

Employees' perspectives of service quality in hotels

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Although the importance of service quality has been recognised, few studies have addressed service quality in hotels from the perspective of employees. Therefore, this study aims to measure the service quality of four and five-star hotels in Jordan from the employees' perspective based on the SERVQUAL model. The current study was carried out by measuring the data gathered according to a five-point Likert scale. A quantitative survey method was applied, and therefore the SERVQUAL instrument was used to measure service quality. Data obtained from a sample of 238 respondents drawn from ten four- and five-star hotels in Jordan were analysed with the SPSS software based on descriptive statistics. The study's findings indicated that service quality of five-star hotels in Jordan was higher than that of four-star hotels.

Keywords: service quality, SERVQUAL, work environment, competitive advantage, hotel industry.

Introduction

Competition among hotels to attract and retain customers is intense and customers may be less likely to return to a hotel if the property fails to meet its customers' expectations relative to service quality, regardless its of price-point (Min & Min, 1997; Rauch et al., 2015). In this competitive arena, service quality has become a critical success factor (Avcikurt, Giritlioglu, & Sahin 2011). Service quality in the hotel industry becomes one of the most important factors for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage and customers' confidence in the highly competitive marketplace (Markovic & Raspor, 2010; Naseem et al., 2011). Service quality is critically important in providing competitive advantage to a hotel, and therefore the greatest chance for hospitality organisations to have competitive differentiation is through service quality (Crawford, 2013). Service quality is thus considered as one of the most significant core concepts in the hospitality industry.

No hotel can survive in this competitive environment, unless it satisfies its customers with good quality service (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). However, service quality is a core aspect of service management (Chen, 2008), and is substantial when it comes to define organisational success (Naseem, Ejaz, & Malik, 2011). A successful hotel delivers excellent quality service to customers, and service quality is considered the life of hotel (Min & Min, 1997). Service quality is a way to manage any hotel in order to satisfy its internal and external customers with good quality service, and to survive in the competitive environment (Gržinić, 2007; Narangajavana & Hu, 2008).

Service quality has many benefits, such as providing a competitive advantage to a business, establishing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty and contributing to its image (Grönroos, 1984; Ghobadian, Speller, & Jones, 1994; Bloemer, de Ruyter, & Peeters, 1998). However, Caruana and

Pitt (1997) noted that most studies in the related literature have focused on customers' perceptions and on the managers' duty to ensure the quality of the services delivered. Edvardsson, Thomasson, and Qvretveit (1994) observed that stakeholders' perceptions of service quality performance differ between employee, manager and customer. Employees may have a higher perception of the quality of services they deliver compared to customers' (Ekinici & Dawes, 2009; Kuşlivan et al., 2010). The differences in perception may be due to various reasons. Managers and employees generally do not like to mention deficiencies in the quality of services (Dedeoğlu & Demirer, 2015). In other words, they may tend not to degrade the work and services they have delivered (Grandey, 2000). The current study adds to the literature by creating a new point of view through considering employees' perceptions of service quality. A review of the literature reveals that most research investigating service quality in hotels has been conducted in upscale (4-star) and luxury (5-star) hotels.

Service quality

Service quality (SQ) is defined as "what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for" rather than "what the supplier puts in" (Drucker, 2007, 206). In some earlier studies, service quality was defined as the extent to which the service fulfils the needs or expectations of the customers (Lewis & Mitchell, 1990; Dotchin & Oakland, 1994), while Zeithaml & Bitner (1996) conceptualised service quality as the overall impression of customers as regards the weakness or excellence of the service. Therefore service quality has frequently been conceptualised as the perceived difference between the expected and the actual service performance (Bloemer et al., 1999; Kara et al., 2005).

To determine service quality elements, different studies have been conducted by researchers in the field. Sasser, Olsen, and Wyckoff (1978) specified that service quality is formed

from three dimensions: materials, physical facilities and staff. Grönroos (1984) divided service quality into two aspects: technical quality and functional quality. Rust and Oliver (1994), taking a similar approach to that of Grönroos (1984), stated that the elements of service quality consist of technical quality, functional quality and environment. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) stated that there are five elements of service quality. Those are the dimensions of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Although there is disagreement among researchers about how to measure service quality, several instruments have been developed to do so, such as SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, INTSERVQUAL and INSQPLUS. Various measurement scales such as LODGSERV, HOLSERV and DINESERV have been developed for service quality evaluation purposes in the tourism industry. LODGSERV (Knutson et al., 1990) and HOLSERV (Wong Ooi Mei, Dean, & White, 1999) are used in the accommodation industry, while DINESERV (Stevens, Knutson, & Patton, 1995) is used in the restaurant services sector. INTQUAL (Caruana & Pitt, 1997) and INTSERVQUAL (Frost & Kumar, 2001) are used in service quality perceptions of employees. CASERV (Wong & Fong, 2012) is used for casino customers. Due to the specificities of services in the hotel industry (i.e. impalpability, inseparability from provider and receiver of service, impossibility of storage), a specific concept called SERVQUAL (SERVICESQUALITY Model) was created (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) introduced the SERVQUAL model to measure service quality. The SERVQUAL scale was developed in the marketing context and this was supported by the Marketing Science Institute (Parasuraman et al., 1985). In the original SERVQUAL instrument, Parasuraman et al. (1985, 47–48) define service quality through ten dimensions: reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, credibility, communication, competence, security, courtesy, understanding the customer, and access, but later Parasuraman et al. (1988, 23) reduced the dimensions to five because some dimensions were overlapping (credibility, communication, competence, security, courtesy, understanding customer and access), and they included reliability, tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions have specific service characteristics linked to the expectations of customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Although this model has been used as an instrument in various studies across industries, the SERVQUAL has received many criticisms from some scholars (e.g., Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Brown et al., 1993) and they are opposed to the use of SERVQUAL to measure service quality due to the differences in industry characteristics. However, other scholars have confirmed that the SERVQUAL instrument is applicable in the tourism industry (e.g., Fick & Ritchie, 1991; Yuan et al., 2005).

The SERVQUAL scale has become the most popular instrument for measuring service quality. The model has been applied in various service industries, including tourism and hospitality. The SERVQUAL model is based on five service quality dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988), namely:

1. Tangibility (physical facilities, equipment and personnel appearance): It consists of the pleasantness of the companies' physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. Tangibility includes also the external appearance of the customer staff.

2. Reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately): It means that the service company offers accurate and flawless service to customers' directly from the first time on and does that in the promised time.
3. Responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service): It means the willingness of the employees in the service companies to help customers, answer their requests, tell customers when the service is provided, and provide prompt service.
4. Assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to gain trust and confidence): It means that the behaviour of the employees makes the customers trust the company and make them feel safe. In addition, employees have the ability to answer the customers' questions and are always polite.
5. Empathy (providing individualised attention to the customers): It means the employees' ability to understand customers' problems, acting towards their benefit and treating them as individuals. Empathy includes also that the opening times of the company are suitable.

The SERVQUAL model offers a suitable conceptual frame for the research and service quality measurement in the services sector. It is based on the customer's evaluation of service quality. The described concept is based on the gap between expectations and perceptions of the customers. Service quality represents a multidimensional construct. Each dimension of SERVQUAL has different features. The five dimensions are described by 22 items for assessing customer perceptions and expectations regarding the quality of service, and the respondents are required to assess on a scale from 1 to 7 what they expected of the service and how they perceived it, where 1 means fully disagreeing and 7 fully agreeing. The level of service quality is represented by the gap between perceived and expected service. As can be seen from previous studies, the SERVQUAL instrument has been the predominant method used to measure employees' perceptions of service quality. The present study can also be considered an attempt to use SERVQUAL for measuring service quality. The theoretical framework of study as shown in Figure 1 is to explore service quality in four and five-star hotels in Jordan.

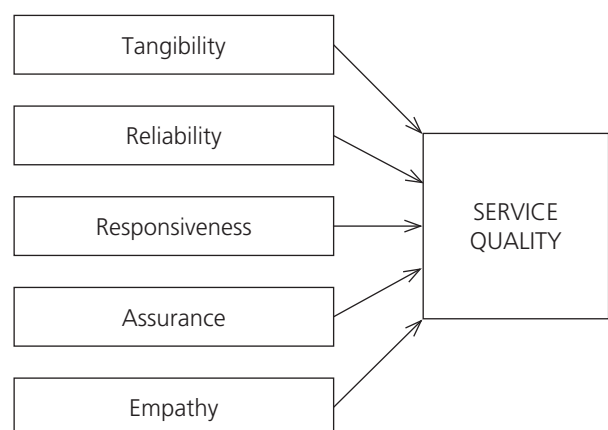


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Methodology

This study was conducted by using a self-administered questionnaire to measure hotel employees' perceptions. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of a multi-dimension measurement to measure service quality from employees' perspectives, and consisted of two parts. The first part measured employees' perceptions of hotel attributes using a modified SERVQUAL model. The Likert measurement scale of the construct was converted from 7 to 5 interval types by assigning a constant statement for each interval. The constant statements were 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree and 5 – strongly agree. The second part was designed to capture respondents' demographic characteristics, which included gender, age, educational level, years of experience, level of employment and the department; and hotels' characteristics, which included hotel classification, hotel affiliation, and hotel management.

The service quality section used a modified SERVQUAL, as developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) to measure service quality throughout five service quality dimensions, namely: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy. The original items were slightly modified to suit the hospitality setting. The service quality section contains 22 items in total.

The target population of the survey was employees in four and five-star hotels in Jordan during the summer of 2014. Questionnaires were distributed in 10 four and five-star hotels, after the hotel managers agreed to participate in the study. Human Resources (HR) managers were asked to administer the questionnaires to their employees, and to collect them after completion. In each hotel questionnaires were randomly distributed to the employees. Of 252 returned questionnaires, 14 were not included in the analysis because of incompleteness. Thus, data analysis is based on a sample of 238 valid questionnaires. The response rate was 63%. SPSS was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to describe respondents' demographic characteristics, hotels' characteristics and to evaluate service quality perceptions of employees. Furthermore, a reliability analysis was performed to test the reliability of the scale and inner consistency of extracted factors. For this purpose, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated.

Results

The questionnaires were personally delivered to 400 employees working in four and five-star hotels, 238 of which were usable for analysis. The demographic characteristics of the respondents were as shown in Table 1.

The results of current study indicated that the studied sample was constituted by 82.3% males and 17.7% females, and 42% of the respondents were between 26 and 35 years old. Most (47.9%) of the respondents held bachelor's degrees, while 10.9% had master's degrees. Almost a third (28.6%) of the respondents had work experience ranging between 2 and 4 years, and 23.5% had 5 to 7 years of experience. Most of employees (46.2%) were supervisors, and 39.5% were staff; 40.3% of respondents were working in housekeeping, 31.1% in the food and beverages department, and 28.6% in the front office. The majority of participating hotels were international

chain and five-star hotels representing 51.3%, and 46.2% of the hotels were managed by management contract.

Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated for each scale to test the reliability and the degree to which the items are tapping the same concept, as shown in Table 2. Results show the Cronbach's alpha for job SQ scale: Cronbach's alpha for the six-item scale of tangibility is 0.783, for the three-item scale of reliability it is 0.706, for the five-item scale of responsiveness it is 0.862, for the four-item scale of assurance it is 0.834, and for the four-item scale of empathy it is 0.775. It is noticeable that the Cronbach alpha values for the scales were between 0.706 and 0.862. That is well above the minimum value of

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants ($N = 238$)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	196	82.3
Female	42	17.7
Age		
25 years or less	70	29.4
26–35	100	42.0
36–45	40	16.8
46–55	20	8.4
56 years or more	8	3.4
Education level		
Less than secondary education	38	16.0
Secondary school graduate	60	25.2
Bachelor's degree	114	47.9
Master's degree	26	10.9
Department		
Housekeeping	96	40.3
Food and beverages	74	31.1
Front office	68	28.6
Experience		
Less than one year	48	20.1
Between 2 and 4 years	68	28.6
Between 5 and 7 years	56	23.5
Between 8 and 10 years	37	15.6
More than 10 years	29	12.2
Job level		
Staff	94	39.5
Supervisor	110	46.2
Department Head/Manager	34	14.3
Hotel classification		
Five-Star Hotel	122	51.3
Four-Star Hotel	112	48.7
Hotel management		
Owner	54	22.7
Management contract	110	46.2
Franchising	74	31.1

Table 2: Internal consistency test of the instrument

Variable	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Factor 1: Tangibility	6	0.783
Factor 2: Reliability	3	0.706
Factor 3: Responsiveness	5	0.862
Factor 4: Assurance	4	0.834
Factor 5: Empathy	4	0.775
Overall service quality	22	0.882

0.60, which is considered acceptable as an indication of scale reliability (Hair et al. 2006). Thus, these values suggest good internal consistency of the factors. Finally, the Cronbach's alpha value for overall SQ is 0.882. This value represents a high consistency and reliability among statements in each variable.

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis of employees' perceptions in the hotel industry are shown in Table 3. The range of SQ perceptions items were from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The results in Table 1 show that the mean score for overall service quality (3.782) with a standard deviation at (0.732), which means service quality is moderately implemented in hotels as reported by employees.

The mean scores for all dimensions of SQ ranged from 3.670 to 4.020, which indicates that SQ in five-star hotels is very good. Furthermore, the results reported that "Assurance" had the highest mean (4.020) that reflects employees' behaviour that makes customers trust the hotel and make them feel safe, the ability of employees to answer customers' questions, and that they are always polite. The lowest mean (3.670) was for "Tangibility" as shown in Table 3.

In order to investigate whether the work environment was different among hotels or not, it was necessary to conduct *t*-tests to investigate any significant differences among hotels based on their classification. The results of the *t*-test for differences in employee perceptions are presented in Table 4.

As shown in Table 4, the findings indicated that there are significant differences between five-star hotels and four-star hotels in term of service quality. Employees in five-star hotels showed higher level of perceptions toward service quality than those employees in four-star hotels. It means that five-star hotels (mean = 3.938) were significantly different and better than four-star hotels (mean = 3.312) in the quality of service.

Discussion and conclusion

The issue of quality is one of the major challenges encountered by organisations, especially hotels. Although there is a large amount of literature on service quality, there is still limited empirical evidence on employees' perceptions of SQ generally and specifically in Jordanian hotels. The quality of services is typically investigated in terms of the viewpoint of customers. Therefore, the present study set out to investigate SQ from the viewpoint of employees working at Jordanian four and

five-star hotels. The findings were that all the five and four-star hotels in Jordan have a moderate level of service quality, but the higher level was in five-star hotels.

This study concluded that SQ should be established as a long-term goal for hotels. Considering the importance of SQ, managers at hotels are recommended to support and internalise SQ as part of their organisational culture. Furthermore, there are some important managerial implications from this study which suggest that managers should be engaged more in implementing the concept of SQ. Some limitations exist throughout this study that must be identified. These limitations include lack of accessibility to all hotels departments, and the inability of the researcher to contact employees and explain to the importance of the questionnaire. Finally, further research is suggested to investigate the differences in the service quality perceptions of stakeholders in hotels.

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Table 3: Description service quality

Statistic variable	Mean	Std. deviation
Service Quality	3.782	0.732
Factor 1: Tangibility	3.670	0.743
Factor 2: Reliability	3.992	0.598
Factor 3: Responsiveness	3.954	0.621
Factor 4: Assurance	4.020	0.574
Factor 5: Empathy	3.724	0.713

Note: All items used a 5-point Likert scale with (1= strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

Table 4: *T*-test for differences in service quality by hotel classification

Dimension	Hotel classification	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. deviation	Mean difference	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Service Quality	Five-star	122	3.938	0.672	0.626	4.84	0.000
	Four-star	116	3.312	0.548			

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