



Customers' Perception of Service Quality in Hotels

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Abstract

The study examined guests' expectations and perceptions of service quality in hotels in Accra and the differences between their expectations and perceptions of service quality (service quality gaps). The study used the survey method. A modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument was used to collect data from guests who had stayed in the sampled hotels for at least one night. The Paired sample t-test was used to test the significant differences between guests' expectations and perceptions of service quality. And it was revealed that guests' perceptions of service quality were far below their expectations and there was a significant difference between expectations and perceptions. It shows that service delivery falls short of guests' expectations and this poses a serious problem for the hotel industry. There were also high association between guests' perceptions of service quality and their profile variables. This paper has implication for critical attention from hotel managers in those areas of concern such as front office services and responsiveness dimensions.

Introduction

The service sector is increasingly becoming important both domestically and internationally. Services contributed a total of 66.3 per cent of world gross domestic product (GDP) in the year 2000 (WTTC, 2011). However, many service sector businesses have had to contend with intense competition and rapid changes in order to achieve competitive advantage and efficiency. These businesses have to seek ways of differentiating their services from others in the market. Companies that search for the most effective ways to incorporate the best service methods and processes tend to be winners in the long term in terms of favorable customer perceptions.

Services are difficult to manage due to certain inherited characteristics such as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. Managers in the service sector are therefore under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are customer-focused but the complex nature of services coupled with the growing prominence of the services sector has also increased the need for better quality of service. The delivery of high quality service allows organisations to differentiate themselves from their competitors by increasing sales and market share. It also results in the satisfaction and retention of customers and employees, thus reducing turnover rates and leading to repeat purchase behaviour and brand loyalty and eventually enables an organisation to attract new customers through positive word-of-mouth (Lewis, 1991; Newman, 2001; Caruana,

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2002; Wang & Hui, 2003). Managers in the service industry are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are customer-focused and that continuous improvement in service quality is being delivered. Given the financial and resource constraints under which service organisations must manage, it is essential that customer expectations and perceptions are properly understood and measured (Shanin, 2004).

The general perception is that in the absence of world class service leaders and /or a benchmark competition, the hotel industry had leisurely ticked over with an “anything goes” service attitude thus resulting in the endemic nature of the issue of service quality in hotels in Ghana (Akyeampong, 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that hotel customers, both domestic and international have in one way or the other experienced shortfalls in the quality of services offered. Guests have expressed varied needs and expectations during their stay but hotels in Ghana have not responded adequately (Bondzi-Simpson, 2012).

Also, the conservative nature of the Ghanaian population, who are disinclined to complain, has led to unprofessional, inefficient service standards being accepted as the norm. Bondzi-Simpson (2012) intimated that there are service quality gaps in the delivery of services in hotels in the Central Region of Ghana. Another study by Amissah (2013) revealed that service quality is poor in hotels in Cape Coast and Elmina in Ghana. Despite the vast amount of research done in the area of service quality, quality related issues have received very little research attention within the hotel industry in Ghana. According to Mensah (2009), there seems to be paucity of credible data on service quality in Ghana’s hospitality industry making it difficult to fashion out an appropriate management intervention to address the problem. This study therefore seeks to examine the gaps in hotel guests’ expectations and perceptions of service quality in hotels in Accra and how perceptions of service quality differ by guests’ profile variables.

Literature Review

Concept of service quality

The subject of service quality is wide and varied and various theories have been advanced by many researchers. Garvin (1988) was among the first scholars who examined the quality concepts for both goods and services. He explained perceived quality as the subjective perception of quality through indirect measures of quality comparison. Most of the service quality research is rooted in expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Bolton and Drew, 1991; Oliver, 1980) which holds that customers perceive service quality as the difference between the actual service performance and their expectations. Disconfirmation is positive when service performance exceeds expectations and negative when the opposite is the case. Based on the perceived service quality concept, Parasuraman et al. (1985) applied premises from other previous studies to form their model of service quality gaps. The idea is that the perception of service quality was developed from a comparison of consumer expectation with actual service performance; also quality evaluation involved the evaluation of both the process and outcome of

service delivery. Therefore, service quality gap denotes the gap between customer's expectations or what the service should provide and the customer's perception of what the service actually provides (Shahin, 2006). There is however, a general understanding that service quality is dependent on the guests' needs and expectations.

Determinants of Service quality

Attempts have been made to distinguish between product quality and service quality. Services are generally described in terms of four unique attributes, namely: intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (Bateson, 1977; Lovelock, 1981; Gronroos, 1990; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). According to Mei et al. (1999), in the hospitality industry, other attributes such as imprecise standards and fluctuating demand have been identified. Service quality has been linked to the success of hospitality businesses (Kotler et al., 2003). It has also been argued that service quality is the great differentiator among service providers (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Kandampully et al., 2002). Juran (1985) stated that the quality of a product or service is determined by its fitness for use by internal and external customers. Gundersen et al. (1996) argued that a customer's experience is a product of both the tangible and intangible aspects whereas Crompton and Mackay (1989) saw service quality as being concerned with the attributes of the service itself and those attributes developed positive perceptions of the service. Gronroos (1992) distinguished between technical quality and functional quality as components of the service image delivery. Technical quality is what the consumer actually receives from the service provider such as quality of the food served in a restaurant. Functional quality on the other hand, is how the technical component of the service is delivered to the consumer. Kotler et al. (2003) identified a third component of service quality, societal (ethical) quality. According to them, societal quality is credence quality which consumers cannot evaluate in advance of purchase. In this light, hospitality businesses concerned about quality service must combine, balance and juggle the tangible and intangible products (Ribeiro, 2003 in Mensah, 2009).

Applications of SERVQUAL in hospitality and tourism

One of the earliest works in the hotel industry was an exploratory study by Akan (1995) that examined the relevance of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) in Turkey hotels. The study identified new dimensions (such as accuracy of speed of service, solutions to problems, communication and transactions), and determined their importance to the customers. Alexandris et al. (2002) also applied SERVQUAL framework in Greece hotels, and found that tangibles received the highest mean value followed by the assurance-dimension. Akama and Kieti (2003) measured tourist satisfaction in Kenya. They used SERVQUAL instrument to operationalize service quality, and they considered two additional dimensions, namely, price and perceived value, apart from the five SERVQUAL dimensions. Lau et al. (2006) in their study on luxury hotels in

Malaysia used SERVQUAL scale to evaluate the hotel services, and found that the tangibility factor was of utmost importance in hospitality services. The study of Nadiri and Hussain (2005) in North Cyprus revealed a two dimensional structure of service quality consisting of tangibles and intangibles, instead of five dimensions. Table 1 depicts some examples of applications of the SERVQUAL scale/instrument in the lodging industry especially hotels.

Table 1: Examples of Applications of the SERVQUAL Scale in Hotels

Researchers and year of study	Objective of evaluation	Comments
Knuston et al.(1992)	Hotels and motels	Modified SEVQUAL scale called LODGSERV(26 items)
Fick and Ritchie (1991)	Airlines, hotels, restaurants, ski areas	Modified SERVQUAL scale(33items) Modified SERVQUAL scale(19 items)
Getty and Thompson (1994)	Lodging industry	Modified SERVQUAL scale called LODGQUAL
Saleh and Ryan (1991)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale(33 items)
Akan (1995)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale (30 items)
Patton et al.(1994)	Hotels	Application of LODGSERV
Gabbie and O’Neill (1996, 1997)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale perceptions only
Suh, Lee, Park & Shin (1997)	Hotels	
O’Neil, Williams, MacCarthy & Groves (1998)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale (35 minutes)
Qu and Tsang (1998)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale called HOLSTAT
Ingram and Daskalakis (1999)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale(21 items)
Mei et al. (1999)	Hospitality Operations	Modified SERVQUAL scale called HOLSERV
Wong & Sohal (2002)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale (27 items)
Juwaheer & Ross (2003)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale (39 items)
Lau et al. (2005)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale
Akbaba (2006)	Hotels	Application of SERVQUAL

Yilmaz (2009)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale
Markovic and Raspor (2010)	Hotels	Modified SERVQUAL scale

Source: Based on literature review

Service Quality in Hotels

Juwaheer and Ross (2003) in a study of hotel guest perceptions in Mauritius concluded that the overall customers' perceptions of service quality provided by the hotel industry were below guests expectations. Renganathan (2011) also found out in his study of Service Quality in Hospitality Services, Gap Model and Factor Analysis, in India that perceptions of service quality were far lower than that of expectations. Tsang and Qu (2000) compared tourists' actual perceptions of service quality with their expectations, using the paired t-test; they found a statistically significant difference on 21 of the 35 attributes examined. Their results indicated that overall, the hotels were not doing a good job in meeting tourists' expectations. The biggest gaps were on attributes like "quietness of room", "adequacy of fire safety facilities", "staff performing services right the first time", "cleanliness of room" and "reasonable room rate/value for money." And the overall service quality provided by the hotel industry in China fell below tourist expectations. Juwaheer and Ross (2003) studied hotel guests' perceptions of service quality in Mauritius and intimated that the perception scores of all the nine dimensions of service quality were higher than the expectation scores. It was revealed that hotels in Mauritius were not meeting their guests' expectations of service quality. A study by Mohsin and Lockyer (2010) found statistically significant differences in importance and performance evaluation responses of the hotel guests. Mohsin, Hussain and Khan (2011) explored service quality in luxurious hotels in Pakistan. The results of their study indicated that expectation scores were far above the perception scores of service quality. Panuel and Zumman (2013) examined the gap between service quality expectation and perception of walk-in guests of economic hotels in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. Their results showed that guests' expectation exceeded the perceived level of service shown by the perception scores. Markovic and Raspor (2010) study in Croatia also revealed high expectations of hotel guests regarding service quality. They found that 'reliability,' 'empathy and competence of staff,' 'accessibility' and 'tangibles' are the key factors that best explained customers' expectations of hotel service quality.

Most service quality studies in the hotel industry have revealed similar findings (Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Lau *et al.*, 2005; Alexandris *et al.*, 2002; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1998; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Czepiel *et al.*, 1985; Choi & Chu, 2000; Karatepe & Avci, 2002; Atilgan, Ekinici & Aksoy, 2003; Arasli, Katircioglu & Mehtap-Smadi, 2005; Mohsin, 2010; Mohsin, Hussain & Khan, 2011; Ukwayin, 2012; Faizan, Khan & Rehman, 2012). Alin's (2010) findings, on the other hand, revealed a positive gap between

customers' expectations and perceptions which means that perceptions were higher than expectations.

Demographic Characteristics and Service Quality

Kotler (2003) noted that demographic characteristics were one of the most popular and well accepted bases for segmenting consumers. Demographic information is often the most accessible and cost effective way to identify a target market. Demographics are easier to measure than any other segmentation variables; they are invariably included in psychographics and socio-cultural studies because they add meaning to the findings (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000). Demographic variables are the most popular bases for distinguishing customer groups (Kotler 2003). Consumer wants, preferences and usage rates are often associated with demographic variables and also demographic variables are easy to measure (Kotler 2003). Several researchers identified that tourists' images differed according to different demographic characteristics (Walmsley & Young, 1998; Baloglu, 1997; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997 and Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993). Skogland & Siguaw (2004) proposed that demographic variables positively influenced customer satisfaction.

Literature suggests that hotel managers should not overlook the importance of the effect of demographic factors on customer perceptions of behavioural intentions, satisfaction, service quality, value, image, and the dimensions of service quality (Al-Sabbahy & Ekinci, 2004; Shergill & Sun, 2004 and Skogland & Siguaw, 2004). According to Renganathan (2011), demographic variables like age, gender, income, highest qualification, are the significant predictors of the hotel guests perceptions and expectations for the SERVQUAL dimensions tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Perception of service quality factors differs with hotel guests' profile (Vijayadurai, 2008).

The Extended Gap model

Much of the research on service quality has been carried out within the framework of the service quality gap model developed from the extensive research of Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988, and 1991). The service quality gap model was derived from the magnitude and direction of five "gaps" which are:

- Gap 1. Gap between customers' expectations and management's perceptions (also known as knowledge gap). This gap may result from a lack of understanding of what customers expect from a particular service due to the absence of a proper marketing research orientation.
- Gap 2. Gap between management's perception and service quality specifications (service standards gap). This gap shows the

- disparity between management's knowledge of client's expectations and the process of service producing resulting from an inadequate commitment to service quality.
- Gap 3. Gap between service quality specifications and service delivery (performance gap). This gap is the consequence of role ambiguity and conflict, lack of teamwork and poor technology. Even when guidelines or specifications exist for performing excellent service, its delivery may not be up to standard due to poor employee performance.
- Gap 4. Gap between service delivery and external communications (communications gap). Customer expectations are established by promises made by a service provider's promotional messages. This gap results from inconsistencies between the quality image portrayed in promotional activities and the actual quality of services delivered.
- Gap 5. Gap between consumer's expectation and perceived service. This gap depends on size and direction of the four gaps associated with the delivery of service quality on the marketer's side.
- Gap 6. Gap between the perceptions of customers' expectations of service quality between hotel guests and frontline staff.
- Gap 7. Gap between customer expectations of frontline staff and management perceptions of such expectations.

Luk and Layton (2002) extended the five gap model to a seven gap model and named it, the extended gap model. Figure 1 depicts the extended gap model with the two additional gaps.

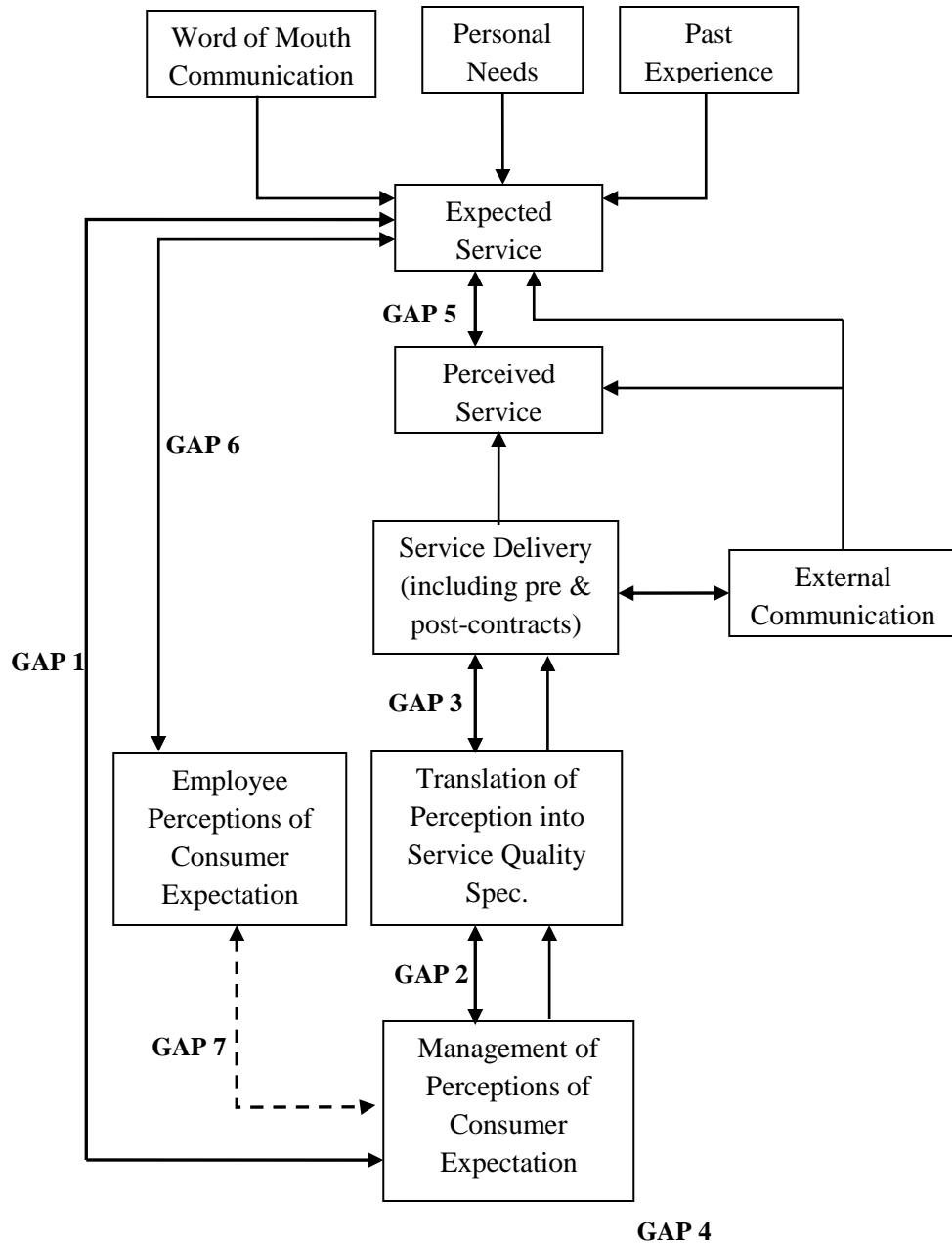


Figure 1: The Extended Gap Model
 Source: Luk & Layton (2002)

According Brown and Bond (1995), the gap model by Parasuraman et al. (1985), is one of the best received and most heuristically valuable contributions to services literature. The model identifies four key internal discrepancies or gaps relating to managerial perceptions of service quality and tasks associated with service delivery to customers. The first four gaps (Gap 1, Gap 2, Gap 3 and Gap 4) are identified as functions of the way in which service is delivered and the existence of these four gaps leads to the extent of Gap 5. In other words, the extent of Gap 5 depends on the size and direction of the first four gaps whereas Gap 5 suggests the gap between

customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual performance and drives the perception of service quality. Given that gap 5 is a function of gap 1 (Parasuraman, 1985), it is logical to assume that, as well as gap 1, the presence of these new gaps could also ultimately lead to the occurrence of gap 5 for several reasons (Luk and Layton, 2002).

First, the occurrence of gaps 6 and 7 will enlarge the service delivery gap. Front-line employees holding strong faith in their knowledge of customer expectations will tend to deliver the service deviated from the specifications that were translated on the basis of the management's understanding of customer expectations. Second, "when providers and consumers are operating under different perceptions there is a higher likelihood of a low quality evaluation resulting in dissatisfaction" (Brown and Swartz, 1989, p. 193). Therefore, measurement of the gap (Gap 5) between consumers' expectations and their perceptions of service quality delivery has become the principal focus of research recently. This analysis may provide management with important insights about how well actual service performance compared with the expectations of the consumers. According to Tsang and Qu (2000), a study of Gap 5 is an extremely useful tool for management in monitoring the service delivery in the hotel industry. Thus it is important to test guests' perceptions (actual experience) to see whether service quality provided by the hotel industry in Ghana was meeting, exceeding or falling below guests expectations.

Research Methodology

This study is part of a broader study on service quality in hotels in Accra. To identify the various attributes and/or dimensions that are responsible for service quality in hotels in the Accra Metropolis, a combination of issues from the literature and views from hotel guests, service providers as well as academia were considered. The issues that emerged (57 service attributes) were grouped under seven main dimensions and termed as HOTQUAL. The dimensions were tangibles, overall room values, food and beverage, empathy, reliability, responsiveness and availability of other hotel services. The current study takes-up four dimensions of the original SERVQUAL scale and adds three more dimensions, i.e., overall room value, food and beverage services and availability of other services, in order to assess the customers' perceived service quality of hotels in Accra. The HOTQUAL scale with the seven dimensions was used to collect data from hotel guests. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part measured respondents' expectations regarding service quality in the hotel industry in Ghana. The second part measured issues on perceptions of hotel service quality. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of respondents' socio-demographic and travel characteristics. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements with responses that ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

A pretest of the instrument was conducted in Elmina and Cape Coast. The response led to the re-wording and removal of some items on the scale to enhance the validity of the instrument. Also items with Cronbach's alpha values that were above 0.8 were retained to test the construct reliability

of the scale used to measure service quality. Convenience sampling method was used to sample 200 guests from 72 hotels in Accra. A total of 200 questionnaires were given out and 188 were returned, yielding a response rate of 94%. Of the 188 questionnaires returned, 172 of them were found to be useful for analysis. The data was coded and entered into the SPSS (version 17) software for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as averages and frequencies were employed to present background characteristics of respondents while paired samples t-test was used to test significant differences between guests' expectations and perceptions of service quality.

Results

Profile of Hotel Guests

The sample of hotel guests contained more males (63%) than females (37%). More than 80 per cent of the respondents had a university, college or graduate education. About 72 per cent of the respondents were professionals, executives or salesmen. The majority of respondents were aged between 31 and 50 (59%). This was followed by those aged below 30 (34%) and above 50 years (7%). Most of the respondents were Africans (44%), Americans (23%) or Europeans (21%) with the rest being Asians and South Americans. About 54 per cent of the respondents indicated that the main purpose of the trip was business followed by vacation (30%). The majority of the respondents were staying in the hotels alone (58 %). More than 38 per cent of them were staying in a hotel for less than a week, with 33 per cent staying between one and two weeks. About 46 per cent of the respondents were first time visitors in the hotel with 54 per cent being repeat visit. Table 3 shows these travel characteristics. Table 2 presents the characteristics discussed above.

Table 2: Profile of hotel Guests

<i>Socio-demographic characteristic</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	108	62.7
Female	64	37.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>Age</i>		
30 years and below	58	34.0
31-50	102	58.9
51+	12	7.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>Religion</i>		
Buddhists	3	1.6
Christians	134	77.8
Hindus	8	4.8
Muslims	27	15.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>100.0</i>

<i>Occupation</i>		
Business man/woman	122	71.4
artisan	23	13.3
Civil servants	17	10.2
Student	10	5.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Marital status</i>		
Not married	85	57.0
Married	64	43.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Education</i>		
Secondary education	29	17.5
Tertiary education	143	82.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Continent of origin</i>		
Europe	36	20.8
North America	39	23.3
Asia	16	8.8
Africa	76	44.0
South America	5	3.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Travel party</i>		
Alone	99	57.6
1-5 persons	55	31.9
6 persons and above	18	10.5
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Length of stay</i>		
< 1 week	67	38.6
1-2 weeks	56	32.6
2-3 weeks	30	18.2
> 3 weeks	19	10.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Purpose of visit</i>		
Business	93	53.7
VFR	15	8.8
Vacation	52	30.1
Other	12	7.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Repeat stay</i>		
Yes	79	45.8
No	93	54.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Travel exposure</i>		

Travel experience	143	83.1
No travel experience	29	16.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Guests’ Expectations and perceptions of Service Quality

A customer assesses quality by his/her perception of the way in which the service is performed (Solomon et al., 1985; Juwaheer & Ross, 2003). As a result, service quality has been defined as the outcome of a comparison between expectations of a service and what is perceived to be received (Czepiel et al., 1985; Choi and Chu, 2000; Al-Rousan & Badaruddin, 2010; Al Khattab, 2011). The gap between expectations and perceptions determines the level of service quality from a customer’s perspective. Evidence from table 4 indicates that guests expectations in all the service attributes were consistently high (Mean=4.53) while their perceptions were moderate at a mean value of 3.96. Table 3 shows the differences between hotel guests’ expectations and perceptions of service quality by listing the mean scores of the expectations and perception scales for each of the 57 service quality attributes and the mean gap (perceptions-expectations).

Table 3: Gap analysis for guests (expectations and perceptions)

Attributes	Expectations mean	Perceptions mean	Gap (per.- exp.)	t-value	Eta square
<i>Tangibles</i>					
Clean environment	4.22 (1.49)	3.78 (1.42)	-0.44	6.63*	
Attractive outside appearance	4.17 (1.50)	3.45 (1.34)	-0.72	6.91*	
Attractive interior decor	4.11 (1.51)	3.66 (1.37)	-0.45	5.77*	
Modern looking equipment	4.11 (1.51)	3.64 (1.37)	-0.47	5.82*	
Modern and comfortable furniture	4.17 (1.45)	3.59 (1.34)	-0.58	7.79*	
Staff appear neat and professional	4.22 (1.44)	3.68 (1.37)	-0.54	7.44*	
Attractive and comfortable lobby area	4.19 (1.44)	3.67 (1.29)	-0.52	6.92*	
Adequate parking space	4.15 (1.40)	3.67 (1.37)	-0.48	6.85*	
Visually appealing physical facilities	4.15 (1.41)	3.55 (1.34)	-0.60	7.19*	
Appealing associated service	4.15 (1.36)	3.78 (1.44)	-0.37	6.51*	
Overall score	4.23(1.24)	3.82(1.25)	-0.41	5.21*	0.14
<i>Overall room values</i>					
Clean and comfortable rooms	4.20 (1.45)	3.53 (1.33)	-0.67	8.67*	
Clean and hygienic bathrooms and toilets	4.85 (1.74)	3.55 (1.31)	-1.30	2.92*	
The lighting in the room should be adequate	4.20 (1.41)	3.67 (1.32)	-0.53	7.24*	
The fixtures in the room should sufficient	4.14 (1.41)	3.66 (1.38)	-0.48	6.21*	
The room should be welcoming	4.21 (1.40)	3.62 (1.38)	-0.59	7.29*	

Easily accessible	4.21 (1.38)	3.38 (1.42)	-0.83	8.96*	
Offer complementary items	4.24 (1.34)	3.45 (1.39)	-0.79	9.24*	
Efficient business centre	4.00 (1.46)	3.39 (1.33)	-0.61	5.91*	
Overall score	4.21(1.35)	3.82(1.30)	-0.39	6.21*	0.18
<i>Front office services</i>					
Efficient reservation/booking system	4.20 (1.39)	3.45(1.25)	-0.75	9.01*	
Staff should be polite and friendly	4.18 (1.46)	3.66(1.24)	-0.52	7.03*	
Efficient check in procedure	4.13 (1.48)	3.54 (1.24)	-0.59	7.15*	
Efficient check out procedure	4.19 (1.41)	3.57 (1.24)	-0.62	7.93*	
Staff should perform services right the first time	4.11(1.47)	3.36 (1.28)	-0.75	8.74*	
Staff should be well trained and knowledge	4.12(1.51)	3.44(1.25)	-0.68	8.06*	
Staff should be skilful and experienced	4.10 (1.49)	3.47 (1.23)	-0.63	7.38*	
Staff have good communication skills	4.15 (1.45)	3.46 (1.23)	-0.69	8.56*	
Efficient telephone and internet system	4.11 (1.46)	3.29 (1.24)	-0.82	9.19*	
Accurate billing system	4.14(1.47)	3.34(1.44)	-0.80	10.44*	
Proper Handling of guests complaints	4.13(1.46)	3.40(1.27)	-0.73	7.32*	
Accurate information about hotel services	4.21 (1.39)	3.47 (1.25)	-0.74	8.91*	
Advanced and accurate information about prices	4.13 (1.44)	3.36 (1.27)	-0.77	8.92*	
Overall score	4.22(1.34)	3.83(1.30)	-0.39	7.43*	0.24
<i>Employees</i>					
Show sincere interest in solving guest problems	4.12(1.49)	3.36(1.24)	-0.76	8.69*	
Always be willing to help guests	4.11(1.53)	3.40(1.23)	-0.71	8.34*	
Never too busy to respond to your request	4.09(1.51)	3.41(1.22)	-0.68	7.65*	
Readily available to provide services	4.14(1.47)	3.42(1.21)	-0.72	8.00*	
Provide prompt services without delays	4.13(1.51)	3.42(1.21)	-0.71	7.65*	
Staff should be friendly	4.15(1.47)	3.57(1.24)	-0.58	6.92*	
Staff should be courteous and respectful	4.18(1.43)	3.55(1.23)	-0.63	8.45*	
Behaviour of staff should instill confidence	4.05(1.44)	3.47(1.20)	-0.58	7.19*	
You feel safe in your transaction	4.16(1.43)	3.49(1.27)	-0.67	8.41*	
Staff should call guests by name	3.96(1.53)	2.86(1.47)	-1.10	9.06*	
Staff should understand	4.13(1.42)	3.43(1.30)	-0.70	8.42*	

guests specific needs					
Staff should have time to listen to guests	4.15(1.37)	3.39(1.29)	-0.76	9.50*	
Give guest special attention	4.15(1.41)	3.39(1.28)	-0.76	8.40*	
Have their guests best interest at heart	4.16(1.43)	3.46(1.24)	-0.70	8.31*	
Recognise their customers as guests	4.17(1.37)	3.48(1.27)	-0.69	8.72*	
Overall score	4.19(4.21)	3.89(1.31)	-0.30	6.24*	0.23
<i>Food and beverage services</i>					
Good and eating drinking facilities	4.16(1.46)	3.49(1.24)	-0.67	8.37*	
Should provide variety of food and drinks	4.08(1.51)	3.51(1.30)	-0.57	6.79*	
Should offer room service	4.13(1.45)	3.40(1.32)	-0.73	9.21*	
Should offer prompt food service	4.15(1.49)	3.31(1.26)	-0.84	9.05*	
Should offer high quality and hygienic food	4.16(1.48)	3.54(1.21)	-0.62	7.58*	
Food and drinks prices should be reasonable	4.02(1.51)	3.27(1.40)	-0.75	6.52*	
Overall score	4.21(1.46)	3.93(1.21)	-0.28	5.78*	1.16
<i>Availability of other facilities</i>					
Variety of quality of sports/recreational facilities	3.93(1.47)	3.24(1.35)	-0.69	6.48*	
An efficient business centre	4.01(1.46)	3.40(1.33)	-0.61	5.91*	
Up to date and modern safety facilities	4.03(1.48)	3.43(1.23)	-0.60	6.38*	
Adequate fire safety facilities	4.06(1.49)	3.46(1.25)	-0.60	6.36*	
All year round swimming pool	3.84(1.56)	3.36(1.31)	-0.48	4.41*	
Overall score	4.12(1.14)	3.92(1.21)	-0.20	4.56*	0.10
Total Gap	4.53(4.21)	3.96(1.35)	-0.57	6.55*	0.20

*(significant) t-test two tailed probability ≤ 0.05 ; standard deviations are in parenthesis; a negative gap indicates that guests perceived that service delivery did not meet their expectations; a positive gap indicates that guests perceived that service delivery exceeded their expectations.

Evidence from Table 4 indicates that a total of 54 attributes had relatively high expectations scores ($M > 4.00$) and three had expectations score of $M < 4.00$. The three are “calling guests by their name”; “variety and quality of sporting/recreational facilities” and “all year round swimming pools.”

Individually, the tangibles dimension had the largest gap (-0.4). Items that recorded serious short fall were “attractive outside appearance” (-0.72); “visually appealing physical facilities” (-0.60) and “modern and comfortable furniture” (-0.58) while “appealing service materials” (-0.37); “clean environment” (-0.44) and “attractive interior décor” had the smallest gaps. This suggests that hotels are trying in meeting guests expectations of these service attributes with small gaps while they are failing in those

attributes that recorded high gaps. From the overall room values dimension, “clean and hygienic bathrooms and toilets” (-1.31) had the highest gap followed by “easily accessible rooms” (-0.83) and “offering of complimentary items in rooms” (-0.79). On the other hand, “sufficient fixtures in rooms” had the smallest gap (-0.48) in the overall room values dimension.

Front office services dimension recorded a moderate gap of -0.39 and from this dimension, “efficient telephone and internet system” (-0.82); “accurate billing system” (-0.80) and advance and accurate information” (-0.77) were the top most attributes that fell short of guests expectations whilst “polite and friendly” (-0.52) was the least serious attribute. Under the responsiveness, “showing sincere interest in solving guests problems” (-0.76); readily available to provide services” (-0.72) and all the other service attributes in the dimension recorded relatively high gaps though the overall gap of -0.38 was relatively low. The most serious attributes under empathy that requires critical attention is “staff calling guests by name” (-1.10). These days’ hotel services are so personalized that staff relate to guests on a first name level but Ghanaians tend to be formal in their business dealings by calling guests “Sir” or “Madam.” This result has proved that guests want to be called by their names when they stay in hotels in Accra.

Hotels are also not meeting their guests expectations in “offering prompt food and beverage services” (-0.84) and “offering reasonable prices for food and drinks” (-0.75). This finding goes further to strengthen the rhetoric anecdotal evidence that food and drinks prices in hotels are very expensive. Finally, the overall gap for availability of other facilities and services was the smallest (-0.20) among all the dimensions. The items in this dimension relatively recorded lower gaps ranging from -0.48 to -0.69. All these indicate that hotels in Accra are not doing well in the tangibles dimension but seem to be closing the gap in the availability of other facilities and services. The most critical service quality attributes are “clean and hygienic bathrooms and toilets”; “staff calling guests by name”; easily accessible guestrooms”; “accurate billing system” and “efficient telephone and internet system”.

In sum all the perception scores were consistently lower than the expectation scores. Thus, resulting in the negative gaps which indicate that hotel guests in Accra perceive that service delivery did not meet their expectations. Using the paired sampled t-test to test the significant mean difference (gap) between customers’ perceptions and expectations of service quality, it was revealed at $t=6.55$, $p=0.0$, that there exists a statistically significant difference between guests’ expectations and their perceptions of service quality. The total gap is -0.57. However, the eta square value of 0.20, according to Cohen (1988) indicates that the magnitude of this difference is very large. This finding confirms the results of studies by Juwaheer and Ross (2003), Mohsin, Hussain and Khan (2011), Ukwayin et al., (2012) and Faizan et al. (2012) but contradicts Alin, (2010) findings which revealed a positive gap between customers’ expectations and perceptions.

Differences in Guests’ Perceptions of Service Quality

Though literature is silent on the relationship between the characteristics of customers and their perceptions of service quality, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are differences in perceptions of service quality among customers with different background characteristics. The study therefore sought to explore the differences in hotel guests’ perceptions of service quality against their profile. Table 5 presents the differences. Both the independent t-test and ANOVA were used to test for significant differences between groups. The result is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Differences in Guests’ Perceptions of Service Quality across their background Characteristics

Characteristics	N	Mean	F value	Sign level
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	108	3.22	0.512	0.052*
Female	64	3.80		
<i>Age</i>				
30 years and below	58	3.61	0.758	0.471
31-50	102	3.82		
51+	12	3.77		
<i>Marital status</i>				
Not married	98	3.77	0.122	0.728
Not married	74	3.71		
<i>Educational level</i>				
Secondary education	31	3.21	5.419	0.022*
Tertiary education	141	3.91		
<i>Religion</i>				
Buddhists & Hindus	11	3.68	5.98	0.001*
Christian	133	3.87*		
Muslim	28	2.99*		
<i>Occupation</i>				
Professional/Business Executives	123	3.54	6.59	0.000*
Artisans	23	4.15*		
Civil servants	17	4.24		
Students	9	2.16*		
<i>Purpose of visit</i>				
Business	93	3.75	0.09	0.971
VFR	15	3.82		
Vacation	52	3.71		
Other	12	3.64		
<i>Continent of origin</i>				
Europe	36	3.40	0.71	0.588
North America	39	3.68		
Asia	16	3.37		
Africa	76	3.73		
South America	5	3.60		
<i>Length of stay (weeks)</i>				
< 1	67	3.71		

1-2	56	3.99	2.79	0.042*
2-3	30	3.49*		
>3	19	4.21*		
<i>Repeat stay</i>				
Yes	79	3.59	1.227	0.222
No	93	3.77		
<i>Travel party size</i>				
Alone	99	3.82*		
1-5 persons	55	3.65		
6 persons and above	18	2.86*	7.49	0.008*
<i>Travel Exposure</i>				
Travel experience	143	3.72	1.01	0.316
No travel experience	29	3.96		
<i>Hotel rating</i>				
1-star	7	3.93*		
2-star	11	3.54		
3-star	71	3.33	9.13	0.000*
4-star	38	3.16		
5-star	37	2.88*		

*significant at 0.05

Source: Fieldwork, 2012

Regarding the gender of guests and their perceptions of service quality in hotels in Accra, it was revealed in Table 5 that there is a significant ($F= 0.05$) difference between males and females perceptions of service quality. Females, thus, perceived service quality to be higher ($M= 3.80$) than their male counterparts ($M= 3.22$). Though results from Table 5 indicates that guests between the ages of 30 and 50 years perceived service quality to be higher (3.819) than those who were 30 years and below (3.610) on one side and those above 50 years old on the other side. In other words, it can be said that the middle aged guests perceived service quality to be a bit higher than the young and older guests. However, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of service quality in hotels among the various age groups. With regard to marital status of hotel guests, there was no significant difference between the perception of service quality between both married and unmarried guests. All of them perceived hotel service quality to be moderate.

Guests who had attained tertiary education perceived service quality to be higher (3.91) than those with secondary level education (3.21). Statistically, there was a significant difference between both guests with secondary education and those who had attained tertiary level education. Religion, however, was significant ($F= 0.001$) in guests perceptions of service quality in hotels. Christians perceived service quality to be higher ($M= 3.87$) than Buddhists ($M= 3.68$) and Muslims ($M= 2.99$). Results from Table 5 shows that professionals and business executives had the lowest ($M= 2-16$) perceptions regarding service quality in hotels. Conversely, civil servants and artisans perceived service quality to be higher ($M= 4.24$ and $M= 4.15$ respectively) than students ($M= 3.54$). Guests staying in hotels with the

sole purpose of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) perceived the service in the hotels to be higher (3.82) than those staying in the hotel for business, vacation and other purposes such as education among others. There was no significant difference between the perceptions of service quality for all the guests visiting for various purposes. Though, guests from the Africa continent perceived service quality to be higher (M= 3.73) than guests from other continents, there was no statistically significant difference between their perceptions of service quality in hotels. In terms of the length of stay of guests in the various hotels, there was a significant difference in the perception of service quality between guests staying in hotels for shorter periods (less than one week) than those staying for longer periods (more than three weeks). For example, evidence from Table 5 indicates that guests staying for less than one week perceived service quality to be lower (3.71) than those staying for more than three weeks (4.21).

Although those who were staying in the hotel for the first time perceived service quality to be higher (3.77) than those who were repeating their stay (3.58), there was no statistically significant difference between the two categories of guests. Travel party size was also found to be significant with guests' perceptions of service quality because persons were staying in the hotels alone or with up to five persons and those staying with six persons or more. Those staying alone in the hotels had higher (3.82) perceptions of service quality than with guests staying with a relative smaller number of people (1-5 persons) and those staying with more people (6 or more persons). Of whether guests have stayed in a hotel before or not, it is evident from Table 5 that guests who had not stayed in any hotel before their stay perceived service quality to be higher (3.96) than those who had lodged in a hotel before. There was however no significant difference between the two groups of guests. Table 5 also indicates that guests who lodged with 1-star rated hotels had the highest (M= 3.93) perception of service quality, followed by those in 2-star rated hotels (M= 3.54), 3-star rated hotels (M= 3.33), 4-star rated hotels (M= 3.16) and then 5-star rated hotels (M= 2.88). In other words, the higher the star rating of a hotel, the lower perceptions of service quality by guests.

Discussion

In general, the expectations of guests on all the service quality items were higher than their perceptions. The study has established that guests' expectations of service quality are far above their perceptions of the service they had received resulting in the negative gaps. Thus, strengthening the expectancy-disconfirmation theory that disconfirmation is negative. This negative disconfirmation indicates that guests' perceived service provided by the hotels in Accra suffered a shortfall. Just as the extended gap model intimates, the other gaps (Gap 1, Gap 2, Gap 3, Gap 4, gap 6 and Gap 7) are identified as functions of the way in which service is delivered and the existence of these gaps leads to the extent of Gap 5. In other words, the extent of Gap 5 depends on the size and direction of these gaps. These perceptions could be caused by a number of factors including understaffing, inefficient operational procedures, staff in need of training, management not

understanding customer desires, lack of service commitment by management and frontline staff and some combination of the aforementioned.

Although, according to the findings of the study, all the gaps or the total gap was relatively high, the largest discrepancy between expectations and perceptions of guests was in the “responsiveness” and “front office services” dimension. Tsang and Qu (2000) posit that the larger the gap, the more serious the service quality shortfall from the point of view of guests. Interactions between the customer and the service organization lie at the heart of service delivery and people who deliver the service are of key importance to both the customer they serve and the employer they represent. To the customer, the employee exemplifies the service (Arasli *et al*, 2005). Guests clearly expect efficient telephone and internet services as well as accurate billing system. They also want a high degree of interaction with the hotel staff that are sensitive to their needs and show sincere interest in solving their problems, prompt service delivery and will not tolerate delays in response times. This has implication for management of hotels. Assessment of this gap is critical because it helps to identify service shortfalls in the hotel industry.

Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) suggested that poor performance by service firms is primarily due to not knowing what their customers expect from them. Hotels in Accra are not customer focused. Also, their products are not tailored to meet guest demand. They are in a “de facto cartel”-like position (Smid & Zwart, 2002) and exploit this situation with a “take it or leave it” attitude towards the hotel services they offer (Arasli *et al*, 2005). This de facto status enjoyed by hotels in Accra faces the risk of breaking down, especially in the present time that there is a strong competition from multinational and franchise hotels, some hotels may be forced to close down from too much competition and high operating costs related to maintenance. If the hotels in Accra don’t comprehend and fulfill customer requirements, and therefore enhance service quality, they will not be able to compete with foreign hotels; will be faced with a loss of clientele and a deterioration of quality over the coming years.

The highly associating profile variables with guests’ perceptions of service quality were their sex, level of education, religion, occupation and length of stay. The travel party size and hotel rating also exerted significant differences in guests’ perceptions as well. This implies that guests perceive service quality differently based on their profile variables.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since it is more expensive to find and attract a new customer than it is to retain an existing one (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991), hotels need to redefine their corporate image to one that emphasizes service quality by introducing standards for service excellence.

This study has shown that guests are looking for hotels that keep their promises, provide prompt service and have employees that are competent and always willing to help the customer. Hotels need to reassess

guests expectations from time to time in terms of products and services and thus provide client specific services. The hotel sector needs to invest in telephone and internet services as well as employee training programs that will provide employees with an understanding of service culture and service excellence. Employee training programs should pay particular attention to “interpersonal communication” and “customer care” factors, in order to be able to meet the customers’ need for “staff showing sincere interest in solving their problems” and “providing prompt service”. This will result in high customer satisfaction and retention, extend the zone of customer tolerance for service failures, increase recommendations about the hotel to others and increase customer loyalty (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991; Caruana, 2002; Reichheld, 1996) within the hotel industry. The gap analysis in this study enables practitioners to identify the most and the least important dimensions underlying guests’ perceptions of service quality. Studies have shown primary importance of repeat customers for long-term financial performance in this industry. In general, the results have revealed that hotel customers are expecting improvement in service quality from the hotels. Thus, hotel managers should take measures to improve service quality provided by the hotels in all service quality dimensions. The factor loadings within these dimensions give important signals about service areas that need to be improved in the hotels. This might enable to a better utilization of limited resources and more effective marketing strategies. Specifically, hotel managers should pay more attention to the tangible, empathy and competence as well as the reliability aspects of the service quality because customers have the highest expectations scores on these dimensions.

Since it is more expensive to find and attract a new customer than it is to retain an existing one (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991), hotels need to redefine their corporate image to one that emphasizes service quality by introducing standards for service excellence. This study has shown that guests are looking for hotels that keep their promises, provide prompt service and have employees that are competent and always willing to help the customer. Again, hotels also need to re-assess guests’ expectations from time to time in terms of products and services and thus, provide client specific services. The hotel sector needs to invest in telephone and internet services as well as employee training programs that will provide employees with an understanding of service culture and service excellence. Employee training programs should pay particular attention to “interpersonal communication” and “customer care” factors, in order to meet the customers’ expectations for “staff showing sincere interest in solving their problems” and “providing prompt service.” This will result in high customer satisfaction and retention, extend the zone of customer tolerance for service failures, increase recommendations about the hotel to others and increase customer loyalty

(Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991; Caruana, 2002; Vijayadurai, 2008) within the hotel industry.

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