

Hotel Ratings, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: The Perception of Guests at Ethiopian Hotels

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship amongst hotel ratings, service quality; customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Ethiopian hotel industry, since the prevalence of different rating (grading) systems is confusing customers. Using stratified cluster sampling by which customers were clustered under the hotels that they stayed in, and stratified according to their hotel ratings, a sample of 1200 hotel guests were targeted. A total of 415 hotel guests responded, by completing the HOTSPERF questionnaire, which is a modified version of SERVQUAL and SERVPERF. Through various inferential techniques, it became apparent that there is a significant relationship between hotel ratings and service expectations, service perceptions, and customer satisfaction. However, no significant direct relationship was found between hotel ratings and overall service quality. Furthermore, significant relationships were found between customer satisfaction and loyalty; but there was no direct relationship between hotel ratings and customer loyalty. Even though, there was no direct relationship between service quality and loyalty, there may be an indirect or mediated effect of hotel ratings on both service quality and loyalty, through its effect on service expectations and customer satisfaction. Hotel management in Ethiopia should understand the importance of the criteria to attain different star ratings locally, by reviewing that as evidenced in the World Tourism Organization and its criteria for evaluation. Adjustments need to be made to individual hotel ratings to align to internationally accepted criteria, which will enable hotel management to understand their customers' expectations and strive to exceed it, in order to maintain their satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, consumer education may be necessary to apprise them on the grading system and what can be expected in terms of the service.

Key words: hotel service, service satisfaction, customer loyalty, hotel ratings

Introduction and Background

In Ethiopia, the hotel industry is showing a steady growth in the last two decades, but it is not without challenges, the main being the quality of service in the majority of the hotels (Kifle, 2012). There are only four internationally branded and managed hotels with a total of 1012 available rooms, and the majority of the "rated" hotels are situated in the capital city Addis Ababa (Hailesilasse, 2013). Hotels with less than 100 rooms which are rated by online travel agents, are scattered throughout major towns and historical tourist destinations in the country. The government owned hotels have not been adequately maintained, and not all have been

privatized (Tomaselli, 2012), and no objective rating has been done of all hotels for several years. Until June 2015, the hotels rated themselves generously without benchmarking against “international” standards (Gobena and Gudeta, 2013), and the non-adherence to rating standards by the hotels affects customers, as it creates wrong service expectations (Nowlis, 2005; Narangajavana, 2007; Madani et al., 2012).

Several researchers concur that the satisfaction of customers is a result of their perceived service quality (Dedeoglu et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2014; Torres, 2014; Po-Hsuan et al., 2014; Kim-Soon et al., 2014; Khan and Fasih, 2014; Hyun Soon et al., 2014; Mbuthia et al., 2013; Sanchez-Gutierrez et al., 2011; Ofir and Simonson, 2007; Gronroos, 2007; Randall and Senior, 1994; Parasuraman et al., 1994). Furthermore, the higher the perceived service quality, the more satisfied customers are, which in turn creates loyalty, and this may result in customers returning to the hotel and/or recommending it to others (Keith and Simmers, 2013; Gbenga and Osotimehin, 2015; Moisescu and Gica, 2013; Alrousan and Abuamoud, 2013; Kursunluoglu, 2011; Lin, 2005; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000).

The Ethiopian hotel rating system is still less than two years old, and little is known about its relationship with and/or effects on service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty (Hailesilasse, 2013). Moreover, limited studies explored the relationship among the hotel rating systems, service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty generally. Thus, this article explores the relationship among hotel ratings and service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the context of the hotel industry in Ethiopia.

Literature Review

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the International Hotel and Recreation Association (IH&RA) (2004), the main purpose of hotel grading is to protect consumers. Binkley (2004) stated that hotel rating improves service quality through the hotels standardizing their properties in order to compete in local and international markets. According to Su and Sun (2007), hotel rating is needed in order to demonstrate the quality of service that they provide, through certification and rankings. However, the existence of more than 100 official hotel rating systems worldwide (IH&RA 2004), confuses customers’ decisions, arising from the reliability and dependability or otherwise of these ratings. Apart from these rankings, online tour operators and travel agencies have their own hotel rating systems on their websites, for facilitating the choice of accommodation by their customers (WTO & IH&RA, 2004). In doing so, they may have negated the hotel standards set by countries and hotels (Anderson, 2012; Del Chiappa, 2013). Confusion is also inevitable if a country has more than one rating system and if the same hotel is rated differently by different rating systems (Daily, 2004). Several attempts were made in many countries, inter-alia, the UK, to find hotel rating systems which represent the correct indicator of good quality service (Callan, 1992). However, due to varying details on the rating systems this did not take place, making hotel comparisons a futile exercise (Callan, 1992).

Hotels essentially offer a service function, which is only experienced by customers during their stay at the hotel, and this makes the assessment of quality difficult (Ramanathan and Ramanathan, 2013). In order to guide potential guests on the nature of the facilities and services that can be expected from the hotels, different kinds of ratings are generally used, which ratings vary between one and five. In general, the higher the rating, the higher the expected level of service and facilities from the hotel (Khan and Fasih, 2014).

Since some hotels were allocating arbitrary ratings to themselves, researchers studied the validity of these ratings by comparing the ratings with the hotels' facility, and found several discrepancies (Briggs et al., 2007; Ofir and Simonson, 2007; Shafiq et al., 2007; Hagy, 2001; Singh and Thakur, 2012). By using data from TripAdvisor and questionnaires, Briggs et al. (2007) found that star rating evaluations are highly based on the physical aspects of the hotel, without consideration of the orientation to service. The aforementioned researchers further clarified the impact of customers demanding improved service, and analysed the service quality gap and customers' determinants.

Some researchers indicated that there was a mismatch between the hotel ratings and service quality (Fernández and Bedia, 2004). Stringam and Gerdes Jr (2010) studied the factors that affect hotel ratings by customers, based on an analysis of "verbal reviews" in association with their hotel ratings. For setting up customer service expectations, it was argued that hotel ratings were one of the important factors in the hotel and lodging sector (Callan and Fearon, 2010; Christopher et al., 2005). Callan and Fearon (2010) also indicated that if hotels are not rated according to "international" standards, it will backfire on the hotels that are rated above the 'true' ratings they deserve, as it might affect their expectations which may lead to lower service quality and satisfaction, that may lead to non-repeat business. In other words, in the hotel industry, customer satisfaction depends on customer service expectations, service perceptions, and overall service quality and, generates customer loyalty (Mohajerani and Miremadi, 2012). As confirmation of this, Minazzi (2010) reiterated that service quality is a result of comparison between the customers' service expectations and actual experiences. Research demonstrates that customer satisfaction is not linked to a specific quality category, but depends on the hotel's ability to meet customer's service expectations (Briggs et al., 2007)

Managing service quality means that a hotel operator has to match service performance with the perceived service so that customer satisfaction is achieved. Vásquez (2011), Boon-Liat and Md. Zabid Abdul (2013) and Abd-El-Salam et al. (2013:142) argued that "despite a long term interest in the understanding of customer satisfaction, its relationship with service quality and the consumer's overall attitude to a service firm, is still unclear". However, for Cronin and Taylor (1994), a specific service experience is the base for the customers' satisfaction. In accordance to the above researchers' views, it is assumed that customer satisfaction is determined by the quality of service that results from the provision of the service by organizations (Agbor, 2011).

Getty and Thompson (2004) stressed the importance of the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty, when recommending the hotel to other customers by word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, and social media. The aforementioned researchers concluded that the customer's loyalty and willingness to recommend a supplier/service provider are a function of their perception of both their satisfaction with and, the overall quality of the hotel service. The reverse relationship was also shown by Anderson and Mittal (2000), as the direct relationship with disloyalty as a result of dissatisfaction.

It became evident from the brief literature review that the rating systems may also affect the service quality by creating customer service expectations which may not match the actual service experienced by the customers. Hence, to explore the relationship among hotel ratings, service quality, satisfaction and customer loyalty by customers in the Ethiopian hotel industry context, it is hypothesized that:

H1: The hotel ratings is related to hotel guests' perception of service quality.

H2: The hotel ratings is related to hotel guests' service satisfaction.

H3: There is a relationship between the hotels guests' service quality perceptions and their satisfaction.

H4: There is a relationship between the hotel guests' service satisfaction and their loyalty.

H5: The hotel guests' loyalty is related to the hotel ratings.

The hypotheses will be investigated using the methodology described below.

Research Methodology

The target population was all hotel guests staying in star-rated¹ hotels in Ethiopia for one or more nights, at the time of the research. However, it was impossible to obtain a list of the all hotel guests at the graded hotels in Ethiopia, from which a random sample could be selected. Therefore, stratified cluster sampling was used whereby; customers were clustered under the hotels that they stayed in, and stratified by the local hotels' ratings. The hotel ratings were used as strata, and from the five strata, a random sample of 40 hotels was selected from the sampling frame of the list of hotels under each stratum. A total of 1200 guests were selected, using systematic random sampling by handing questionnaires at check-in to every other (second) customer, until 30 guests were surveyed per hotel.

The survey method using a self-administered questionnaire was considered appropriate, due to the volume of data that was needed to be collected and analysed quantitatively to assess the research model. The first section of the questionnaire focused on biographic information, followed by the second and third sections consisting of service quality related questions which were designed on a modified version of the attribute-based measurement instrument known as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1991) and HOTSPERF (modified version of SERVPERF, Cronin and Taylor, 1994). The fourth section focused on customer satisfaction and loyalty questions which were based on past studies (Kursunluoglu, 2011; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000).

The SPSS Version 23 was used to conduct descriptive analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), correlations, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multiple linear regressions, while Stata Version 13.1 was used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM). Since this research was guided by the hypotheses, both descriptive and inferential analysis (Wilson, 2014) were conducted.

Since five attributes were added to the tangible dimension of SERVQUAL, and some attribute names were changed to adapt the questionnaire for the hotel industry in Ethiopia, it became necessary to test the validity of the adapted instrument using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). EFA was conducted using the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method with varimax rotation. However, prior to performing PCA, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed using KMO and Bartlett's test. Inspection of the correlation matrix for both the expectations and perceptions matrix (Table 1) revealed that many coefficients were above 0.4.

¹ In this paper star and grade were used alternatively

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test for Service Expectations Factors

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.967
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	8981.476
	Df	351
	Sig.	.000

Table 1 also reveals that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value for service expectations was 0.967, which exceeded the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974), and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chin, 1998) revealed statistical significance ($p=.000$), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. From Table 2, it is evident that three factors explained 65.2% of the variance among the factors.

Table 2: Total Variance of Service Expectation Factors

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	14.994	55.535	55.535	14.994	55.535	55.535
2	1.519	5.628	61.163	1.519	5.628	61.163
3	1.084	4.016	65.178	1.084	4.016	65.178
4	0.961	3.561	68.739			
5	0.719	2.661	71.4			
6	0.69	2.555	73.955			
7	0.567	2.1	76.055			
8	0.547	2.027	78.082			
9	0.521	1.929	80.011			
10	0.499	1.85	81.861			
11	0.478	1.769	83.63			
12	0.444	1.643	85.273			
13	0.401	1.485	86.758			
14	0.379	1.402	88.16			
15	0.357	1.323	89.483			
16	0.334	1.238	90.721			
17	0.317	1.174	91.895			
18	0.296	1.096	92.991			
19	0.266	0.984	93.975			
20	0.26	0.964	94.94			
21	0.241	0.893	95.832			
22	0.228	0.845	96.678			
23	0.219	0.81	97.488			
24	0.208	0.771	98.259			
25	0.179	0.663	98.922			
26	0.158	0.584	99.506			
27	0.133	0.494	100			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: Primary data

Using Cattell (1966) scree test guideline, it was decided to retain two components for further investigation, and the two component solution reflected in Table 3 showed a total of 61.2% variance among the service expectations dimensions.

Table 3: Total Variance Explained for Service Expectation Factors

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Loadings			Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	14.994	55.535	55.535	14.994	55.535	55.535	10.573	39.160	39.160
2	1.519	5.628	61.163	1.519	5.628	61.163	5.941	22.003	61.163
3	1.084	4.016	65.178						
4	.961	3.561	68.739						
5	.719	2.661	71.400						
6	.690	2.555	73.955						
7	.567	2.100	76.055						
8	.547	2.027	78.082						
9	.521	1.929	80.011						
10	.499	1.850	81.861						
11	.478	1.769	83.630						
12	.444	1.643	85.273						
13	.401	1.485	86.758						
14	.379	1.402	88.160						
15	.357	1.323	89.483						
16	.334	1.238	90.721						
17	.317	1.174	91.895						
18	.296	1.096	92.991						
19	.266	.984	93.975						
20	.260	.964	94.940						
21	.241	.893	95.832						
22	.228	.845	96.678						
23	.219	.810	97.488						
24	.208	.771	98.259						
25	.179	.663	98.922						
26	.158	.584	99.506						
27	.133	.494	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Source: Extracted from the data

To assist in the interpretation of the two components, Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation was performed. The rotated solution in Table 4 revealed the presence of a simple structure with both components showing a number of strong loadings. Four of the SERVQUAL measurement dimensions (Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy), and two of the tangibles variables (“the convenience of the hotel location and “the neatness and

professional appearance of the staff uniform”) loaded on the first component, hereinafter referred to as Expectation_Intangibles. The Tangible dimension of SERVQUAL and the second component (factor 2) extraction were the same, except for the four additional attributes used in this research, and hereafter referred to as Expectation_Tangibles. Furthermore, factor 1 (Expectation_Intangibles) contained 17 of the 27 attributes from the scale (61.163%) as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Rotated Component Matrix for Service Expectations Factors

	Component	
	1	2
The staffs dealing with customers in a caring fashion.	.808	
The friendliness of the staff	.796	
The responsiveness of the staff to customers’ request	.789	
The helpfulness by staff	.788	
The willingness of the staff to help customers	.784	
The ability of the staff to in-still confidence in customers	.778	
The promptness of the service to customers	.761	
The provision of personal attention to customers	.739	
The hotel's having customers’ interest at heart	.711	
The assurance of safety for you to feel secure by the staffs	.708	
The accurateness of information about the hotel service	.702	.420
The knowledge of your specific interests by the staff	.695	
Keeping customers informed about when the service will be performed	.690	.419
The performance of services at the time promised	.682	.447
The staffs’ knowledge of product information of the hotel.	.677	
The performance of the services right the first time	.665	.456
The convenience of the hotel location	.555	
The neatness and professional appearance of the staff uniform	.541	.529
The modernity of the furniture and equipment		.740
The physical features of the hotel		.688
The availability of swimming pool, saunas and gym		.673
The visually appealing brochures, pamphlets, etc.		.668
The cleanliness of the rooms	.469	.650
The attractiveness of the lobby area	.440	.589
The availability of complementary items (WIFI)	.431	.588
The hygiene of the bathroom and toilet	.519	.553
The size of the rooms	.445	.548

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Primary data

The items from four of the SERVQUAL measurement dimensions (Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy) loaded on the first component (factor 1) hereafter called Perception_Intangibles, and the second component (factor 2) hereafter was called Perception_Tangibles. The Perception_Tangibles dimension had loaded on to 10 attributes, while Perception_Intangibles (factor 2) contained 15 of the 25 measurement attributes. Furthermore, the component correlation matrix in Table 5 revealed a strong correlation between Perception_Intangibles and Perception_Tangibles factors (dimensions) ($r = .726$).

Table 5: Correlation Matrix for Service Quality Perception Measurements

Component	1	2
1 Perception_Intangible	1.000	.726
2 Perception_Tangible	.726	1.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Primary data

The extraction of the two components was not in line with Parasuraman (1985) SERVQUAL measurement instrument. This finding although different in its modelling structure, is similar to the findings from other studies, namely, HOLSERV with 3 dimensions and 30 attributes, LODGESERV with 5 dimensions and 26 attributes, and DINESERV with 5 dimensions and 22 attributes (Wong Ooi Mei et al., 1999; Wei, 2009).

Hence, based on the EFA, the two factors (Perception_Intangibles and Perception_Tangibles), hereafter are called intangibles and tangibles, seem to be the important dimensions to evaluate when we analyse the relationship between service quality and the other dependent (customer satisfaction and loyalty), and independent variables (hotel ratings). To differentiate the 'new' model from the others referred to in the literature, it is referred as HOTSPERF.

The HOTSPERF measurement is differentiated from the SERVQUAL or SERVPERF models due to the addition of three new attributes, rewording of the SERVQUAL/SERVPERF attributes to read with a positive connotation, using a five-point Likert scale, and only two measurement dimensions, in order to be more appropriate for use in the hotel industry in Ethiopia. It was necessary to determine the reliability and validity of the HOTSPERF dimensions, using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and CFA analysis.

Reliability

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Table 6) for both the Intangibles and Tangibles service quality measurement scales were above 0.7, indicating internal consistency of the HOTSPERF measuring instrument.

Table 6: Reliability of the HOTSPERF

Measurement Instrument		
Measuring scales	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Intangibles	.962	15
Tangibles	.906	10

Source: Primary data

Confirmatory Factor Analysis using maximum likelihood estimation was conducted to verify if the 25 service perception attributes of the HOTSPERF instrument. The result in table 7 indicate that the standardized factor loading (SFL) values for each of the 25 observed variables, their standard error, significance, and confidence intervals. The SFL for all observed variables to their corresponding latent variable were greater than 0.90 with significance at $p < .001$, and had a 95% confidence interval that ranged from 0.88 to 1.11. The Chi-Square/degree of freedom was 3.2 at $p < .001$. While all the factor loadings looked good, further tests of goodness of fit were conducted to reconfirm the aforementioned results.

Continues...

Measurement		OIM				[95% Conf. Interval]	
		Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z		
REL_PQ12 <-	Intangibles	1	(constrained)				
	_cons	3.672289	.0480378	76.45	0.000	3.578137	3.766441
REL_PQ14 <-	Intangibles	.9530287	.0559768	17.03	0.000	.8433161	1.062741
	_cons	3.715663	.046253	80.33	0.000	3.625008	3.806317
REL_PQ15 <-	Intangibles	1.028147	.0565358	18.19	0.000	.9173391	1.138955
	_cons	3.915663	.047222	82.92	0.000	3.823109	4.008216
RES_PQ16 <-	Intangibles	1.109131	.0638357	17.37	0.000	.9840154	1.234247
	_cons	3.737349	.0528129	70.77	0.000	3.633838	3.840861
RES_PQ17 <-	Intangibles	.9707738	.0582217	16.67	0.000	.8566613	1.084886
	_cons	3.679518	.0478528	76.89	0.000	3.585728	3.773308
RES_PQ18 <-	Intangibles	1.056747	.0572446	18.46	0.000	.9445494	1.168944
	_cons	3.913253	.0478832	81.73	0.000	3.819404	4.007102
RES_PQ19 <-	Intangibles	.9948566	.0553916	17.96	0.000	.8862911	1.103422
	_cons	3.934494	.0460514	85.45	0.000	3.844681	4.025199
AS_PQ20 <-	Intangibles	.9768654	.0562725	17.36	0.000	.8665733	1.087157
	_cons	3.737349	.0464986	80.38	0.000	3.646214	3.828485
AS_PQ21 <-	Intangibles	1.025419	.0580389	17.67	0.000	.9116649	1.139173
	_cons	3.889157	.0481265	80.81	0.000	3.79483	3.983483
AS_PQ22 <-	Intangibles	.9812692	.0559602	17.54	0.000	.8715891	1.090949
	_cons	3.853012	.046227	83.35	0.000	3.762409	3.943615

LR test of model vs. saturated: chi2(269) = 863.01, Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

Findings

Figure 1 shows the positive and significant effect of hotel ratings on the customer's service expectations (standard coefficient 0.33, $P < 0.01$). The positive and significant effect of the hotel ratings on customer's service perception (standard coefficient 0.36, $p < 0.01$) is also depicted on the figure. The effect of the hotel ratings by the owners on service quality (standard coefficient -0.074, $P > 0.01$) did not support H1. The effect of the hotel rating by the owners on customer satisfaction (standard coefficient 0.18, with significance level $< .01$) supported H2. The positive effect of customer service quality on customer satisfaction (standard coefficient 0.26, $P < 0.01$), supported H3. The effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty (standard coefficient 0.83, with significance level $P < .01$) supported H4. The effect of customer loyalty on hotel ratings by customers (standard coefficient 0.96, with significance level $< .01$), supported H5. Finally, it is shown that there is no significant effect of hotel ratings on customer loyalty (standard coefficient 0.03, with significance level of .333).

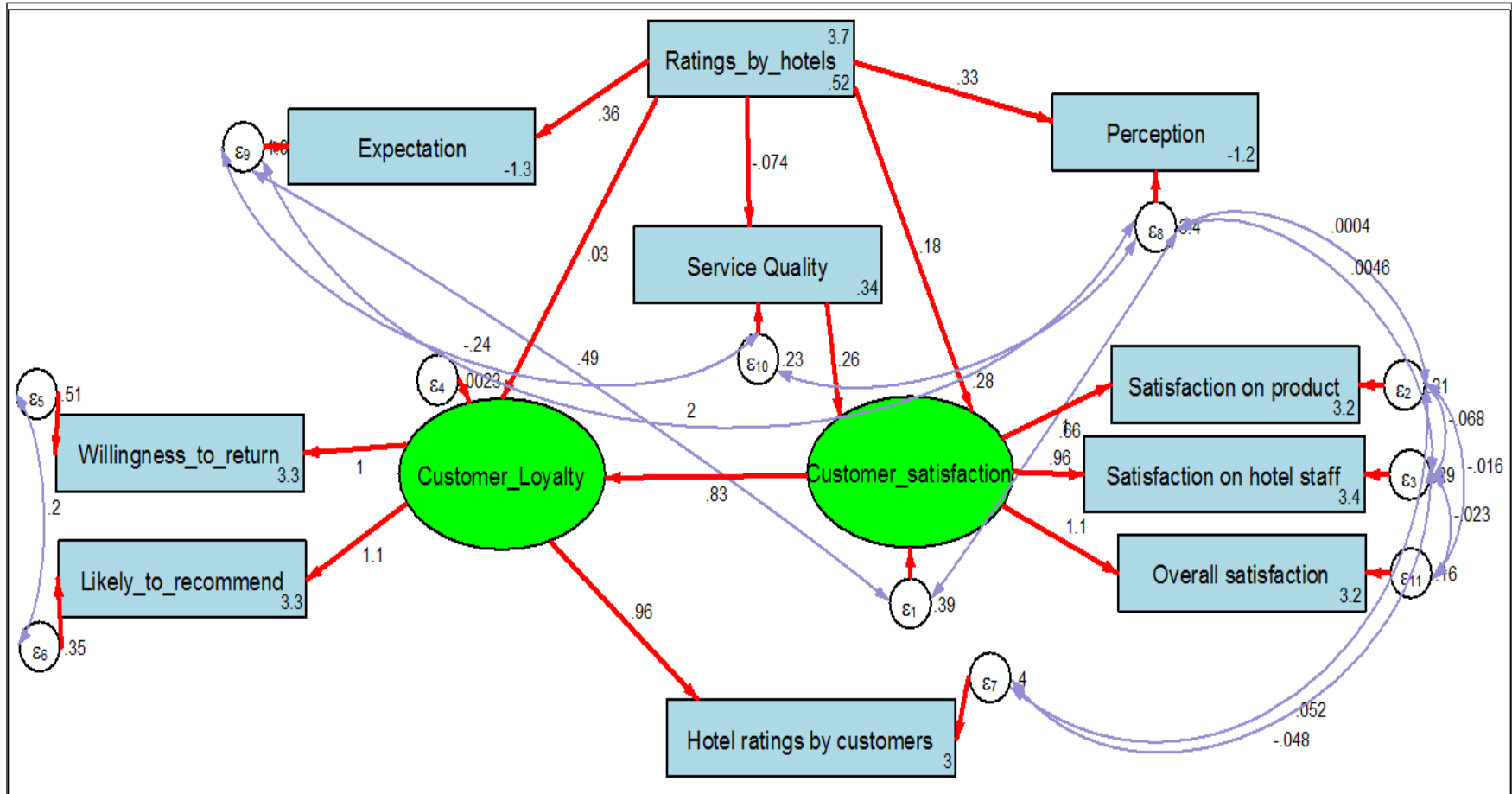


Figure 1: Relationship among Hotel Ratings, Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty

Table 8 summarizes the SEM results derived from the total effects (direct and indirect) reflected in Figure 1.

Table 11: Model Summary

Structural equation model		Number of observations = 415					
Estimation method = ml							
Log likelihood = -3832.1693							
(1) [LO_Q1]Customer_Loyalty = 1							
		OIM					
		Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P> z	Conf. Interval]	
Structural							
Customer satisfaction	<-						
	Service quality	0.260543	0.068026	3.83	0.000	0.127215	0.393871
	Ratings_by_hotels	0.233747	0.047009	4.97	0.000	0.141611	0.325883
	_cons	3.025249	0.177268	17.07	0.000	2.677811	3.372687

Perception <-	<-						
	Ratings_by_hotels	0.333026	0.125762	2.65	0.008	0.086508	0.579372
	_cons	-1.22084	0.469991	-2.6	0.009	-2.142002	-0.29967

Expectation	<-						
	Ratings_by_hotels	0.364781	0.094857	3.85	0.000	0.178865	0.550697
	_cons	-1.33782	0.354494	-3.77	0.000	-2.03262	-0.64303

Service quality	<-						
	Ratings_by_hotels	-0.07369	0.033002	-2.23	0.126	-0.13837	-0.00901
	_cons	0.344332	0.123332	2.79	0.005	0.102604	0.586059

Customer_Satisfaction	<-						
	Ratings_by_hotels	0.175661	0.466518	3.77	0.000	0.842249	0.267096
Hotel rating by customers	<-						
	Customer_Loyalty	0.957373	0.095369	10.04	0.000	0.770454	1.144292
	_cons	3.033883	0.175908	17.44	0.000	2.762331	3.448486
Customer_Loyalty	<-						
	Customer satisfaction	0.832769	0.077996	10.68	0.000	0.679899	0.985639
	Ratings_by_hotels	0.030470	0.031545	0.97	0.334	-0.03136	0.092298

Measurement							
Satisfaction on products <-	<-						
	Customer satisfaction	1	(constrained)				
	_cons	3.20153	0.176047	18.19	0.000	2.856485	3.546576

Satisfaction on hotel staff <-	<-						
	Customer satisfaction	0.961312	0.075812	12.68	0.000	0.813043	1.11022
	_cons	3.386025	0.170877	19.82	0.000	3.051113	3.720938

Overall satisfaction <-	<-						
	Customer satisfaction	1.069075	0.064915	16.47	0.000	0.941845	1.196306
	_cons	3.194251	0.184838	17.28	0.000	2.831975	3.556527

Likelihood to return to the same hotel <-	<-						
	Customer_Loyalty	1	(constrained)				
	_cons	3.318818	0.176776	18.77	0.000	2.972344	3.665291

Likelihood to recommend the hotel <-	<-						
	Customer_Loyalty	1.115906	0.06952	16.05	0.000	0.979649	1.252163
	_cons	3.314109	0.192454	17.22	0.000	2.936907	3.691311

Discussion of the Findings

Hotel Rating and Service Quality

The hypothesis H1 which indicates a relationship between hotel ratings and the hotel guests' perception of service equality is NOT supported. However, when the relationship was analysed using the SERVQUAL dimensions, there was a significant difference between the hotel ratings by the owners and "service quality, with respect to the Reliability and Responsiveness dimensions only. The descriptive analysis of the relationship between the five dimensions of service quality and the hotel ratings" also revealed that, for all hotels (irrespective of rating), there were positive service quality perceptions, only with respect to the tangibility and empathy dimensions. With regard to the reliability dimension, both four and five star rated hotel customers perceived the service quality negatively, and the same perception existed with respect to the responsiveness and assurance dimensions of service quality, with respect to the five star hotels. The service quality 'Gap' score for the assurance dimension was negative, since the scores for both the four and five star hotels were negative. Three star hotels on the other hand registered positive scores for all service quality dimensions. Thus, with respect to the study, hotels of different star ratings have no significant relationship with the service quality. Some researchers indicted that there was a mismatch between the hotel ratings and service quality (Fernández and Bedia, 2004). However, a study in Taiwan showed that "there were no significant differences in the service quality perceptions among different hotel ratings" (Narangajavana and Hu, 2008).

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

The results revealed that there was a significant positive relationship between customer service quality and customer satisfaction. This was in line with the findings of El Saghier and Nathan (2013); Li and Jarinto (2012); Blešić et al. (2011); Boon-Liat and Md. Zabid Abdul (2013); Chen and Chen (2014); Dominici and Guzzo (2010); Hyun Soon et al. (2014) and Khan and Fasih (2014) which indicated service quality's significant relationship with customer satisfaction. This meant that irrespective of the hotels' ratings, service quality is significantly related to the hotel customers' satisfaction.

Many studies also confirmed higher service quality leading to higher customer satisfaction, which eventually leads to customer loyalty (Getty and Thompson, 1994 ; Mohajerani and Miremedi, 2012; Agbor, 2011; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2003). Parasuraman et al. (1993) finding of higher perceived service quality leading to higher customer satisfaction was also confirmed in this study. This study confirmed many other authors' recognition that the level of customer satisfaction is based on the level of service quality (Wu et al., 2014; Khan and Fasih, 2014; Markovic and Jankovic, 2013; Boon-Liat and Md. Zabid Abdul, 2013; Auka et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the most important service quality dimension related to the customer's satisfaction was assessed using the HOTSPERF measurement dimensions and the beta coefficients revealed that the 'Intangible' dimensions had a higher standardized coefficient than the 'tangibles' dimension. This was in line with Nadiri and Hussain (2005) who reported that intangibles and tangibles are predictors of customer satisfaction, where intangibles have a higher relative effect. The multiple regression model of service quality also showed that when intangibles increase by one point, the overall satisfaction increased by 0.329, and when

tangibles increase by one point, the overall satisfaction increased by 0.272. This was reiterated by Kim-Soon et al. (2014) who argued that sustaining or increasing customer service satisfaction levels require continuous and regular monitoring of the “controllable elements of service quality.

Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

The relationship between customer satisfaction, more specifically, satisfaction with the product, the hotel staff and overall satisfaction, and customer loyalty as measured by the customer's willingness to return, was tested using the Person's correlation coefficient. The result indicated that there was a significant and positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Similar results were obtained in Iran by Mohajerani and Miremadi (2012), and in Taiwan by Chang-Hsi et al. (2006). Similar results were also reported in studies from other countries (Awara and Anyadighibe, 2014; Prentice, 2013; Moisescu and Gica, 2013; Alrousan and Abuamoud, 2013; Ranjbarian et al., 2011; Kursunluoglu, 2011; Lin, 2005).

Furthermore, using a multiple regression model, the attributes that contributed to customer loyalty were computed and the results revealed that the estimated coefficient β_0 (constant) was 1.064; β_1 (satisfaction with the product) was 0.227; β_2 (satisfaction with the hotel's products) was 0.190 and β_3 (overall satisfaction) was 0.328. The model fit was relatively strong with R^2 equal to 0.333. This is an indication that the three customer satisfaction variables explained about 33.5% of the variance in customer loyalty. Based on the statistical test and model fit, it was shown that customer satisfaction had an effect on customer loyalty. Even though all variables of customer satisfaction had an effect on customer loyalty, the overall satisfaction variable had the highest standardized coefficient (0.328), followed by satisfaction with the product (.227) and satisfaction with the hotel staff (0.190) at a significance level of $p < .01$. This means that for every one unit increase in customer overall satisfaction, customers' willingness to return to the same hotel in the future increased by 0.328. In line with Cheung and Thadani (2010) study, this result was a confirmation that the overall satisfaction of customers is the main contributor to customer loyalty. Therefore, this finding may help hotel operators to understand the most influential factors in customer loyalty when devising and implementing marketing strategies. This finding is also in line with the study by Prentice (2013) who reaffirmed customer satisfaction as being essential to a thriving hotel industry and that customer loyalty plays an even more significant role because it is an indicator of success in the service industry.

Customer Loyalty and Hotel Ratings

There was a strong positive relationship between the two customer loyalty variables described by the likelihood to stay in the same hotel in future and the hotel ratings, $n = 415$, $p < .01$ and $r = .443$ and of recommending the hotel to others, $n = 415$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was performed to check the best predictor of the customers' hotel ratings. The model fit of the relationship between customer loyalty and hotel rating (by customers) was relatively strong ($R = 0.473$). The two loyalty variables explained about 22.4% ($R^2 = .224$) of the variance in the hotel rating by the customers. The customers' likelihood to recommend the hotel showed the higher standardized coefficient (0.269) with a statistical significance ($p = 0.01$), while the likelihood of the customer to stay in the same hotel in the future showed a standardized coefficient of 0.213 with the same statistical significance ($p < .001$).

Multiple regression modelling of customer loyalty reconfirmed the fact that a one unit increase in the likelihood that the hotel would be recommended will lead to 0.269 unit increase in hotel

ratings by the customers, and a one unit increase in the likelihood that guests would stay in the hotel in the future will lead 0.213 unit increase in the hotel ratings by customers.

This finding complements the findings of Su and Sun (2007) and Yu (2014) which stated that customers could comment on their experience after they departed from the hotel using the on-line travel agents' websites, to share their evaluation of the service quality and grade the hotels according to their reviews. According to Yu (2014:35), "the web portals in all cases use a double rating system: one for the rating and one for customer comment". This is an indication that by improving customers' loyalty, hotels can increase their hotel's ratings through word of mouth or online guest review platforms (eWoM).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The average service expectations score in this study was 3.71, which makes it imperative for hotel management to exceed these expectations and narrow the service quality gap. Guests already had expectations which were set by the hotel ratings systems through the hotels' websites, online travel agents' websites, and the Ethiopian authorities. With this in mind, it is recommended that hotel management, first and foremost, know and understand the criterion needed for attaining different star ratings. They need to review the ratings standard criteria of World Tourism Organization, the Ethiopian Tourism and Culture Ministry, online travel agencies, hotel associations, etc. Once they understand the way hotels are rated, they need to adjust their personal ratings. The highest service quality 'gap' emanated from the tangible dimensions. All ten attributes showed relatively higher service quality scores, except for the 'neatness and professional appearance of the staff uniform.' Most of the hotels' in Ethiopia are relatively new, as most of them were built within this decade. This might explain why the tangibility dimension exceeded customers' expectations.

It is recommended that management ensures that employees, especially those that have direct contact with guests, are always neat and professional. The new employees need to have adequate induction, so that they understand the hotel culture and values and are empowered to become valued members of the customer service team. Employees should be able to attend to anything that fosters customer service satisfaction experience, through setting up a reward and recognition program for team members, and informing team members about everything regarding service information on a daily basis. It is also recommended that management develop training programmes on customer service and its implication on both managers and the employees should be demonstrated using real-world examples. The hotel management needs to create and develop a culture of employee willingness to help customers and follow through with the program until it becomes second nature (a culture in the organization) to everyone. This is especially important for front-line employees who will have direct contact with guests.

Hotel managers and owners need to study their ratings in accordance to the "international" standards in order not to 'over-promise' but be realistic so that they meet customers' expectations. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Ethiopia (authorities) used star ratings which were not properly promoted and explained to the hotels' management, staff and most importantly the consumers. It is therefore, recommended that the authorities conduct continuous awareness programs and seminars for hotel owners/managers/relevant staff so that they know and fully understand the ratings system. It is also good to incorporate the hotel ratings system in the curriculum of hotel schools and training institutes in Ethiopia.

It is further recommended that inspection of the hotels needs to be carried out by both the relevant authorities and Ethiopian Hotel Owners Association annually to ensure maintaining of standards. This will enable all stakeholders to participate and provide a monitoring system over

time. Ratings on online travel agents' websites and comments of guests are out of the hotel owners and the relevant grading authority's control. Hotel owners need to monitor the websites on a daily basis for opinions/comments on their hotels. They need to respond to every negative and positive comment in a professional manner. For some of the unsatisfied customers, the hotel management needs to devise a service recovery policy and mechanism to redress service delivery issues, since unattended negative comments may create a negative personal WoM and eWoM that influences potential new guests further. More emphasis needs to be paid to the service quality 'gap' scores that were negative, because in this study it was reconfirmed that service quality had a significant effect on customer satisfaction. In order to improve customer satisfaction, the hotels should not set the customer expectations very high through a higher than deserved hotel rating. The hotel management needs to know the status of their customers' satisfaction levels, and conduct customer satisfaction surveys regularly. It is also recommended to have focus group discussions and user group forums like blogs and observation studies that may identify the customer's satisfaction level and address where issues where they are evident. Hotel management should introduce dedicated team members that engage with potential customers on social media and online travel agents' websites. Service level agreements be established with customer service employees and they should be rewarded with bonuses and other incentives.

If hotels in Ethiopia need to increase their customer satisfaction, they need to work at improving their service quality by paying special attention to the attributes in the intangible dimension, as this will result in higher customer satisfaction. Although in this study it emerged that the hotel ratings have no direct effect on customer loyalty, its indirect effect through service expectations and service satisfaction was apparent. The improvement of customer loyalty is important for any organization which depends on repeat business, and hotel management needs to create a service milieu which engenders loyalty. The hotel operation is dependent on the service they provide to their customers, while retaining customers depends on how expertly the service is delivered, and therefore it is recommended that all hotel employees be skilled and properly trained on customer service on a regular basis.

Trust should be built through having a relationship with customers by having periodic communication with them via emails or creating a blog and posting newsletters on the hotels activities, specials, etc. Furthermore, it is recommended that the hotel management set up social media profiles (Facebook, twitter, etc.) to build an on-line relationship with existing and potential customers. Implementing anticipatory customer service strategies like inspecting rooms before and at the time of check-in by the guest service staff and doing a white glove test needs to be considered and implemented.

The hotel management in Ethiopia is recommended to firstly assign the correct (realistic) ratings for their hotels in order to create the correct and realistic customers service expectations. Secondly, they should focus on meeting or exceeding the customers' service expectation to create positive service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thirdly, they need to encourage loyal customers to rate and comment about their hotels through word-of-mouth and or eWoM on social media and online travel agents' website on guest reviews.

Limitations of the study

Only 17 hotel guests from two five star hotels participated in the study, and this might be a limitation of the study as it may not be possible to generalize about the five star hotels.

Furthermore, only one of four internationally branded hotels participated. Due to the budget limitations and time constraints, the study only included 41 hotels in seven cities and towns. A more representative national study should be considered to increase generalizability of the findings.

Directions for Further Research

It is recommended that all of the five star and internationally branded hotels be included in the study of the Ethiopian hotel industry as it will provide a bigger sample and enable one to determine if the findings of this study could be repeated. Such bigger sample sizes may further enable the validation of the modified version of the SERVPERF measurement model, namely the HOTSPERF, which could then be used for studies of hotels in general and not only Ethiopian hotels. In the same note, as the main objective of this research was not the building of theory, the focus of HOTSPERF was based on the development and validation of the scale.

To get a wider scope, considering that the Ethiopian scenario is present in most East African countries, a cross-sectional study could be conducted across the East African region to assess the effect of the hotel ratings on service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty in the region. Future studies may also look at other factors that affect service quality through expectations, such as price and advertising, in order to provide more comprehensive feedback to the hotel industry. Finally, it is recommended that future research includes service quality perceptions among managers and employees, in the context of the hotel industry in Ethiopia and identifying and addressing gaps in perceptions across the various groups.

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