

GUESTS' SATISFACTION IN HOTELS OF KASHMIR VALLEY: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

As the level of competition intensifies, service organizations find their offerings becoming similar to one another's specifications. Under such circumstances, service quality and customer satisfaction becomes the only way to differentiate services from those of the competitors. In hotel industry also customer satisfaction is largely hooked upon quality of services. Hotels which are able to understand and satisfy customer's needs make greater profits than those which fail to understand and satisfy them. However, quality cannot be increased unless it is measured. In view of the strategic and growing importance of customers' satisfaction for corporate success and growth, an attempt has been made in the present study to measure guests' satisfaction in hotels of Kashmir Valley. Based on data gathered, with the help of a self-developed and statistically-tested research instrument, from one hundred fifty nine (159) respondents representing one hundred seven hotels (107) of different categories, the study concludes that respondents are overall satisfied with the hotel services but overall improvement is needed in all dimensions of hotel services particularly on Reliability and Responsiveness to make hotel services more effective and efficient.

Introduction

Customer satisfaction is the outcome of customer's perceptions of the value received in a transaction and relationship, where value equals perceived service quality, compared to the value expected from transactions or relationship with competing vendors (Blanchard and Galloway, 1994). In order to achieve customer satisfaction, it is important to recognize and to anticipate customer's needs and to be able to satisfy them. Enterprises which are able to rapidly understand and satisfy customers needs, make greater profits than those which fail to understand and satisfy them (Barsky and Nash, 2003). The cost of attracting new customer is higher than the cost of retaining the existing ones; as such managers need to concentrate on retaining existing customers by implementing effective policies of customer satisfaction and loyalty. This is especially true in the hotel industry. Retaining customers in the lodging industry has become increasingly more important with increasing competition. Hotels that can attract, maintain, satisfy and retain customers are more likely to survive (Choi and Chu, 2001). In general, the longer the customer stays in the long term relationship, the more profitable the relationship becomes to the organization. High quality service and customer satisfaction, therefore, are widely recognized as important factors leading to the success of companies (Barsky and Lambagh, 1992; Choi and Chu, 2001). It is believed that customers

who are satisfied are more likely to establish loyalty, repeat purchase and favorable word of mouth (Fornell, 1992).

Nowadays, one of the biggest challenges for managers in the hotel industry is to provide and sustain customer satisfaction. Customer requirements for quality products and services in the tourism industry have become increasingly evident to professionals (Lam and Zhang, 1999; Yen and Su, 2004). Guest relationships are a strategic asset of the organization (Gruen et. al., 2000) and customer satisfaction is the starting point to define business objectives. In this context, positive relationship can create customers higher commitment and increase their return rate. Long-term and reciprocally advantageous relationships between customers and the hotel is becoming progressively important because of the highly positive correlation between guests overall satisfaction level and the probability of their return to the same hotel (Choi and Chu, 2001). Hotels are increasing their investment to improve service quality and the perceived value for guests so as to achieve better customer satisfaction and loyalty, thus resulting in better relationships with each customer (Jones et.al, 2007).

Furthermore, it is commonly known that good service quality results in long-term customer satisfaction and loyalty (Zeithmal, et al. 1996). Besides improving service quality, the hotel service providers should also consider offering differentiated service as it is found that frequency of usage of hotel services helps in developing the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. A differentiated offer which meets high and low frequency users' preferences will improve the overall customer loyalty and thus ensure long term profitability. In spite of the growing importance of consumer satisfaction for hotels success and growth, there is limited empirical evidence about the satisfaction levels of hotel guests in Kashmir Valley. Present study, therefore, is aimed to fill up this research void with the following objectives.

Objectives of the Study

1. To measure guests' satisfaction in select hotels of Kashmir Valley.
2. To suggest, on the basis of study results, ways and means for improving hotel services in Kashmir valley with a view to make the overall hotel service more effective and efficient.

Literature Review

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a complex construct. Recently, researchers have argued that there is a distinction between customer satisfaction as related to tangible products and as related to service experiences. This distinction is due to the inherent intangibility and perishability of services, as well as the inability to separate production and consumption. Hence, customer satisfaction with services and with goods may derive from, and may be influenced by, different factors and therefore should be treated as separate and distinct (Veloutsou, et. al., 2005).

According to the previous literature, research for this model supports the conceptualization of perceived quality as a separate construct, distinct from satisfaction (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994). Moreover, many authors make it a point to highlight that service

quality and satisfaction are distinct constructs (Parasuraman, et. al., 1988; Bitner, 1990; Boulding, et al., 1993; Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Taylor and Baker, 1994). Oliver (1980) identified satisfaction and dissatisfaction in terms of the disconfirmation of consumers' expectation. A positive disconfirmation leads to customer satisfaction and a negative disconfirmation leads to customer dissatisfaction. Oliver (1980) argued that the amount of dissatisfaction is dependent on the extent of disconfirmation and the consumer's level of involvement with the service and the problem solving process. The Expectations Disconfirmation Model has been dominant model in satisfaction research. The model uses pre-consumption expectations in a comparison with post-consumption experiences of a product/service to form an attitude of satisfaction or dissatisfaction toward the product/service (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980, 1981; Oliver and De Isarbo, 1988; Tse and Wilton, 1988). The expectancy disconfirmation paradigm in process theory provides the grounding for the vast majority of satisfaction studies and encompasses four constructs: (1) Expectations (2) Performance (3) Disconfirmation and (4) Satisfaction.

Disconfirmation arises from discrepancies between prior expectations and actual performance. There are three possibilities: zero disconfirmation can result when a product performs as expected; positive disconfirmation can occur when the product performs better than expected; and negative disconfirmation when the product performs below expectations and dissatisfaction sets.

A comparison of the satisfaction model with the Gaps model indicates that the most salient feature is that the latter leaves out the issue of disconfirmation and seeks to represent an entire psychological process by an operationalisation that involves the simple subtraction of expectations from perceptions. A number of other distinctions are often made between satisfaction and quality. First, while the original five dimensions of SERVQUAL are fairly specific, those for satisfaction are broader and can result from a wider set of factors. Second, satisfaction assessments require customer experience, while quality does not (Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman, et. al., 1988; Bolton and Drew, 1991b; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Boulding, et. al., 1993). Operationally, satisfaction is similar to an attitude, as it can be assessed as the sum of the satisfactions with the various attributes of the product or service (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). However, while attitude is a pre-decision construct, satisfaction is a post decision experience construct (Latour and Peat, 1979). Furthermore, it highlights the construct of a "global" level of satisfaction (the overall service satisfaction) in contrast to the construct of a component level of satisfaction (the encounter service satisfaction). Boulding, et. al., 1993; mentioned that customer's satisfaction is influenced by two factors which is experiences and expectations with service performance. Two additional issues that need to be clarified when researching customer satisfaction in services is whether satisfaction is conceptualized as facet (attribute specific) or as overall (aggregate); and whether it is viewed as transaction-specific (encounter satisfaction) or as cumulative (satisfaction over time) (Hoest, et. al., 2004). However, according to Levesque and McDougall (1996) satisfaction is conceptualized as an overall customer attitude towards a service provider. Similarly,

Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) claimed that customer satisfaction is the accumulated experience of a customer's purchase and consumption experiences.

Sample Design

Keeping in the view the paucity of time, the present study was limited to District Srinagar of Kashmir valley. The size of the sample was limited to one hundred fifty-nine (159) respondents selected from (107) hotels of different types. Stratified random sampling was, however, followed for the present study. All important demographic characteristics like age, gender, level of education, length of stay, nationality, purpose of visit, number of visits to valley and category of hotel was taken into consideration while seeking the response from the customers regarding their level of satisfaction in hotels. All these aspects have an important bearing on the user's evaluation of hotel services. The effort was made to give a balanced representation to above demographic characteristics to make the sample representative. The data on the table 1 clearly shows that majority respondents (40.3%) belonged to the age group of 31-40 years followed by the age group of 41-50 years (29.6%) where as the respondents belonging to the age group of above 51 years of age were the least participants followed by the age group of 20-30 years (20.1%). The sample includes (60.4 %) male respondents. Highest numbers of the respondents (64.2%) were graduates followed by post graduates (16.4%) and the remaining was under graduates. (49.1%) respondents had their stay in between 1-6 days, (38.4%) in between 7-12 days, (8.2%) had stayed in between 13-18 days and the remaining (4.4%) had stayed more than 19 days. Indian respondents were (70.5%) and the remaining were foreigners. Leisure/Holiday seekers were heavy participants (67%) followed by business tourists (4.4%) and the pilgrimage tourist were the least (1.9%). A sizeable number (44.7%) belonged to C category hotels followed by B category hotels (33.3%) and the least number (22.2%) were from A category hotels. (61.6%) respondents had come to the valley for the 1st time followed by (31.4%) 2nd time, and (5.75%) for 3rd time and remaining for the 4th time.

Research Instrument

A self administered questionnaire, an adapted version of SERVQUAL scale was used in this paper to measure the level of customer satisfaction of the hotel guests. Two widely known models, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, et. al., 1991), and SERVPERF (Cronin, et. al., 1992) are used by researchers to measure customer satisfaction. However, Cronin and Taylor (1992) objected on measurement of quality of services in terms of expectation and perception. They provided empirical evidence across four industries to corroborate the superiority of their 'performance only' instrument over disconfirmation-based on SERVQUAL Scale. Several other authors were in line with Cronin and Taylor about the use of SERPERF instrument (Buttle, 1996; Hahm, et. al., 1997; Quester and Romaniuk, 1997; Robinson, 1999; Lee, et.al., 2000). As such service performance (SERVPERF) has been used in present study.

Some modifications were made to SERVQUAL instrument in order to suit the context of hotels. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was designed to

measure the guests' perceptions regarding their satisfaction in hotels. The second part of the questionnaire contained questions relating to socio-demographic data about the respondents. The researchers introduced the tool of measurement in such a way that it briefly illustrated the topic of the study and procedures of response. The measurement grades were placed according to the 10-point Likert scale (Malhotra, 2003). The scale was ordered regressively as highly satisfied (10) to highly dissatisfied (1).

The study was conducted in the hotels of Srinagar of Kashmir valley for three months during the summer of 2012. The target population selected for this study during the data collection period comprised tourists who stayed in hotels of Srinagar. A stratified sampling approach (Getz, et. al., 2006) was employed, in which 159 questionnaires were distributed to the guests in 107 hotels of different categories (A, B and C) who agreed to participate in the survey. The guests completed the questionnaire in the presence of the researchers.

The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics analyses were used to measure customers' perception scores. To explore dimensionality of the (40) item scale, a factor analysis was performed. The exploratory factor analysis extracted five factors, which accounted for 68.619 percent of variance in the data (Table 2). Most of the factor loadings were greater than 0.50, implying a reasonably high correlation between extracted factors and their individual items. The communalities of 26 items ranged from .580 to .828 indicating that a large amount of variance has been extracted by the factor solution. Fourteen items (v1, v2, v3, v6, v12, v13, v15, v17, v27, v28, v29, v35, v36, v40) were below the suggested value of .50 (Haier et al., 2006) and were considered in factor analysis. The remaining factors are labeled as F1- 'assurance' (knowledge and accuracy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence), F2-'tangibility' (appearance of the facilities, equipment and communication material), F3'empathy' (staff knowledge and ability to provide individual attention), F4 'responsiveness' (willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service), F5 'reliability' (solving guests' problems and performing error-free service at promised time). The first factor contains most of the items and explains most of the variance (22.22%). Thus, hotel service assurance is an important determinant of perceived customer satisfaction.

The results of the reliability analysis showed that cronbach's alpha coefficient of the extracted factors ranged from 0.836 to 0.891. That is well above the minimum value of 0.70, which is considered acceptable as an indication of scale reliability. Thus, these values suggest good internal consistency of the factors. Finally, Cronbach's alpha value for the overall perception scale is 0.970 and indicates its high reliability.

**Table 1 Measuring Perceived Guest Satisfaction using SERVPERF
Factor Analysis and Reliability Analysis Results of Hotel Guests' Perception (n=159)**

Item (n=26)	Factors					Communalities
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	
V5	.774					.675
V11	.503					.737
V20	.556					.667
V32	.606					.769
V33	.609					.741
V37	.674					.778
V14		.549				.773
V18		.518				.782
V19		.641				.707
V30		.565				.580
V21			.632			.733
V9			.508			.727
V24			.636			.714
V38			.742			.775
V7			.617			.740
V22				.715		.777
V23				.754		.828
V25				.637		.750
V34				.608		.713
V4					.795	.690
V8					.596	.695
V10					.512	.734
V16					.506	.775
V26					.569	.718
V31					.699	.697
V39					.613	.761
Eigen value	8.890	7.360	5.216	4.856	1.124	19.036
% of Variance	22.226	18.401	13.040	12.141	2.811	68.619
Cronbach's alpha	.836	.861	.891	.887	.873	.970
Number of items	6	4	5	4	7	26

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test	
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.938
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Approx. Chi-Square)	6963.041
Cronbach's Alpha	.970

* Significance at 1% level

The adequacy of the sample size was confirmed using both the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) test sampling adequacy and Barlett's Test of Sphericity (Table 4). In fact, KMO for customer satisfaction (0.938) exceeded satisfactory value and revealed a Chi-square at 6963.041, ($p < 0.000$) which verified that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix, thus validating the suitability of factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was performed which showed KMO= 0.938 is higher than the suggested 0.6 value (Tabachnik and Fidell, 2001).

Results of the Study

In line with the objectives, the present study seeks to find out the level of customer satisfaction in hotels. As mentioned earlier, customer satisfaction was measured on a ten point Likert type (highly dissatisfied/highly satisfied) scale. Mean scores and standard deviation were calculated and ranks were assigned accordingly (on the basis of mean) on each element/ dimension. The result of all this is shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Overall Customer Satisfaction

In order to assess the overall customer satisfaction, mean scores were calculated on each element. The element-wise mean scores were then averaged on all dimensions to get overall tourist satisfaction score. The data on Table 4 clearly reveals higher levels of guest satisfaction (7.93) in hotels, under reference, of Kashmir Valley. Dimension-wise analysis brings to light relatively higher satisfaction levels in hotel services on Assurance (8.02) followed by Tangibility (7.94) and Empathy (7.93) while as reliability (7.85) followed by responsiveness (7.90) are reported relatively low.

Table 3 Overall Customer Satisfactions in Hotels

S. No.	DIMENSIONS	MEAN	RANK
1	Assurance	8.02	1
2	Tangibility	7.94	2
3	Empathy	7.93	3
4	Responsiveness	7.90	4
5	Reliability	7.85	5
Total		7.93	

Dimension Wise Analysis

Assurance

Data on table 5 shows relatively higher SERVPERF score on Assurance (8.02) dimension which indicates that the service personnel of hotels in Kashmir Valley are knowledgeable and competent to convey trust and confidence. It's element-wise analysis reveals higher satisfactory score on 'safe and secure hotels (8.18) followed by 'friendly staff' (8.10). However, least satisfactory score is reported on 'imparting confidence to guests' (7.80) followed by 'having time and knowledge to answer guests questions' (7.82).

Tangibility

Data on tangibility dimension shows comparatively high SERPERF score of 7.94, which demonstrates appearance of the hotel facilities, location, neat and cleanliness of hotels and hotel-employees besides quality meals are fairly appropriate and appealing. The element wise analysis of the said dimension clearly shows relatively higher mean score on 'neat and cleanliness of hotels' (8.15) followed by 'appropriate location' (8.11) whereas lowest score (6.22) is reported on 'broachers and pamphlets' (7.66) followed by 'high quality meals' (7.87), 'interior and exterior decoration (7.90) and 'employees neat appearance' (7.96).

Empathy

The SERVPERF score (7.93) on empathy dimension discloses satisfactory knowledge of the staff and ability to provide individual attention with smile. It's element-wise analysis reveals higher satisfactory score on 'understanding guest's specific needs' (8.14) followed by 'providing services with smile' (8.20) whereas guests reported relatively low satisfaction on 'calling guests by name (7.43) followed by 'good communication capability' (7.84). The items that fall in between include 'convenient operating hours' (8.07), 'guest's best interest at heart' (7.98) and 'understanding guest's specific needs' (7.89).

Responsiveness

The SERVPERF score (7.90) on responsiveness dimension in Table 5 brings to light that hotels of valley are providing prompt services to customers. Its element-wise analysis reveals higher levels of customer satisfaction on 'services without any delay' (8.08) followed by 'willingness to help guests (8.02) and 'credible and courteous employees' (7.85). Though, said dimension is relatively low on 'giving individual attention to guests' (7.77) followed by 'easy to use reservation system (7.78).

Reliability

Table 5 shows comparatively low SERVPERF score (7.85) on reliability dimension which implies that hotels of Kashmir Valley don't perform the service dependably and accurately besides not keeping their promise. It's item-wise analysis reveals comparatively lowest satisfactory score on 'verification of reservation requests by front-desk employees' (7.69) followed by 'promised services' (7.91). However, the said dimension shows highest score on 'check in or check out time' (7.98) followed by 'accurate information' (7.84).

Conclusion and Suggestions

In this study, a scale for measuring the customer satisfaction of hotels was proposed through exploratory factor analyses. Having knowledge on these areas would definitely help managers meet the challenge of improving service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry. The findings of this study indicate that the most important factor in predicting hotel service quality evaluation was assurance, followed by tangibility, empathy, responsiveness and reliability. These results support the idea that despite the usefulness of the SERVPERF scale as a concept, it should be adapted for the service management as well. The questionnaire developed through this study is suitable for use for guests staying in hotels of Kashmir valley, allowing them to confidently identify the service areas which require action. At the same time, the modified questionnaire could also provide indicators through which managers and planners can plan their service policies that would result in satisfied customers. This study was conducted for hotels of district Srinagar of Kashmir valley. To be able to generalize the findings for this specific hotel segment, a study that would include more hotels in a variety of regional settings would be appropriate.

The results of the study lead us to conclude that guests are overall guests satisfied (7.93) with the hotel services of Kashmir Valley. However, SERVPERF score on reliability and responsiveness dimension was reported relatively low (7.85 and 7.90 respectively). Services quality of these two dimensions need to be improved particularly on verification of reservation requests by front-desk employees, providing individual attention to guests, easy to use reservation system and credible and courteous employees.

Monitoring customer satisfaction has become an important focus for all managers in the hotel industry. Failure to recognize the power of customer satisfaction, especially their emotions, could destroy the power of customer retention, Yi, et.al (2001). Therefore, the hotel management's greatest challenge lies not only on attracting customers but specifically on identifying customer satisfaction individually. Customers may agree that the hotel provides high levels of service quality but not necessarily agree that the hotel ensures high satisfaction. If prices are perceived to be high, this may still have a negative effect on satisfaction. Higher levels of quality are only meaningful to the extent that customers believe that value is being enhanced. Therefore, managers must carefully execute price competition and understand the value perceived by different market segments. Customers may sometimes refrain from purchasing when price is perceived to be too high, while some became suspicious of quality when price is too low. In summary, understanding the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction will help managers in better decisions besides in planning their strategies with greater confidence in today's competitive hospitality environment.

Table 4 Guest Satisfaction Scores in Hotels

S.No	Dimensions of Service Quality	Mean	S.D	Rank
Elements of Assurance				
1	Safe and secure hotel.	8.18	1.05	1
2	Imparts confidence to the guests.	7.80	1.31	4
3	Friendly staff.	8.10	1.26	2
4	Having time and knowledge to answer guests 'questions.	7.82	1.32	3
Total		8.02		
Elements of Tangibility				
1	Brochures and pamphlets are visually presented.	7.66	1.71	6
2	Employee's neat appearance.	7.96	1.20	3
3	Interior and exterior decoration is quite appealing.	7.90	1.25	4
4	Appropriate location.	8.11	1.06	2
5	Neat and clean hotel.	8.15	1.05	1
6	High quality meals.	7.87	1.25	5
Total		7.94		
Elements of Empathy				
1	Calling by name.	7.43	2.05	7
2	Understanding requirements.	7.89	1.27	5
3	Good communication capability.	7.84	1.29	6
4	Polite staff and providing services with smile.	8.20	1.25	2
5	Convenient operating hours	8.07	1.24	3
6	Understanding guest's specific needs.	8.14	1.12	1
7	Guests' best interest at heart.	7.98	1.12	4
Total		7.93		
Elements of Responsiveness				
1	Reservation is easy to use.	7.78	1.54	4
2	Giving individual attention.	7.77	1.55	5
3	Willing to help guests.	8.02	1.22	2
4	Services without any delay.	8.08	1.17	1
5	Credible and courteous employees.	7.85	1.50	3
Total		7.90		
Elements of Reliability				
1	Promised services.	7.91	1.30	3
2	Front-desk employee verifies the reservation requests.	7.69	1.59	4
3	Providing accurate information.	7.84	1.28	2
4	Check in or check out time is not too long.	7.98	1.08	1
Total		7.85		
Over-all Tourist Satisfaction (averaged on all dimensions)		7.93		

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