Customer Perceptions of Service Quality Towards Luxury Hotels in Odisha Using Servqual Model

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research paper is to determine the service quality of luxury hotels in Odisha using the SERVQUAL approach. The delivery of high quality services is one of the most important and most difficult tasks that any service organization faces due to its unique characteristics such as intangibility, perishability, heterogeneity and inseparability. Service quality is the degree and direction of discrepancy between consumers' perceptions and expectations in terms of different but relatively important dimensions of service quality. Therefore it is essential that service providers understand customer expectations and perceptions as well as the factors that influence their evaluation and satisfaction with the provided service. Empirical research has been used to determine the customers' expectations and perceptions of the quality of service, and a comprehensive scale adopted from "SERVQUAL" is empirically evaluated for its usefulness in the luxury hotels of Odisha. The findings of this research based on observing the differences between expectation and perception scores of luxury hotels' by capturing the responses from the customers through the questionnaire. The findings of this paper would help the hotel managers of Odisha to understand their customers better and subsequently improving their quality of service.

Keywords: SERVQUAL, Empirical research, Expectations, Perceptions, Luxury hotels

INTRODUCTION

All service organizations try and provide the best possible and high quality services to their customers but still they very often fall short of the customers' expectations since the customers have become more aware of their requirements and demand higher standards of services. In the highly competitive hotel industry, service becomes one of the most important elements for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace. Consequently, the efforts of service managers and academic researchers are directed towards understanding how customers perceive the quality of service. In most cases, service quality is judged by customers and as such, the definition for service quality is based on customers' perception of how well a service meets or exceeds their expectations. Despite the difficulties in evaluating quality, service quality may be the only way customers can choose one service over another. Recent studies have shown that service delivery has changed dramatically due to globalisation, influx of new information and communications technology and growing demand by customers for quality goods and services (Mensah, 2009).

India is an attractive destination for tourists because of its rich heritage, which includes the famous Taj Mahal, Red Fort, various temples and caves and many other famous monuments. In addition to tourists there are also a lot of businessmen and officials who visit India for business purposes because of the trade relations that our country has with the world. Similarly within our country also there are people who travel from one state to another or from one city to another for business or leisure.

Tourism in Odisha is one of the main contributors to the Economy of Odisha, India, with a 500 km long coastline, towering mountains, serene lakes and frolicking rivers. Odisha is one of the major tourism sectors of India, with various tourists' attractions, ranging from wildlife reserves, beaches, temples, monuments, the arts and festivals. Other than wildlife reserves, beaches, temples, monuments, the arts and festivals, the Odisha Tourism Development Corporation, a Public Sector Undertaking of Government of Odisha, is also developing tourism sector of Odisha and India

(Wikipedia- Tourism in Odisha). Since Odisha is an important tourist destination of India, it attracts a number of tourists not only within India but from the whole world. Thus it requires not only a good number of luxury hotels but also good quality luxury hotels where the tourists can stay comfortably and relax. Looking at the importance that Odisha has as a tourist destination, it is important to know where its hotel industry stands in terms of its service quality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are a number of models described in the literature that conceptualized the construct of service quality (e.g. Garvin, 1988; Albrecht and Zemke, 1985; Parasuraman et al, 1988; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991; Dabholkar et al, 1996). Parasuraman et al (1985, 1988) emphasized that Service quality is determined by the difference between customer's expectations of service provider's performance and their evaluation of the service they received. The construct of service quality is a multidimensional phenomenon that contains various dimensions that make up the construct (e.g. Parasuraman et al, 1988). There are many research findings to the effect that service companies are benefitted tremendously through their loyal customers (Anderson and Zeithaml, 1984). Gronroos (1982) argued that customers, while evaluating the quality of a service, compare the service they expect with perceptions of the services actually received by them. Zeithaml et al (1994) revealed that there could be a transaction-specific quality judgment as well as global judgment reflecting the level of service. Service quality is generally measured in two ways (Urbany et al, 1999): (i) as an overall evaluation of quality of service (i.e. an overall attitude towards the whole service experience); or (ii) as consisting of a range of opinions about different aspects of the service experience (e.g. perceptions of Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy). Juran (1999) elaborated the customers' perception of service quality as: "the features of services which meet customers' needs and necessities and thereby provide customer satisfaction." Thus, service quality has been considered by researchers as an attitude formed through long-term and overall evaluation of a firm's performance (Hoffman and Bateson, 2001).

Hospitality services are a harmonious mixture of three elements- material products, behavior and attitude of employees and the environment (Reuland et al, 1985). E l Farra in 1996 found that price was the most important factor which influences the patronage of medium priced hotels by customers. Thomson and Thomson in 1995 conducted a study on quality issues of nine hotels in Wellington, New Zealand and Juwaheer in 2004 analyzed the strategic importance of service quality in hotels of Mauritius. Shergill (2004) examined travelers' perceptions when evaluating the service quality of hotels in New Zealand and identified factors considered important to customers using factor analysis. Davidson (2003 a) argued that there was a causal link between good organizational climate and the level of service quality in a hotel. In another study Davidson (2003 b) examined the service quality in hotels and also incorporated customer satisfaction in organizational culture and climate. SERVQUAL was considered to be the most appropriate tool to measure service quality of hotels (Fernandez, 2004). According to Markovic and Raspor (2010), the main dimensions of perceived service quality in hotels are 'reliability,' 'empathy and competence of staff,' 'accessibility,' and 'tangibles.' The dimensions of service quality play a significant role in the performance of a hotel as a service sector. It is thus necessary to continuously measure customer satisfaction in order to assess the service providers' performance (Molah and Jusoh, 2011). According to Gunaratne (2014), most important factor in predicting tourism service quality evaluation was tangibility, followed by empathy, reliability, and responsiveness. Service responsiveness in terms of responsive attitude and prompt response to customer's request do have adverse effect on service quality which can lead to customer loyalty and profitability (Asirifi et al. 2014).

To sum up, providing an excellent and satisfactory service quality is extremely important to capture and retain customers. For this reason, this study utilized the "SERVQUAL" model and gap scores to investigate the hotel visitors' expectation and perception. Assessing and comparing the perceptions of the hotel visitors with actual served service quality will help the hotel managers to find shortfalls and subsequently improve their quality of services with respect to luxury hotels of Odisha.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the present paper are to describe a conceptual framework of service quality involving both service provider and service receiver. The current study was aimed at evaluating the service quality of selected luxury hotels of Odisha. The objectives of this study are enlisted below:-

- To study the customer's perception of service quality of selected luxury hotels of Odisha.
- To analyze the service gaps with respect to hotel industry and to draw inferences thereof, concerning the importance of different dimensions of service quality in these studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Hotel guests' perceptions were measured with a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a literature review and adopted to suit the specific features of a hotel setting (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988; Zeithaml et al. 1990; Snoj and Ogorelc 1998; Pizam and Ellis 1999; Markovic 2003). As a foundation for questionnaire development, the SERVQUAL model was used.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part measured guests' perceptions of hotel attributes using a modified SERVQUAL model. SERVQUAL is based on five dimensions of service quality, namely, 'Tangibility' (physical facilities, equipment and personnel appearance), 'Reliability' (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), 'Responsiveness' (willingness to help customers and prompt service), 'Assurance' (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to gain trust and confidence) and 'Empathy' (providing individualized attention to the customers) and is operational in the form of two 24-item sections to measure customer expectations and perceptions.

Service quality perceptions were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree.'

1= strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= somewhat agree 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree.

The second part was designed to capture respondents' demographic and traveling characteristics, which included country of residence, age, gender, purpose of visit, duration of staying at a hotel, level of education, and hotel category. The target population of the survey was the guests staying in few selected luxury hotels (hotels belonging to 3 star categories and above) of Bhubaneswar and Puri during the autumn of 2014 since Bhubaneswar and Puri are the important tourist destinations of Odisha. Questionnaires were distributed in 8 luxury hotels (3-star, 4-star and 5-star), after their hotel managers agreed to participate in the study. Reception desk employees were asked to administer the questionnaires to guests during their hotel stay, and to collect them after completion. Overall 300 questionnaires were distributed to the guests by using convenience sampling method. Out of 300 questionnaires that were distributed, 194 were returned and was found to be useable, yielding a response rate of 64.66%. With this background, this study aims to determine the service quality of luxury hotels in Odisha using SERVQUAL measures.

DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table No5.1. *Demographic profile of Respondents*

VARIABLES	CATEGORIES	NO OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENTAGE
Gender	Male	114	58.76
	Female	80	41.24
Age	18-35	40	20.62
	36-50	98	50.52
	51 and above	56	28.86
Educational Qualification	Under Graduate	32	16.49
	Graduate	89	45.88
	Post Graduate	61	31.44
	Others	12	6.19
Annual Income	<4 lakhs per annum	28	14.43
	4-8 lakhs per annum	79	40.72
	>8 lakhs per annum	87	44.85
Purpose of visit	Business/Official work	30	15.46
	Visit friends and relatives	24	12.37
	Vacation	129	66.49

Hotel Category	Others	11	5.67
	3- Star	108	55.67
	4- Star	53	27.32
	5- Star	33	17.01
Duration of stay at hotel	1-3 days	57	29.38
	4-7 days	112	57.73
	8 days and more	25	12.89

The profile of the sample respondents is shown in table no 5.1 and revealed that 58.76 percent of them were male, 50.52 percent of them were between 36-50 years old and 45.88 percent had graduate degree as educational qualifications. 44.85 percent of the respondents have an annual income of more than Rs. 8 lakhs. 66.49 per cent of the respondents indicated that the main purpose of their visit was vacation and most of them stayed at 3-star hotels (55.67 percent), for between four and seven days (57.73 percent).

Expectations, Perceptions and Gap Analysis for LUXURY Hotels

Table No5.2. *Expectations, perceptions and gap scores of luxury hotels.*

Attributes	Mean Expectation Score (E)	Mean Perception Score (P)	Mean Gap Score (E-P)	t-value
T1. Hotel has adequate facility and supplies.	4.233	2.969	1.264	5.26
T2. Visually appealing physical facilities.	4.108	3.112	0.996	3.80
T3. Visually appealing materials (pamphlets, statements and web-sites).	4.126	2.881	1.245	4.92
T4. Large parking area.	4.357	2.848	1.509	5.78
T5. Neat, clean and tidy hotel premises.	4.382	3.356	1.026	5.11
RL1. Performing the service within the promised time duration.	3.991	2.453	1.538	6.04
RL2. Solving the problems of the guests with interest.	3.886	2.679	1.207	5.34
RL3. Performing services right from the first time.	4.082	2.817	1.265	5.06
RL4. Providing service without any delays.	4.295	2.948	1.347	5.70
RL5. Providing error free service.	4.176	3.054	1.122	4.69
RL6. Guests know the exact time when the service would be performed.	3.713	2.428	1.285	5.19
RS1. Hotel staff always willing to help the guests.	3.974	2.575	1.399	5.53
RS2. Hotel staffs devote their time to answer the questions asked by guests.	3.819	2.672	1.147	4.38
RS3. Hotel staffs provide prompt service.	4.168	3.149	1.019	4.46
AS1. Hotel staffs have adequate knowledge to answer questions.	3.762	2.498	1.264	4.99
AS2. Hotel staffs' behavior instills confidence in guests.	4.059	2.934	1.125	4.78
AS3. Guests feel safe and secure during their hotel stay.	4.558	3.461	1.097	4.03
AS4. Availability of clear information in the hotel.	3.675	2.473	1.202	4.81

AS5. Courteous hotel staff.	4.195	3.116	1.079	4.16
EM1. Providing individual attention to guests.	3.993	2.717	1.276	5.14
EM2. Hotel staffs provide personal attention.	4.165	3.094	1.071	4.88
EM3. Convenient opening hours.	4.269	3.241	1.028	4.59
EM4. Luxury hotels have their guests' best interests at heart.	4.297	3.174	1.123	4.61
EM5. Understanding guests' specific needs.	4.071	2.997	1.074	3.97

Note: *T = Tangibility; RL = Reliability; RS = Responsiveness; AS = Assurance; EM = Empathy t-test two tailed with probability < 0.05.*

Table 5.2 presents the means for the perception and expectation items relating to the five dimensions of service quality in the SERVQUAL model. The means for expectations ranged from 3.675 (=somewhat agree) to 4.558 (=strongly agree). The lowest mean of 3.675 was in the 'Assurance' dimension on item AS4, about the availability of clear information in the hotel doesn't affect too much on the employee expectations regarding service quality of luxury hotels. The highest expectation mean of 4.558 was on assurance item AS3 indicates that the guests give maximum importance to safety during their stay at hotel.

For perceptions the mean scores ranged from 2.428 (=disagree) to 3.461 (=somewhat agree). The lowest mean was on item RL6 of 'Reliability' which referred to the 'guests knowing the exact time when the service would be performed' which some of the respondents disagreed since according to most of the respondents in some of the services the actual service deviates from the predefined service time resulting in slight delay in service delivery. The highest mean score for perception was on item AS3 of 'Assurance' dimension indicates that the guests give maximum importance safety during their stay at hotel to which most of the guests somewhat agreed to it.

The gap score (E-P) is equal to expectation minus perception. In Table 5.2, all items showed positive gap scores, which means that the expectations of the customers of the luxury hotels on service quality items as suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1988) were higher than their perceptions. Higher the gap score, the less desirable is the performance and vice versa. The t-statistics were also calculated to test for significant difference between expectations and perceptions. All the gap scores were statistically significant at 5% probability level. All the items recorded gap scores of which suggest that the hotels need to attend to all the dimensions and their items. However, in terms of magnitude of the gap scores, it was found that the gap scores ranged from 0.996 to 1.538.

The lowest gap score of 0.996 was for item T2 (i.e. visually appealing physical facilities) in the 'Tangibility' dimension followed by gap score of 1.019 which was for item RS3 of 'Responsiveness' dimension which stated that hotel staffs provide prompt service to the customers. This signifies that these are some of the areas where the luxury hotels are doing relatively well from customer's perspective and the hotels should uphold what they are doing to sustain quality service delivery.

The highest gap score of 1.538 was for item RL1 of 'Reliability' dimension (i.e. performing the service within the promised time duration) followed by the gap score of 1.509 for item T4 of 'Tangibility' dimension which indicated the parking space near the luxury hotel. According to some of the respondents, there are not enough parking spaces near the luxury hotel.

In short these are some of the service gaps which the hotels should address to ensure that the customers are satisfied with the quality service delivery in the hotel industry.

Factor Analysis on Gap Scores

In order to explore and recognize the factors that have the most effect on customer perceptions, factor analysis was conducted on the gap scores of the 24 items in the questionnaire. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.793 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at p<0.05, indicating that the data is appropriate for factor analysis.

Table No5.3. *Results of Factor analyses of gap scores*

Attributes	Factor loadings				
	Tangibility	**Reliability**	**Responsiveness**	**Assurance**	**Empathy**
T1. Hotel has adequate facility and supplies.	0.741				
T2. Visually appealing physical facilities.	0.709				
T3. Visually appealing materials (pamphlets, statements and web-sites).	0.692				
T4. Large parking area.	0.727				
T5. Neat, clean and tidy hotel premises.	0.776				
RL1. Performing the service within the promised time duration.		0.711			
RL2. Solving the problems of the guests with interest.		0.585			
RL3. Performing services right from the first time.		0.652			
RL4. Providing service without any delays.		0.661			
RL5. Providing error free service.		0.635			
RL6. Guests know the exact time when the service would be performed.		0.692			
RS1. Hotel staff always willing to help the guests.			0.571		
RS2. Hotel staffs devote their time to answer the questions asked by guests.			0.586		
RS3. Hotel staffs provide prompt service.			0.558		
AS1. Hotel staffs have adequate knowledge to answer questions.				0.562	
AS2. Hotel staffs' behavior instills confidence in guests.				0.725	
AS3. Guests feel safe and secure during their hotel stay.				0.601	
AS4. Availability of clear information in the hotel.				0.547	
AS5. Courteous hotel staff.				0.534	
EM1. Providing individual attention to guests.					0.691
EM2. Hotel staffs provide personal attention.					0.628
EM3. Convenient opening hours.					0.605
EM4. Luxury hotels have their guests' best interests at heart.					0.579
EM5. Understanding guests' specific needs.					0.511
Eigen value	5.142	4.373	3.506	2.674	2.018
Variance extracted %	21.43	18.22	14.61	11.14	8.41
Total Variance extracted %	21.43+18.22+14.61+11.14+8.41=73.81				
Cronbach's alpha	0.854	0.816	0.781	0.746	0.872
Number of items	5	6	3	5	5

The exploratory factor analysis extracted five factors, which accounted for 73.81% of variance in the data. The first factor ('Tangibility') contains most of the items and explains most of the variance (21.43%). Thus, hotel service tangibility is an important determinant of perceived service quality.

Most of the factor loadings were greater than 0.60, implying a reasonable high correlation between extracted factors and their individual items. All factors with Eigen values were greater than 1.0 and factor loadings are greater than 0.5. So all the Eigen values and factor loadings were considered and retained (Hair et al., 1998). The results of the reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the extracted factors ranged from 0.746 to 0.872. That is well above the minimum value of 0.60, which is considered acceptable as an indication of scale reliability (Hair et al. 2006). Thus, these values suggest good internal consistency of the factors.

DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Perceptions of hotel service quality are the degree to which hotel guests find various hotel attributes important in enhancing their satisfaction with the hotel stay. In the present study, it was revealed that the main dimensions of perceived service quality in luxury hotels were found to be 'tangibility' which explained 21.43% of the variance, 'reliability' which explained 18.22% of the variance and 'responsiveness' which explained 14.61% of the variance followed by 'assurance' (11.14% of variance explained) and 'empathy' (8.41% of variance explained).

However, the studies conducted in the hotel sector has identified several outcomes with regard to the number and interpretation of dimensions guests use to assess perceived hotel service quality. Akan (1995) reported a seven-dimension structure, labelled as 'courtesy and competence of the personnel,' 'communications and transactions,' 'tangibles,' 'knowing and understanding the customer,' 'accuracy and speed of service,' 'solutions to problems' and 'accuracy of hotel reservations.' Wong Ooi Mei et al. (1999) identified 'employees, 'tangibles' and 'reliability' as key dimensions of service quality in the hospitality industry.

So with respect to the analysis and interpretation made in this study, it is recommended that all the dimensions need attention since in each and every item of all the SERVQUAL dimensions, there exists a gap between customer expectations and customer perceptions. Several suggestions and recommendations were given in these contexts which were as follows:-

- The services must be performed within the promised time duration.
- The luxury hotels should occupy more space to increase the parking space.
- Services must be delivered without any delay.
- Individual attention must be given to the guests since these hotels belong to the luxury category. Therefore the hotel managers must stress on 'empathy' dimension as well.
- Employees must be given more training so that they develop and handle the customers even better, thereby increasing customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, knowing how consumers perceive service quality and being able to measure service quality can benefit management of luxury hotel service. Measuring service quality can help management provide reliable data that can be used to monitor and maintain improved service quality. Using the SERVQUAL model to assess service quality enables management to better understand the various dimensions and how they affect service quality and customer satisfaction. The concept of measuring the difference between expectations and perceptions in the form of the SERVQUAL gap score proved very useful for assessing levels of service quality. Parasuraman argued that, with minor modification, SERVQUAL can be adapted to any service organization. Information on service quality gaps can help managers diagnose where performance improvement can best be targeted. The largest gap, combined with assessment of where expectations are highest, facilitates prioritization of performance improvement. This study has conducted a survey in selected luxury hotels in Odisha by using five service quality dimensions that represent the evaluative criteria which guests use to assess service quality of luxury hotels. The findings show that our emphasis on the service quality antecedents is vital because the dimensions of service quality play a significant role in the performance of a hotel as a service sector. It is thus necessary to continuously measure customer satisfaction in order to assess the service providers' performance. This paper has helped better

understanding of these performance drivers' nature that potentially can be used by hotel managers in a practical sense. Service organizations can achieve a strong reputation for quality service only when they consistently meet or exceed customer service expectations. Having knowledge about these areas can help managers improve service quality of their firms.

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