

Exploring Service Quality in the Hospitality Sector from the Perspective of Religious Tourists in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In a developing country like KSA some studies have explored individual concepts regarding service quality and customer satisfaction, but fewer if none have investigated their relationship in hotel industry. Clients' perceptions seem to be largely ignored by the management in hotel industry. Therefore, this study is a customer-centered one and focuses on examining service quality indicated by differences of clients' expectations and perceptions. It also examines the link between clients' perception and their overall satisfaction with hotel services. Respondents were interviewed using a modified SERVQUAL (Service quality) questionnaire. Results of the study reveals that relatively high customer perception scores were found for understanding of specific needs of client, individual attention by the company, interest in solving client's problems etc. and low perception was found for advanced reservation technology, employees behavior towards customers , just in time service etc. the article concludes by giving Future research directions and policy recommendations.

Keywords: Service Quality, Religious Tourists, Perceptions, Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

Nowadays service sector plays a significant role in the societal and economic development of nations, and Saudi Arabia is not an exception to this. In case of Saudi Arabia tourism is a major potential sector that can contribute to get revenues, reduce unemployment and alleviate poverty. This sector has expanded rapidly. But as per the expert opinion due to the lack of measuring service quality and due to the reluctance of service providers tourists are not served up to the desired level specially in the hotel industry and most notably in hotels around sacred places.

The assessment of service quality poses some interesting challenges that have engaged academics and practitioners in many countries for quite some time. For conducting this study the researchers have chosen service industry more specifically tourism industry and then more specifically hotel industry. We would like to relate it with religious tourism sector also. Service quality and customer satisfaction in hotel industry that is an essential part of tourism will be investigated in this research.

Saudi Arabia being a center of sacred places for the Muslims all over the world attracts millions of tourists each year. Especially during the annual congregation of HAJ a lot of pilgrims come to perform this religious duty. Thus the hospitality sector plays a vital role in catering to the needs of these religious tourists. Especially the hotel sector in particular is of immense importance in order to satisfy the needs of these pilgrims.

The general objective of this study is to evaluate the current scenario of service quality that has impact on tourist satisfaction in the tourism marketing especially in hotel industry in Saudi Arabia. This research will explore whether a satisfactory level of service is prevailing in hotels or not. The study also aims at providing empirical evidence in order to adopt effective policies for boosting tourism and hospitality.

The next section of the article consists of theoretical background, methodology adopted for the study, Results and discussion, and conclusion containing limitations, future research directions and policy recommendations.

Theoretical Background

For quite a long time the researchers have been emphasizing on the measurement of quality in terms of tangible goods and products at the expense of service sector which was comparatively difficult task. Gronroos (1990) has observed that most of the time quality has been linked with technical attributes of products and the definitions are usually associated with the manufacturing sector where quality control was the dominant slogan. Quality has been defined by Crosby (1979) as "conformance to requirements", similarly Juran (1980) explained it as "fitness for use", while Garvin (1983) came up with the idea of employing the concepts of internal and external failures in his definition of quality. Such definitions were appropriate in the context of manufacturing sector as through such definitions it was difficult to measure and understand the quality of service (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Travel and tourism industry usually provide service along with augmented product that is very difficult to define. While the importance of service quality is undisputed, the theory and practice of service quality has not reached a consensus, after decades of research, on the true meaning of service quality and the true value of the measurable gaps between expectations and perceptions (Ham et al 2003). According to Kotler, "A service is any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the

ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product” (Kotler 2001). So, it can be defined as all those economic activities, which are intangible and involve in close interactions in between service provider and the consumer. Like service its perceived quality is difficult to define and measure. According to Parasuraman et al. service quality is a gap between consumers’ expectation and perception of service along the quality dimensions.

In literature hospitality refers to the broad field incorporating, travel, lodging, leisure, food service, attractions and conventions (ottenbacher et al, 2009). Generally it may also refer to the way one deals and behaves with another person. Pezam et al have differentiated hospitableness and hospitality such that the former is associated with authentic generosity and kindness, while the latter refers to the creation of experiences. Hospitality is all about overcoming the uncertainty and anxiety associated with a new environment (O’Connor,2006). For this purpose different actions may be taken like engaging the guests in activities and polite talk (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Crick, 2000; Tracey,2000; Constanti and Gibbs, 2005).

Hospitality industry in general and hotels in particular have been facing cut-throat competition, thus resulting in increased demand and satisfaction from customers (Parayanie et al, 2010). There is a dire need on part of hotels management to understand their customers and to know what are their needs and expectations. Keeping in view the diversity of customers in terms of their age, experiences, preferences, hobbies, and personalities it seems to be difficult to cater to needs of all your customers, however researchers have tried to answer this question that what kind of service is preferred by the hotel’s customers and how they can be satisfied. What customers think to be of value is changing. Poon (1993) has used the term “new tourists” for the groups which are quality conscious and have different and special interests as compare to the old breed of tourists who had belief in the mass-produced experiences. Such diversity in preferences results in different perceptions of quality, thus confirming the investigations of different researchers in this field of inquiry (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991) . The way customer responds to different service initiatives and problems vary from customer to customer, they do not usually respond in a similar manner. Liden & Skalen (2003) in their study have observed that the frequent visitors of hotel chain were more tolerant after a critical incidence of service failure as compare to the customers who were visiting for the first time, or very rarely. Besides this, providing quality service is continuous and dynamic process and it cannot be achieved once for all. Service organizations including hospitality organizations are striving for increased customer satisfaction, but Tores et al believes that this the minimum organizations can do, they must strive for customer delightment in order to attract and retain them. Keeping in view the abstractness of the concepts of service and quality, they can be termed as elusive (Van Hoof, 2002) and researcher have faced difficulty in defining them separately or in combination. Through service quality an organization can gain competitive advantage over its competitors (Lewis, 2004; Hoffman and Bateson, 1997), thus measuring it is of immense importance for knowing the gap in the service quality of an organization (Bateson,1995; Fridgen, 1996). The contemporary service quality management concepts have their roots in the following two multidimensional models.

(1) SERVQUAL, a product of the North American school of thought (Parasuraman et al., 1985)

(2) The Nordic European model (Gronroos, 1984; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). These models were the harbinger in answering the question of quality conceptualization and management. The SERVQUAL model considers service quality as the gap that exists between the expectations of the customer and the actual performance (Ekinci, 2002). The model further suggests when actual performance should match with the expectations or supersedes it, thus may lead customer satisfaction and delightment respectively. Keeping in view the importance of service quality in service sector in general and hospitality sector in particular different attempts have been made by the researchers to know about customers’ perception of quality service, as they are the primary stakeholders. Lewis in 1984 and Nightingale in 1985 tried to know about guest’s perceptions about the important attributes of hotels. Later on different derivative models for measuring the specific attributes were developed like DINESERV (Knutson et al,1995), LODGQUAL(Getty and Thompson,1994) and LODGSERV(Knutson et al, 1995).

Keeping in view the above theoretical background, this study attempts to know about the perceptions of tourists in general and religious tourists in particular in order to investigate the exiting level of quality service provided by the hotels. Besides this the study also attempts to come up with practical suggestions in order to address the needs of the guests.

Methodology

On the basis of literature review, a primary questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire design with some modification that follows the SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, 1991) instrument (Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy and Responsiveness) by using a 5-point Likert scale with “1” being “Strongly Disagree” and “5” being “Strongly Agree”.

Out of 611 questionnaires 527 have been returned. Finally 439 questionnaires have been selected for analysis after rejecting the incomplete questionnaires. STATA and SPSS have been used for the mathematical

computation.

We used a convenient sampling approach to choose the sample for the study. If a potential respondent did not fulfill the condition of being a current user of a hotel, or was not willing to participate, then the next convenient sampling unit was chosen. The questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and collected immediately after they completed it. As convenient sampling technique has its own issue but keeping in view the nature of this study it was the most appropriate sampling method.

The structured questionnaire consisted of four parts. First part collected socio-demographic data about the respondents; second part was designed to access customers' expectations of service quality; third part was designed to access customers' perception of service, the final part was designed to evaluate the customers' overall satisfaction with service quality. Pure quantitative approach was adopted for conducting this study.

Results and Discussion

Out of 527 questionnaires received 439 were completed and usable, representing an initial response rate of 86.25% (considering 611 distributed and 527 received questionnaires) and final response rate of 83.30% (considering 527 received questionnaires and 439 used questionnaires).

Several data analysis techniques were used. Frequency distributions were obtained to check for data entry errors (e.g. unrecognized or missing codes) and to obtain descriptive statistics. The measures of service quality were factor analyzed: five factors were extracted based on eigenvalue more than one. Finally extracted factors were regressed.

Profile of respondents

Table 1 show that 57.2% of the respondents were male. Most respondents fall in the age category of 30s. Surprisingly age category of above 50 represents a substantial portion that is 22.6%. The majority of respondents were blue-collar (43.4%), white-collar (31.3%). Recently pink-collar users have increased (9.3%). It appeared that respondents with business, leisure and family visiting purpose for the last trip dominated the sample.

Table -3 Characteristics of respondents/users of hotel service

Variables		% of total
gender	Female	42.8
	Male	57.2
Age	20s	20.5
	30s	31.2
	40s	25.7
	above 50	22.6
Occupation	White-collar	31.3
	Blue-collar	43.4
	Pink-collar	9.3
	Student	5.6
	Others	10.4
Purpose of the last trip	Business/job	26.4
	Leisure	18.6
	Visiting family and friends	26.2
	Others	28.8

Expectations and perceptions of service quality and gap values (Paired t test)

Table 2 shows the respective expectation means, perception means, gap means and t-values regarding the service quality received by current users of hotel industry. The result shows that customers had relatively high expectation for most of the variables. They had relatively low expectation score for few variables like convenient operating hours, quality service, company image, employee appearance etc.

Relatively high customer perception scores were found for understanding of specific needs of client, individual attention by the company, interest in solving client's problems etc. and low perception was found for advanced reservation technology, employee appearance, just in time service etc. It should be noted that all the perception scores except one in relation to the service attributes in this study were lower than the expectation scores. It indicates that almost all service attributes suffered a service quality shortfall. The largest gap scores were found for just in time service, advanced reservation technology, employee appearance and surprisingly office decoration. It indicates that the agencies are lacking advanced technology, office decoration, smart employees who are unable to provide in time service.

If expectations scores of service quality are greater than perceived scores, then perceived quality is less

than satisfactory and hence customer dissatisfaction occurs (Tribe, 2012; Akram, 2003; Brady et al, 2002; shi et al, 2004). To investigate if the expectation and perceived scores differ significantly I have used paired sample t test. Table 2 shows the respective expectation means, perception means, gap means and t values regarding the service quality received by current users of hotel industry.

Overall expectation values exceed perception values in 23 attributes. This means that there was negative gap in the 23 attributes and positive gap in one attribute. So, apparently hotels in KSA offer, relatively, a low-quality tourism product and services to tourists. The paired-samples t-tests between the respective expectation means and perception means of all the 24 attributes except one showed that they were significantly different ($t \leq 0.05$).

Table -2 Paired samples statistics (service quality values between consumers' expectations and perceptions of KSA hotels)

Attributes	Perceptions		Expectations		Gap means (Mean differences)	T value	P
	means	SD	means	SD			
1 Understanding of specific needs of client	3.8542	.92488	4.0615	.83220	-.2073	3.455	.001*
2 Provide sufficient trust to customers	3.6150	.91903	4.0023	.71353	-.3872	6.722	.000*
3 Employees instill confidence to customers	3.9681	.84068	4.2073	.73114	-.2392	4.591	.000*
4 Find best options for client	3.8633	.77312	3.7813	.92776	.0820	-1.443	.150
5 Projection of quality service image	3.3804	1.05063	3.9317	.86266	-.5513	8.230	.000*
6 Convenient operating hours	3.6902	.85990	3.8588	1.01725	-.1686	2.644	.008*
7 Neat employees	2.8884	1.09329	3.9954	.84938	-1.1071	15.919	.000*
8 Appealing office decoration	2.2984	1.04018	4.0888	1.02652	-1.7904	25.121	.000*
9 Quickly and willingly respond to customers' requests and feedbacks	3.4100	.89161	3.8200	.88207	-.4100	6.804	.000*
10 Provide error-free service	3.3622	.84049	3.7654	1.03239	-.4032	6.244	.000*
11 Having customers' best interest	3.7289	.85574	3.9021	1.01674	-.1731	2.756	.006*
12 Solving customer problem sincerely and accurately	3.1048	.92057	3.9203	1.09816	-.8155	12.137	.000*
13 It is a successful company	3.4670	.82660	3.7267	.83201	-.2597	4.579	.000*
14: Manage the quality of output	3.3485	.97886	3.9476	1.01112	-.5991	8.899	.000*
15 Knowledgeable employees to answer customer question	3.7745	1.02110	3.9385	1.10555	-.1640	2.343	.020*
16 equipped with modern devices	2.8998	1.07013	3.7745	1.01886	-.8747	12.770	.000*
17 Provide service within agreed time	2.6196	.97862	3.9636	1.03082	-1.3440	20.273	.000*
18 Promotion strategies to project image	3.3713	.91472	4.0501	.95192	-.6788	10.842	.000*
19 Individual attention by the company	3.9066	.82646	4.0820	1.06098	-.1754	2.737	.006*
20 Interest in solving client's problems	3.7426	.76438	4.0251	.92495	-.2825	4.862	.000*
21 Willingly help the customers when they need	3.2938	.86417	4.0683	.86001	-.7745	13.417	.000*
22 Advanced reservation technology	2.6560	1.04364	3.8884	.82419	-1.2323	20.479	.000*
23 customers feel safe	3.8200	.86111	3.9590	.95475	-.1390	2.315	.021*
24 Consider customer's core questions and requests	3.9043	.81647	4.0683	.88358	-.1640	2.965	.003*
Overall Satisfaction ^b	3.25						

Bold value indicates the values that are statistically insignificant (n=439)

Notes:

*t-test two-tail with probability < 0.05 .

^aGap mean is defined as perception mean - expectation mean.

^bOverall satisfaction was measured on a 5 point interval scale: from 1=very dissatisfied to 5= very satisfied.

SD =Standard deviation

Apparently the negative gap-means indicated that the perceived service quality provided by travel

agencies did not meet customers' expectations. Nevertheless, the shortfall did not seem to undermine the customers' overall satisfaction. Table 3 shows that customers appeared to be slightly satisfied with the overall service quality (mean 3.25). In that case of negative gap we will consider: the smaller the gap, the better the service quality provided, and the greater the customer satisfaction. But research conducted by Filiz mentioned that the smaller the gap, the better the service quality provided, and the greater the customer satisfaction while having the gaps all positive that I don't agree with. In my opinion in case of positive gap: the bigger the gap, the better the service quality provided and delighted customers in result (provided that Gap mean is defined as perception mean - expectation mean).

It is mentionable that in this study all the positive attributes were taken. There might be some negative attributes. In that case a negative difference between "experience" (perception) and "expectation" indicates satisfaction, or in our opinion less dissatisfaction. Therefore, comparing the results between user's perception and expectation on service quality had interesting findings, especially the differences among the gap means.

Conclusion

The concept of measuring the difference between expectation and perceptions in the form of the SERVQUAL gap score proved very useful for assessing levels of service quality. This study applied SERVQUAL instrument with some modification in predictor variables to measure the service quality of hotel industry in KSA. Gap analysis was used to identify service shortfalls. As the results indicate that Results of the study reveals that relatively high customer perception scores were found for understanding of specific needs of client, individual attention by the company, interest in solving client's problems etc. and low perception scores were found for advanced reservation technology, employee behavior, and just in time service etc. As the overall assessment of service quality in the eyes of customers is not up to the desired level, therefore different actions must be taken to improve the overall service quality in the hotel sector. Management should pay special attention to the online reservation system and should make it convenient for customers as lack of improvement in this aspect could be a cause of dissatisfaction for customers. The management of hotels should also pay special attention to the training and development of their employees, especially the front-desk employees who interact with the customers frequently; they should be equipped with communication and interpersonal skills in order to deal with customers' complaints and problems effectively. The just in time service concept is also primarily related with the skills of employees, therefore a spirit and philosophy of just in time service must be inculcated in them. Gap that has been developed for decades can't be bridged with a single effort. It can be bridged by ensuring service quality that the customers care about. So, it is time for the management to realize the potential of this sector and come forward to revive this industry for the sake of development of the country. This research is not without limitations, the religious tourists' preoccupation with their religious duties might have affected the results, besides this dissatisfaction with other aspects of their journey might creep in to their opinions about their hotels. Future studies can replicate this study in other sectors besides hospitality, and both quantitative and qualitative approaches might be adopted in order to get better results, as the weakness in one method will be handled through the strength of the other.

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