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Expectations and perceptions of customers in mall restaurants in an East London shopping mall using the DINESERV approach

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Abstract

Shopping malls have become distressed in South Africa, with statistics showing a decline of 5.3% in tenant mix in 2013 compared to 2012, as retail stores in malls decline due to online shopping and the changing consumer value equation and culture. As such, to reposition and resuscitate shopping malls, restaurants have become an important part of the leasing strategy in malls. However, despite lowering their prices and spending marketing funds on promotions, mall restaurants seem to be finding great difficulty in determining customer expectations. With this as background, the focus in this study was to gain insight into restaurant customers' expectations and perceptions in Hemmingways shopping mall using the DINESERV model. Customers' expectations and perceptions were measured on a five point Likert-type scale. The empirical results show that, on a 5 point Likert scale, the overall mean score for expectation items was 4.50 whilst for perception items was 3.46. The overall DINESERV gap was -1.04, implying that mall restaurants did not meet customers' expectations. The results of this study serve not only to identify customers' expectations and strengthen customer loyalty in mall restaurants, but also improve the mall's reputation and increase customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Customers' expectations and perceptions, DINESERV, mall restaurants, service quality, shopping malls.

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Introduction

Shopping malls have become distressed in South Africa, with statistics showing a decline of 5.3% in tenant mix in 2013 compared to 2012, as retail stores in malls decline due to online shopping and the changing consumer value equation and culture (Landsman, 2013). This has led to the need for a thorough portfolio analysis of their tenant mix including their trade area and capture rates, their physical facility, competition and other factors impacting their performance (Anselmsson, 2006). As such, to reposition and resuscitate shopping malls, restaurants have become an important part of the leasing strategy in shopping malls (Landsman, 2013).

However, as customers lose appetite for shopping malls the demand for mall restaurants has also been declining (ShopperTrak, 2013). Customers have become more careful with their discretionary spend and more likely to dine at home (Thornton, 2009). Despite lowering their prices and spending marketing funds on promotions, mall restaurants seem to be finding great difficulty in determining customer expectations (Rosslee, 2009). Consequently, today's customers in mall restaurants presents a challenge, since they are now more sophisticated than ever before (ShopperTrak, 2013).

It has become increasingly difficult to meet customers' expectations in mall restaurants (Enz, 2004; Hu, 2009; Reynolds & Biel, 2007). Customers not only expect good services provided at mall restaurants, but also expect a memorable experience (Thorn, 2003). Following a memorable experience, comes positive perceptions and word of mouth communication which are considered critical to the success of mall restaurants (Ladhari, Brun & Morales, 2008).

Customers progressively demand higher quality food (Hu, 2009) and service (Quan & Wang, 2004) than before in mall restaurants. Understanding customers' expectations is crucial for mall restaurants, because the way customers perceive a restaurant will affect their future purchase decisions (Barsky & Nash, 2002). Repeat customers not only bring revenue into the business, they also provide predictability, security and enjoyment for those involved in the business (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 2000).

However, while there is no guarantee of a satisfied customer's repeat business, it is almost certain that a dissatisfied customer will not return (Soriano, 2002). Customer satisfaction leads to positive behavioural intentions, such as return patronage or repeat purchase (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999a). For this reason, a memorable experience and positive perceptions can directly affect customer loyalty, organisational profits, return patronage, complaint behaviour and word of mouth communications (Ladhari *et al.*, 2008).

This article offers increased insight into customers' expectations and perceptions in mall restaurants in South Africa. In spite of the growing international interest in restaurant customer expectations and perceptions research, limited research has been completed on this topic in South Africa in a mall context. International studies on customers' expectations and perceptions might not be applicable to mall restaurants in the South African restaurant subsector, since national culture has an effect on research and on restaurant customer expectations and perceptions (Mueller, Palmer, Mack & McMullan, 2003; Jensen & Hansen, 2007). The findings of research on customer expectations and perceptions in mall restaurants should therefore be interpreted in the light of its national culture and should not be generalised to other cultures.

The contribution of the research which this article reports on is unique in that, as far as can be ascertained, there is no further international or national research on service quality on restaurants in a mall context. Anselmsson (2006) also reports that no research has so far been done about the expectations and perceptions of mall restaurants. Given the challenge of mall restaurants and the importance of customer expectations and perceptions, research within this context was necessary. Customer expectations and perceptions are often used as performance indicators to measure success in a mall setting, since these constructs are assumed to play a critical role in the financial sustainability of the mall and its tenants (Anselmsson, 2006).

The article provides a theoretical background of customer expectations and perceptions in mall restaurants. The research methodology applied in conducting the research and the empirical findings are explained. The article concludes with a discussion of the managerial implications for mall restaurants.

Theoretical background

Tourism is one of the largest industries globally. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2014) reports that the tourism industry contributed 9.5% to the global economy in 2013 and expects tourists to spend more per trip and stay longer on their holidays in 2014. Despite tough global economic conditions, the South African tourism industry reached a record of 9.6 million international tourist arrivals in 2013 (Statistics South Africa, 2013). Consequently, the sector's contribution to gross domestic product in South Africa has risen gradually from 8.1% in 2007 to 10.3% in 2013 and is expected to reach 12% in 2014 (WTTC, 2014).

Restaurants are classified as one of the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes within the hospitality industry that make up the South African Tourism Industry (CATHSSETA, 2014). Statistics South Africa (SSA, 2013:11) estimates that restaurants provided for 93 000 jobs in 2013, while the total income generated by restaurants was R1 728 million in September 2013 (SSA, 2013:3). It is therefore a modern day engine of economic growth (Matshediso, 2014:6).

The growth in the restaurant industry over the past years can mainly be attributed to a change in the modern way of life (Moolman, 2011). Consumers are nowadays experiencing an increasing scarcity of time (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). As a result, consumers prefer to eat out than to spend their scarce time cooking meals at home (Moolman, 2011).

International researchers have investigated restaurant customer expectations and perceptions from various perspectives. Soriano (2002) examined customers' expectation and perception factors in Spanish restaurants. Soriano (2002) found that customers expected high quality of food, service quality, cost and ambience in up-scale Spanish restaurants. In 2004 Iglesias and Guillén (2004) determined that perceived quality had a positive effect on customer expectations. Sulek and Hensley (2004) found that food quality, a restaurant's atmosphere and the fairness of the seating procedure had a significant effect on customer expectations. Their research identified only food as a significant contributor to customer expectations.

Markovic, Raspor and Segaric (2010) used the modified DINESERV model to establish the difference between expected and perceived service quality. Markovic et al. (2010) concluded that customers' expectations and perceptions of restaurant service quality are best explained by the following seven factors - "cleanliness and appearance of facilities and staff", "assurance", "individual attention", "satisfaction and loyalty", "basic demands", "responsiveness" and "reliability". However, none of the researchers investigated customer expectations from a mall restaurant perspective.

The operations and marketing manager of Hemmingways mall (hereafter referred to as mall management) recognised the importance of customer expectations and perceptions for the continued success of the mall and its restaurants. They approached the researcher to gain more insight about customers' expectations and perceptions in mall restaurants.

Problem statement

Shopping malls are undergoing big shifts as shopping centre developers begin to change the layout of malls to cater for shoppers' changing habits (Landsman, 2013). They are adding a full course of sit down restaurants in spaces typically occupied by retailers (ShopperTrak, 2013). Consequently, restaurants now serve as a critical component of a mall's leasing strategy, retail offering and its tenants mix (Anselmsson, 2006).

However, despite the increasing popularity of eating out and continued growth of the restaurant subsector (SSA, 2010), the international failure rate for mall restaurants is considered to be higher than the average failure rate for small businesses (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Parsa, Self, Njite and King (2005) estimated that thirty percent of mall restaurants fail during the first year of operation, although claims are made that it is closer to ninety percent.

Researchers (Soriano, 2002; Chi & Gursoy, 2009) identify restaurateurs' inability to satisfy their customers' expectations as one of the main reasons for restaurant failure in malls. As such, a study to gain insight into restaurant customers' expectations in a shopping mall context has been visualised. Restaurants have a potential to brand malls, bring foot traffic to the malls and keep shoppers at the malls longer than if there were no restaurant options (Anselmsson, 2006).

Research questions and objectives

The research questions were conceptualised by taking into account the concerns raised by customers in mall restaurants, namely:

- What are the levels of expected and perceived service quality for mall restaurants?
- What are the differences between perceived and expected service quality for mall restaurants?
- What is the factor structure of the DINESERV model?

Based on the defined research questions, the study objectives were to: (a) assess customers' expectations and perceptions, (b) establish the significance of difference between perceived and expected service quality, (c) identify the number of dimensions for expectations and perceptions scales of the DINESERV model.

Methodology

A list of registered restaurants at Hemmingways mall was obtained from the mall management. The Hemmingways mall is the biggest mall in the Eastern Cape Province (Tourism Buffalo City, 2013). The mall has 200 stores including clothing shops, jewellery stores, stationers, movies, home décor, interior and furniture, hair and beauty salons, banking and finance, health, optometrists, audio visual equipment, electronics, music and 15 restaurants (Tourism Buffalo City, 2013). Eight of the 15 restaurants were included in the study. These restaurants complied with the criteria set by SSA (2007) for classification as a restaurant, namely "enterprises involved in the sale and provision of meals and drinks, ordered from a menu, prepared on the premises for immediate consumption and with provided seating." The other food and beverage outlets could not be classified as restaurants, but as fast-food outlets and pizzerias and were therefore excluded.

The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data that were collected from 407 customers of the eight selected mall restaurants. A sample of

407 was adequate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), since the total population of customers in mall restaurants at Hemmingways mall exceeds 5 000. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Creswell *et al.*, 2007). With this method each element of the population had a known probability of being selected for the sample (Cooper & Schindler, 2003).

In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the sample size for a particular restaurant taking into cognisance the restaurant's seating capacity. A proportional sample of 22.5% of the total seating capacity per restaurant enabled the researchers to obtain 407 completed questionnaires. Table 1 reflects how the total sample size of 407 customers in mall restaurants was calculated.

Table 1: Sample size per restaurant

Restaurant	Seating capacity	Respondents	Response rate per restaurant
Restaurant A	180	41	22.78%
Restaurant B	280	63	22.50%
Restaurant C	300	68	22.67%
Restaurant D	220	50	22.73%
Restaurant E	180	41	22.78%
Restaurant F	200	45	22.50%
Restaurant G	240	54	22.50%
Restaurant H	200	45	22.50%
Total	1800	407	22.61%

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select respondents by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every *k*th element. This method is useful in situations where the population elements arrive at a certain location over time (Maree, 2005). As such, respondents were selected by systematically targeting every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999b) until the sample size for a particular restaurant was reached. It was better to target every fourth customer so as to be discreet and avoid annoying other customers who were not participating in the survey (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b).

Data were collected during a three-week period in December 2013 during weekdays, weekends and during lunch and dinner as recommended by various researchers (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b; Soriano, 2002; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Akinyele, 2010). This enabled the researchers to maximise chances of eliciting information from customers of different lifestyles, occupation, income, age and gender.

The following procedures were used to collect data. The researchers systematically approached every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant after they were seated in the restaurant or as they were scanning/perusing the menu. The researchers explained the aim of the study to the customers and requested them to participate. It was emphasised that the researchers would treat the information provided as confidential and anonymous. Customers who were willing to participate in the study received a questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked and discussed with the respondents in case of any queries.

Results

Comparison of customers' perceptions with their expectations

Various authors (Susskind, 2002; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002b; Coye, 2004) posit that customers compare their perceptions with their expectations to determine their levels of satisfaction. As such, descriptive and bivariate analysis were used to compare customers' perceptions with their expectations to establish customers' satisfaction. Table 2 shows the results for the customers' expectations and perceptions of food and beverage, service quality and ambience. The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for food and beverage, service quality and ambience as well as the gaps and t-values for food and beverage, service quality and ambience.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for customers' expectations and perceptions of food and beverages, service quality and ambience

	Attributes	Expectations		Perceptions		Gap	t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Food and beverages							
V1	Presentation of the food	4.66	1.33	3.89	0.53	-0.77	1.42
V2	Combination of food on the plate	4.49	0.59	3.53	1.53	-0.96	4.50*
V3	Garnishing	4.72	1.08	3.79	0.79	-0.93	6.46*
V4	Colour of food	4.64	0.66	3.66	0.72	-0.98	4.53*
V5	Colour of beverages	4.73	1.51	3.81	0.87	-0.92	6.28*
V6	Smell or odour of food	4.28	0.86	3.31	1.36	-0.97	6.07*
V7	Smell or odour of beverages	4.74	1.45	3.88	0.70	-0.86	3.47*
V8	Taste of food	4.68	1.38	3.89	1.42	-0.79	5.26*
V9	Taste of beverages	4.71	0.72	3.89	0.58	-0.82	8.02*
V10	Texture of the food	4.37	1.04	3.44	0.96	-0.93	5.83*
V11	Temperature of food	4.32	0.75	3.35	1.08	-0.97	7.36*
V12	Temperature of beverages	4.78	1.37	3.83	1.61	-0.95	4.83*
V13	Variety of menu items	4.74	1.01	3.78	0.56	-0.96	5.61*
V14	Value-for-money	4.66	0.81	2.94	1.27	-1.72	8.36*
V15	Overall quality of food and beverages	4.71	1.26	3.89	0.84	-0.82	4.08*
Service							

	Attributes	Expectations		Perceptions		Gap	t-value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Food and beverages							
V16	Friendliness and politeness of staff	4.86	1.42	3.73	1.36	-1.13	5.83*
V17	Attentiveness of staff	4.30	0.64	3.52	1.01	-0.78	7.44*
V18	Staff greeting diners	4.73	1.79	3.65	0.46	-1.08	5.65*
V19	Efficient service	4.86	0.48	3.94	0.73	-0.92	8.86*
V20	Management presence	4.55	0.80	3.57	1.07	-0.98	2.96*
V21	Staff have food and beverage knowledge	4.19	1.36	2.98	1.36	-1.21	5.58*
V22	Sympathetic handling of complaints	4.82	0.97	3.14	0.68	-1.68	7.37*
V23	Overall quality of service	4.86	0.61	3.08	0.94	-1.78	5.76*
Ambience							
V24	Attractiveness of exterior appearance	4.56	1.00	3.52	1.34	-1.04	2.06*
V25	Attractiveness of interior décor	4.23	0.83	3.17	0.64	-1.06	3.66*
V26	Subdued lighting	4.08	0.61	3.04	0.58	-1.04	5.20*
V27	Comfortable temperature	4.25	0.77	3.19	0.69	-1.06	8.27*
V28	Desirable level of noise	4.02	1.17	2.98	0.76	-1.04	3.62*
V29	Rational music	4.14	1.05	3.11	1.56	-1.03	1.51*
V30	Pleasant odours	4.53	1.48	3.58	1.05	-0.95	2.03*
V31	Spatial layout and functionality	4.34	0.55	3.37	0.58	-0.97	5.22*
V32	Effective signs, symbols and artefacts	3.91	0.63	3.14	0.64	-0.77	1.64
V33	Overall quality of ambience	3.97	1.26	2.98	0.58	-0.99	7.63*
Experience							
V34	Overall satisfaction with the dining experience	4.39	1.21	3.07	0.63	-1.32	9.29*
Overall mean for 34 attributes		4.50	-	3.46	-	-1.04	-

*V: Factor attribute; * t-test (2 tailed Significance.) p< 0.05; *SD: Standard deviation p<0.05.

Discussion

Customers’ expectations and perceptions were measured on a five point Likert-type scale, where the higher the score, the greater the expectation or perception of restaurant service. The mean scores of customers’ expectations ranged from 3.91 to 4.86. The item with the lowest expectation score was “effective signs, symbols and artefacts” (V32), which indicates that customers least expected effective signs, symbols and artefacts in mall restaurants.

On the other hand, items with highest expectation scores were the “friendliness and politeness of staff” (V16), "efficient service“ (V19) and "overall quality of service" (V23). Customers mostly expected staff to be friendly and polite, efficient restaurant service and overall high quality of service. Thus, “friendliness and politeness of staff”, "efficient service“ and "overall quality of service“ are important attributes that should be considered in meeting the customers’ expectations in mall restaurants. The overall mean score for service quality expectation items was 4.50. This score indicates rather high customer

expectations (Markovic *et al.*, 2010) in mall restaurants regarding service quality.

In the same vein of thought, the mean scores of customers' perceptions ranged from 2.94 to 3.89. The item with the lowest perception score was "value for money" (V14), which indicates that customers in mall restaurants had less value for money than they expected. On the other hand, items with highest perception scores were the "presentation of the food" (V1), "taste of the food" (V8), "taste of beverages" (V9) and "overall quality of food and beverages" (V15). The overall mean score for service quality perceptions items was 3.46. This score indicates rather low customer perceptions (Markovic *et al.*, 2010) in mall restaurants regarding service quality.

According to the results in Table 2, all 34 items of the customers' expectations scores were higher than the perceptions scores. Thus, the DINESERV gap was negative for all 34 restaurant items. The narrowest gaps were for the items "presentation of the food" (V1) and "effective signs, symbols and artefacts" (V32). These low gap scores imply that there was a narrow/small difference between perceived and expected service. Thus, the perceived service for the presentation of food and the effectiveness of signs, symbols and artefacts were close to the expected service quality.

In the same vein, the widest gap was for the item "overall quality of service" (V23). This wide gap score implies that there was a wide/big difference between perceived and expected service. Thus, there was a wide gap between what customers actually perceived than what they expected on the overall quality of service.

Finally, the DINESERV gap was -1.04, implying that the overall restaurant service quality fell below customers' expectations. A comparison of customers' perceptions of service quality with their expectations, using the paired samples t-test, indicated a statistically significant difference on 32 of the 34 examined restaurant attributes. Although the narrowest gaps were "presentation of the food" (V1) and "effective signs, symbols and artefacts" (V32), they were not statistically significant. The biggest gap "overall quality of service" (V23) was statistically significant.

Managerial Implications

The results of gap analysis (-1.04) imply that restaurant service providers did not meet customers' expectations. As such, service quality for mall restaurants should be improved, because all of the restaurant items assessed were below

customers' expectations and that there is room for service quality improvement for restaurants in Hemmingways shopping mall.

Furthermore, the analysis of respondents' expectations scores suggested that items with highest expectations scores were "friendliness and politeness of staff" (V16), "efficient service" (V19) and "overall quality of service" (V23). The results reveal similarities to studies conducted by other authors (Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995; Zopiatis & Pribic, 2007; Lee & Hing, 1995). Therefore, mall restaurateurs should continuously strive to exceed customer expectations by emphasising these three expectations items (friendliness and politeness of staff", "efficient service" and "overall quality of service").

It should be noted that managers should not ignore the restaurant attribute that was assessed with the lowest expectation score, that is, "effective signs, symbols and artefacts" (V32). This item is just less important when compared to other attributes. However, if the signs, symbols and artefacts meet the expected minimum, customers will focus on other dimensions in the service quality evaluation process. Hence, managers should maintain at least this expected minimum of restaurant service (Markovic *et al.*, 2010).

According to the findings of this study, the biggest gap related to "overall quality of service" (V23), meaning that customers expected higher overall quality of service than they actually received. The "overall quality of service" also had the widest statistically significant gap implying that it requires significant attention of restaurant managers in terms of making improvement efforts.

To improve the "overall quality of service" mall restaurateurs should develop appropriate training and empowerment programmes for all employees (Moolman, 2011). Empowered employees tend to be satisfied employees who feel more motivated and positive about their jobs. This increase in job satisfaction has the potential to generate higher levels of customer satisfaction and employee retention (Susskind, Kacmar & Borchgrevink, 2007). Even though mall restaurateurs should develop the overall human capital of their restaurants, they should place specific emphasis on the development of their frontline employees to improve the overall quality of service. Attention needs to be paid to the development of frontline characteristics such as emotional intelligence and creativity (Namasivayam & Denizci, 2006).

Conclusion

The study implies two main contributions. Generally, the findings contribute to the development of a service excellence approach that helps identify customers'

expectations and secure performance improvement for mall restaurants. In this context, results may broaden the knowledge of service quality for mall restaurants. In particular, the study itself is considered useful for South African academics and practitioners, as it is the first that presents the application of the DINESERV instrument for mall restaurants in South Africa and captures the measurement of both expectations and perceptions attributes. Improving service quality for restaurants in Hemmingways shopping mall will not only increase customer satisfaction and strengthen customer loyalty, but also improve the mall's reputation and generate greater revenue.

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