlier framed by various researchers for measuring service quality & guest satisfaction. These include Fick and Ritchie (1991), Reisinger and Waryszak (1994), Arnould and Price (1993), Crompton and Love (1995), Geva and Goldman (1991), Maddox (1985), Ryan (1995). These categories establish a framework for a questionnaire used as measurement instrument. SERVQUAL methodology insists on two sets of 22 questions, where the respondents are given the first set of 22 questions prior to service delivery by which their expectations are measured. Then the respondents are given the second set of 22 questions to measure their experience, perception (attitudes) of consumers about the delivered service. Based on the detailed analysis of the mentioned models, author firstly made the list of 22 hotel attributes to rate each of the 22 hotel attributes on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 - *extremely important* to 1 - *extremely unimportant*.

The questionnaire used in this research consists of three parts. The first part of questionnaire comprised of the questions relating to the demographic information about the hotel guests. The second part consisted of 23 hotel attributes, for which guests were asked to indicate the perceived importance of the attributes when they choose a hotel while the third part of the questionnaire included of a serial of 23 questions whose aim was to examine their perceptions of actual hotel performance during their hotel stay. Attributes were measured a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1, least important to 5, most important, in the Importance part, and from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree, in the Performance part. The data obtained from all questionnaires are statistically processed, analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for social Science) and the quantified results from the questionnaires define the level of service quality.

4. DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research was conducted in the star category; budget and unclassified hotels located in Khajuraho, during the months of September - November 2011. The above mentioned hotels record 65% of visits and 54% overnight stays of the total number of visits and overnight stays in all hotels in Khajuraho in 2010 (Dept. of Tourism Govt. of India, 2010). In total, 200 questionnaires were distributed and 192 (92%) usable questionnaires were obtained. The average time spent for filling out the questionnaire was 10 minutes.

Variables	Sample size	Percentage
Gender		
Male	112	58.3
Female	80	41.7
Age		
20-29	18	9.4
30-39	52	27.1
40-49	51	26.6
50-59	44	22.9
60-69	11	5.7
70+	16	8.3
Nationality		
India	73	38
Overseas	119	62
Education		
Elementary School	32	16.7
High school	40	20.8
Intermediate	65	33.9
University / College	55	28.6
Occupation		
Student	13	6.8
Serviceman	30	15.6
Businessman	52	27.1
Agriculturists	46	24
Self Employed	51	26.6

Table 1 - Demographic Profile of the Sample (N = 192)

Source: Data collected through field survey during the months of September – November, 2011

The sample included 112 (58.3%) males and 80 (41.7%) females among the respondents. The main age group was 30 - 39 and represented 27.1% of the respondents. The next biggest age group was 40-49 which represents 26.6% of the total number of respondents. Most of the respondents (33.9%) finished secondary school. Most of the respondents come from overseas (62%), when the variable occupation is concerned; the majority of respondents are either businessman (27.1%) or self-employed (26.6%).

The data collected by surveying of hotel guests are stored in SPSS database and further analysis were carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Science, SPSS, (Statistical Package for Social Science), version 10.0.

5. RESULTS

The data relating to the identified hotel attributes were factor analysed using the principal component method in order to extract the sub-dimensions of those hotel attributes. In this study, all factors with eigenvalue greater than 1 and with factor loadings more than 0.5 were retained. The factor analysis suggested six - factor solution ("**assurance**", "**foods and beverages**", "**empathy**", "**tangibility**", "**responsibility**", "**reliability**") included 23 hotel attributes are identified to analyse levels of expectation and perception from the hospitality experience.

Factor	Attribute	Expectation (E)		Perception (P)		SERVQUAL GAP (P -E)
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean
Assurance (F 1)	Friendliness of the employees	3.57	.88	3.51	1.07	- 0.06
	Professionalism of the employees	3.49	.99	3.45	1.06	- 0.04
	Personal and material safety of guests	3.34	1.13	3.47	1.16	+ 0.13
Foods and Beverages (F 2)	Presentation	3.43	.98	3.24	1.02	- 0.19
	Appearance	3.02	1.02	3.41	.94	+ 0.39
	Taste	3.46	1.04	3.52	1.03	+ 0.06
	Food Quality	3.02	.98	3.08	1.09	+ 0.06
	Menu item variety	3.34	.83	3.47	1.01	+ 0.13
	Serving Temperature	3.70	.98	3.41	1.05	- 0.29
Empathy (F 3)	Individual care of guests	3.52	.97	3.54	.99	+ 0.02
	Honest and empathic treatment of guests	3.44	.97	3.56	1.04	+ 0.12
	Understanding of specific guests' needs	3.38	.82	3.70	.86	+ 0.32
Tangibility (F 4)	Hotel location	3.61	1.06	3.33	.90	- 0.28
	Hotel exterior	3.39	.88	3.65	.82	+ 0.26
	Hotel interior	3.30	1.07	3.73	.95	+ 0.43
	Leaflets, brochures, menus, wine cards	3.48	1.09	3.65	.88	+ 0.17
	Appearance of the employees	3.37	.91	3.63	.86	+ 0.26
Responsibility (F 5)	Readiness of the employees to help guests	3.25	1.08	3.57	1.03	+ 0.32
	Readiness of the employees to provide guests with answers	3.44	.94	3.57	1.02	+ 0.13
	Timeliness of the hotel staff	3.22	1.03	3.65	.87	+ 0.43

Reliability (F 6)	Offering services in a promised manner of time	3.18	1.00	3.50	.99	+ 0.32
	Offering previously arranged services from the first meeting and onwards	3.23	.94	3.58	.90	+ 0.35
	Offering services without mistakes	3.41	1.03	3.25	.98	- 0.16

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Guests' Expectation / Perception and Servqual Gap with Select Attributes

Source: Data collected through field survey during the months of September - November 2011

Table 2 represents means and standard deviation of the guests' responses concerning to expectations and perception level with the hospitality experience in Khajuraho. Values of means on scales of expectation levels are from 3.02 to 3.70. The lowest means is the closest to grade 3 while the highest means is the closest to grade 4. On the basis of above data, it can be concluded that expectations of the guests staying at the hotels of Khajuraho were relatively high. Standard deviation, which shows average level of deviation in expectation of particular grades from means, had highest value of 1.13 and the lowest value .82.

Means of perception is from 3.08 to 3.73. The lowest grade was given to the question of food quality in the survey. Standard deviation at 11 questions is more than 1 (1.01 to 1.16), while in remaining questions these values are between 0.82 to 0.99. SERVQUAL gap (difference between perceived service and expected service) is found positive in most of the cases ranging from + 0.02 to + 0.43 lowest grade was in case of the question of Individual care of guests (+ 0.02) and best grade was given to both Hotel interior (+ 0.43) and Timeliness of the hotel staff (+ 0.43). Negative SERVQUAL gap range from - 0.04 to - 0.29, minimum to Professionalism of the employees (- 0.04) and maximum to Serving Temperature (- 0.29). Standard deviation of perception at 11 questions is above 1 (1.01 to 1.16), in remaining 12 questions these values are between 0.82 to 0.99.

Factors	Expectation (E)		Perception (P)		SERVQUAL GAP (P - E)
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	
Assurance (F 1)	3.47	1	3.48	3	0.01
Foods and Beverages (F 2)	3.33	4	3.35	5	0.02
Empathy (F 3)	3.45	2	3.60	1	0.15
Tangibility (F 4)	3.43	3	3.59	2	0.16
Responsibility (F 5)	3.30	5	3.60	1	0.30
Reliability (F 6)	3.27	6	3.44	4	0.17
Total SERVQUAL gap	3.37		3.51		0.14

Table 3: Mean, SERVQUAL GAP of Expectation & Perception for Identified factors

Source: Data collected through field survey during the months of September - November 2011

If we rank the quality factors the highest expectations are concerned to the factor Assurance then factors Empathy, Tangibility, Food and Beverages, Responsibility and Reliability. Taking into consideration small absolute difference of the arithmetical means, it can be concluded that the above mentioned factors of quality are of almost equal importance for the surveyed guests. Grades for quality perception are found highest in two factors Empathy and Responsibility, then for Tangibility, Assurance, Reliability and Foods and Beverages. The difference between perceived and expected quality of service is positive in all factors which is resulted due to low expectations. Total SERVQUAL gap is positive and its value is 0.14.

If the consequences of the above Table 3 are considered carefully, it gives the indication that hypothesis H_0 (There will be a significant SERVQUAL GAP between guests' perceptions and the expectations) should be rejected whereas hypothesis H_a (There will not be any significant SERVQUAL GAP between guests' perceptions and the expectations) should be accepted. Similarly, it can be said that hypothesis H_b which claims that Reliability is the most important service quality dimension for the hotel guests of Khajuraho should be rejected because it is Responsibility with SERVQUAL GAP value of + 0.30, emerged as the most important dimension of service quality for the hotel guests in the study area.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to establish the relationship between guest's expectation and perception of hotel service quality with relation to hospitality products & services in Khajuraho. The results of above study indicated that hotel guests are satisfied with hotel products & services. Their perceptions were higher than their expectations of service quality in all the six factors identified for the study. The SERVQUAL GAP is quite less in case of Assurance (F 1) and Foods and Beverages (F 2) 0.01 and 0.02 respectively so, the burning issue in providing the quality of Foods and Beverages products and services in the hotels besides enhancing Knowledge, courtesy and trustworthiness of the hospitality personnel, in the study area. In order to minimise the gap between the guests' expectations and their perceptions of actual service delivered, the managers and personnel in the hotel have to ensure that every contact with guests results in positive experience for the guests. First, it is necessary

to define quality standards that are transparent and measurable. Those appear as procedural quality dimensions, including timeliness, accommodation to meet the guests' needs and properly controlled coordination; and as social dimensions, including positive attitude, solving current problems, giving individual attention to guest. Prior to any planning, it is necessary to establish company's current position. It is achieved by objective assessment of the level and quality of service delivered in the hotel. The results of this and similar researches may contribute to estimation of current level of service quality and support in planning aimed at correcting current deficiencies. Market segmentation strategies could assist managers to better detect target groups and provide services tailored to their guests' needs.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As can be said for all research, this study does not proceed without limitations. This research too has some limitations that should be addressed by future research. The most obvious limitation is the type of research being conducted. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002) suggest that survey research, as employed in the present study, may be problematic in the sense that: a) respondents may misinterpret various items on the questionnaire; b) some subjects in the study may simply forget to complete and return the questionnaire; and c) it is possible that segments of the population may not be able to read and respond to the questionnaire. A variety of factors germane to present work also limits the study. First, the study is limited in scope in regard to the types of tourists and hotel management being asked to respond to the questionnaire. Secondly, the study area selected covers only one destination i.e. Khajuraho, India.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

First, it might be useful to replicate this study, perhaps in other tourist destinations. Second, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, the study should be extended to other industries with a different set of contextual and competitive characteristics. Third, it would be useful to explore whether loyalty to service provider extends to brand loyalty, an issue that would be particularly relevant for service providers with

multiple brands. Fourth, an analysis of the impact of the medium on switching behaviour would be a worthwhile complement to the analysis of loyalty and customer satisfaction. Finally, future research should explicate the customer decision processes by which alternative forms of loyalty, especially ultimate loyalty (Oliver 1999), are formed and maintained.

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