

Service quality variance in hotels: an empirical assessment

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Abstract: *Service quality in the past three decades has attracted the attention of major practitioners, researchers and managers due to its robust influence not only on business operations, profitability but also on customers' satisfaction and repurchase intentions. Furthermore, a number of empirical studies indicate a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction as well as between customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth. In view of the strategic and growing importance of service quality for corporate success and growth, an attempt has been made in the present paper to measure service quality variance among different categories of hotels in northern India. Based on data gathered, with the help of a statistically-tested research instrument, from six hundred and sixty three (663) respondents, the study concludes that respondents are overall satisfied with the hotel services but overall improvement is needed to influence customer satisfaction particularly among "A" category of hotels to make accommodation services more effective and efficient.*

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, SERVPERF, Hotel Industry, Northern India.

Introduction

The Indian tourism and hospitality industry has materialized as one of the key drivers of growth among the services sectors in India. It contributes to 6.23 percent to the National GDP and 8.78 percent of the total employment in the country. Tourism and hospitality in India has generated immense employment opportunities and is a vital source of foreign exchange for the country. The travel, tourism and hospitality industry contributed Rs 2.17 trillion (US\$ 36 billion) or 2 percent to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015. The figures are expected to rise to Rs 4.35 trillion (US\$ 72.17 billion) by 2024 (Kannan, 2015). The importance of providing quality services in hospitality industry is being recognized as a way to expand and maintain a large and loyal customer base for long-term success. As stated by Kandampully et. al., (2011), consistent quality of service creates and sustains the image of a business which ultimately results in positive customers' behavioral intentions. Therefore, customers' behavioral intention is dependent on the firm's ability to consistently deliver service quality. On the contrary, the cost of poor quality relate to lack of responsiveness to the customer, dissatisfied customers, customer complaints, adverse word of mouth communication, and dissatisfied employees (Crosby, 1979). Postma and Jenkins, (1997) also stated that quality improvement must be seriously considered as a useful instrument in achieving competitive advantage and as a strategy to reduce uncertainty and improve the results of hospitality services. Superior customer service may, therefore, be seen as a mechanism to achieve differentiation and a competitive advantage, and so become integral

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to the overall direction and strategy of an organization (Brown and Swartz, 1989; Parasuraman et. al., 1988). The importance of providing quality services in hotel industry is being recognized as a way to expand and maintain a large and loyal customer base for long-term success.

To be competitive, one of the biggest challenges for managers in the hotel industry is to provide and sustain guest satisfaction. 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). Developing and maintaining customer loyalty or creating long-term relationship with customers is the key to survival and growth of service firms (Duff, 1998; Griffin, 1995; Kandampully, 1988; Richheld, 1996).

In the highly competitive hotel industry, service quality becomes one of the most important elements for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage in the market place. Consequently, the efforts of service managers and academic researchers are directed towards understanding and measurement of service quality. Realizing the growing importance of service quality for long-term growth and profitability of hotel industry, present study is aimed to achieve following objectives.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study service quality variance in hotels, under references, on critical service quality dimensions.
2. To suggest ways and means for improving hotel services with a view to make overall accommodation services more effective and efficient.

Review of Literature

Service Quality

Quality initiatives date back to the 1920's when manufacturers began to focus on controlling the physical production of goods and the internal measurements of the production process (Kandampully, 2002). Quality has taken on a variety of definitions and no consensus has been reached as to how to define or evaluate this elusive concept. Reeves and Bednar (1994) defined quality as excellence, value, conformance to specifications, conformance to requirements, fitness for use, loss avoidance and meeting and/or exceeding expectations. Quality can also be defined as delighting the customer (Ermer and Kniper, 1998; Chelladurai and Chang, 2000); and satisfying or meeting implied needs (Chelladurai and Chang, 2000). The broad nature in which quality is defined suggests that it is evaluated based on the targets or features of a product or service, the standard or criteria applied in the judgment, and the evaluator or arbiter of quality (Chelladurai and Chang, 2000). Kandampully, (2002) measures quality by counting the incidence of "internal" failures (those observed before a product leaves the factory) and "external" failures (those incurred in the field after a unit has been installed). Crosby (1979) defines quality as "conformance to requirements". Requirement must be clearly stated so that they cannot be misunderstood. Measurements are then taken continually to determine conformance to those requirements. The non-conformance detected is the absence of quality. Quality problems become non-conformance problems, and quality becomes definable. However,

understanding of quality in goods and its importance is not sufficient to understand service quality. Four well documented characteristics of services – intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability – must be acknowledged for a full understanding of service quality (Parasuraman, et.al., 1985). Many researchers (Madanlal, 2007; Knowles, 1996 and Sunmee, 2005) traditionally agreed and accepted that service quality is a comparison between expectations with perceptions of performance. Perceived quality is the customer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml 1987). Bitner and Hubbert (1984) defined quality as the customer's overall impression of the relative inferiority/ superiority of a firm by comparing the service user expectations with actual performance (Lewis and Booms, 1983; Gronroos, 1984). Wisniewski and Donnelly (1996) are of the opinion that service quality is the extent to which a service meets customer's needs or expectations. Customer expectations are beliefs about service delivery that function as standard or reference points against which performance is judged (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003).

Parasuraman, et al., (1985) defined service quality as: "the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' perceptions and expectations in terms of different but relatively important dimensions of the service quality which can affect their future behaviour". In line with this thinking, Gronroos (1982) developed a model in which he contends that customers compare the service they expect with perceptions of the service they receive in evaluating service quality. Also, Smith and Houston (1982) claimed that satisfaction with service is related to confirmation or disconfirmation of expectations. They based their research on disconfirmation paradigm, which maintains that satisfaction is related to size and direction of the disconfirmation experience where disconfirmation is related to person's initial expectations. Similarly Lewis and Booms (1983) stated that "service quality is a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations. According to Berry, et. al., (1988), service quality has become a significant differentiator and the most powerful competitive weapon that organizations want to possess. Its importance to firms and customers is unequivocal because of its benefits that contribute to market share and return on investment (Parasuraman, et al. 1985). The delivery of high quality service to customers offers firms an opportunity to develop unique position in the minds of the target customers which results in greater customer satisfaction and behavioural intention, greater willingness to recommend to others, reduction in customer complaints, improvement in customer retention rates; and, contributes to long-term profits of a business (Berry et. al., 1994; Schneider and Chung, 1996; Magi and Julander, 1996; Lee et. al., 2000). Consequently, understanding and maintaining quality should be the main concerns of businesses today. Both manufacturing companies and service firms should be highly concerned with providing quality and delivering quality service (Akan, 1995).

From the above discussion it is clear that service quality revolves around customer expectation and their perceptions of service performances. Hence it is characterized by the customers' perception of service and the customers are the sole judges of the quality. Parasuraman et. al., (1991) rightly explained that consistent conformance to expectations begins with identifying and understanding customer expectation, only then the effective service quality strategies can be developed.

Sample Design

Keeping in the view the paucity of time, the present study was limited to hotels of northern India. The size of the sample is limited to six hundred sixty three (663). The size of the sample (663) was calculated using Morgan's (2004) formulae after determining the sample population

(5,19,000). This represents a proportionate sample of 207 (two hundred seven) respondents selected from Jammu and Kashmir and 456 (four hundred fifty six) from Punjab. The study has been carried out in five categories of hotels viz., A, B, C, D and E (classification of hotels). Further, present study is limited to two states in Northern India, i.e., Jammu & Kashmir and the state of Punjab. J&K has been selected keeping in view that it is a tourist destination which on an average provides accommodation to 13,11,000 tourists (J&K Tourism Department, 2016). The state of Punjab was selected for its religious diversity and is the largest state in terms of geographical area in northern India. 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 and category of hotel was taken into consideration while seeking the response from the customers regarding service quality 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. Majority respondents (36.60%) belonged to the age group of 31-40 years followed by the age group of 20-30 years (30.87%) 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 41-50 years (24.30%). The sample includes (57.75 %) male respondents. Highest numbers of the respondents (50.50%) were graduates followed by post graduates (27.75%) and the remaining was under graduates. Respondents (47.00%) had their stay in between 1-6 days, (27.00%) in between 7-12 days, (14.50%) had stayed in between 13-18 days and the remaining (11.50%) had stayed more than 19 days. Majority of respondents (60.48%) were Indians and the remaining were foreigners (39.52). Leisure/Holiday seekers were heavy participants (42.50%) followed by business tourists (16.75%) and the tourist who came for visiting friends and relatives were the least (7.38%). Heavy number of respondents (29.62%) were first time visitors followed by (29.25%) 2nd time, and (21.01%) for 3rd time and remaining for the 4th time.

Methodology

Two widely used service quality instruments (SERVQUAL, SERVPERF) are used for assessing quality services. However, the use of the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, (1985, 1988) has been criticized by many researchers. Cronin and Taylor (1992) objected on measurement of quality of services in terms of expectation and perception. Several other authors were in line with Cronin and Taylor about the use of SERVQUAL instrument (Quester, 1995; Robinson, 1999). As such service performance SERVPERF has been used in present study. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part was designed to measure the guests' perceptions regarding service quality among different categories of 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 5-point Likert scale (Malhotra, Y 2003) where (1) was strongly disagree and (5) was strongly agree. The study was conducted in the hotels of northern India (Jammu, Kashmir, Chandigarh and Amritsar) for four months during the summer of 2016. The target population selected for this study was hotel guests belonging to A, B, C, D and E category of hotels. A stratified sampling approach (Getz, et.al., 2006) was employed, in which 663 questionnaires were distributed to the guests who agreed to participate in the survey. The guests completed the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher. The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) and (Amos) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics analyses were used to measure service quality

perception scores. To explore dimensionality of the (26) item scale, confirmatory factor analysis was performed. Factor loading of all the service quality elements ranged from .52 to .91. All the factor loadings were above the minimum criteria of .50 (Chin, 1998; Malhotra and Dash, 2011). Therefore, magnitude and significance of the loading estimates supports convergent validity of all the five dimensions of service quality. The fit of CFA for service quality model was examined. The indices were as: value of $\chi^2/df = 1.773$, GFI = .994, AGFI = .932, NFI = .902, TLI = .949, CFI = .954, RMSEA = .034. Collectively, the result of CFA fit indices reveal that the model fits the data well. Thus the CFA model is accepted.

Figure 1: Measurement Model for Service Quality

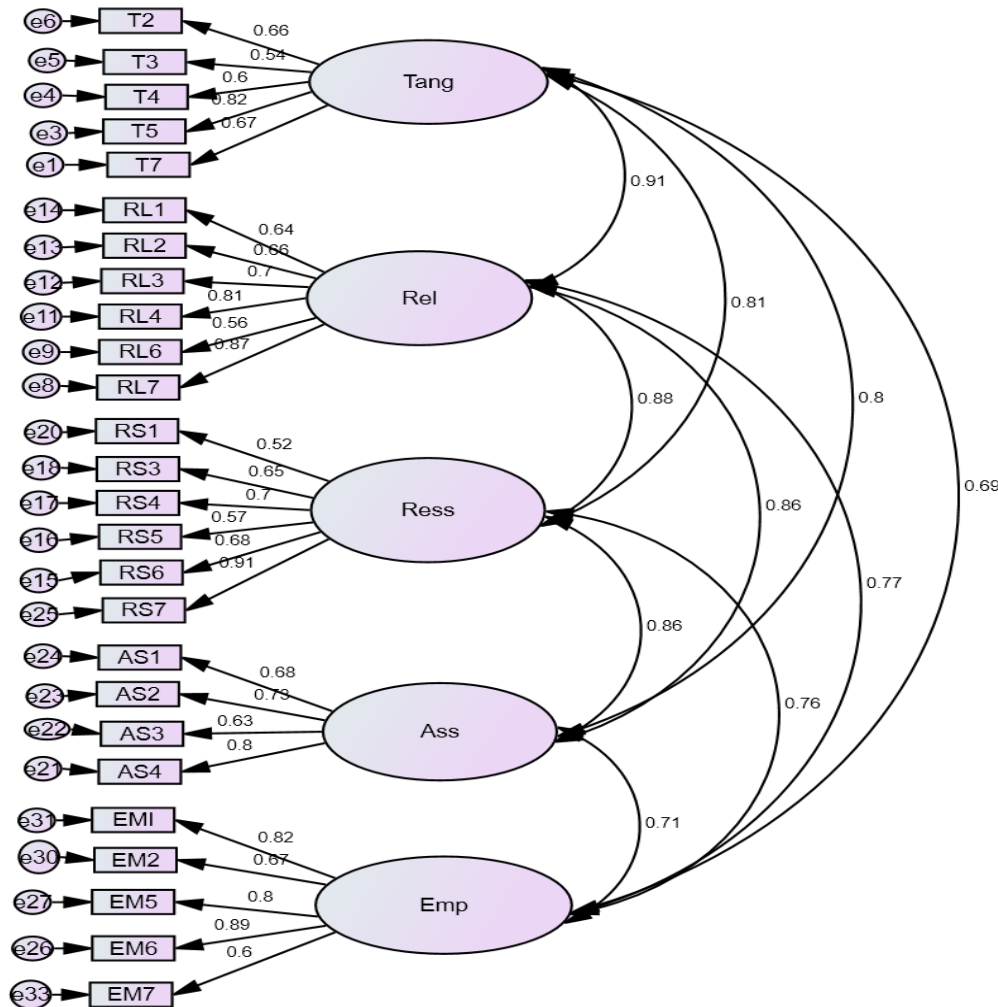


Table 1: Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Construct Reliability (CR)

Dimension	AVE	CR
Tangibility	0.542	0.72
Reliability	0.538	0.75
Responsiveness	0.540	0.79
Assurance	0.579	0.73
Empathy	0.560	0.76
Service Quality	0.551	0.75

Table 2: Discriminant validity

Conatructs	Tangibility	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy
Tangibility	.542	.378	.423	.492	.409
Reliability	.378	.538	.469	.289	.331
Responsiveness	.423	.469	.540	.467	.512
Assurance	.492	.289	.467	.579	.494
Empathy	.409	.331	.512	.494	.560

Results of the Study

To measure service quality variance in hotels on critical hotel service quality dimensions, mean value and standard deviation for different categories of hotels were computed separately for all hotels in the sample organization. One way ANNOVA was also performed to understand overall and dimension-wise significant variances in service quality followed by effect size and post hoc test to measure the size of significant difference and to check the homogeneity respectively. The results obtained from this computation are presented in Tables: 3 and 4.

Table 3 summarizes data regarding overall service quality variances in different hotels and brings to light that there is significant variance ($p < 0.05$) in service quality among different categories of hotels with explained variance of 42.43 percent. The over-all mean score of different hotels shows relatively higher service quality score of C (3.65), B (3.57) and E (3.56) category of hotels, whereas, relatively low service quality scores are observed on A (3.46), followed by D (3.52) category of hotels. The above result reveals significant variances (0.004) in the quality of services offered by different categories of hotels, under reference.

Dimension-wise analysis shows significant variance ($p < 0.05$) on tangibility as reported by the respondents of different category of hotels. However, service quality score on tangibility as reported by 'C' category of hotels is relatively high (3.83) followed by 'E' category of hotels (3.63). Relatively low service quality scores have been reported by the 'A' category of hotels followed by 'B' category of hotels. Similarly, the analysis of the data (Table3) shows significant variance ($p < 0.05$) in the quality of services on reliability dimension as reported by all the respondents of different category of hotels. Respondents from 'D' category have reported relatively higher service quality scores (3.77) on reliability followed by the 'B' category (3.56) of hotels, whileas relatively low service quality scores (3.39) have been observed among 'C' category of hotels followed by 'E' categories (3.46). On responsiveness dimension, respondents of all the categories of hotels reported insignificant variances ($p > 0.05$) meaning there by that all hotels, under reference, are providing nearly same service on said dimension. Relatively higher scores (3.48) have been reported by the 'E' category of hotels followed by the 'C' category while as comparatively low service quality scores have been reported by 'A' category of hotels followed by 'B' category of hotels. Respondents of all categories of hotels have reported significant variances ($p < 0.05$) on assurance dimension. The respondents belonging to 'C' category of hotels have reported relatively higher service quality scores (3.81) followed by 'B' category of hotels (3.73). Relatively low service quality scores have been observed by 'D' category of hotels (3.38) followed by 'E' category of hotels (3.54). Data on empathy dimension brings to fore significant variances ($p < 0.05$) as reported by the respondents of all categories of hotels. Relatively better quality of services has been reported by 'C' category of hotels (3.76) followed by 'E' category of hotels (3.71) while as relatively low scores have been observed by 'A' category of hotels (3.38) followed by 'D' categories (3.43).

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Table 3: Service Quality Variances among different Categories in Hotels

Dimensions	Hotels	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Variance			P Value	Effect Size
				Between Hotels	Total	Percent Explained		
Tangibility	A	3.40	1.18	3.52	9.76	36.70	0.034*	.045
	B	3.54	1.60					
	C	3.83	1.83					
	D	3.61	1.38					
	E	3.63	1.36					
Reliability	A	3.55	1.51	4.51	9.32	48.39	0.002*	.102
	B	3.56	1.63					
	C	3.39	1.72					
	D	3.77	1.37					
	E	3.46	1.74					
Responsiveness	A	3.31	1.26	3.20	12.21	26.21	0.064	.041
	B	3.36	1.74					
	C	3.46	1.63					
	D	3.45	1.57					
	E	3.48	1.46					
Assurance	A	3.70	1.54	3.98	9.77	40.74	0.006*	.113
	B	3.73	1.66					
	C	3.81	1.93					
	D	3.38	1.48					
	E	3.54	1.66					
Empathy	A	3.38	1.34	3.79	9.33	40.62	0.044*	.312
	B	3.70	1.39					
	C	3.76	1.40					
	D	3.43	1.76					
	E	3.71	1.81					
Overall	A	3.46	1.43	5.653	13.32	42.43	0.004*	.305
	B	3.57	1.87					
	C	3.65	1.95					
	D	3.52	2.76					
	E	3.56	2.02					

Note: Significant $p < 0.05$ at 5% level

Table 4: Shows homogeneity based on Variances in Different Categories of Hotels

Different Categories of Hotels	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
	1	2
A	3.459	
B	3.218	
C	3.192	3.192
D		3.175
E		3.217

The effect size (0.305) calculated on the mean scores of different category of hotels across the sample organization indicate medium difference (see table 5 for threshold limits for effect size). To gain more insight of differences in different categories of hotels on the bases of service quality scores, post-hoc test was performed. Post hoc test results (Table 4) identified two homogenous subsets. The data in the two subsets clearly shows significant variances in the quality of services offered by two subsets. However, C category hotels service quality falls between two heterogeneous subsets.

Table 5: Threshold Limits for the Effect size

Small	0.20
Medium	0.50
Large	0.80
Very Large	1.30

Source: Rosnow and Rosenthal (1989),

Conclusion

In this study, a scale for measuring the service quality of hotels was adopted through confirmatory factor analyses. The analysis brings to light that there is a significant variation ($p < 0.05$) in the overall quality of services offered by different categories of hotels and across all dimensions with medium effect size (0.305) and results of post-hoc test indicates that guests experience a different services quality among all categories of hotels. The study further concluded that “A” category of hotels reported relatively low service quality in comparison to other category of hotels; probably this category receives customers who have higher level of service expectations. Therefore, this category of hotels should increase their quality of services by focusing on all the dimensions of service quality, particularly on responsiveness and empathy dimension, so as to increase the levels of satisfaction among guests and thereby influence their repurchase intentions. Along with the important finding obtained in this study, the questionnaire used for measuring the service quality in hotel industry of northern India itself is an important contribution. The questionnaire used for this study is suitable for measuring service quality among guests staying in hotels of northern India, allowing them to confidently identify the service areas which require action. At the same time, the questionnaire could also provide indicators through which managers and planners can plan service policies that would result in satisfied customers. Further, this study was conducted in hotels of northern India (Jammu , Kashmir, Chadigarh and Amritsar) and 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.

Monitoring service quality has become an important focus for all managers in the hotel industry. Failure to recognize the power of delivering quality services and enhancing 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 and giving them quality services. 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 the same customer becomes suspicious of quality when price is too low. In summary, understanding the relationship among service quality and customer satisfaction will help managers make decision and plan their strategies in the competitive hospitality market environment.

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