

Family friendly services and customer satisfaction in Zimbabwean resorts

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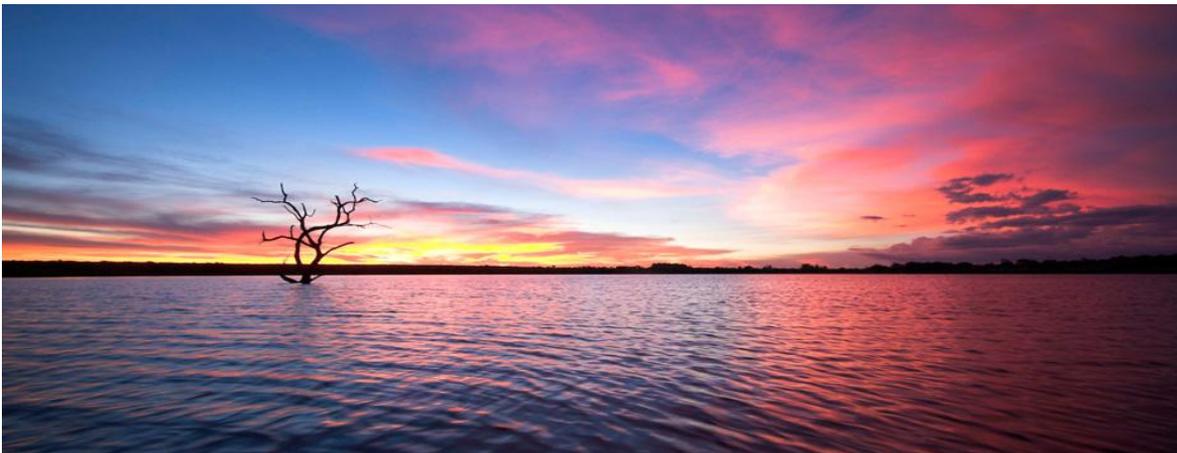
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Abstract

Hospitality establishments are lacking in the aspect of family friendly services and facilities. There is not much research of family friendly services in the hospitality industry. This may affect the satisfaction of families on vacation. Family tourism is increasing worldwide such that it is now a huge market which should be given attention. In Zimbabwe very few hotels are servicing families who come for holiday vacation. This shows that lack of family friendly services, activities and facilities could affect customer satisfaction resulting in low volumes to hotels. Kariba was used as the research area, which is one of the popular destinations in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the research was to explore the level of satisfaction for families with family friendly services offered by hotels in Zimbabwe. The researchers used qualitative research design for hotels and tourists (supply and demand). The researchers established that the level of satisfaction was low based on the limited choice and variety. Key findings revealed that there is still extensive research lacking in the area of family friendly service provision. The services provided were also noted to be of poor standard where quality was concerned. Hence hotels need to improve the quality, quantity and variety of the family services so as to increase guest frequency and satisfaction levels and thus become more sustainable.

Key words: Kariba, Zimbabwe, family friendly services, customer satisfaction, perceptions.



Source: <http://www.karibatours.com/images/img2.jpg>

Introduction

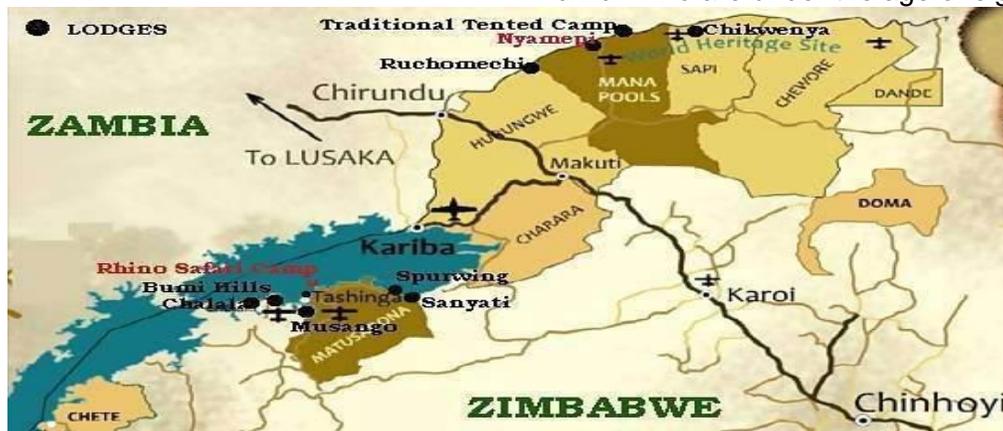
In the past Gaines, Hubbard, Witte, & O'Neill (2004) note that the major target and market for hotels were business travellers. With the gradual move Stringam (2008) argue that nowadays tourists are combining business with leisure meaning that when going for a business one may decide to go with his or her family. In this study a family consists of parents either both or single with a minimum of one child who is/are under the age of eighteen.

Revels (2012) is of the view that, during the 21st century more families were engaging in family vacations as a time to spend with their children to reconnect. Family is a chief socialization agent through which youths acquire social skills and consolidating family relations Lee et al., (2011). Despite this ever-increasing segment a few American hotels and resorts are gradually shifting to reflect the implementation of the best possible services to draw families' attention such that they spend more days at the hotel or resort (Bayes 2008). However this reflection is still missing in developing countries even though Shaw & Dawson (2010) and Revels (2012) opine that parents value mostly time spent with their children partaking in family friendly services offered at the resort.

The availability of family friendly services according to (Bayes 2008) allows parents to

spend time with their children, which leads to customer satisfaction at resorts or hotels. However activities which involve participation of parents and their children or those activities that allow the parents time to relax are few. Hence there is need to increase these facilities and offer quality and up-to-standard services or programs (Gaines et al., 2004). Hotels and resorts world over are now aware of the increase of family market leading towards more demand of family friendly services and children's services (Clark, 2001). This is no exception for Zimbabwe as tourist volumes are high but very few visit resorts with families and this is an untapped market with potential (ZTA 2013; The Standard 2013). Therefore there is need to improve on services and facilities in Zimbabwe for families such that they will be satisfied and spend more days at the hotel (Gaines et al., 2004).

It is against this notion that using the qualitative methodology the study sought to explore the satisfaction of customers towards family friendly services in Zimbabwe. The specific objectives focused on establishing family friendly services that are offered in Kariba resort town, assessing customer satisfaction levels towards family friendly services and lastly to suggest strategies to improve satisfaction from the current obtaining. For the purposes of the study a family consists of parents either both or single parent with minimum of one child who are under the age of eighteen.



Source: <https://www.afrizim.com/Image/maps/zimbabwe/kariba/Lodges-mat-mana.jpg>

Literature review

There is a paucity of literature regards hospitality and family friendly services in developing countries. Family friendly service spread throughout the nation of America and became popular not only amongst the wealthy people but to the middle class society as a way of seeking health and pleasure (Revels, 2012). The 20th century was the golden age of family vacation because even the great depression did not stop families from spending more time together in vacations (Rugh, 2008). Whilst the same researcher contends that during family vacations, more conflicts between family members arose because members of the family were not used to stay together. Lee et al., (2008) argues otherwise that family leisure actually cultivates rich opportunities for socialization through which youth acquire social skills and fosters cooperation between children. Gaines et al., (2004) purports that in recent years many families are opting to spend most of time with their children hence there has been an increased demand for activities and services for family hospitality and this is the reason why family friendly hospitality has become more popular.

Family Friendly Offerings in Hotels

Children nowadays are interested in partaking in activities that are different from the ones they are used to and those which are challenging and bring fun to them (Lee et al 2008) Bishop's Lodge Resort (Mexico), Howard Johnson (U.S.A), Ritz Carlton (Boston) hotel, only to mention a few accommodate children by implementing separate pool areas, computer rooms, dining areas as well as rooms with small-size furnishings especially designed for children. Stringam (2008) and Gaines et al. (2004) purports that children are excited with the bright and vivid colors in their guest rooms and value-added amenities should be featured within each room such as, Crayola lamps, Crayola clock/radio Crayola

easel, entertainment centre, a mini-refrigerator, microwave oven, a night-light, and colorful furnishings. They further note that electronics such as internet access, CD players and video game equipment also matters. Johanson (2008) and Chon & Singh, (1995) also noted that families desire facilities and accommodation that best cater for them. These are some of the activities that can be offered by Zimbabwe to cater for families. Even when eating out Hove (2013) noted that parents take into consideration facilities for children when choosing where to eat. This implies that even in hotels parents are also concerned with the availability of facilities that cater for children. In restaurants children's menu, high chairs, children cutlery and children's prices are some of the facilities that can be provided so as to cater for children. These may also be some of the facilities that parents may be looking forward to when they go to eat out (Johanson 2008). In addition to indoor activities, outdoor games are available like ski les-sons, potato sack races, perform puppet shows, watch movies or use their creativity in the arts and crafts facility (Makens, 1992). Despite all these activities this market has not been fully attended.

Hilbrecht et al., (2010) postulated that teenagers are more interested in physical and fun activities. Activities include fish and duck feeding, Indian bead crafts, computer games, sun visor art, scavenger hunts, hiking, water balloon fun, swimming, sports, and parachute play. Lee, Graefe, and Burns, (2011) contend that families also preferred recreational activities within scenic areas, historic sites and nature centers whereby the children can acquire knowledge through educational value. Lee and Graefe (2010) also posit that outdoor recreation is a major factor which enhance family quality and promote cohesion hence family recreation contributes to satisfaction. All these activities stimulate family bonding and may be used by Zimbabwean hotels to offer the ultimate family experience, thus the

need to seek the perceptions of families on holiday to better satisfy them.

Apart from this Nanda, Hu and Bai (2006) noted that provision of services and programs for families is beneficial to destination marketers in that they will be able to formulate proper and right strategies so as to market for family travellers and enhance the experiences of families at holidays. Gaines et al., (2004; 92) also argues that provision of these services at resorts attract more families to the resort and repeated visits. When families are satisfied they will in turn tell others through positive word of mouth.

The contribution of family friendly service to satisfaction

Satisfaction has been noted by Meng et al., (2008) as a significant component to sustain competitiveness. Based on this premise Hotels can explore this untapped market, hence the desire to close this gap for the Zimbabwe. Johanson (2008) analyzed vacation trends in American resorts and found a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and family friendly services.

These services are amongst other child care services such as storytelling, babysitting, child centered activities (Revels, 2012; Lee et al., 2008). Otherwise hotels may lose revenue by not adequately catering for families. Another factor which can influence satisfaction of families when they are at hotels is the atmosphere.

Hove (2013) argues that atmosphere has a major contribution to satisfaction. If the type of clientele of the hotel is families the colour scheme should tell that they cater for families. Bright and cheerful colours promote positive feelings. They are also more stimulating colors that have been proven to increase one's appetite. Neutrals are a great color scheme because these colors help families feel calm and depict a lot about service to be offered (Hove 2013).

The availability of family friendly facilities during vacations centered more on atmosphere and availability of facilities that reduce stress on parents and time to relax and escape pressure from home life. Johanson (2008) concluded that there is need for resorts to continuously upgrade their services in line with customer's expectations as a way to beat competitors in the new millennium. Agate et al., (2008) came up with a different dimension to family friendly service where they examined the family religiosity, family leisure, and family functioning. Agate et al., (2008) developed a model which illustrates that there is need for resorts to offer facilities that are tailor made to customer's needs and wants. The availability of such facilities results in the customer satisfaction through cohesion and adaptability between members and core family activities provide a safe and comfortable environment in which feelings of closeness and bonding can increase (**see fig.1**) below. Leisure can be done through two ways which are balance and core family leisure. Core family leisure patterns is a type of leisure which people frequently engage in whilst they are at home on daily basis and the costs are very low for this type of leisure (Agate et.al, 2008). Some of the activities that people can engage in at core family leisure are playing around the yard, dinners with all family members, watching television together as a family, only to mention a few.

On the other hand balance family leisure patterns are not frequently done and they are not common. There is more need for planning, they are costly and there is need for more resources. There are varieties of activities which are done through balance family leisure which include vacations, engaging in different recreational activities such as indoor and outdoor activities. Since the activities are done in a new environment and they seem to be challenging, there is need for adaption such that they would be able to partake in the activities for pleasure.

Stringam (2008) posits that it is not just about recreational families. Shaw et al., (2010) are of the view that family leisure activities are pleasurable such that satisfaction is attained. However from the

foregoing there has been no study done in developing countries to capture the family vacation market, which will be carried out by this study.

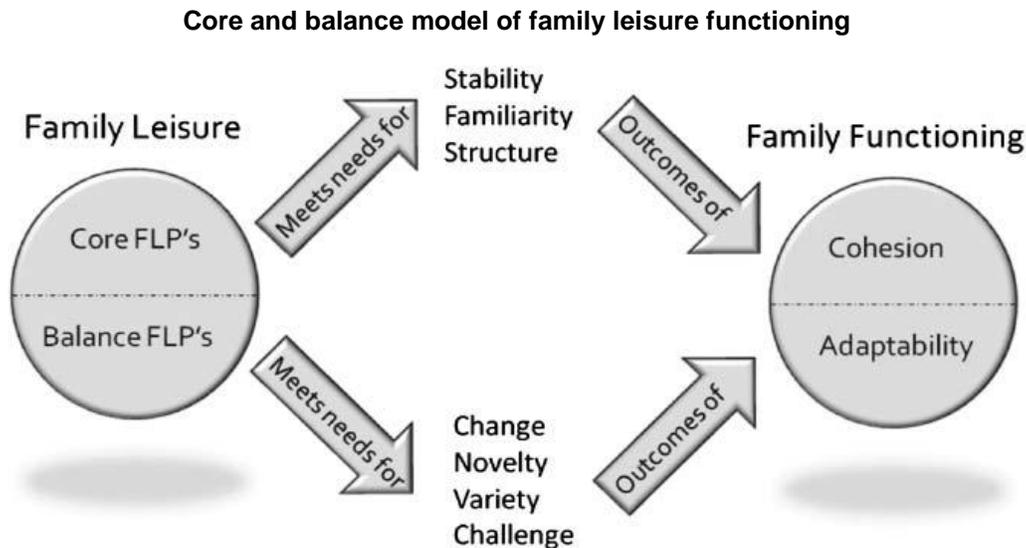


Figure 1: Adapted from Agate et al. (2008)

Methodology

The research adopted the interpretivism philosophy using the qualitative approach. Interpretivists are of the view that subjective interpretation is the only and best way in which reality can be drawn from and the way in which the truth can be understood. Information can be gathered from both verbal and non verbal communication and those types of communication are very vital (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008 cited by Flowers 2009). For views to be interpreted exploratory research design was found to be appropriate. Exploratory design is a means of seeing new insights, asking questions and assessing phenomenon in a new light which is practically useful if one wishes to clarify understanding the problem by means of finding out what is happening (Moser et al., 2001). It is against the above description why the researchers adopted the exploratory design because no other studies have been done in Zimbabwe regarding customer perceptions towards

family friendly hospitality/ services. The researchers used this design through in depth open ended questionnaires and guided interviews so as to increase the interest of analysis towards the problem. Questionnaires were distributed to tourists and the service providers in Kariba resort. The study was limited to the two categories as the providers offer the family friendly services whilst the tourist participants were the end user. The sample size was reached using a sampling table guide for sample size decisions provided by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) to estimate the sample size. According to the table a population of tourists who visited Kariba can be represented by a sample size of 5% of the total respondents and accordingly managers were represented by 5% of the total managers at the hotels. From a population of 220 tourists per month to the resort town of Kariba a sample of 140 tourists was chosen and 10 operators. Purposive /judgmental sampling was used because the researchers were only

interested in tourists travelling as families. Questionnaires were distributed to tourists and the service providers in Kariba resort. The study was limited to the two categories as the providers offer the family friendly services whilst the tourists participate in service consumption as the end users.

Results and discussion.

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 80% response rate was realized. Females who participated in the

study were 52 whilst men were 28 from the side of tourists which constituted 65% as compared to men who constituted 35%. The large number of females in the sample may be because they are the ones who normally go with their children for holidays. This is cited by Shaw et al., (2010) that women value recreational leisure because it has more benefits for the family hence they tend to go for family vacation. The other reason may be that some women are divorced, single or widowed and come with their children for a holiday more than men.

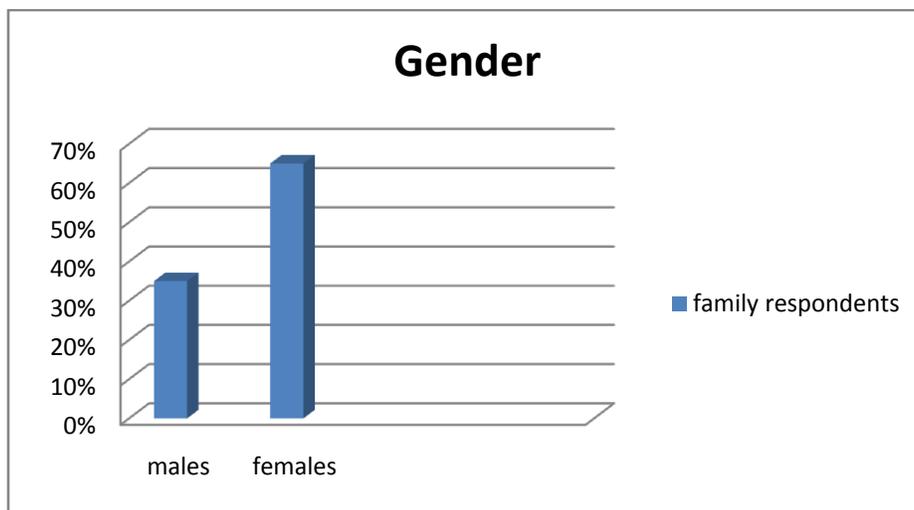


Figure 2. Demography of tourist respondents. Source: primary data

Family friendly offerings

Several family friendly services are being offered in Kariba to cater for families on vacation (see table 2 below). There are more of outdoor than indoor activities. There are more water activities which constitute about 50% of the activities being offered. The availability of water bodies in Kariba enables the hotels to have more of water activities than other activities. Kariba has very high temperatures and more water activities are provided to cool tourists and avoid discomfort from the harsh weather. Mostly parents want to relax, engage in cultural activities whilst children are more

interested in outdoor activities (Hilbrecht et.al, 2010; Shaw et.al 2010). This is also in support of Lee et al., (2008) findings that outdoor recreation activities have inherent challenges which offer opportunities for experiences in wilderness that create feelings of efficacy and have positive effects on family functioning. Availability of different activities are vital in hotels as they recognize the importance of children's activities, services, amenities and programs to better cater for family vacationers. Ultimately when the children are satisfied parents will also be satisfied, hence enhancing their comfort and satisfaction.

ACTIVITIES	FACILITIES	SERVICES
Water sliding	Water slide	Poolside service
Boat cruising	Swimming pools	Children's menu
Game viewing	High chairs	Room service
Swimming	Coat beds	Children's prices
Physical fitness activities	Bunk beds	Shutdown service
Paintings e.g. face painting	Swings	
	Gym room	

Table 2 - Activities, facilities and services offered (Source: primary data)

Thematic analysis

Several themes emerged from the data concerning perceptions and satisfaction from family friendly services rendered. Five themes emerged as discussed below:

1. Satisfaction with services and facilities offered

The researchers found out that families with children were satisfied with the services which were being offered at hotels, despite the lack of new activities. Three sub-themes emerged. According to the parents, 90% of the children really enjoyed the services, activities and facilities offered by the hotels. The guests perceived that the staff was friendly; the children liked the staff they were with when partaking in any activities. These results support Milman, (1997) who noted that guests tend to be satisfied with their stay when they perceive staff to be friendly. Huff et al. (2003; 19) also argues that the staff have a great influence on the experience of the families at holiday. Thus they have a crucial role in bringing out the satisfaction of the family members.

"It seems as if my children were friends long back with the staff such that they want to spend more time playing and doing different activities with the staff".

"My kids really enjoyed playing together with the staff and loved the services and activities."

This shows that staff has a contributing role to guest satisfaction and positive perceptions to families during their stay at the hotel. However Harvitz et al. (2010) disputes this fact when they posit that staff providing recreation may fall short in facilitating memories among families because they are not part of the attraction mix. Yet to the families creating positive family memories is an urgent long-term goal, associated with strengthening the family unit.

Variety of activities for families

One of the respondents noted that,

"We really enjoyed the activities offered for us (parents with children). There are different but limited activities even for us fathers we can go to gym, game viewing and boat cruising whilst my children will be at the super tube (water sliding) which they seem to like the most. My children really liked the water activities and they want to come back here for another holiday and I might consider that and come back again".

The notion of repeat business might be due to the activities offered though they were cited as few in variety and choice by the destination. Many respondents were of the same view as 65% of them noted the following:

"The services and activities that they have are somewhat limiting and old we expected to do much more for the kids entertainment

including computer and live video games, plays, but hey what they have seems to be entertaining my kids despite it not being up to scratch."

"There is no choice for my kids but what is here is occupying my kids. They seem not to mind, the idea of being on holiday as a family is just fun"

"I have been to this country with my family several times to different hotels but it looks like a few of your hotels offer family friendly services that try to cater for all the ages, at the same time the hotels offer almost the same type of service. There is nothing unique for my family except the choice of resort"

The provision of different activities though limiting and not modern gives room for every member of the family to choose the activities they want to partake. The standards of the playing equipment and all the activities were deemed below quality as well. The other unseen benefits both encounter is their interaction and socializing with other families which enhance fun and result in total satisfaction of families.

Hotels seem to have left the family market as this statement shows that few offer family friendly services and rarely do they differ in activity variety.

Well organized services and activities

The services offered were well supervised, very organized and timed with free participation.

One responded said that:

"Their services and activities are very organized because the staff managed to keep the time correctly. I saw it when we went to a boat cruise we left for the cruise on time. Also we never had a problem with the food and beer whilst in the boat."

The respondents noted they were able to leave their children to participate in activities in their absence without fear of accidents even where teen's activities were less supervised.

One female respondent explained:

"The activities for children are well supervised because ever since I started visiting this hotel I never heard about any accidents that occurred to children when they were partaking in offered activities. No children have drowned in the pool because there is always someone supervising and monitoring these children."

2. Time utilization interests

Due to availability of activities and services, different activities could be done by all members together. The sub-themes emerging are discussed below.

More time together as family

Availability of family friendly services encourages families to have more time together as a family and enjoy each other's company. When families are at home they spend most of their time engaging in their daily routines and this hinders the time they spend together when they are at home. Therefore when families go for a holiday they spend more time together relaxed and having a good time. This is supported by Shaw et al., (2008) who postulated that at vacation families spend more together and interact more rather than when they are at home.

Such comments were noted:

"When we are home I tend to spend less time with my family even with my wife and kids. I work far from home and most of the times I will not be at home. I love this time when we are on holiday together as a family because we have fun and I interact more with my family."

The vacation becomes a forum for family togetherness that can also develop open communication amongst family members. On a different note parents perceived that availability of family friendly services and activities enabled them to have individual time alone.

One female respondent suggested that:

“Availability of these activities that cater for family members is very good even though limited; they enable each family member to do whatever we want. My kids are having a good time at the slides, my husband has gone to the gym and I am enjoying myself whilst reading because I like it very much”.

This implies that family members want alone time where they can cater for their wants or concentrate on themselves as individuals.

Adults spend more time together relaxing

The availability of these services which occupied the kids parents were allowed time to be together as couples relaxing without any disturbances.

Some adults commented that:

“We had a great time as adults only when we socialized whilst at pool and had great entertainment which we enjoyed a lot.”

“We went to shop for souvenirs and we also managed to exercise at the gym which we rarely do when we are at home due to pressure of work”

Parents had more time to relax as a couple when the children were not with them. Of the respondents 55% perceived that availability of family friendly activities was a leeway to have more time alone. They also participated in other activities together as couples. Hilbrecht et.al (2010) also noted that the family desire for relaxation during their stay and at the same time they really relaxed because they were also free from work.

Responded 44 stated that:

“When children are participating in their activities we lie by the pool with my wife and we also just relaxed at our balcony which had a nice view of the river”.

3. Conflict and communication bonding.

Communication and conflicts is another factor which is a problem between parents and children therefore partaking in vacation together created better cohesion.

Increased communication

The findings from the respondents showed that their communication increased resulting from family friendly services offered. When the families were allocated rooms with bunk beds they would spend more time together and relax together as family and during that time they would tend to communicate with each other more than they do when they are at home. In addition the respondents ate together as a family and during this process their interaction increased.

The researcher noted the following:

“We really had a good time together as a family. We managed to interact more, than we do when we are at home. Here we ate together and talked more because when I am at home I leave the house early and come back late and the children will be already sleeping so here we increased our communication and I was happy about that.”

There was enhanced interaction and affection amongst the family, kids, and parents and with other children from different destinations and tribes. Therefore availability of family friendly services satisfied guests and gave a positive perception to the families.

Shaw et al., (2010; 224) also noted the same findings in that parents especially mothers want good relationships between children meaning that for a relationship to

be good it means there should be kindness and affection which was also found in this study.

Increased trust and support

Communication, also led to increased trust and support within family members through open communication. Respondents developed a strong sense of unity between the family members through the provision of family friendly services. Shaw (2010) highlights that parents desire long term goals from the family friendly services offered which are cohesion and maintenance of closeness for family members even in the future. The researcher also noted the same from the respondents that they are concerned with family togetherness in terms of both physical and emotional attachment will remain intact and unity.

4. Increased emotional attachment

The experiences of families from family friendly services contributed emotionally to a greater extent on perceptions of families during their stay. Families experienced more of positive feelings rather than negative emotions.

Very comfortable

All family members were feeling comfortable during their stay because everyone was being considered in the selection of activities and services on offer. For example in the restaurant there were high chairs such that the children would sit and eat comfortably and also the parents would eat comfortably without holding children whilst eating.

Happy/ glad and excited

When a family is going for a holiday there are certain preferences which they consider before going. Families were happy and glad by the services and activities offered for every age group. This afforded the parents an opportunity to see the importance of

family vacation. This concurs with Lee *et al* (2008) who opine that family members who often recreate together report higher levels of happiness.

Confident and less worried

Families felt confident and they had less worries whilst at the hotels. Parents were confident and were not worried because their children were safe with the staff when they were partaking in activities that are offered for children. One of the many comments was:

"I am satisfied with the services being offered by the hotel. I do not worry about anything even if my children are at the supatube (water slide). I just know that my children are safe even if I am not there physically with them I just know that someone is looking after my kids and I can do my business whilst they are being catered for."

If the parents were not confident with the staff and services they offer they would never allow their children to participate in any activity that was offered for children.

5. Positive memories

Almost all the respondents (98%) had positive perceptions concerning the memories they experienced whilst they were on holiday. Almost all the respondents highlighted they had positive memories. Family members were of the view that being on holiday as a family and engaging in family friendly services and activities left them with positive memories.

"I think all my children had memorable experiences towards this holiday and also my husband and I, had a wonderful memory. I think family friendly services enables each family member to have a memorable time and experience"

There are several strategies to improve satisfaction of families during vacation. One

of the strategies is an increase in the facilities offered for more choice and variety. This enhances satisfaction resulting in repeat and customer loyalty. New and modern activities should be introduced so that the customers would be satisfied. Some of the activities include specially designed play rooms for kids, fish and duck feeding, water balloon fun, sharing culture with children, table football matches, only to mention a few. As for families they can offer activities such as scavenger hunts, night river watch, live food and wine cooking and more of water activities. These are some of the activities that respondents highlighted that they need to be improved and implemented.

Respondents also suggested free shuttle service by going to the dam wall and the crocodile farm and other areas of interest will increase length of stay and satisfaction. Provision of family packages also enables families to stay within the budget and the activities they are to engage in when they get there. It is also prudent to add other amenities to families like free family entertainment nightly, cultural shows among others in the package.

Conclusion

Family vacations may represent a last bastion of family togetherness which hotels can capture as a vibrant niche market grappling at bonding families before they leave the nest. It is also a vehicle to nurture the notion and appreciation of children growing up to continue vacations into the future. To a greater extent nearly all the respondents had positive perceptions concerning the memories they experienced whilst they were on holiday. They felt it was money lying in the drain though they felt there is need to introduce more modern activities as children are now living in the internet age and are more advanced. The parents felt it was the right forum for them to build that emotional attachment with their children and it also created a conducive

environment for them to share life skills with their children especially the teenagers. To sum up hotels need to improve the quality, quantity and variety of the family services to increase guest frequency and satisfaction levels.

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