

# Service quality provision in upmarket restaurants: a survey of diners in three restaurants in a Gauteng casino complex

A Nicolaidis

(Vaal University of Technology)

## **Abstract**

A number of studies have established that service quality has a direct impact on a restaurant's profitability. This study made an empirical assessment of customers' perceptions and expectations of service to measure service quality in three restaurants in a casino complex in Gauteng Province in South Africa.

The research helped to assess the levels of customer satisfaction with service provision in three restaurants and identified factors that contribute to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction; It also determined the current status of service and compared and ranked three restaurants service provision. Another importance was the aiding in the establishment of customer service standards for the restaurants concerned. The tipping of waitrons was also used as an indicator of customer satisfaction with service provision in general. A three-column SERVQUAL instrument was used together with part of the Fishbein model. The study was able to firstly determine and analyze service gaps that exist in the service delivery procedure to measure service quality as well as general customer satisfaction and secondly, to evaluate customers' attitudes towards the service measure attributes of similar restaurants in the same location. The findings offer implications to improve service quality in restaurant business in general.

## **Introduction**

In the last few decades, service quality and customer satisfaction have become critically important aspects for restaurant owners and managers to consider if they are serious about expanding or even keeping an existing business. In South Africa there are a number of restaurant chains as well as unique restaurants that resemble what were previously referred to as steakhouses in the period 1960-1980. Hsieh & WU (2007:1) maintain that service quality is a server's endeavour that is observable by a diner throughout a service encounter. This will

ultimately influence the outcome of the service. When we speak of the quality of service executed this refers to the promptness, friendliness or attentiveness of the person who is serving (Bodvarsson *et al.*, 2003). Since competition for business is becoming increasingly greater, it is especially managers who try to maintain existing customers while seeking to attract new ones. The aspect which attracts customers the most is service quality excellence.

The dining experience comprises tangible and intangible elements. The

tangible elements can easily be improved, but the intangible aspects of restaurant service require great attention. Researcher indicates that the ability to deliver high quality service provision will provide long-term financial viability and lead to more sustainable business success (Keiser, 1988). Researchers have postulated that there exists a very strong relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty to restaurants (Szymanski and Henard, 2001) and the notion that service quality excellence impacts business profits has been apparent for a number of years (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). A study conducted by Bodvarsson *et al.* demonstrates that predicted service quality significantly affects the size of a tip that a waiter obtains (Bodvarsson *et al.* 2003; Parrett, 2006). Tipping is considered to be an efficient way of rewarding workers for good work and serves as a major incentive to encourage service quality excellence (Lynn *et al.*, 1993:478; Lynn 2003:140). Consequently, tipping can be used as an indicator of customer satisfaction. This is directly linked to the idea of superior quality of service which is undoubtedly an aspect that can add value to a restaurant's product offerings and ultimately impacts on a restaurant's bottom-line as it leads to customer loyalty via repeat visits (Lee, Barket, & Kandampully, 2003). The key purpose of this study was primarily to understand the restaurants' levels of service quality as per customers' perceptions of service delivered, the customers' satisfaction levels with service provision, and thirdly the customers' assessment regarding other restaurants in the same location. The findings of the research were anticipated to provide useful service quality provision suggestions for the restaurants involved.

### **Motivation for the study and restaurant background**

The research was conducted in order to:

1. assess the levels of customer satisfaction with service provision in three restaurants;
2. identify factors that contribute to customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction;
3. determine the current status of service;
4. compare and rank three restaurants service provision;
5. help establish customer service standards for the restaurants concerned.

There were three restaurants involved in the study. The largest restaurant in the study case, which shall be termed 'X', is a privately owned franchise operation which has a large number of restaurants in operation in Gauteng. This operation has 364 seat capacity and 12 waitrons, 15 cooks/chefs, 4 cleaning staff, 2 front of house managers and 3 floor managers who may not all work at the same time, but rather in varying shifts. The cuisine served could be considered to be wholesome family meals and the menu has a large variety of dishes. Items on the menu range from pizzas, salads, and farinaceous dishes to antipasto, meat, fish and vegetarian fare. There is also a selection of starters and desserts to choose from. Drinks include coffees, teas, soft drinks and alcoholic beverages. The targeted customers include casino walk-ins, families and friends going out for either lunch or dinner, and from time-to-time, special events such as engagement parties, birthday parties etc, for which an upstairs 'private area' seating for 120 is available. This establishment also prepares special breakfast menus for Saturday mornings. This popular brand name family restaurant has appealing

furnishings that create a homely ambience and it is easily accessible and pleasant to be in. It is a casual to smart dress code restaurant.

Restaurant 'Y' has a capacity of 188, with 9 waitrons -4 of whom are seasonal and 3 cooks/chefs. It staffs 3 cleaning staff, 1 front of house manager and 2 floor managers and 4 cleaning staff. Restaurant 'Z' has a capacity of 165, with 5 fulltime waitrons and 5 seasonal waitrons. It has 2 chefs/cooks, 1 front of house manager and 1 floor manager as well as 4 cleaning staff. Both restaurants 'Y' and 'Z' are privately owned and not part of any franchise operation and only a short distance from restaurant 'X' both offer various styles of steak and other meals in what are seemingly silver-service cuisine set-ups with high back chairs and stylish candle holders and wine glasses, for example. They would be considered to be luxury restaurants. The menus both include appetizers, soups, antipasto, salads, entrées (steaks), dessert, and a selection of soft drinks and alcoholic beverages. In each of the restaurants, 'X', 'Y' and 'Z', the customers can select whatever they wish to order and thus can create their own series of courses which will comprise their ultimate meal. The style of the decor in these restaurants makes diners feel they should dress up to eat there, although there were a number of casually dressed diners present at the times the research was conducted.

This study will hopefully serve as a practical guideline for the managers of the three restaurants under review, especially the floor managers and waitrons. The outcome of this study will be to further develop the service quality provision of staff in order to satisfy customers' needs and expectations so as to maintain customer loyalty and enhance profits.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Service quality** means the difference between the customers' expectations of service delivery and their perceived service.

**SERVQUAL** is an instrument used for measuring service quality, in terms of the discrepancy between customers' expectations regarding service offered and the perception of the service received by them; Respondents are required to answer questions about both their expectation and their perception.

**Customer expectation** refers to uncontrollable factors including past experiences, personal needs, word of mouth, and external communication about service.

**Customer perception** refers to customers' feelings of pleasure / displeasure or the reaction of the customers' in relation to the performance of the restaurant staff in satisfying their needs.

**Waitron** is a non gender specific term for waiter or waitress.

### **Literature review**

Research clearly shows that it costs a lot more to attract new customers to a restaurant, than to retain existing customers (Oliver, 1999; Rosenberg & Czepiel, 1983). Restaurants in today's food and beverage industry are thus required to satisfy customers through continuous service quality excellence, and indeed, should do so in any event (Gabbie & O'Neil, 1996). In fact, customers need to be delighted with the service they obtain. The service provided to customers by a restaurant has a huge and immediate impact on the company's profits since it is directly

related to customers' perceptions of services rendered and to general satisfaction. Repeat business and customer loyalty demand service quality excellence (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). What is tricky to determine is which intangible characteristics are most important to a customer (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991).

The research aimed at measuring service quality through analysing the tipping of waitrons by customers as well as by attempting to comprehend the perceptions of customers concerning the service provided. The literature suggests that there is a strong correlation between tipping amounts indicating customer satisfaction and repeat business by satisfied customers which ultimately leads to enhanced profitability for a restaurant business (Azar, 2007; Parrett, 2006; Getty & Getty, 2003; Tsang & Qu, 2000). Lynn *et al.* (1993), considers tipping to be an almost "pervasive consumer behaviour" of significant economic value. As stated earlier, it is vital for a restaurant operation to fully comprehend its customers' attitudes towards service quality provision, assuming that this is in fact happening (Kandampully, 1997). The customers' attitudes concerning service provision cannot be measured simultaneously on SERVQUALS five service measure attributes. What can be used here is the Fishbein model.

### **Using SERVQUAL**

The perceptions of the customers in the service process is crucially important as the business needs to be aware if there is any discrepancy between perceived service and that expected by the customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Where there is a clear incongruity this is generally referred to as the service "gap" (Oliver, 1981). Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, (1985),

developed the SERVQUAL model which is still widely used today to evaluate service quality. They broke service quality down into five dimensions, namely. *Reliability*, *Responsiveness*, *Tangibles*, *Assurance* and *Empathy*. They evaluated service quality by subtracting a customer's score that is based on a perception of the service provider's performance, from the customer's expected score. Where customers were satisfied with service quality provision, there has been higher service quality which resulted in higher satisfaction levels. The dimension of *Reliability* relates to what is considered to be accurate and highly dependable service provision. *Responsiveness* relates to the desire of a server to provide prompt service to the customer. The *Tangible* dimension relates to the equipment used, physical facilities as well as the appearance of the waitrons, for example. *Assurance* related to the product knowledge of the waitrons, their welcoming attitudes, as well as their ability to be trusted. The *Empathy* dimension relates to their ability to come across as genuinely caring for the needs of the customers. The scores obtained by using the SERVQUAL model thus represent the variation between expected and perceived service quality. Literature supports the use of SERVQUAL as a valid and reliable measure of the quality of the service for food and beverage operations, for example (Stevens, Knutson, & Patton, 1995; Nel & Pitt, 1993).

### **The Fishbein Model**

Ajzen and Fishbein, (1980), developed a model which is based on the hypothesis that a customers' behaviours are the result of a cognitive process in which they systematically processes all accessible information. This information describes beliefs, attitudes and behaviour for a wide range of attitude

measurement. Consequently by using both SERVQUAL and the Fishbein model to evaluate service quality provision levels and satisfaction, the customers' attitudes can be assessed as an evaluation of a psychological item which is encapsulated in five attributes namely, good or bad, harmful or beneficial, pleasant or unpleasant, likeable, dislikeable (Fishbein, 2000). Such a methodology can help in understanding the attitudes of customers towards a restaurant and also allows for the measurement of these qualities in different restaurants.

The beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of customers are evaluated using the Fishbein Model. Beliefs refers to the knowledge that a customer has concerning objects, their attributes, and their benefits. The objects would include the products (food and beverage), people (restaurant staff), companies, and things about which people hold beliefs and attitudes such as quality service provision. The attributes are the characteristics or features than an object may or may not possess. The benefits include all the positive outcomes that attributes might provide to the customer such as enjoyment of food, relaxing ambience, quality service, value for money etc. It is important to realize that people buy a whole lot of benefits, not product attributes.

The cognitive component of the tripartite model is generally assessed by using a version of the multi-attribute or Fishbein model where:

$A_o = \sum B_i E_i$  and where:  $A_o$  = the overall attitude toward object  $o$

$B_i$  = the strength of the belief that object  $o$  has some particular attribute  $i$

$E_i$  = the evaluation of the goodness or badness of attribute  $i$

In this model, evaluative component consequently serves as something of a weight. The Fishbein model is well utilised by consumer researchers and greatly assists to measure restaurant customers' attitudes towards the SERVQUAL's five attributes. It is nonetheless not necessary to adopt its mathematical equation for the research. The model was modified in this research using Solomon's theory (2002) to suit the requirements of the study.

In another model as developed by Bodvarsson *et al* (1997), it is the waitrons who are requested to report on tips received by them for service rendered to diners as the latter tend to exaggerate on this aspect. Bodvarsson *et al.*'s suggest that there is a strong two-way causal relationship between the diners' experience of service quality provision and the percentage of tips received. The waitrons' expectations of tips to be received has an influence on the quality of service which is supplied and the service quality provision also influences the amount of tip that is dispensed (Bodvarsson *et al.*, 2003).

### **Tipping *per se***

Tipping is generally considered to be a social norm and many diners feel a need to tip because others around them are tipping tip and as such it is expected (Azar, 2005). If diners do not tip, those with them may perceive them to be stingy and they consequently feel pressurised to tip so that those accompanying them will respect them more. Generally speaking then, tipping may be regarded as a social convention that most customers in South Africa would adhere to (Bodvarsson *et al.*, 2003). In a survey conducted by Azar (2007) to assess whether repeating diners' tips were more sensitive to service quality provision than tips of non-repeating diners, the findings

suggested that the tips of repeating diners are less sensitive to service quality provision than the tips of non-repeating diners. Consequently we may say that future service provision as a motivation for customers to tip is not supported by the literature and therefore only social norms appear to motivate tipping patterns. Parrett's (2006) conducted a study in Virginia in the United States to address the issue of why diners tip and how much they tip. The results demonstrated that age as a control variable, had a marked effect on tip size. Older people tend to tip more as well as more frequently than younger people (Parrett, 2006). Parrett also found that diners who pay with cash tend to tip more than diners who pay using credit cards. Furthermore, when there were less than 3 diners at a table, tip size decreased; while for tables of more than three diners, tip size increased. Sill (2004) states that service is very important and restaurants should not over-promise and under-deliver. Research in the United States has also indicated that Blacks are less familiar than Whites with tipping norms and this suggests that the Black-White differences in tipping, can be significantly reduced by making customers aware of tipping norms (Lynn, 2006 a).

### **Methodology**

The methodology was mixed, and was thus both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

The **quantitative** data was analytical and it allowed the researcher to arrive at a universal statement. A survey described and explained tipping issues and had a quantitative analysis and questionnaires were utilised.

The **qualitative** methodology used produced descriptive data, which was generally the participants' own words pertaining to their experience or

perception of service quality provision. The researcher was thus more concerned with understanding rather than explaining. He was seeking novel or unanticipated findings and the theme of the research was essentially phenomenological where the participants' perspectives were the empirical point of departure. This was basically a focus on real-life experiences. The researcher was able to interpret and describe the actions of various people, including employees and customers.

The SERVQUAL instrument as well as the theory of Aizen & Fishbein, were adopted to achieve some of the research objectives. In addition a seven-item, five-point Likert scale (Question 1) was used to measure the practice of tipping as a social rule in the area. The SERVQUAL was used to measure customer satisfaction with service quality provision, while the Fishbein model was used for multi-attribute attitude assessment.

### **SERVQUAL research**

The greatest part of the survey was designed on a three-column approach and the five attributes as defined in the SERVQUAL model as postulated by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). In this approach, a brainstorming session was conducted and the selected group of five employees from the different restaurants met for just less than two hours to discuss and define the variables/factors for each of the five attributes as defined in the SERVQUAL model adopted. Each of the appointed members were in supervisory positions as front-line servers

As a result of the brainstorming meeting, 35 variables were created and used to illustrate and measure an attribute of the SERVQUAL model. The factors to be

evaluated were included in the survey (Questions 1-5) and each factor was measured on a scale of 1 (extremely low) to 10 (extremely high).

The second part of the survey was designed to evaluate the five SERVQUAL attributes for the respective restaurants. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a convenience sample of approximately 15 customers using a collaborative participant pre-testing method. Data for the main study was collected during June and July 2012 by means of a self-administered survey. Customers were approached by the researcher/s after dining at either restaurant X, Y or Z. and after they had paid their bills.

### **Sample used**

Since it is easier to study a representative sample of a population, rather than an entire population, a sample was used. Sampling was thus used to select a group with the view to determine the characteristics of a large group (the population). The sample should display the same characteristics as the population. Stoker's sample size (1985) as quoted in De Vos *et al* (2002), suggests that from a population of 1000, 14% should be used thus comprising 140 respondents. The researcher opted to use 200 respondents as an appropriate sample size. The target sample for the proposed study consisted of adult diners (>18 years of age) at three restaurant, X, Y and Z, in a casino complex in Gauteng province, South Africa. The units of analysis were thus the individual adult diners to the restaurants in question and they were a segment of the population that is representative of the entire population

(Chase, 1967). The respondents were stratified according to age and randomly selected on the basis of convenience sampling (accidental sampling). Random selection means selecting a sample in such a way that each member of the population has an equal chance to be selected. In a random sample then, the researcher assumes that the characteristics of the sample approximate those of the general population. This approach takes people or other units that are readily available, such as those that arrive on the scene by simple happenstance. It contributes towards validity and reliability and to a large degree eliminates biases. Customers who were previously allowed to express an opinion were eliminated from the study on subsequent arrivals at the restaurants in question.

This method was used as it is similar to that used by Mukherjee and Nath (2005) for similar studies on service quality. This study aimed to achieve a minimum sample size of 200 respondents. The realised sample size of the study amounted to 212 questionnaires, with a favourable response rate of 94.33%. A total of 200 questionnaires were analysed. The survey was distributed using a person-to-person method to individual restaurant customers as they left either restaurant X, Y or Z. They were given the survey on a hard board with a pen attached and a gift pack comprising of a box of Belgian chocolates. The researcher provided guidelines and instructions on how to respond to the survey questions. Data was gathered over a nine day period and 212 surveys were completed of which 200 were used. Unusable surveys were eliminated.

**Table 1.**  
**Demographic Profile of the Survey Respondents (n =200)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
n =200	107	93
Percentage	53.5%	46.5%
<b>Ages of respondents</b>		
18 – 25 years	7	12
Older than 26 – 35 years	12	36
Older than 36 – 45 years	42	19
Older than 46 – 55 years	21	13
Older than 56 – 65 years	23	9
Older than 66 - 99 years	2	4
<b>Restaurants</b>		
Usable Samples		
Restaurant X	43	
Restaurant Y	33	
Restaurant Z	31	

### **The Service Gaps**

The SERVQUAL of Parasuraman *et al* was used to compare customers' expectations with their experiences so as to demonstrate where service delivery has either strengths or weaknesses. As in most Gaps Theory research, the clearest gap, Gap 1, was the one between customers' expectations of service provision and their perceptions of the service provision that they actually received in the restaurants.

This was the most critical gap that required study by making using of a three-column SERVQUAL. Gap 2 was the discrepancy between management assumptions that customers require fast service and service delivery. Gap 3 was the discrepancy between management targets of food been delivered within ten minutes of an order being placed and actual service provision. Gap 4 related to the discrepancy between the service quality provision as evaluated by customers' attitudes on the service

attributes amongst each of the three restaurants. Gap 5 related to general perceptions of poor service quality provision.

It is important to bear in mind that service quality provision is by its very nature a highly subjective concept and with this in mind, what the customers' think about service quality provision is essential to success for any food and beverage operation. Customer satisfaction clearly results from a service encounter and by assessing if expectations are met when compared to actual performance in a restaurant. The service quality would relate to how a customer feels about a restaurant's excellent service provision or otherwise. Value would relate to how a customer relates the quality of a dining experience with the price paid and if it was 'good value for money' or if there is some psychological benefit such as relaxation away from an otherwise humdrum daily routine.

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### The Survey Tool

Voluntary Survey: RESTAURANT X Y Z (circle establishment- researcher will assist.  
Respondent number: \_\_\_\_\_ (number provided by researcher/s)

Dear patron

In an effort to improve service quality levels in restaurants in general, kindly complete the survey as accurately and honestly as possible. Thank you for your willingness to assist in this research initiative. The purpose of the survey is to determine the levels of service quality provision in each of three restaurants and some aspects are related to tipping of waitrons. The survey should take about seven minutes to finish. You will remain anonymous throughout this highly confidential survey. Answers provided will be utilised only for research on service quality provision. Answers cannot be right or wrong. Answer by inserting a cross (X) in the relevant block.

Please indicate your age:

18 - 25	
26 - 35	
36 - 45	
46 - 55	
56 - 65	
66 - 99	

Your gender (place an X on your selection)

Male	Female
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Your race

Black	White	Coloured	Indian
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### Question 1.

Kindly consider each statement below carefully and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each one. (Please mark with an (X) 1 for "strongly agree", 5 for "strongly disagree" or select an option in-between).

	Extent of response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.1	Whenever I eat out my tipping is a unique amount	1	2	3	4	5
1.2	I tip varying amounts, not only the accepted 10%	1	2	3	4	5
1.3	A standard tip percentage is important	1	2	3	4	5
1.4	I tip based on quality service provision	1	2	3	4	5
1.5	I decide what to tip before I order	1	2	3	4	5
1.6	I increase my tip size if the waitron is presentable or good looking	1	2	3	4	5
1.7	I tip all waitrons' the same amount at all restaurants I visit	1	2	3	4	5
1.8	I tip more if the waitron comes across as caring	1	2	3	4	5

**Question 2.**

Service quality provision: Read each statement carefully and then indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each. (Please mark **(X)** 1 for “strongly agree”, 5 for “strongly disagree” or select an option in-between.)

	Extent of response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2.1	The waitron immediately attended to me	1	2	3	4	5
2.2	Waitrons were in close proximity	1	2	3	4	5
2.3	My order was correctly provided	1	2	3	4	5
2.4	Service delivery was prompt	1	2	3	4	5
2.5	The ambience of the restaurant is inviting	1	2	3	4	5
2.6	Relaxing background music was available	1	2	3	4	5
2.7	Waitrons were neatly attired	1	2	3	4	5
2.8	Place settings were correct	1	2	3	4	5
2.9	The food was tasty	1	2	3	4	5
2.10	The restaurant was very noisy	1	2	3	4	5

**Question 3.**

Tipping by customer: Read each statement carefully and then indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement. (Please mark **(X)** 1 for “strongly agree”, 5 for “strongly disagree” or select an option in-between.)

	Extent of response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3.1	I was brought up to tip	1	2	3	4	5
3.2	I decide how much I will tip if at all	1	2	3	4	5
3.3	My tip is always 10% of the total bill even if service is poor	1	2	3	4	5
3.4	I will not tip if service is poor	1	2	3	4	5
3.5	I am influenced by my friends when I decide how much to tip	1	2	3	4	5
3.6	I do normally ever tip	1	2	3	4	5
3.7	My tip size depends on service provision	1	2	3	4	5
3.8	Money is tight and I cannot afford to tip	1	2	3	4	5
3.9	If waitrons are polite I tip more	1	2	3	4	5
3.10	I tip good looking waitrons more	1	2	3	4	5
3.11	Waitrons whom I know get greater tips	1	2	3	4	5
3.12	I tip females more	1	2	3	4	5
3.13	I don't tip unprofessional waitrons	1	2	3	4	5
3.14	My tip size depends on my total dining experience.	1	2	3	4	5

**Question 4.** Which methods of payment did you utilise? (*Please select only one.*)

Credit card	1
Debit card	2
Cash	3
Other e.g. cheque	4

**Question 5.**

5.1 What was the total bill? R \_\_\_\_\_

5.2 How much did you tip the waitron? R \_\_\_\_\_

5.3 I will / **will not** recommend this establishment (delete whichever does not apply)

Part 2 of the Survey evaluates SERVQUAL attributes as well as tip size in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. At the end of the survey, customers could make general comments on any aspect.

**Evaluation of the five SERVQUAL dimensions for the respective restaurants.**

In this part of the survey, there were two questions. Customers were required to give a score on a scale (1 to 10) on their expectation from the restaurant about each attribute so as to gauge their reflection on the service quality provision experienced by them. Question two

(Table 1) was designed to measure the importance of the five attributes for multi-attribute attitude measurement. An aggregated scale measurement, which is considered to be valid, was used to measure the reliability of the methods of data collection. Respondents were requested to rate the five attributes based on their perceived importance. Table 2 measured tipping of waitrons.

**Part 2.**

**Table 2: Service evaluation (SERVQUAL) factors as identified by 'brainstorm' group and univariate descriptive statistics**

	<i>n</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
<b>A. Service Measure Dimension: Reliability Service Evaluation Factors</b>			
(1) Food that was served was as requested	200	4.22	0.76
(2) Food looked appetising	200	4.32	0.65
(3) Food was very tasty	200	4.14	0.74
(4) Waitrons were efficient	200	4.24	0.80
<b>B. Service Measure Dimension: Responsiveness Service Evaluation Factors</b>			
(5) Waitrons were well trained	198	4.55	0.62
(6) Incorrect orders were immediately replaced	200	4.34	0.66
(7) Waitrons were on hand	198	4.38	0.64
(8) Food was served in under	193	4.46	0.81

15 minutes			
(9) Waitrons assisted each other	192	4.37	0.63
<b>C. Service Measure Dimension: Assurance Service Evaluation Factors</b>			
(10) Waitrons asked about service regularly	200	4.38	0.58
(11) Waitrons knew what menu items included	200	4.44	0.80
(12) Same meal selections were identical for different customers	200	3.36	1.11
(13) Service was generally good	195	4.95	0.95
(14) The bill was accurate	200	4.03	0.93
<b>D. Service Measure Dimension: Empathy Service Evaluation Factors</b>			
(15) Staff welcomed customers	198	4.38	0.62
(16) Staff were courteous in all dealings	196	4.55	0.79
(17) Staff were handled well by managers	200	4.23	0.80
(18) Staff were sincerely sorry for errors made	200	4.18	0.81
<b>E. Service Measure Dimension: Tangibles Service Evaluation Factors</b>			
(19) Dining area was clean and presentable	200	4.24	0.82
(20) Toilets were clean	198	4.55	0.62
(21) Furnishings were appealing	190	4.22	0.73
(22) Menus were easy to understand	194	4.13	0.72
(23) Seats were comfortable	198	4.25	0.83
(24) Customers felt safe in the restaurant	200	4.38	0.65
(25) Staff were appropriately and neatly attired	200	4.21	0.71

“Strongly agree” was coded as 1, “Agree” as 2, “Neutral” as 3, “Disagree” as 4 and “Strongly disagree” as 5. The lower the mean score for an item, the stronger customers’ agreement with that item. The items in the scale were all reverse scored and thus the lower the mean score for an item, the lower the customer’s level of agreement with the item. Since the items all tend to fall between 4 and 5, this indicates that the

customers’ have a strong level of agreement with the items in the scale. Where there is a minor standard deviation (relative to that of other items) this indicates that customers tended to answer the item in a similar fashion. All the items have relatively low standard deviations which mean that all the customers tended to concur in their responses to the questions posed

Table 3. SERVQUAL Attribute evaluation factors

Service Attribute measured	Evaluation factors for service provision	Perceived customer service provision rating	Tolerable or minimum service provision rating	Customers desired service provision rating
<b>Reliability</b> (relates to what is considered to be accurate and highly dependable service provision)	1	8.56	8.36	8.70
	2	8.98	8.77	8.86
	3	9.20	8.18	8.66
	4	8.34	8.44	8.65
<b>Responsiveness</b> (relates to the desire of a server to provide prompt service)	5	8.32	8.26	9.10
	6	8.46	8.55	8.55
	7	8.31	8.45	8.50
	8	7.87	7.66	8.00
	9	8.55	8.40	8.55
<b>Assurance</b> (relates to the product knowledge)	10	7.56	8.12	9.08
	11	8.33	8.35	8.88
	12	8.49	8.55	8.67
	13	9.08	8.00	8.88
<b>Empathy</b> (relates to staff ability to come across as genuinely caring for the needs of the customers)	14	8.89	9.10	9.60
	15	8.80	7.77	8.50
	16	8.56	7.88	7.90
	17	8.70	8.34	8.89
<b>Tangibles</b> (relates to the equipment used, physical facilities as well as the appearance of the staff)	18	7.60	7.25	8.07
	19	8.47	8.24	8.87
	20	7.90	8.00	8.33
	21	8.05	8.35	8.36
	22	7.68	8.08	8.70
	23	7.33	8.77	8.62
	24	8.33	8.12	8.79
	25	7.85	7.88	8.62

Part 2 of survey

Table 4: Univariate descriptive statistics for tipping of waitrons

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
<b>Tipping variance</b>			
Whenever I eat out my tipping is a unique amount	200	4.21	0.76
I tip varying amounts, not only the accepted 10%	200	3.88	0.89
A standard tip percentage is important	197	3.57	1.27
I tip based on quality service provision	200	3.30	1.43
I decide what to tip before I order	199	3.19	1.30
I increase my tip size if the waitron is presentable or good looking	200	4.11	0.99
I tip all waitrons' the same amount at all restaurants I visit	200	3.46	1.08
I tip more if the waitron comes across as caring	200	4.23	0.79

An answer of “Strongly agree” was coded as 1, “Agree” as 2, “Neutral” as 3, “Disagree” as 4 and “Strongly disagree” as 5. It is evident that where there is a lower mean score for an item, the stronger the customer’s ranking of agreement with that item. Where there is a large standard deviation this

indicates that customers tended to answer the item in somewhat of a unique way. However, all of the items have relatively high standard deviations, which indicate that customers were inclined to be at variance in their answers to the question posed.

**Table 5:** Univariate descriptive statistics waitron efficiency and ambience

Item	N	Mean	Standard deviation
The waitron immediately attended to me	200	4.12	0.98
Waitrons were in close proximity	200	4.25	0.86
My order was correctly provided	200	3.20	1.28
Service delivery was prompt	200	3.99	1.12
The ambience of the restaurant is inviting	200	4.04	0.87
Relaxing background music was available	200	4.01	0.86
Waitrons were neatly attired	200	3.96	1.06
Place settings were correct	196	4.14	0.99
The food was tasty	200	3.77	1.13
The restaurant was very noisy	199	4.33	0.52

A response of “Strongly agree” was coded as 1, “Agree” as 2, “Neutral” as 3, “Disagree” as 4 and “Strongly disagree” as 5. It is apparent that the lower the mean score for an item, the stronger the customers’ levels of agreement with that particular item. Where there is a minor standard deviation (relative to that of other items) this indicates that customers tended to answer the particular question in about the same way. These items have relatively low standard deviations and this means that customers tended to agree in their responses to the question posed.

165 or 82.5% paid by means of credit card. 21 or 10.5% paid by debit card. 5 or 2.5% paid cash and 9 or 4.5% paid by other such as cheque.

All of the 200 customers answered the payment mode- question 4. Of these,

Some studies on tipping in the United States have examined the possibility that race differences in tipping vary with the race of the waitron (Lynn, *et. al.* 2006; Willis, 2003). In each of these studies, the interaction between customer and waitron race was not significant. In this study tipping by race, produced an interesting finding. Blacks left smaller average restaurant tips than Whites, suggesting that Blacks tip less than Whites do even when provided comparable levels of service. It did not

make a difference that the waitron was black. It appears that and Blacks do not know that it is customary to tip 10 percent of the bill size in South African restaurants.

A Likert scale was used to measure the customers' tipping behaviour at the restaurants. This measure included 14 Likert scale statements of which the scale points were labelled: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the 14 items was 0.84 indicating internal consistency reliability. In restaurant X, in which tip size was assessed, the results indicate that the smallest bill size that customers received was R18,50 and the largest bill size was R2656.00. The average bill size of each of the three establishments is R259.70 and the bill size variable has a standard deviation of 87.44. The total number of bills processed was 201 and the average tip size for credit card transactions was R20.00. Cash tips were pocketed directly by the waitrons and there is no record for such. Minimum tip size was R2.50 and maximum was R35.00. The standard deviation was 4.77 and the mean was R15.89. Over a three and a half week period (01 April 2012 to 25 April 2012) at restaurant X, the employee tip report indicates that a directly tipped total of R27327.64 was gained by a total of 12 waitrons. This gives an average tip gain over the period for each waitron of R2277.30. By category of sales at each of the three restaurants, the largest tips were obtained at dinner times, followed by lunch and then breakfast. The highest tip amounts were for tables of more than four guests and the least at tables with only one guest. Virtually all of the waitrons were black employees and 70% of these were women. The largest tips were paid to men.

A multiple item rating scale was utilised to assess various determinants of service quality provision the restaurants X, Y and Z. This encompassed ten Likert scale items. The scale points were categorized as follows: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly disagree. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the ten items was 0.87, which indicates that there is acceptable internal consistency reliability. Higher overall scores indicated a higher level of service quality provision experienced by customers.

### **Findings**

The most stated gaps in the study related to "waitron responsiveness", "inadequate assurance" and "clean ablution facilities". In each case customers felt more quality was required. The key demographic profile of the survey respondents was males who especially like to visit Restaurant X. Most customers are between 36 to 45 years of age (21%). while customers between 56 and 65 years of age (11.5%-all in that age category), patronised Restaurant X. It was clear from the research that the desired satisfaction levels of expected service provision the customers' hoped to receive, was predominantly from Restaurant X. The least acceptable establishment was Restaurant Y. The score for the multi-attribute attitude measurement was calculated by making use of a modified equation as per Solomon (2002): Where, A is the overall attitude toward the restaurant, B the strength of the belief that the restaurant has any type of attribute (i), (i) the SERVQUAL attribute of a restaurant, (j) the restaurant, (k) the customers of a restaurant, (l) the customer evaluation of the strength or weakness of the attribute (i), (n) indicates the total number of customers. In making use of this equation, a customer's attitude towards

a restaurant's service quality provision was measured based on the total of the products obtained by multiplying the mean values of each of the SERVQUAL attributes and their respective mean value of importance.

Restaurant X had the highest total mean attitude (8.94) and Restaurant Z (7.96), while Restaurant Y had the lowest total mean attitude (7.66). The variance between each of these three restaurants is thus small. The findings do however suggest that customers of Restaurant X expect a certain kind of service given that it is part of a restaurant franchise brand. Not surprisingly then, it achieved the highest *Assurance* attribute rating. In some cases, service failure on the part of a waitron or kitchen staff, was exacerbated by poor floor management techniques where managers failed to effectively deal with failures and where public arguments with customers were almost a norm.

Restaurant X, as the most popular restaurant of the three investigated should reassess the attributes of *Empathy* and *Tangibles* for improvement if it is desirous of obtaining a greater market share. The research is clear that Restaurant X generally provides quality service to its customers. There are however concerns with ablution facilities that are not as clean as patrons would like them to be. The same applied to Restaurants Y and Z. Service was generally in line with what customers' expected but portions were not considered to be value for money in either of the restaurants. There was also an observation that meals were not balanced nutritionally and that vegetables, for example, had to be paid as an extra item in some cases. Customers felt this was not acceptable.

Service performance levels as perceived by customers were generally above the "minimum service level," but were however below the level of service that customers desire. The least problematic area for Restaurant X, was between perceived and desired service delivery presented for the attribute *Responsiveness*. This indicated that the restaurant's service is comparatively good. The *Tangibles* attribute was also fairly good. For restaurants Y and Z, service delivery was considered to be poor and prices were "unrealistic". The fastest service was at Restaurant Z, but that also had the least customers. The dirtiest ablution facility was at Restaurant Y. Waitrons in this restaurant were also sloppily dressed and the least empathetic. The training of waitrons was considered to be in need of improvement although it was acceptable, perhaps indicating a complacency amongst the South African consumer. Noise levels were the highest at Restaurant X, which is not surprising given that it had the most customers overall. The seating and ambience in all three restaurants was acceptable but could be improved. Dining areas were all 'fairly clean', but the method of cleaning tables after others had just eaten at a table was considered 'laughable'. Menu items were acceptable, but prices were considered to be high for certain items. The *Assurance* and *Reliability* attributes were consistent in Restaurant X-although some customers disagreed. It was mentioned in one customer comment that the floor manager of Restaurant Z was a 'pig'. After a complaint was made about cold food, he told the customers they were welcome to go elsewhere if they were not happy. Any customer service failure such as this, especially the information provided by the customer at the time that the complaint is lodged, should be viewed as a critical marketing research data, which is necessary not only for

immediate service recovery but for the improvement of future performance which will hopefully lead to customer loyalty.

Seventeen of the customers surveyed commented that they found prices to be higher than what they recalled from previous visits to each of the three restaurants. Restaurant customers typically store prices of meals in their memories (Grewal et al., 1998). Consequently, if the prices on a menu are higher than what the customer expects to pay, customer satisfaction will be negatively affected. It is thus important, for restaurants to have competitive menu prices for the market segment in which they seek to position their offerings.

Parking of vehicles was not problematic and customers felt safe in the casino complex, given that the area is boomed and that there is a visible security personnel presence. The evidence suggests that there is room for improvement in all three restaurants, especially Y and Z. especially tangibles need improvement. Better waitron training could also to a large degree result in better service quality provision in all three restaurants. The poorest floor management was in Restaurants Y where the person 'irritated' customers by constantly asking if everything was alright. Waiters should be certain and concise when taking orders, and meals and drinks must be delivered to diners within a reasonable time, ideally within 15 minutes. This requires effective training. It is also clear that South African customers who opt to pay using a credit or debit card tend to leave larger tips than those paying with cash. Previous studies have demonstrated that regular customers tend to leave larger tips than new customers (Azar, 2007) and this was found to be the case in this research.

The researchers was able to evaluate the service quality provision, and gained greater understanding of the customers' satisfaction levels as well as attitudes toward SERVQUAL's service attributes. It was discovered that there is indeed a large variance in service quality provision, which manifested itself in the tipping of waitrons. Based on comments obtained in the survey, it is apparent that waitrons who serve customers well develop a relationship with them that promotes service quality provision. This concurs with Fernandez (2004) who states that personal connections are what drive excellent service quality. From comments made, it is also clear that tip size provided by a customer at a restaurant is not only affected by the quality of service they receive, but also by the economic state of the country. However, despite economic downturns, prompt and good quality service, is likely to result in bigger tips for waitrons' and in return patronage, but black customers must be educated about the customary 10% tip in South Africa. If we rank the restaurants in terms of the findings, Restaurant X would in 'gold medal' position, Restaurant Z would obtain 'silver' and Restaurant Y would obtain 'bronze'. The findings of this research provide useful suggestions to the restaurants in question for taking any necessary corrective actions to improve their service quality provision but there were some limitations.

### **Study Limitations**

SERVQUAL is a simple and useful model for qualitatively exploring and assessing customers' service experiences. It is widely used by service delivery organizations and is considered to be an efficient model in helping a business to intensify its efforts in However SERVQUAL's five dimensions are not universals, and do not draw on

established economic, statistical and psychological theories. Service quality provision is also linked to employee satisfaction, which was not investigated in this study. SERVQUAL does to an extent illustrate the core of what service quality provision may mean including price, but it may also include other psychological and economic benefits. The intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of services create problems for managers and employees and thus also for customers.

The results of the study are based on a relatively small sample size which has been chosen from a small geographic during a short time period. Although the sample is reliable, it would be more accurate to expand this research throughout the province of Gauteng. There may well be other relevant restaurant service quality provision attributes that could influence customers' expectations and perceptions about their overall dining experience that are not included in this study.

The sample size of  $n=200$  was acceptable, but a bigger sample would have allowed for more authoritative analyses and findings. There could also have been more restaurants evaluated and ideally three from the same brand of franchise as Restaurant X. More efficient scales could be developed where individual items can be grouped together to reflect the construct which is to be measured. The nature of the environment was problematic as respondents were approach after leaving a restaurant where they had dined and were initially distrustful. There was also, in some cases extremity bias, where diners responded to questions by ticking the same number in a Likert scale, for all the items in a scale.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the gap analysis make it clear that the restaurant service providers did not meet customers' expectations. The indication is that overall restaurant service quality fell below the customers' expectations and that satisfaction was not as high as it should have been. There is thus room for service quality provision improvement in each of the restaurants. The three restaurants in this study could improve service quality provision through especially the dimensions of responsiveness, reliability and assurance. While how a waitron behaves may not directly influence customer satisfaction with a meal, it may have an indirect effect on customer satisfaction via quality service provision.

In terms of the findings of this study, three of the biggest gaps related to "waitron responsiveness", "inadequate assurance" and "clean ablution facilities", meaning that customers' expected much more responsive waitrons, greater assurance that quality of service and food would be good, and cleaner rest rooms than was actually experienced. All of the attributes in Table 3, with the widest statistically significant gaps represent severe deficits and require the significant attention of restaurant managers and staff in terms of making required improvements. The findings indicate that most of the customers' expectations concerning restaurant quality service provision are best explained by the subsequent factors, namely, appearance and ambience of facilities, a feeling of assurance, personalized service, satisfaction, responsiveness and reliability of waitrons. The latter determined the tip size they obtained to a large extent. The results thus strongly suggest that restaurant managers must train staff effectively and make certain that they provide timely service. The

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competence and efficiency of staff is critical to success. This will mean that there is accurate billing and service that is free of errors, leading to enhanced levels of customer satisfaction.

The critical strategy to retain customers is to improve service recovery quality, and by having a quick response to service failure. Consequently restaurant managers must immediately begin to focus attention on ensuring that future service delivery levels are high and seek to enhance the strength of customer relationships with each of the complaining customers. Managers should thus be attentive to recovery service quality as much as they are to service quality provision and should therefore enhance complaint management by having suggestion boxes at the front-desk or present customers with survey material to assess quality matters. Managers should formulate a competitive strategy based on a modified model of service quality provision to keep loyal customers and to enhance customer relationship management. Customer satisfaction undoubtedly has a major and direct effect on customers' behavioural intentions. Despite its shortfalls and limitations, this study implies some new contributions. The findings contribute to the development of a service quality provision excellence approach that will help to identify customers' expectations and hopefully encourage staff performance improvement in the three restaurants studied. The results may thus expand knowledge of restaurant service quality provision that could drastically improve business for the restaurants involved as well as restaurants in general.

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