



# Perception of Service Quality: Voices of Guests and Lodge Managers in Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa

Tondani Nethengwe\*  
University of Venda, School of Management Sciences  
Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management  
Thohoyandou South Africa Private bag X5050 Thohoyandou 0950  
email: Tondani.nenthengwe@univen.ac.za

Munei Nengovhela  
University of Venda, School of Management Sciences  
South Africa

Richard Shambare  
University of Venda, School of Management Sciences  
South Africa

Corresponding author\*

## Abstract

Over the past decade the proliferation of lodging establishments in Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa, has intensified competition within the sector, which is threatening the survival of many of the businesses. As a result, lodging establishment businesses are continuously searching for strategies to maintain their market share in a tricky environment. Given the high service nature of the hospitality sector, managers seek to improve customers' experience and service offering. The current study presents the results of an investigation into managers' and guests' perceptions of service quality in one municipal district in Limpopo Province, South Africa, and the ways in which service quality can lead to customer satisfaction. A qualitative study was designed to collect data, through semi-structured interviews, from three lodging establishments as well as from five guests. The study found managers to be perceiving satisfaction as being highly influenced by tangibles. On the other hand, guests were also observed to attribute satisfaction to both tangible and intangible factors, including employees' attitudes, and to 'ambience'. Despite this revelation shared with them, lodging establishment managers appeared to lack the urgency to prioritise employee training as a measure to enhance employee attitudes. The implications of the study are many. Firstly, managers need to invest more resources towards employee training. Secondly, tangible factors such as improving the environment and ambience, are likely to enhance guests' (intangible) emotional experiences.

**Keywords:** service quality, lodge managers, Rural Lodging Establishments, guest's perceptions

## Introduction

Service quality has been said to directly influence service firms' growth and profitability. This is because quality service satisfies customers while at the same time creating positive revisit intention. The current paper presents an enquiry into an evaluation done by guests and managers of lodging establishments in the Vhembe District Municipality concerning the factors which make up service quality and guest satisfaction. The researcher considered such an enquiry to be critical in terms of improving the quality of service of lodging establishments in the district and elsewhere in the country, not only because of the intensifying competition in the sector, but also in terms of being able to provide valuable, in-depth information on perceptions of service quality in this sector, specifically on whether managers and guests perceive service quality similarly or differently. The question the researcher was attempting



to answer was, 'Do managers and guests of rural lodging establishments perceive service quality and guest satisfaction similarly?' In other words, do their perceptions of two paramount concepts in hospitality services marketing deviate significantly or not? The literature appears to argue that differences arise when the service delivery perceptions of managers and those of guests/customers are in conflict, or differ sharply (Amin, Yaha, Faizatul, Ismayatim, Nasharuddin & Kassim, 2013). According to a recent survey by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2016), tourism made a direct contribution of R118.6bn to the South African GDP during the 2015 financial year, with a forecast to rise to R178.3bn in 2026. Apart from its financial impacts, the WTTC (2016) further reported that the South African tourism industry at the time created 703,000 jobs directly, with a forecast of rising to 1.1 million by 2026 (WTTC, 2016). Due to the large proportion of rural areas which make up South Africa, the South African government adopted and formulated the National Rural Tourism Strategy in 2012, whose vision was to have in place a developed rural tourism economy and a mission to enhance and develop tourism in rural communities, particularly in less visited provinces (National Department of Tourism, 2012).

Rural tourism has been variously defined. In the 1990s Lane (1994) defined it in general terms simply as tourism that takes place in the countryside. A more recent definition of tourism, including rural tourism, by the WTTC (2016) includes the need for accommodation and specifies this in terms of a guest or guests staying in accommodation for over 24 hours. Melo, Hernandez-Maestro and Munoz-Gallego (2016) see rural tourism as including, among other services, accommodation services. The wide variety of rural lodging establishments has been described as including hotels, hostels, guesthouses, motels and farm houses (Hernandez-Maestro, Munoz-Gallego, & Santos-Requejo, 2007).

Quality and satisfaction as perceived by all those involved in the industry are mutually inclusive concepts, and together they constitute the basic cornerstones of marketing. They translate into business owners in the industry being able to actualize customer retention and improve the profitability of a business (Coti, 2013). Customer satisfaction determines the level of service quality that was rendered during their stay (Pizam, Shapoval, & Ellis, 2016), customer expectations determine the customer's perceptions of service quality (Hayes, 1997), and the actual service delivery process determines the organisation's managerial perceptions of service quality (Sudin, 2011). Thus, from this literature it is clear that the hospitality sector in any area or country should focus on providing quality service with respect to the factors of quality that are most important to customers, as perceived by the customers themselves (Nasution & Mavondo, 2005). In this context, Walls, Okumus, Wang and Kwun (2011), in their survey and meta-analysis of hospitality management studies, conclude that customer satisfaction and experiences are multidimensional, subjective, and unique to each individual. It is this subjective dimension which suggests a qualitative approach to their enquiry. In spite of this recommendation, globally there has been little qualitative research conducted into customers' various definitions and perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (Lu, Berchoux, Marek & Chen, 2015). This applies particularly to Rural Lodging Establishments (RLEs) while it is also applicable in urban settings. For the survival of rural lodging establishments, and the continued harnessing of tourism related economic benefits, customer satisfaction becomes crucial for corporate sustainability and thus survival (Pizam, Shapoval & Ellis, 2016).

Customer satisfaction, service quality, and customer value are not new concepts. They have been the central marketing concepts over the past three decades (Oh & Kim, 2017), and have been pivotal concepts for over 30 years within the literature. Thus, it follows that any research conducted in order to investigate and assess whether managers of rural lodging establishments and customers of these have the same perceptions towards such pivotal concepts would be of value to the industry. In this context, much of the literature argues for



the notion that business competitiveness is positively related to the degree to which the characteristics of services match the ideal preferences of clients (Campos-Soria, Garcia & Garcia, 2005). Studies done over the past decades in various parts of the world (Olorunniwo, Hsu & Udo, 2006; Campos-Soria, Garcia & Garcia, 2005; Radder & Wang, 2006; Solnet, Baum, Robinson & Lockstone-Binney, 2016), have found quality of service to be determined by how well the service level delivered matches customers' expectations, and thus its assessment necessarily takes place during a service delivery process, in the course of which there is an encounter between customers and service providers (Heung & Wong, 1996). A plethora of studies, articles and books has given character and shape to service quality and customer satisfaction as marketing concepts. Managers of accommodation establishments have increasingly familiarised themselves with, and focussed with varied degrees of attention on, these two concepts. With so much awareness of service quality, and customers becoming more discerning with passing each day, we should be enquiring whether the perceptions of quality accommodation of lodging establishment managers align with those of their guests. Are accommodation establishment managers investing their resources and efforts into what the customers believe determines the quality of the service which ultimately creates satisfaction? Are these managers even aware of, or focussing on, the expectations and perceptions of their guests? The current study intends to explore the perceptions of service quality of accommodation establishments from both the managers and the guests, and to determine if any deviances exist between these two perceptions.

Therefore the objective of this study is to investigate the degrees of congruence and/or deviance of and between these perceptions. The significance of this study can be summed up by the argument of Parasuraman et al. (1985) that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction, and the assessment of the quality of service exists during its delivery, which in turn denotes that customer satisfaction is a result of a customer's perceptions of both service quality per se, and of the managers of this service quality. The study is important in that it addresses its objective using qualitative rather than quantitative data and research methodology. It thus provides in depth and nuanced insights into the perceptions, views and feelings of both managers and customers of the quality of service of the rural lodging establishments which constitute the site of the study, and of customer satisfaction. It must also be noted that a study of this kind has to date not been conducted in the context of the Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa.

## **Literature review**

### ***Rural lodging establishments***

A definition of rural tourism has to date not been precisely or comprehensively configured or agreed-upon in the literature. Hernandez-Maestro and Gonzalez-Benito (2013) maintain that a commonly agreed-upon definition of rural tourism remains elusive as some scholars use the term interchangeably with other 'tourism' terms, such as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and eco-tourism. Rural tourism, for example, has been variously linked with providing such offerings to visitors as 'authentic experiences', including 'authentic' ecological and/or cultural experiences'. Melon, Hernandez-Maestro and Munoz-Gallegos (2016) categorise a wide variety of rural lodging establishments, ranging from hotels, motels, guest houses, lodges, and hostels, into two broad categories: those that rent individual rooms and those that rent their entire facilities. The current study focuses on and refers to those rural establishments that rent individual rooms to guests, using the early, general definition provided by Lane (1994): rural lodging establishments are those facilities that offer a room, or rooms, for rent in countryside locations.

Rural lodging establishments (RLEs) as providers of accommodation to visitors at remote touristic destinations represent a core sector where rural tourism development could be



harnessed and from which positive word of mouth recommendations for the rural tourist destination can emerge (Pena, Jamilena, Molina & Olmo, 2015). The reason for this has been found in several studies to be that rural tourists seek experiences from personal interactions with the service supplier, and seek physical and 'psychological' (World Tourism Organisation's 1985 concept of customer satisfaction as a 'psychological' concept) or emotional relaxation at a remote lodging establishment (Hernandez-Maestro & Gonzalez-Benito, 2013; Roberts & Hall, 2001). This then suggests that the success of RLEs depends on the level of hospitality they offer at a personal level, which may in turn influence the guest/tourist satisfaction, word-of-mouth recommendation, and result in repeat business. In light of the fact that, according to a recent study based on rural tourism lodgings in Portugal conducted by Pato and Kastenholz, (2017), and one which could apply to Vhembe district, RLE managers are not fully capacitated with marketing skills. As a result they are obliged to devote most of their efforts and resources towards the creation of positive tourist experiences as their sole marketing strategy, in order to ensure repeat business and positive word-of-mouth recommendations, as well as long-term business survival. A number of studies (Monty & Skidmore, 2003; Santana-Jimenez, Suarez-Vega & Hernandez, 2015; Ohe & Ciani, 2011) have found that infrastructural attributes of RLEs (swimming pool, jacuzzi, room size, number of beds), environmental attributes (location in village, local cultural attributes, 'wild'/unspoiled natural landscape and diversity of land scape), and spatial attributes (population density, distance from nearest city and from the nearest air or seaplane base) affect the value proposition of RLEs as well as guest expectations.

The current study used a qualitative framework based on that of Walls, Wang and Kwun (2011) and also used by Lu, Berchoux, Marek and Chen (2015). However these two studies were also investigating the level and quality of the luxury of service which was not considered for inclusion in the current study. The framework affords room for collecting data from both the managers and customers, which fulfils the primary objective of the study.

### ***Service quality***

In the 1980s, Garvin (1984) published his classic article on the meaning of "product quality", and his concept was taken up and developed by Yarimoglu (2014) who conceives of five main interrelated approaches to identifying a comprehensive definition of quality: (1) the transcendent approach of philosophy; (2) the product-based approach of economics; (3) the user-based approach of economics, marketing, and operations management; (4) the manufacturing based-approach, and (5) the value based approaches of operation management. Yarimoglu (2014) sees the transcendent view as being of equal if not more importance than the other four views: this view maintains that quality can only be recognised through experience. Thus the service field of RLEs is of crucial importance to the overall guest experience of the rural tourism product. Service quality management and improvement are thus central to the profitability and growth of tourism businesses, more especially the accommodation sector. By their very nature, services are intangible and not easily measurable or quantifiable, which makes it generally difficult and complicated to measure their quality (Yarimoglu, 2014). This complex, intangible dimension which dominates tourism services and products creates a significant purchase risk for consumers since they cannot assess the service prior to purchase (Melo, Hernandez-Maestro & Munoz-Gallego, 2017). This feature increases service consumers' perceptions and expectations of quality and satisfaction (Keyser, 2009:207; Writz, Chen, & Lovelock, 2013). As early as the early 1990s Bitner (1990), commented on the effect of the gap between consumer expectations and the 'performance' of the product, noted that:

Each individual consumer is assumed to have expectations about how each individual service/product will perform. These expectations are compared with actual perceptions of performances as the product is consumed. If expectations exceed performance, dissatisfaction results. When expectations are met or when performance actually exceeds expectations satisfaction results. (Bitner, 1990:70)



This kind of disjuncture indicates that some knowledge of a customer's perception of service quality and of a manager's perception of service quality would identify the likelihood that, when the manager's and customer's perceptions of service quality converge, or are similar, customer satisfaction may be more apparent or possible (Nomga & Mhlanga, 2015).

In the late 1990s Pine and Gilmore (1999) had already forecasted the birth of the Experience Economy which they saw as requiring that service providers deliver services which are meaningful and which satisfy the core emotional and physical needs of consumers while creating memorable experiences; in that way they saw service organisations as being able to gain sustainable competitive advantage in the fiercely competitive 21st century, adventure hungry marketplace.

Services as a concept has been well articulated and explained in the literature. According to its literal meaning, 'service' is the process or activity of serving the needs of consumers (Allan, 2016). At this level it therefore means that service can only be delivered in the course or context of an interaction between a service provider and the consumer. According to several authors, such as Amin, Yahya, Ismayatim, Nasharuddin and Kassim (2013), Melo, Hernandez-Maestro and Munoz-Gallego (2017), and Kattara (2008), a quality service is one that meets the needs and expectations of consumers while maintaining customer value. Service quality represents an assessment of the overall level of service offered by an organisation, and the assessment is based on perceptions formulated during service encounters, on word of mouth about the brand, personal needs, past experience, and organisational marketing efforts (Farrell, Souchon & Durden, 2001). Customers view services as a variety of components and determine their perceived or cognitive value based on their experience with the delivery process of these services (Markovic & Raspor, 2010).

### ***Service quality theories***

From the 1980s on marketing literature has witnessed a number of models that have been developed to measure and define service quality. The most widely used model is the service SERVQUAL concept pioneered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), which also resulted in the identification of determinants used by consumers when interpreting service quality. Gronroos (1984) developed an early service quality model and one that measured perceived service quality using qualitative methods. Technical quality, interactive quality, and corporate image were used as criteria to measure service quality. At that time Haywood-farmer (1988) discussed a service quality model which was similar to the determinants of Parasuraman et al. (1985), but which only had four basic attributes: physical facilities, process and procedures, people behaviour and conviviality, and professional judgement. Similarly, Cronin and Taylor (1992) developed SERVPERF which focuses on performance and is more suitable for fast food sectors and banking. Philip and Hazlett (1997) proposed a hierarchical structure model called P-C-P, which was based on pivotal, core, and peripheral attributes for measuring service quality in service organisations. Frost and Kumar (2000) saw a need to consider the quality of service from the internal perspective and developed the INTSERVQUAL which was based on the adaptation of the GAP model pioneered by Parasuraman et al. (1985). An Industry specific service quality measuring model has also been crafted, with LDGSERV being the one widely used to measure consumer expectations of service quality in the hotel experience. This model was developed by Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert, Patton and Yokoyama (1990). HOLSAT was developed by Tribe and Snaith (1998) to measure holiday satisfaction. In 2001 Brandy and Cronin developed a service quality model that focused on interaction quality, physical service environment quality, and outcome quality. Salazar, Costa, and Rita (2010) modified the SERVQUAL with the objective of creating a scale that can measure service quality in the hospitality sector. The resultant model was titled HOLSERV scale, which has attributes that are linked to the staff in the industry.



Although SERVQUAL has been widely criticized in the literature (Carman, 1990; Babakus & Boller, 1992), it has also been used extensively. A Services Marketing Mix model was created to meet customer needs profitably in a competitive service marketplace. This model consists of marketing elements such as product, price, place, promotion, physical evidence, people, and process. Measuring the quality of service effectively requires a thorough understanding of the nature of services. Services are distinguished from goods due to their different respective natures and characteristics. One of the recommendations for service providers included in the conclusion to this paper is that it can also be deduced that other models, such as SERVPERF and INTSERQUAL, have been developed from the GAP concept pioneered by Parasuraman et al. (1985).

### ***Customer satisfaction***

As has been mentioned, service quality is an important driver for and of customer satisfaction and behavioural intention. Pizam et al. (2016) emphasise the earlier definition of customer satisfaction formulated in the 1980s by the World Tourism Organisation (1985) which referred to customer satisfaction as a 'psychological' concept that involves the feeling of well-being and pleasure that result from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product or service. Within the Context of RLEs, consumers' satisfaction is, according to Melo et al. (2016), said to be derived from 'authentic experiences': traditional experiences that reflect the essence of rural life. These are not the same experiences as those to be had in luxury hotels, where customer satisfaction is associated with superior value for money, and with better quality of service and facilities (Pizam et al., 2015).

Customer satisfaction has recently been defined by Allan (2016) as the degree to which the needs, demands and expectations of customers are met in service delivery. Prior to Allan (2016), Tuckson (2012) offered a similar definition of customer satisfaction, but with the addition of 'problems': the degree to which the wants and problems of a customer are appropriately addressed in service delivery. Within the lodging establishment, customer satisfaction and service quality include strong, comfortable beds, rooms and bed sheets which are aromatic, and ventilated or air-conditioned rooms, good TV services, and a good/congenial hotel-customer relationship (Allan, 2016). Hernandez-Maestro and Conzalez-Benito (2013) maintain that rural tourists/guests at rural lodging establishments tend to seek congenial personal interactions with the service supplier, and evaluate their satisfaction accordingly.

Customer satisfaction is currently typically referred to as a post-consumption evaluative judgement concerning a specific service or product (Nomnga & Mhlanga, 2015). The 'cognitive' expectancy disconfirmation theory developed in the early 1980s by Oliver (1980) proposed that satisfaction is the result of the difference between expected and perceived service performance. Anderson, Fornell and Lehmann (1994), Yeung, Ging and Ennew (2002), and Luo and Homburg (2007) all found that customer satisfaction positively affects business profitability. Various studies, from the late 1990s on, have investigated the positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer behaviour patterns (Söderlund, 1998; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Dimitriades, 2006; Olorunniwo, Hsu & Udo, 2006; Chi & Qu, 2008; Faullant et al., 2008). These findings postulate the fact that customer satisfaction escalates customer loyalty, impacts repurchase intentions, and leads to positive word-of-mouth communication/recommendation.

Numerous studies exist on the hospitality industry that specifically examine a range of attributes that travellers/tourists – at various times and in various locations globally over the last three decades or so – have considered important regarding customer satisfaction. In the 1980s Atkinson (1988) found – at that time - cleanliness, security, value for money, and courtesy of staff to determine customer satisfaction. Similarly, conducting his study at the same time as Atkinson (1988), Knutson (1988) found room cleanliness and comfort, convenience of location, prompt service, safety and security, and friendliness of employees to be important to customers. In the early 1990s Barsky and Labagh (1992) found employee



attitude, location, and rooms as being likely to influence travellers' satisfaction. Research conducted by Akan (1995) showed that the foremost determinants of hotel guest satisfaction at that time were the behaviour of employees, cleanliness, and timeliness/punctuality. Choi and Chu (2001), in a study conducted in the Hong Kong hotel industry in the early 2000s, found at that time staff quality, room qualities, and value for money to be the top three hotel factors that determined travellers' satisfaction. These earlier studies, taken together, show that providing the services customers prefer is a starting point for providing customer satisfaction, and that a relatively easy means to determine what services customers prefer is to simply ask them their opinions. Based on this literature review it may be deduced, from the wide agreement of the findings of a range of studies, that rural tourism is of great importance to an area's sustainable development, including that of a rural area, and that the possibility exists for RLEs to harness tourism related economic activities.

The numerous studies and models reviewed in the literature have also shown that customer satisfaction and service quality significantly affect business performance, profitability, survival, and growth in any industry, but particularly in the tourism and hospitality industry. The literature has also shown that rural tourists expect authentic rural experiences and thus the rural hospitality sector should take advantage of such expectations and desires. The literature also showed satisfaction of customers of hotels, or of hospitality accommodation generally, to depend on, amongst other factors, employee attitude, location, prompt/timeous service, safety, and security. The literature also showed that, in hospitality management, many subtle elements communicate non-verbal messages to customers, such as room cleanliness, employee attitudes, and other functions which may or may not be visible to the customer, but affect the customer's experience.

### **Research methodology**

The literature has clearly shown that service quality and customer satisfaction are vaguely defined, intangible concepts. Any investigation or evaluation of service quality would require more than a superficial, quantitative evaluation, but would need deeper insight/probing, as advocated by Walls et al. (2011). Any understanding of the ways in which managers of RLEs and guests at these establishments perceive and define service quality and customer satisfaction would require in depth and sensitive investigation. Qualitative research involves the identification of inherent patterns rather than preconceived ideas (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, Van Ardt & Wagner, 2011). Thus an in depth and sensitive study such as the current study required a qualitative method to collect and sensitively analyse complex and at times intangible data.

### **Research Objectives**

The following objectives were developed for the current study:

- To determine the determinants of service quality at rural lodging establishments in one municipal district.
- To investigate the nature of the perceptions of service quality by a sample of RLEs managers and guests of rural lodging establishments.
- To investigate these guests' and managers' perceptions and views of guest satisfaction.
- To determine whether there were any deviances or similarities between guest and managers perceptions of service quality and, if so, the specific ways in which these perceptions deviated from one another.



## Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The decision to use this kind of interview was that, in semi-structured interviews the researcher is free to ask follow-up questions and to explore participants' responses, even though the interviewer comes to the interview prepared with a list of topics or questions. The protocol for in-depth, semi-structured interviews was developed with reference to these as data collection instruments as developed and used by Walls et al. (2011). The same interview protocol used by Walls et al. (2011) was used by Lu et al. (2015), who used the protocol to determine the deviance between the respective perceptions of guests and managers of luxury hotels of service quality and customer satisfaction. The data collection instrument thus used was guided and semi-structured interviews. An initial protocol of questions was developed, based on a review of the pertinent literature, and divided into categories of service quality and customer satisfaction.

## Findings

This section presents the findings from an analysis of interviews with managers of a 3-star rated hotel, a 3-star rated guest house, and one un-rated bed and breakfast respectively, in toto 3 lodging establishments. Five guests were also interviewed. The analysis synthesized the comments of the hotel managers and the guests, based on the conceptual framework which consisted of two dimensions: service quality and customer satisfaction, a framework adapted from that of Walls et al. (2011). These dimensions permitted a cautious, or tentative/flexible, analysis of the perceptions and views of the participating RLE managers and guests.

## Service quality and its determinants

The first major theme in the conceptual framework of the study was service quality. The literature has already argued for its importance in the RLEs context. The guests associated the quality of service with the employees' attitudes and friendliness. Guest 1 reported his association of service quality with the feeling of being at home as soon as one has checked into the establishment. This guest further felt the quality of the service to come from the treatment by the staff of a guest, from the person at reception to the cleaner, from the cleaner to the cook, and from the cook to the person serving the food. Guest 2 admitted that service quality is a difficult concept to explain or pin down, but he went on to state that, from his own point of view, he rated the quality of the service on the basis of when he finds or gets what he wants (expects).

A 21-year-old female American student however maintained that for her service quality is demonstrated when there is a clean room and staff "always seeing if we need help with something and willing to help". A 21-year-old American male student associated service quality with the friendliness of the employees but also mentioned room cleanliness to be of importance. General Manager (GM) 1 saw service quality as giving the best service to the customer, with the best coming from a clean place to sleep, clean healthy food, and being there for the guests. However it was interesting to note that GM 1 did not associate service quality with timeliness and responsiveness to guests, although all of the other guests participating emphasized the importance of this for them. Guest 2 associated the determinants of service quality with the tangible elements of lodging establishments, such as room, food, shower, and bed.





On a general note the guests saw the quality of service as determined by the cleanliness of the room, the quality of food, and, more importantly, the friendliness and/or attitude of the employees. This response was similar to that of the general managers, differing only in the fact that the general managers did not emphasize the importance of employee attitude, but focused more on providing better quality tangibles in terms of what determines the quality of service

Interestingly, in comparison to General Manager 1, GM 2 was of the view that the quality of service depends less on tangible items but is determined more by the nature of those guests' experiences which create ultimate value for guests, and some of the value of such experience is derived from the cleanliness of the room. General Manager 3 referred to service quality as the way in which guests from different backgrounds are treated. From the responses it was deduced that the managers associated service quality with employee attitude and the creation of positive experiences, whereas guests associated it with room cleanliness, staff attitude, and room usability/comfort.

An important remark was made by Guest 1 when he expressed the view that service quality will differ from individual to individual based on an individual's background.

Manager's perceptions and views of the meaning of service quality	Guest's perceptions and views of the meaning of service quality
Best customer service	Emotional based concept, meeting specific needs of guests
Cleanliness, good food, experience based, different from being at home	Clean room and employee promptness attention
Value based in relation to amount paid	

**Table 1:** Summary and comparison of respective perceptions and views of managers and guests.

## Ambience

Within the hospitality sector ambience, or what constitutes ambience, although an intangible quality, has been found to play an important role in customer satisfaction. Out of the five guests participating in the study, three were familiar with the term ambience, the term being unfamiliar to the other two guests. However, after the explanation by the researcher, they could understand the term. Of the three general managers, two were familiar with the term.

Guest 4 mentioned that the term ambience refers to the design of the space, the amount of attention that is paid to details, and the way hotel staff design or arrange the space before guests arrive. Guest 1 however placed ambience in the frame of tangible elements contributing to the quality of service in the form of the space/establishment. He made an important observation when he considered ambience to include the privacy and safety of the space. He further went on to state that ambience has to do with the elements of the establishment, such as swimming pools, Lapa, and lighting, all of which together create a hospitable and welcoming environment.

It was interesting to find that Guest 2 associated ambience with an environment that is beautiful enough to be shared on social media; such behaviour indicates an intention to convey, and an anticipation of, satisfaction with the establishment's ambience. Guest 3 however mentioned that the attitude of the staff contributed to and complimented the ambience of the lodging establishment. Generally, the guests interviewed associated ambience with the attractiveness of the environment with specific reference to tangible characteristics of the establishment, such as a swimming pool, garden, Lapa, and the lighting.



Although ambience had to be explained to GM 1, once she understood she expressed the view that ambience is what gives the kind of life and vibrancy to a place which ultimately attracts people. GM1 also saw ambience as having something to do with the décor and furniture, which together create in guests a certain mood and an emotional attachment to the place. GM2 however associated ambience with emotional peace of mind, restfulness, and quietness, all of which are emotional concepts, and intangible factors. GM3 was of the opinion that, particularly in rural areas, the décor of a RLE should reflect the local culture which is usually different from that of the guests.

Generally, managers did not believe there to be a relationship between ambience and employee attitude, although guests mentioned the existence of this link. According to GM3 ambience is about a calm well decorated environment which could be different to that featuring in the background of the guests, and should reflect local culture

GM's perceptions of ambience	Guest's perceptions of ambience
Tangible related and experience based	Attractive tangible elements of the establishment coupled with employee attitude
The décor of the place, emotional concepts	

**Table 2:** Comparison between the respective perceptions of general managers and guests of what constitutes the ambience of a rural lodging establishment.

### Importance of employee and guest interaction

All participants in the study associated the interactions with employees at RLEs with customer satisfaction. General Managers generally mentioned that the friendliness of the employees when interacting with guests determines the guests' satisfaction and increases the likelihood of a repeat visit. All GMs agreed that RLE employees should know everything about the establishment so that they may be thoroughly useful to the guests in terms of being able to fulfil any need, or answer any question, that may arise on the part of guests. GM1 summed this up: "If the guests ask anything, the employee must know; if they don't know the guest loses faith or the experience may be ruined". This response/view reinforces the fact that employee attitude is critical to service quality and guest satisfaction, more especially in a rural context, as was found in many studies in the literature. The importance of employees' interactions with guests was also emphasized by GM3, who stressed that the employees are the ones who are capable of making guests feel at home and of enhancing their experience. Generally, managers perceived employees as the ones who are in a position to make guests feel welcome and improve guest satisfaction.

Employees are the face of the hotel, said guest 1. Guest 1 expressed the view that RLE employees' conduct and approach to doing things will affect the service 100%. This view would suggest that managers should give more emphasis to training, developing, and branding their employees in order to enhance guest experience and satisfaction. Employees are more than the face of the business. Guest 2 felt that "employees and management need to understand people; they need to make sure that if you need something, maybe you can't even pour a drink, they direct you, and they are friendly". Three guests from the USA also emphasised the importance of employee interaction, insisting that in a rural context it is the employees who bring the local culture and the feeling of being at home away from home. All of the guests interviewed believed the RLE employees' attitude and friendliness to be the strongest guarantee of guest satisfaction. Although the importance of employee and guest interaction is well established and rated highly, both in the literature and in these findings, it was rather



astonishing to find that the managers of RLEs continue to depend on training provided by the government, which is done only once per year.

### **Guest room quality**

Cleanliness, usability of facilities, and promptness in fulfilling guest requirements were prominent themes in guest perceptions of the quality of the guest rooms. Guest 1 remarked that changing linen, fumigating the rooms, and ensuring that room appliances, such as TV, are working well add more value and quality to the room. Apart from the feeling of being at home away from home, both the literature the findings confirm the importance of these aspects of comfortable accommodation. Guest 2 also associated room quality with staff courtesy: "When you go out and you come [back], you find that there is rooibos, and at home I am using no name brand tea bags". This points to the fact that, in addition to ambience and to room tangibles, staff courtesy around guest rooms may play a significant role in guest satisfaction. Managers associated room quality with cleanliness and room tangibles, such as furniture, TV, and bedding. GM2 placed priority on cleanliness in terms of expectations of guests of the quality of guest rooms:

The first thing I see in people is that people can put up with anything in the world, only just when the place is clean, even though the room may be furnished, but if not clean it would ruin the whole experience and there would be no delivery of good quality.

Generally, the perceptions of the managers and guests were similar in terms of guest room quality. Both the guests and the managers perceived guest room quality as being associated with cleanliness, good bedding, TV, courtesy, and good furniture, all of which enhances room usability.

### **Guest Satisfaction**

Guest satisfaction is the driver of business growth and survival in the hospitality industry, as was found in the literature. Many studies have found that guest satisfaction affects the behavioural outcomes of customers, such as that of repeat purchase. However it is not always possible or easy to precisely define guest satisfaction, particularly in a decontextualized way. Guest 2 admitted that he was unable to precisely define the meaning of guest satisfaction: "No, that one I don't know, I don't know how to explain to you that one". He did express the interesting view that the nature of guest satisfaction is that it is contextual based and depends on the type of a person a guest is, and the needs of that person.

However he identified some of the elements that he considered to bring him satisfaction as a guest, depending on the place and the season. These included the food, the openness of the space, and the décor. Guest 1 also referred to satisfaction as a concept that depends on an individual and the background of the individual: guest satisfaction is "situational specific and context dependant".

GM 1 associated guest satisfaction with service responsiveness, clean rooms, and fresh and delicious food. GM1 emphasized the importance of general guest satisfaction and considered that exceeding customer satisfaction is of great importance. Thus, in order to achieve this, managing and evaluating guest satisfaction through guest comment cards helps in ensuring consistency in the level of guest satisfaction.

Generally, guests and managers shared similar outlooks towards guest satisfaction, and the tangible and intangible factors influencing this. However two of the guests saw guest satisfaction as going beyond these obvious and agreed-upon factors, and as, in the end, being dependent on the context of the RLE and the visit, and on the background of the person visiting the RLE. Interestingly, none of the managers mentioned this during the interviews.



## Discussion

The principal objective of the study was to explore the respective outlooks of managers and guests towards service quality and guest satisfaction within the context of lodging establishments in Vhembe District Municipality of South Africa. The major findings of the study were as follows:

- The managers associated guest satisfaction with the tangibles of the service offerings, such as food, furniture, and décor, whereas, while many of the guests mentioned these factors, some of them were of the view that guest satisfaction depends on the individual. However, most agreed that the tangible elements of the service offered enhanced the satisfaction.
- With relation to service quality, some of the guests referred to this as an emotional concept which is created as a result of employee attitude, service responsiveness, and general cleanliness of the facilities, whereas managers associated service quality with best customer service, which is also related to value, and enhanced by cleanliness, food quality, positive experience, and the creation of an environment which serves as a home away from home. This last factor was also mentioned by the guests.
- Employee interaction was emphasized by both managers and guests as being of critical importance to service quality and guest satisfaction. What was rather disappointing, and concerning in terms of improving service quality in RLEs, was that managers did not prioritize regular, frequent, and intensive employee training as playing a significant role in creating and sustaining this.
- With regards to ambience, managers emphasized the decor and other tangible elements of the establishment as being of critical importance, while the guests related ambience to employee attitude. This would suggest that ambience from guests' perspective is complemented by the employees and their attitudes and demeanours.

The findings of the study on the whole align with those of the body of literature which was reviewed. Some of the guests participating in the study admitted that they could not precisely define guest satisfaction, a finding which also emerges in some of the literature. Generally, there were no major deviations in the outlooks of the managers and guests towards service quality and guest satisfaction. An interesting finding was that, although the importance of employee attitude was well established in both the literature and the findings of the current study, it was surprising to discover that none of the managers of the lodging establishments train their employees on a regular or intensive basis but depend on infrequent generic training provided by government programmes.

## Managerial implications

From the analysis of the findings of the study the following implications can be drawn and recommendations made:

- Regular, quality, and up-to-date employee training has the potential to enhance the quality of service and guest satisfaction at the lodging establishments in the area. Therefore it is recommended that managers conduct frequent and regular training of their staff with the aim of improving the attitude of the staff towards guests, and towards the quality of their own service, more especially the frontline staff.
- Courtesy and caring in the establishment's services can add greater value to guest satisfaction and service quality. It can create the feeling in guests of a home away from home, which was considered by the guests interviewed as a defining standard of service quality.
- With regards to ambience, albeit an intangible factor, managers should also develop their staff through training in the creation of this, and consider supplying staff with the



kind of branded work uniform which could create and reflect the ambience and values of the establishment.

- As was mentioned earlier, in the section discussing marketing models, management should take note of and pay close attention to marketing tools in developing the services they offer if they want to increase the quality of their services.

## Conclusion

Both the literature and the findings of this study point to the importance of the management of lodging establishments generally, and RLEs in particular, to thoroughly and sensitively understand the perceptions of their guests of what service quality is, or could mean, in terms of guest satisfaction. This researcher would argue, on the basis of this study, that this understanding should go beyond what is possible for management when merely assuming, or second-guessing, what their guests want and expect from their accommodation. This understanding and information should come from both quantitative and qualitative customer satisfaction surveys, or even from brief comment cards left by guests on departure, so that the overall physical and service environment of the lodging establishment can be crafted to minimize negative incidents and maximize positive experiences and repeat visits. This has the potential to ultimately increase business survival and profitability.

The benefits of this information and in-depth understanding can manifest themselves both in the planning and execution of the physical and service features. Although the study found small differences to exist between the perceptions of guests and managers in terms of service quality and guest satisfaction, these differences are not insignificant. By providing some channel of communication between the management of RLEs and guests, the study can be said to have succeeded in highlighting certain areas for both management and government (National Rural Tourism Strategy and National Department of Tourism, 2012) to target in order to improve customer satisfaction, and, in turn improve the profitability and survival of RLEs.

## References

- Akan, P. (1995). Dimensions of service quality: a study in Istanbul. *Managing Service Quality*, 5(6): 39-43.
- Allan, M. M. (2016). The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction and Retention in Ghana's Luxury Hotels. *The IUP Journal of Marketing Management*, (15)4.
- Amin, M., Yahya, Z., Faizatul, A. I., Nasharuddin, S., Z. & Kassim, E. (2013). Service Quality Dimension and Customer Satisfaction: An Empirical Study in the Malaysian Hotel Industry. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 34:115–125.
- Anderson, E.W., Fornell, C. & Lehmann, D.R. (1994). Customer satisfaction, market share and profitability. *Journal of Marketing*, 56(July):53–66.
- Atkinson, A. (1988). Answering the eternal question: what does the customer want? *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 29(2):12–14.
- Babakus, E. & Boller, G. W. (1992). An empirical assessment of the SERVQUAL scale. *Journal of Business Research*, 24(3):253-268.
- Barsky, J. D. & Labagh, R. (1992). A strategy for customer satisfaction. *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 35(3): 32–40.
- Bitner, M. J. (1990). Evaluating Service Encounters: The Effects of Physical Surroundings and Employee Responses. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(2): 69-82.



- Brady, M. K. & Cronin, J. J. (2001). Some new thoughts on conceptualizing perceived service quality: a hierarchical approach. *Journal of Marketing*, (65)3, 34-49.
- Bryman, A., Bell, E., Hirschsohn, P., Santos, A., du Toit, J., Masenge, A., van Aardt, I. & Wagner, C. (2011). *Research Methodology business management context*. Cape Town. Oxford University Press
- Campos-Soria, J. A., Gonzalez Garcia, L. & Roperro, Garcia, M. A. (2005). Service quality and competitiveness in the hospitality sector. *Tourism Economics*, 11(1): 85-102.
- Carman, J. M. (1990). Consumer perceptions of service quality: An assessment of the SERVQUAL dimensions. *Journal of Retailing*, 66(1): 33-55.
- Chi, C. G. Q. & Qu, H. (2008). Examining the structural relationships of destination image, tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty: an integrated approach. *Tourism Management*, 29: 624–636.
- Choi, T. Y. & Chu, R. (2001). Determinants of hotel guests' satisfaction and repeat patronage in the Hong Kong hotel industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 20: 277–297.
- Coțiu, M. A. (2013). "Satisfaction with Goods and Services Definitions and Determinants. A Critical Review of the Literature," at International Conference "Marketing – from information to decision" 6th Edition, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
- Cronin, J. J. & Taylor, S. A. (1992). Measuring service quality: a re-examination and extension. *Journal of Marketing*, 56: 55-68.
- Dabholkar, P. A., Thorpe, D. I. & Rentz, J. O. (1996). A measure of service quality for retail stores: scale development and validation. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 24(1): 3-16.
- Dimitriades, Z. S. (2006). Customer satisfaction, loyalty and commitment in service organizations –some evidence from Greece. *Management Research News*, 29(12): 782–800.
- Farrell, A. M., Souchon, A. L. & Durden, G. R. (2001). Service Encounter Conceptualisation: Employees' Service Behaviours and Customers' Service Quality Perceptions. *Journal of Marketing Management*, (17): 577-593.
- Faullant, R., Matzler, K. & Füller, J. (2008). The impact of satisfaction and image on loyalty: the case of Alpine ski resorts. *Managing Service Quality*, 18(2): 163-178.
- Frost, F. A. & Kumar, M. (2000). INTSERVQUAL—an internal adaptation of the GAP model in a large service organisation. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 14(5): 358-377.
- Garvin, D. A. (1984). What does "product quality" really mean. *Sloan management review*, 26(1): 25-43.
- Grönroos, C. (1984). A service quality model and its marketing implications. *European Journal of Marketing*, (18)4: 36-44.
- Hayes, B. E. (1997). *Measuring Customer Satisfaction: Survey Design, Use, and Statistical Analysis Methods*, 2nd ed. ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI.
- Haywood-Farmer, J. (1988). A conceptual model of service quality. *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, (8)6: 19-29.
- Hernandez-Maestro, R. M., Munoz-Gallego, P. A. & Santos-Requejo, L. (2007). The Moderating Role of Familiarity in Rural Tourism in Spain. *Tourism Management*, (28): 951–64.



- Hernandez-Maestro, R. M. & Gonzalez-Benito, O. (2013). Rural Lodging Establishments as Drivers of Rural Development. *Journal of Travel Research*, 53(1): 83–95.
- Heung, C. S., and Wong, M. Y. (1996). Hotel service quality in Hong Kong: A study of tourists' expectations. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 3(3): 264-271.
- Kandampully, J. & Suhartanto, D. (2000). Customer loyalty in the hotel industry: the role of customer satisfaction and image. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 12(6):346–351.
- Keyser, H. (2009). *Developing Tourism in South Africa*. 2nd ed. Cape Town. Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Knutson, B. (1988). Frequent travellers: making them happy and bringing them back. *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 29(1): 83–87.
- Lane, B. (1994). What Is Rural Tourism?. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 2(1-2): 7-21.
- Lu, C., Berchoux, C., Marek, M. W. & Chen, B. (2015). Service quality and customer satisfaction: qualitative research implications for luxury hotels. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 9(2):168-182.
- Luo, X. & Homburg, C. (2007). Neglected outcomes of customer satisfaction. *Journal of Marketing*, 71(2): 133–149.
- Markovic, S. & Raspor, S. (2010). Measuring Perceived Service Quality Using servqual: A Case Study of the Croatian Hotel Industry. *Management*, 5(3):195-209.
- Martinez Caro, L. & Martinez Garcia, J.A. (2008). Developing a multidimensional and hierarchical service quality model for travel agency industry. *Tourism Management*, 29(4): 706–720.
- Melo, A. D. V. T., Hernández-Maestro, R. M. & Muñoz-Gallego, P. A. (2016). Service Quality Perceptions, Online Visibility, and Business Performance in Rural Lodging Establishments. *Journal of Travel Research*, 56(2): 250–262.
- Monty, B. & Skidmore, M. (2003). Hedonic pricing and willingness to pay for bed and breakfast amenities in Southeast Wisconsin. *Journal of Travel Research*, 42(2):195-199.
- Nasution, H. N. & Mavondo, F. T. (2005). "The impact of service quality on customer value in the hotel industry", ANZMAC Conference: Tourism Marketing, Western Australia, 5-7 December.
- National Department of Tourism. (2012). Rural Tourism strategy. [Online] Available from: <https://www.tourism.gov.za/AboutNDT/Branches1/domestic/Documents/National%20Rural%20Tourism%20Strategy.pdf>. [Accessed: 07 Aug. 17]
- Nomnga, V. J. & Mhlanga, O. (2015). An assessment of customer satisfaction and service quality: the case of hotels in East London, South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, (4)2:1-13.
- Oh, H. & Kim, K. (2017). Customer satisfaction, service quality, and customer value: years 2000-2015. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*. 29(1): 2-29.
- Ohe Y. & Ciani A. (2011). Evaluation of agritourism activity in Italy: facility based or local culture based? *Tourism Economics*, 17(3): 581-601.
- Oliver, R. L. (1980). A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decisions. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 17(4): 460–469.



- Olorunniwo, F., Hsu, M. K. & Udo, G. J. (2006). Service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions in the service factory, *Journal of Services Marketing*, 20(1): 59-72.
- Parasuraman, A., Berry, L. L. & Zeithaml, V. A. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research, *Journal of Marketing*, 49(4): 41–50.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: a multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality, *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1): 14–40.
- Pato, L. & Kastenholz, E. (2017). Marketing of rural tourism – a study based on rural tourism lodgings in Portugal. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, (10)2: 121-139.
- Pena, A. I. P., Jamilena, D. M. F. & Molina, M. A. R., & Olmo J. C. (2015). Rural Lodging Establishments: Effects of Location and Internal Resources and Characteristics on Room Rates. *Tourism Geographies*, 17 (1): 91–111.
- Philip, G. & Hazlett, S. A. (1997). The measurement of service quality: a new PCP attributes model. *International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management*, 14 (3): 260-286.
- Pine, B. J. & Gilmore H. J. (1999). *The experience economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a stage*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Pizam, A., Shapoval, V. & Ellis, T. (2016). Customer satisfaction and its measurement in hospitality enterprises: a revisit and update. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, (28)1: 2-35.
- Roberts, L. & D. Hall. (2001). *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*. Wallingford: CABI.
- Salazr, A., Costa, J. & Rita, P. (2010). A service quality evaluation scale for the hospitality sector: Dimensions, attributes and behavioral intentions. *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, (2)4: 383-397.
- Santana-Jimenez, Y., Sun, Y. Y., Hernandez, J. M. & Suarez-Vega, R. (2015). The Influence of Remoteness and Isolation in the Rural Accommodation Rental Price among Eastern and Western Destinations. *Journal of Travel Research*, 54(3):380–95.
- Söderlund, M. (1998). Customer satisfaction and its consequences on customer behaviour revisited: the impact of different levels of satisfaction on word-of-mouth, feedback to the supplier and loyalty. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 9(2): 169–188.
- Solnet, D., Baum, T., Robinson, R. N. S. & Lockstone-Binney, L. (2016). What about the workers? Roles and skills for employees in hotels of the future. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 22(3): 212-226
- Sudin, S. (2011), “How service quality, value and corporate image affect client satisfaction and loyalty”. In Proceedings of the 2nd International Research Symposium in Service Management Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 26-30 July.
- Tribe, J. & Snaith, T. (1998). From SERVQUAL to HOLSAT: Holiday satisfaction in Varadero, Cuba. *Tourism Management*, 19(1): 25–34.
- Walls, A., Okumus, F., Wang, Y. & Kwun, D. J. W. (2011). Understanding the consumer experience: an exploratory study of luxury hotels. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*. (20)2:166-197.
- Wirtz, J., Chen, P. & Lovelock, C. H. (2013). *Essentials of Services Marketing*, 2nd ed. Singapore: Pearson Education South Asia.





World Tourism Organization. (1985). Identification and Evaluation of Those Components of Tourism Services Which Have a Bearing on Tourist Satisfaction and Which can be Regulated, and State Measures to Ensure Adequate Quality of Tourism Services, World Tourism Organization, Madrid.

World Travel and Tourism Council. (2016). Travel and Tourism economic impact South Africa 2016. [Online] 17 August 2017. Available from: <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic%20impact%20research/regions%202016/world2016.pdf>.

World Travel and Tourism Council. (2016). Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2016 South Africa. [Online] Available from: <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic%20impact%20research/regions%202016/world2016.pdf>. [Accessed: 07 August 2017].

Yarimoglu, E. K. (2014). A Review on Dimensions of Service Quality Models. *Journal of Marketing Management*, (2)2: 79-93.

Yeung, M. C. H., Ging, L. & Ennew, C. T. (2002). Customer satisfaction and profitability: a reappraisal of the nature of the relationship. *Journal of Targeting, Measurement and Analysis for Marketing*, 11(1): 24–33.