Customers' Perception of Food Service Quality: The Case of Cape Coast

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Abstract

Providing quality food services has become one of the critical issues in the tourism industry and a lot of studies have focused on it. However, there seems to be paucity of data on service quality in Ghana's hospitality industry, making it difficult to fashion an appropriate management intervention. Also there has been very little attempt to relate customers' perception of service quality to their socio-demographic characteristics as well as the characteristics of organizations delivering the service. This study, therefore, analyzes customers' perception of service quality in the food service sector in Cape Coast Municipality, an important tourist destination in Ghana. A survey of 101 customers of food service facilities revealed that there was a negative service gap between customers' expectations and perception of service quality. The expectations of forty percent of the respondents were not met and this was attributed mainly to the attitude of employees and long waiting periods. The findings have serious managerial implications for training, marketing, motivation and provision of services and amenities. It also has implications for the grading of food service facilities by regulators of the industry.

Introduction

Service quality delivery has become an issue of great concern to nations and hospitality managers. It has been argued that it is one of the major challenges facing hospitality managers (Lazer & Layton, 1999). The hospitality industry sells experiences which are produced and consumed immediately. Due to this, it is difficult to correct any defects on the service before it gets to the final consumer. Also, the tourism industry is becoming increasingly competitive with tourist attractions and facilities being replicated in various destinations and, therefore, the only thing that puts one destination ahead of the other is the quality of its service. However, quality remains a very subjective concept, which has been defined variously (Reeves & Bednar, 1994).

The importance of service quality to emerging tourist destinations cannot be

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overemphasized as quality service is possibly the foremost determinant of success in the tourism and hospitality business (Tsao Fang, 1997). A bad experience during a service encounter will mar the entire vacation experience, which will result in not only a lack of repeat visit but also a negative word-of-mouth publicity for the destination. Research has shown that a customer who is not satisfied will typically inform about eight to ten people about his/her experience (Leboeuf, 1987). A destination that does not deliver quality service is, therefore, likely to suffer reduced patronage and bad publicity and thereby loose its customers to competing destinations. Also, at the micro level, service quality has been found to be related to sales growth and profitability of restaurants (Bernhardt *et al*, 2000).

There, however, seems to be a paucity of credible data on service quality in Ghana's hospitality industry making it difficult to fashion an appropriate management intervention to address the problem because the exact dimensions of the challenge and its causes are not known. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to assess the level of perceived service quality in the food service sector in Ghana by analyzing customers' perceptions and expectations as well as the organizational characteristics of the food service facilities. It is expected that the results of this study will contribute towards filling existing research gaps and to fashion appropriate corrective measures to improve service standards in the tourism industry.

Literature Review

Quality

Quality has been identified as the most important strategic management issue (Fortuna, 1990; Cooper *et al*, 1993; Olsen *et al*, 1998). However, it is a very subjective concept; in view of this, it has been defined variously. Reeves and Bednar (1994) identified six different definitions of quality namely, value, conformance to specifications, conformance to requirements, fitness for use, loss avoidance and meeting and exceeding customers' expectations. Quality has also been defined as conformance to design (Chase & Aquilano, 1992); design and conformance to quality characteristics that are of interest to customers when evaluating the product offered by the firm (Banker *et al*, 1998); totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that satisfy a customers' needs (British Standards Institute, 1983; Juran 1992). According to Jones and Lockwood (1989), the modern concept of quality is fitness for purpose. Olsen *et al,* (1998) drawing on the works of Gronroos (1982) and Juran (1992) defined quality in the hospitality industry to mean doing the right thing, right, consistently.

Service Quality

The issue of service quality has received a lot of attention in the hospitality industry (Kotler *et al,* 2003; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005). The subject of service quality in the hospitality industry is even more important because it has been linked to the competitiveness of hospitality firms (Kotler *et al*, 2003, Campos-Soria *et al*, 2005); and customer purchase behaviour and retention (Crosby *et al*, 1990; Oh & Mount, 1998). There has, however, been little attempt to link service quality to the organizational characteristics of facilities providing services to customers. This is particularly significant in the context of a developing country like Ghana, where most of the hospitality facilities are small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and often lack the capacity for reinforcing service quality. In the opinion of Jones and Haven-Tang (2005. xviii) 'Orthodox approaches to considerations of service quality management do not map on well to the heterodoxy of tourism SMEs and micro businesses due to the inherent characteristics of tourism SMEs and the problems associated with their understanding of service quality and how to achieve it.' Characteristics of tourism and hospitality SMEs include weak business models, lack of market stability, low levels of capital investment, poor management skills and their resistance to change makes the delivery of service quality difficult to achieve.

There have been several attempts to distinguish between 'product quality' and 'service quality' because products differ from services. Whilst goods are produced (tangible), services are performed (intangible) (Olsen *et al*, 1998). The hospitality industry provides services which have been differentiated from products because they are intangible (Cooper *et al*, 1993); are simultaneously produced and consumed (Sasser *et al*, 1978; Bowen, 1990); involve customers in the production process (Olsen *et al*, 1998); are perishable (Hartman & Lingren, 1993); are perceived by customers to be associated with risk-taking (Sasser *et al*, 1978) and are variable (Renaghan, 1983). These unique characteristics of services make the issue of service quality particularly imperative because the attainment of 100 percent zero-defect service delivery is almost impossible (Collie *et al*, 2000).

However, there is another school of though every service has a product component. Gronroos (1982) distinguished between technical quality and functional quality as the components of the service image delivery. Technical quality is what the customer actually receives from the service provider such as quality of food served in the restaurant. Functional quality, on the other hand, is how the technical component of the service is transferred to the consumer e.g. the attitudes and behaviour of frontline staff. Kotler *et al,* (2003) identified a third component of quality, societal (ethical) quality. According to them, societal quality is credence quality which consumers cannot evaluate in

advance of purchase. In this vein, hospitality businesses concerned about quality service must combine, balance and juggle the tangible and intangible product (Ribeiro, 2003).

Service quality is an ambiguous concept which has received a lot of attention from researchers (Schneider & White, 2004). It goes beyond describing a firm's products or services as excellent or poor to include a range of factors which determine customers' perception of a service (Kwortnik, 2005). However, the most quoted definition is the one provided by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), who defined it as the degree to which a customer's perception of the service encounter equates or exceeds his/her expectations for the service (ES $\leq$ PS) where ES is expected service and PS is perceived service.

Conceptual Framework

Service Quality is what the customer perceives and not what management or workers think (Gronroos, 1990; & Olsen *et al*, 1998). Perceived service quality is customers' assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of a service (Zeithaml, 1988). Perceived service quality is a subjective concept and therefore, customers' perception of the level of service quality of a hospitality facility will vary from one customer to another.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model on Customers' Perception of Service Quality
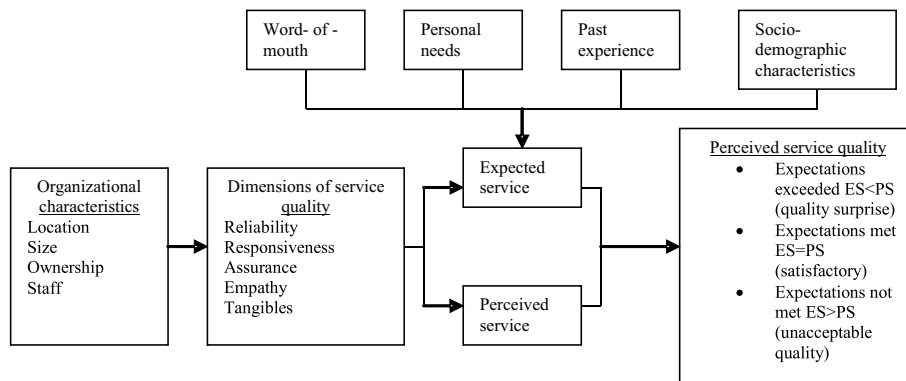
Source: Adapted from Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994)

According to Gronroos (1982), perceived service quality depends on experienced service and perceived service, as indicated in Figure 1. Customers' perception of the service quality of a facility, therefore, depends on their own past experiences and perception. The latter is influenced by attributes of the

service delivery process (Bolton & Drew, 1991), whilst expectations are influenced by personal needs, word-of-mouth communication and past experience (Parasuraman *et al,* 1985). There has, however, been very little attempt to link the socio-demographic characteristics of customers to their perception of service quality. Consumers' perception of service quality is as a result of an evaluation of the gap between expected service and perceived service (Gronroos, 1982; Parasuraman *et al*, 1985). As the gap widens negatively (i.e. expectations are higher than perception), the perception of service quality declines. It is, therefore, important to first identify what guests perceive as quality so as to provide service at the quality level desired by them. Managers must also not promise more than they can deliver and try to deliver their services to match customers' expectations. Most of the research on customers' perception of service quality has been undertaken in hotels.

Parasuraman *et al* (1985) have developed the SERVQUAL instrument for measuring service quality. According to them, customers perceive service quality in terms of five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The various quality dimensions can be quantified by obtaining measures to represent expectations and perceptions of performance of service attributes which are relevant to each dimension. Differences between expectations and perceptions can then be calculated on these attributes and then averaged across attributes.

However, the SERVQUAL model has suffered a barrage of criticisms. The criticisms have bothered on the measurement of expectation (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Teas, 1993), the nature and number of dimensions (Finn & Lamb, 1991; McDougall & Levesque, 1994), the relative importance or the weight of service attributes (Carman, 1990, Fick & Ritchie, 1991) and the timing for collection of data on expectations and perceptions (Weber, 1997; Caruana, Ewing & Ramaseshan, 2000; Hudson *et al*, 2004). Cronin and Taylor (1994) argued that asking respondents to indicate their perceptions of performance means they have already compared mentally, perceptions and expectations whilst Teas (1993) questioned the SERVQUAL scale of expectations which are not able to differentiate between types of expectations when they provide evaluations. Finn and Lamb (1991) discovered that the dimensions of service quality change depending on the type of service i.e. product services and pure services. On the SERVQUAL model, Carman (1990) suggested that it should be $Q=\sum li(Pi-Ei)$ instead of $Q=Pi-Ei$, where I is the important service attribute of i. In view of these criticisms, there have been several modifications to the original SERVQUAL model, including service performance perceptions (SERVPERF) (Cronin and Taylor, 1994); holiday satisfaction (HOLSAT) (Tribe, 1998); Dinning Service Quality (DINESERV) (Bojanic & Rosen, 1994); Lodging Service Quality (LODGQUAL) (Getty & Thompson, 1994): Ecotourists' Quality Expectations (ECOSERV) (Khan, 2003).

However, different studies have yielded different results in terms of the importance of the five dimensions to customers. Parasuraman *et al* (1991) identified that customers consistently rank reliability as the most important service quality dimension. Getty and Thompson (1994) in a related study on the lodging industry also identified reliability as the most important service quality dimension. Nightingale (1985) in a study of the characteristics of quality perceived by guests in a large city hotel identified availability as the most important dimension to customers. However, in a related study by Farouk and Ryan (1991), business customers in a hotel found that staff attitudes and attention to guests were the most important factors to them. Based on the conceptual framework and the contributions by various authors and research context, the paper tested three hypotheses;

H_1: There is no positive relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics of customers and their perception of service quality.

H_2: Customers' perception of service quality is not influenced by the size of the facility.

H_3: There is no significant difference between the expectations of service quality and the perception of service quality by customers.

Methodology

The primary data collection instrument for this study was developed around the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman *et al* (1988). The original SERVQUAL instrument contains a list of 22 items designed to load on the five dimensions of service quality but this was modified to 10 items since some of the items were duplications. Respondents were asked to rate their expectations and perceptions of service quality on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=*strongly agree* to 5=*strongly disagree*), based on the five dimensions proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

The target population comprised all customers of food service facilities in the Cape Coast Municipality. A sample of 150 customers was selected for the study through cluster sampling. The study area (figure 2) was divided into four clusters i.e. beachfront (n=35), commercial business district (CBD) (n=40), outskirts (n=35) and campuses of educational institutions (n=40). A total of 101 questionnaires representing a response rate of 67.3 percent were retrieved. Since the Ghana Tourist Board (GTB) did not have a comprehensive list of all food service outlets in the Cape Coast Municipality, the cluster sampling

method had to be employed. In the sampled food service facilities, only customers who had finished eating their meals were covered so that they could give a more objective appraisal of the quality of the service which they had experienced. The data collected was clearly edited, coded and processed using the Statistical Package for Science Solutions (SPSS) was used.

Figure 2: Cape Coast Municipality
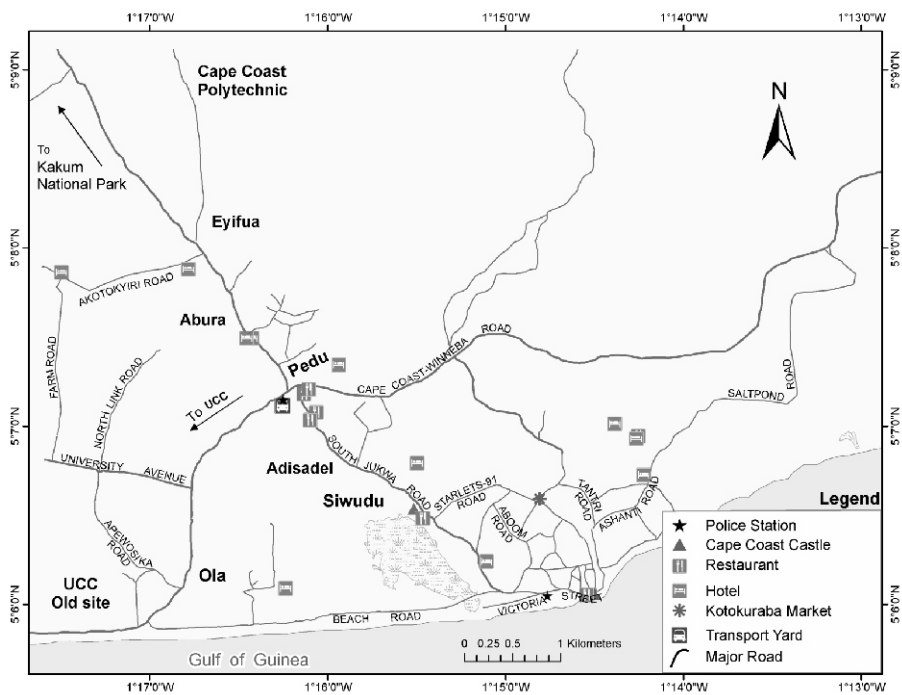
While the pair-wise t-test was used to test the third hypothesis H_3, the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to test the first two hypotheses (H_1 and H_2). Preliminary analysis was done to ensure that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were not violated. A reliability test was also conducted on the perception and expectation of service quality items on the likert scale to establish internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha was used because it is the most commonly accepted formula for assessing the reliability of a measurement scale with multi-point items (Peter, 1979). To avoid very

low Cronbach alpha values, all the negative worded scale items were reverse coded. The cronbach alpha for the multi-point items was 0.91, above the critical level of 0.70, which means there is internal consistency and stability in the data.

Customers' Perception of Service Quality: The Evidence

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 100)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Male	67	67.0
Female	33	33.0
Age		
Less than 21	9	9.0
21-29	47	47.0
30-39	25	25.0
40-49	13	13.0
50-59	3	3.0
60+	3	3.0
Education		
Primary	8	8.1
Secondary	18	18.2
Post secondary/Training college	5	5.1
Technical/vocational	8	8.1
Polytechnic	21	21.2
University	39	39.4
Religion		
Christian	90	90.0
Moslem	10	10.0
Income		
Less than GH¢50	14	16.7
GH¢50- GH¢150	39	46.4
GH¢151- GH¢250	15	17.9
GH¢251- ¢350	4	4.8
¢351- GH¢450	2	2.4
GH¢451- GH¢550	3	3.6
GH¢551+	7	8.3
Occupation		
Student	32	33.3
Driver	6	6.3
Services	16	16.6
Skilled professionals	31	32.3
Artisans	6	6.2
Secretary/clerk	5	5.2

Source: Data Collection, 2006

The respondents covered in this study were mainly between the ages of 21 and 29 years (47%). As indicated on Table 1, more than two-thirds (67%) were males with 33 percent being females. In terms of the level of education, the respondents had mostly tertiary institution background (i.e. 21.2% polytechnic and 39.4% university). This is due to the fact that the majority of the respondents were from the University of Cape Coast and the Cape Coast Polytechnic. With regards to religious affiliation, 90 percent were Christians and 10 percent Moslems. While the low percentage of Moslems could partly be due to the fact that the data collection period coincided with the Moslem month of fasting, the reality is that Christians are more than Moslems in Ghana. Most of the respondents earned below GH¢200 ($275). Majority of the respondents (61.2%) became aware of the food service outlets by word-of-mouth or recommendations from friends and relatives and visited those facilities occasionally (39.8%).

Table 2: Characteristics of Foodservice Facilities

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Type		
Restaurant	60	60.6
*Chop bar	30	30.4
Canteen	9	9.1
N	99	100
Sitting Capacity		
1-20	32	32.7
21-40	25	25.5
41-60	14	14.3
61-80	4	4.1
81+	23	23.5
N	98	100
Staff strength		
1-5	45	45.4
6-10	27	27.3
11-15	18	18.2
16-20	10	9.1
N	99	100
Ownership		
Sole proprietor	75	76.5
Local partnership	11	11.2
Local & foreign partnership	2	2.0
Local Limited liability company	5	5.1
Institutional ownership	5	5.1
N	98	100
Other services offered		
Banqueting	16	22.9
Catering	47	67.1
Delivery	7	10.0
N	70	100

*Chop bar is a local eating place where mainly local dishes are served to customers' order. Counter service is normally provided.
Source: Data Collection, 2006.

As shown in Table 2, the foodservice outlets that were studied exhibited characteristics of small to medium enterprises (SMEs). The Ghana Ministry of Trade and Industry defines a small enterprise as employing six to 29 people with fixed assets valued at $100,000 whilst a medium enterprise employs between 30 to 99 people with fixed assets amounting to $ 1 million. The majority of food service facilities surveyed (45.4%) employ between one to six people. They are predominantly sole proprietorship businesses (76.5%) which seat up to 20 people (32.7%) and 21-40 people (25.5%) and are mostly restaurants (60.6%) and *chop bars* (25.3%) which offer catering services (67.1%) and banqueting (22.9%), apart from serving food and beverage.

Table 5: Comparisons between Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality

Quality Dimension	Expectation		Perception		Pair-wise t-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Reliability	2.574	1.126	2.990	0.954	-3.362	0.001
Assurance	2.228	1.038	3.129	1.017	-7.468	0.000
Tangibles	2.178	0.974	2.980	1.183	-7.75	0.000
Empathy	2.248	0.963	2.960	1.067	-6.220	0.000
Responsiveness	2.158	1.155	3.089	1.242	-7.040	0.000

Survey Scale: 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= indifferent, 4= disagree and 5= strongly disagree

Source: Data collection, 2006

Table 5 show a paired-sample t-test conducted to compare the mean ratings for expectations and perceptions of service quality on five service-quality dimension. The results show that the mean scores were significantly lower ($p > 0.001$) on perceptions of all five dimensions of service quality, suggesting a negative service gap (ES>PS).

Table 6: Correlations between Size of the Facilities and Perception of Service Quality

Organizational Characteristic	Correlation Coefficient	P-value	N
Class	0.034	0.369	97
Sitting capacity	-0.005	0.479	96
Staffing	0.030	0.385	97

Source: Data collection, 2006

Table 6 shows the correlations between perception of service quality and the size of the facilities. The results suggest that almost all the variables did not explain customers' perception of service quality. The key variables used in this analysis were class, sitting capacity and number of employees.

Table 7: Correlations between Socio-demographic Characteristics and Perception of Service

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Correlation Coefficient	p-value	N
Age	0.019	0.425	98
Sex	-0.067	0.257	98
Education	0.398	0.000	97
Religion	0.064	0.264	98
Income	0.069	0.298	83
Occupation	-0.178	0.043	94

Source: Data collection, 2006

The analysis also explored whether the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents could explain their perception of service quality. However, as shown in Table 7, they did not adequately explain customers' perception of service quality. The only significant correlation was with the level of education (0.40), which had a positive relationship. There was also a limited negative correlation with occupation (-0.18). The level of education of customers, therefore, appears to determine their perception of service quality in the food service facilities.

Discussion of Findings

This study has provided some very useful insights into our understanding of service quality. There is a negative service gap in food service delivery in the food service sector in Cape Coast. Expectations were higher than perceptions in all five service quality dimensions (ES>PS). Over 40 percent of respondents indicated that their expectations for the food service outlets were not met whilst 20.6 percent suggested they would not eat in those facilities again. This is a bleak picture of service quality which calls for management intervention. For those whose expectations were not met, the most often mentioned reasons were attitude of employees (18.6%) and long waiting periods (18.6%). The

implication is that quality dimensions of empathy and responsiveness also need improvement in those facilities.

Managers of the food service facilities in Cape Coast need to address this negative service quality gap due to the effect it has on their image. This perception has the potential of affecting their quest for new customers and retaining existing customers because most customers (61.2%) get to know of the food service facilities by word-of-mouth . This means customers base their choice of food service facility on what they are told by friends and relatives. Only 2 percent base their decisions on radio or television advertisements. This situation could exacerbate the spread of negative service experiences among actual and potential customers.

In general, the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents did not correlate significantly with their perception of service quality, except for level of education. This tends to support findings by Teye *et al,* (2002) in their study on residents' attitude towards tourism development in the same area. They reported that as education levels increased, perception of tourism also improved.

Another interesting observation from the results is that food service facilities in Cape Coast are quite homogeneous (Table 2). It is, therefore, understandable that the characteristics of the food service facilities did not correlate significantly with customers' perception of service quality. They have similar ownership structure, sitting capacity, staff strength and services offered. It is difficult to clearly draw a line of distinction between a restaurant and a *chop bar* as they often provide the same service style and menu, except that the former normally provide table service. At the moment, there is no single multinational or restaurant chain in Cape Coast. Their presence would have provided a better basis for comparisons and correlations since they have distinct characteristics. Compounding the complexity of the situation is the fact that though hotels in Ghana have been classified and graded on the basis of their services and facilities, the grading of food service establishments by the GTB has not followed similar clear-cut criteria.

This notwithstanding, there was a minimal correlation between perception of service quality and ownership (r =0.10). The ownership structure impacts on service quality. Whilst multinational food service facilities like McDonalds and KFC have the blueprint and resources for delivering quality service, foodservice facilities owned by individuals or sole proprietors are usually smaller and lack the capital, technology and other resources that could enhance service quality as alluded to by Jones and Haven-Tang (2006). Such facilities lack a good business model and organisation structure that could support the provision of service quality. The proprietors who mostly double as managers, take critical decisions without consulting anybody. They are also tempted to look more at the bottom line rather than the welfare of customers

and employees. The employment of unqualified staff, coupled with the lack of training or motivation for their staff contributes to the present perception of service quality by customers. Unfortunately, more than three-quarters of the food service facilities in the study area (76.5%) are sole proprietorship businesses and this explains the negative service gap.

Results from this study also suggest that customers of food service outlets in Cape Coast seem to associate quality with the tangible aspects of service such as the food, seating arrangement among others (technical quality). When asked what they liked most about the facilities, customers mostly mentioned location (25%) and quality of food (22.4%). With regards to what needs to be changed or improved, more than one-third of the responses bothered on the physical facilities (35.2%). The t-value for expected service quality and perceived service quality on the various quality dimensions was highest for tangibles (t= -7.75). This lends further credence to the fact that customers of food service facilities in Cape Coast attach more importance to tangibles. This seems to be different from the results of similar studies by Parasuraman *et al,* (1991) and Thompson (1994)*,* which showed that reliability is the most important service quality dimension to respondents.

In this regard, managers of food service facilities in Cape Coast need to pay more attention to the technical quality or the tangible aspects of the service. Quality is a subjective concept and findings from the study indicate that customers of food service facilities in Cape Coast expressed a lot of reservations about the ambience and facilities of the food service outlets. In most food service outlets, managers place more emphasis on the food itself, to the neglect of other facilities like cutlery, plates, air conditioners, tables and chairs. The quality of these items contributes in no small measure to the entire service experience and this would have to be upgraded.

Conclusion and Implications for Research

This study has unearthed customers' perception of service quality in the food service sector of the tourism industry in Cape Coast. The results revealed a negative service gap between customers' expectations and perceptions. Understanding what customers perceive is a logical first step to addressing the issue. The study has provided some data and information on what needs to be changed in order to improve service quality delivery in the food service sector in Cape Coast. Appropriate management interventions such as the training of staff and upgrading of facilities aimed at arresting the problem should, therefore, be pursued. Since service quality is also a subjective concept, the patrons of food service facilities in Cape Coast place a high premium on the tangible aspects of the food service, which implies management must invest in

their physical facilities as well as train and motivate staff.

The study was conducted out of the tourist season and, therefore, the perceptions of foreign tourists were not adequately captured. It would, therefore, be useful to understand foreigners' perception of service quality in the food service sector in Ghana, in the light of the competitiveness of Ghana as a tourist destination. Also, customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality were derived in a single interview. One major criticism of the use of SERVQUAL is that respondents are made to complete the survey in one interview, and some researchers   have recommended that two interviews should be conducted with a given respondent, one before the service experience and the other after the experience (Caruana, Ewing, & Ramaseshan 2000; Hudson *et al,* 2004). The absence of fast food chains and other forms of food service facilities may have thwarted the attempt to link service quality to organizational characteristics.

On the basis of these observations in the study area, future research should be directed at foreign tourists and managers of the food service facilities. According to Oh (2001), involving managers in the early process of quality research is desirable, especially for developing a set of strategically important attributes. Also, a similar study should be done in Accra or Kumasi where different categories of food service outlets exist.

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