

Customers' Experiences of Five-Star Hotels in Johannesburg

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Abstract

This study evaluates the experiences of customers at five-star hotels in Johannesburg. The objectives were to analyse: (a) customers' experiences posted online, (b) the problems reported by customers during their visits (c) the positive feedback posted on online platforms, and (d) the online responses from the five-star hotels. The empirical research was conducted using secondary data from three online websites, namely TripAdvisor, Trivago, and HelloPeter. The study followed a qualitative design and inductive thematic analysis were done. The online reviews and hotel responses of 186 five-star hotel customers and managers were downloaded and analysed. The results show that horrible experiences, poor service delivery, poor hotel management, hotel location, and its environment were identified as major problems, causing customer dissatisfaction and negative experiences. The results of the study could help hoteliers identify areas in need of improvement to increase customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Based on the findings from the study, it was recommended that more training and development should be available to employees in the industry to improve customer service delivery. Employees should be empowered with knowledge and skills to do their jobs efficiently.

Keywords: Customer experiences; customer satisfaction; five-star hotels; online reviews; service quality

Introduction

According to Mhlanga and Tichaawa (2016), understanding customers' experiences is crucial in the hotel industry because customers consider hotel service quality and location as some of the factors on which they base their purchasing decisions. Ensuring the long-term viability of an hotel is dependent on enticing customers to purchase the products and services of the hotel. Furthermore, in the hotel sector customers are not only bringing profit but the personal interaction between employees and customers also contributes to job security and job satisfaction for the employees in this sector (Kaya & Karatepe, 2020). Researchers have argued that it is increasingly difficult to provide the level of service that will leave customers satisfied (Cheng et al., 2018). Customers no longer only require a porter to carry their bags to their rooms, but they are also in need of a hotel setting where they can be part of the experience (Lee et al., 2016; Mhlanga & Tichaawa, 2016).

Mhlanga (2018) stated that organisations in the service industry, such as hotels, are faced with the challenge of satisfying evolving customers' needs. Hotels responding to this challenge, require increased levels of service quality and customer satisfaction as key factors

of ensuring positive customer experiences. Successful hotels quickly adapt to the changes in customers' needs as expressed in their reviews of their experiences during their hotel visits (Phillips et al., 2017). Therefore, hoteliers should use those reviews either positive or negative to improve their working strategies. Mhlanga et al. (2015) emphasised that customer experiences influence their decisions of revisiting a hotel and should therefore be considered as very important. This study focused on the experiences of customers who visited five-star hotels in the city of Johannesburg, Gauteng. The responses of the hotels were also analysed to serve as a benchmark for the development of good practice guidelines when responding to online reviews. In this article, the term 'customers' is used throughout which is referring to hotel guests.

Literature review

Customer satisfaction

In essence, customer satisfaction is meeting the needs of customers through products and services (Yarimoglu & Gunay, 2020). A study conducted by Mubiri et al. (2016) asserted that in the hospitality industry, customer satisfaction often leads to customer loyalty and a positive reputation for the hotel which is good for the success of the hotel. Molai et al. (2020) defined customer loyalty as a commitment to repurchase products and services consistently despite various changes or influences on buying behaviour. Several studies such as Pizam et al. (2016), as well as Madhovi and Dhliwayo (2017) defined customer satisfaction as resulting from the difference between customer expectations and customer experiences of a product or service. If the experience exceeds the expectations such experiences are perceived to be positive (Paulose & Shakeel, 2022). Hotels can ensure their long-term survival and growth by consistently exceeding the service quality expectations of customers.

However, when customers' expectations are not met, it will contribute to customer dissatisfaction (Sangpikul, 2022). Dissatisfied customers often raise their complaints. They will convey their dissatisfaction directly to hotel employees and often give feedback about their stay at the front desk when checking out. Many customers, however, have a need to share their views with a broader audience and also feel a need to inform prospective customers on their own experiences of a hotel. Therefore, they would post their reviews (positive and negative) on websites such as HelloPeter, TripAdvisor and Trivago. Through these online complaints, hotel management gets to know how customers experienced their products and services. By regularly reviewing the customers' reviews on these websites, the hotel management can gain knowledge and insight into the customers' experiences and determine what leads to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty or dissatisfaction and reputational damage (Sirzad, 2022).

Sirzad (2022) opined that hotel management should see complaints as critique that can assist in identifying service quality gaps. Once they become aware of these shortfalls, they can implement interventions leading to improved hotel products and services that would be of benefit to all the customers. Madhovi and Dhliwayo (2017) also stated that customer complaints are an important source of information that can be used to develop new strategies for the hotel to prevent unpleasant situations from re-occurring.

Kim and Kim (2022) explained customer experience as an interaction between the individual and the products and services offered. Such experiences can be positive or negative depending on how the products and services were rendered to the individual. Positive customer experiences, generally generates customer satisfaction. Bravo et al. (2019) supported this notion by stating that a positive customer experience creates positive feelings in customers which leads to loyalty to the brand or hotel. Batra (2019) also defined customer experience as effective customer responses towards all the phases of products and services provided by the hotel. Both, customer experiences and customer satisfaction have an influence on customer

repurchase decisions and, therefore, influence a hotel's customer retention (McCull-Kennedy & Zaki, 2022). The reviewed literature indicated that there is still a dire need for the improvement of hotel service provision. Various authors asserted that hotels, food and drink outlets, event facilities, accommodation entities, and other hospitality and tourism offerings in the South African context are still faced with inconsistent service delivery that is causing customer frustration and complaints (Ramphal & Nicolaidis, 2014).

Challenges in the hotel industry

The hotel sector is facing many challenges. Line and Runyan (2012) highlighted electronic marketing as one of these challenges. Gursoy (2018) found that hotels are moving their focus from traditional product marketing to e-marketing which often includes feedback from customers. Hotel managers should evaluate the e-marketing message carefully as that message will inform the service quality expectations of the customer (Alnaidi et al., 2021). Any over-selling by the hotel will inevitably lead to a customer experience that did not match the customer expectations, consequently leading to customer dissatisfaction and complaints. Therefore, electronic marketing campaigns and communication should be considered carefully as an element of customer satisfaction, which in turn will influence the customers' feedback on the online review sites. The author further stressed the importance of monitoring these reviews to gain an understanding of customers' expectations, experiences, and levels of satisfaction (Chen et al., 2022). Identifying a gap between the e-marketing and customer experience can enable managers to alter the marketing message, as well as address hotel operations to avoid future service quality lapses.

Another challenge often mentioned by researchers is the fact that the hotel sector seems to be slow to adopt modern technologies, and underestimates its importance in hotel performance, customer experiences, and customers' level of satisfaction (Menegaki, 2021). Services such as WIFI, are repeatedly reported as an important service that could enhance customer satisfaction (Breda et al., 2019). Thus, its availability can contribute to meeting the needs of customers and positively impact the level of satisfaction. A study by Rahimi (2017) emphasised the fact that hotels adopting new technology, such as WIFI, can contribute to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty that will manifest in customers' revisiting decisions.

Another challenge that often contributes to service quality lapses in hotels, is the lack of adequately skilled employees. To provide excellent quality service that might satisfy customers' needs, hotel managers and employees require specific skills to perform their duties competently and professionally (Losekoot et al., 2018). According to McCull-Kennedy et al. (2015), failure in service delivery is often linked to inadequate educational qualifications of hotel employees while Murphy (2016) added that it is the result of poor management. One of the reasons for the shortage in appropriately qualified and skilled employees is that hotels often appoint unqualified employees as they are cheaper on the one hand, and because there are simply not enough skilled graduates available to fill all the vacancies.

Employee training and development

Goh and Lee (2018) advised that the hospitality education sector should incorporate the development of the skills required by hotels in the curriculum, to deliver employees that possess the required skills at appropriate levels. Graduates must also be offered training and skills development while they are still gaining experience in the industry (Booyens, 2020). Appointing graduates from these institutions will contribute to improved service delivery, but it is also essential that hotels offer continues skills development and training to their employees. This will contribute to enhanced service quality ensuring sustainability in a hyper-competitive market (Jaykumar, 2018). Although hotels often appoint graduates, many are not qualified in

the field of hospitality, resulting in a failure to deliver quality service. Therefore, it is essential that such employees should be trained and developed in hospitality skills. The lack of employee and management competency in this sector is true evidence that most hotel employees need continuous training and development to ensure excellent quality service provision that is done consistently (Howarth et al., 2015).

Service quality gaps can develop when hotel managers have limited knowledge and understanding of the customers' expectations. To prevent such gaps the customers' expectations should be incorporated into the hotel's service standards (Wang et al., 2021). Some reasons for the development of service quality gaps include employees ignoring or misunderstanding service standards, or a difference between promises and the reality or the perception and the reality (Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2018). Hotel management is responsible to prevent lapses in the service quality and to ensure that excellent service quality standards are maintained. The application of total quality management (TQM) in hotels will aide management in achieving the desired service quality levels (Yeng et al., 2018). It is widely accepted that total quality is essential to a successful hotel industry. Effective TQM in hotels is a combination of management focusing on customers, service and production processes and continuous improvement (Jabbarzare & Shafigi, 2019). The attention paid to these focus areas contributes to the effective implementation of TQM that will then have a positive impact on, amongst other, the following hotel business aspects: cost management, guest and staffing forecasts, timely identification of service or product problems, staff training, recovery strategies, cost effective, consistent, and standardised services, product provision, meeting customer expectations, setting minimum specifications, compiling process and preparation checklists and learning from mistakes. In order to learn from mistakes, it is essential to elicit and note customer feedback (Wang et al., 2021). Pun and Ho (2001) elaborated on the importance for eliciting customer feedback as part of TQM activities and mentioned customer satisfaction surveys, as well as web page and online reviews as tools that can assist in gaining customer feedback.

Customer satisfaction surveys

Customer satisfaction surveys can be developed by using quality dimensions included in the numerous measurement instruments available for the measurement of customers satisfaction with service quality. A prominent and often referred to measurement instrument was developed and reported on in 1985, by Parasuraman, Zethaml and Berry (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This instrument, known as SERVQUAL, has been widely employed for the measurement of service quality dimensions and is also recommended as an exceptional tool to measure quality in the hotel industry (Ali et al., 2021). The SERVQUAL dimensions of service quality include tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy as shown in Figure 1. These dimensions are measured before the customer experienced the service and again once the customer has received the service. In other words, it determines the expectations the customer has and then compare it to the actual experience. The two sets of scores are compared to identify the service quality gap. When customers score the experience of the quality dimensions higher than the score of the expectation, the customer is satisfied with the service. The opposite is also true.



Figure 1. SERVQUAL Model (Parasuraman et al., 1988)

The SERVQUAL Model initially consisted of ten dimensions, namely material wealth, understanding, reliability, security, sensitivity, assurance, communication, initiative, competence, and politeness. Subsequently the measuring instrument have been refined and reduced to five dimensions of quality service, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibility. This model is still popular with service quality researchers as is evident from the fact that it was recently used as a measuring instrument by the researchers listed in Table 1 (Anvarovna, 2022).

Table 1. Recent application of SERVQUAL

Year	Author	Title	Instrument
2022	Ramos, A. P., Tanes, R. L. V. & Esplanada, D. E.	Sentiment analysis in service quality of Eugene’s villa of baler based on Airbnb reviews.	SERVQUAL
2019	Heydari, M. D. & Lai, K. K.	The effect employee commitment on service performance through a mediating function of organizational citizenship behaviour using SERVQUAL and collaborative filtering modelling: Evidence from China’s hospitality industry.	SERVQUAL
2021	Nguyen, P. H.	Fuzzy analytic hierarchy process based on SERVQUAL for hotel service quality management evidence from Vietnam.	SERVQUAL

According to Chaturved (2017), researchers across the world proposed various measuring instruments to measure service quality in hotels, such as, LODGSERV, SERFPERF, SERVICESCAPE, LODGQUAL, DINESERV, TANGSERV, LQI, DINESCAPE, DINEX and HOLSERF. Hotel managers or researchers can use any of these to measure quality dimensions to determine whether customers are satisfied with the quality of service provided. These are all quantitative measuring instruments which do not consider the feedback that customers post on the various online platforms. Hotel managers and researchers can identify specific factors that satisfy and dissatisfy customers by analysing the qualitative data (online reviews) that is available on the various platforms.

Due to the increased use of the internet, it became a useful tool for customers looking for information about the products and services offered by different hotels (Kim & Kim, 2022; Philips et al., 2017). The online customer reviews also became an important factor, influencing the decision-making process of those in need of hotel accommodation (Ye et al., 2022). The impact of these reviews should be considered as it is relevant to the hotel’s marketing

campaigns. At the same time, it should be used by hotel managers to determine the customers' level of satisfaction with the service they received at the hotel.

Philips et al. (2017) asserted that the traditional face-to-face method of sharing information is more and more replaced by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Therefore, online platforms such as TripAdvisor is an important method used by customers to share their experiences and opinions about the products and services offered by various hotels. Kim and Kim (2022) reiterated that customer reviews offer details about the customer's experience and perception of the service they received. Such reviews can largely determine whether prospect customers are more likely to trust the customer reviews, or the information offered by the hotel in the marketing materials. Lately, customers also make use of social media platforms to share their personal experiences in the hotel industry (Han et al., 2016).

Online platforms

This study focused on reviews posted on three online platforms namely TripAdvisor, Trivago, and HelloPeter. TripAdvisor is defined as a third-party online review platform. This website is the best known and is widely used in the hospitality industry (Li, 2020). TripAdvisor offers approximately 500 million reviews within the hospitality and tourism sector. The website has five million users, visiting the platform 30 million times per month on average.

The second website consulted in this study was Trivago, which is known as a customer review platform, acquired by Expedia (Fritsch & Sigmund, 2016). A study conducted by Babahmetovic (2018) pointed out that the Trivago was the first review platform used in Germany. The website is also used to advertise products and services. It is often used by hotel customers to express their negative and positive experiences after visiting a hotel, in the hope of having their complaints recognised and resolved in a suitable manner.

The third website used in this study was HelloPeter. It is defined as an online customer advocacy area (Jugwanth & Vigar-Ellis, 2013). This site was created 22 years ago by Peter Cheales, offering satisfied or disappointed customers a way of sharing their experiences publicly. The aim was to create a platform where individuals could lodge their complaints and for managers to respond to such complaints by offering an explanation or solution to the problem.

Methodology

This study followed an inductive thematic qualitative design. The subjects under investigation were the experiences of five-star hotel customers in Johannesburg. The inclusion criteria used to select customers were that such customers posted online reviews after visiting a five-star hotel in Johannesburg, South Africa. Collecting information that is already in the public domain do not normally require ethical clearance. However, to protect the interest of those who might be implicated, permission to conduct the research was sought from the Faculty Research Committee of Ethics at the Tshwane University of Technology and the downloaded reviews as well as the hotels were anonymised. The researcher included 186 online reviews referring to 26 five-star hotels in the research sample. The data were analysed by means of coding and identifying themes.

A convenience sampling approach was used to select customer reviews and management responses from the three websites. The suitable reviews were downloaded, and it was found that 65.6% of the downloaded documents were from customers who posted their reviews online and 34.4% were management responses to these reviews. The information collected was available in the public domain which indicates that it was posted voluntarily (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). Table 2 shows the number of customer reviews and managers' responses that were downloaded from the three websites selected for this study.



Table 2: Customer and management distribution

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Customers	122	65.6	65.6
Management	64	34.4	100
Total	186	100	

Data were collected from January 2019 to December 2020. Using three websites and covering a period of two year were done to maximize the chances of eliciting adequate information from online reviews of hotel customers and responses from hotels so that data saturation could be achieved. In total 186 reviews and responses of people with different lifestyles, occupations, income, ages, and gender and different five-star hotels in Johannesburg formed part of this study.

Inductive thematic analysis was used in this study. This is a process of coding data without the use of an existing coding frame as a guideline (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected to discover people’s opinions and experiences shared in online arenas. Data were analysed independently by the researcher, using a manual method. It was then co-coded by the study supervisor to ensure trustworthiness. The two parties met and the emergent codes were compared. Differences in coding were debated to reach agreement on the final codes to be used. The researcher then worked through all the coding to refine according to the decisions at mentioned meeting. According to Humble and Mozelius (2022), there are six phases used to code and edit qualitative data. The study has adopted these six phases, namely, familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining the themes, and producing the report.

Results and discussion

A total of 186 reviews from customers and responses from management were included in the study. Of these 124 reviews and responses were downloaded from TripAdvisor, 42 from Trivago and 20 from HelloPeter. The data were analysed by doing manual coding and themes were developed from the codes. The themes were reported and supported by statements cited from hotel managers and clients originally posted on the selected web pages. In line with Fritsch and Sigmund (2016), who identified TripAdvisor and Trivago as prominent customer review websites, most of the data were collected from these two websites. Table 3 shows a breakdown of the number of reviews and responses collected from the different websites. The table distinguishes between the number of reviews from customers and responses from managers for the time period 2019 to 2020 that formed part of this study.

Table 3: Online customers and management reviews

	TripAdvisor			Trivago			HelloPeter		
	N	%	Cum%	N	%	Cum%	N	%	Cum%
Customers	63	50.8	50.8	40	95.2	95.2	19	95	95
Management	61	49.2	100	2	4.8	100	1	5	100
Total	124	100		42	100		20	100	

Codes from customer reviews and management responses

The researcher and the project supervisor found that in general some reviews can be classified as positive (commending the service) or negative (complaining about the service). It was decided that it will be beneficial to the quality of coding to separate the positive and negative reviews once preliminary coding were completed. A total sum of 101 initial codes were identified in the reviews on customer experiences. Further analyses were done to establish the

frequency in which the various codes were mentioned in the reviews and responses. The codes were then grouped in themes.

As far as negative experiences were concerned. The results show that most of the reviews at 43%, referred to codes that were grouped under the service delivery theme. The code that appeared the most was *underwhelming food* in 11 cases, followed by the *expectation-reality gap* in 8 cases. Reservations and billing were mentioned 7 times each and *disappointed* 6 times.

The reviews on the quality of food contained this customer comment amongst others: “Breakfast had flies all over. Had a bad tummy for two days as fruit was covered with flies and a small fan that did nothing to stop them landing on the food.” As for the quality expectation reality gap reviews, the following reports were posted: “Nice hotel and the staff are pleasant and friendly, but the service is incredibly slow, and they often forget what it is you actually asked for. Not remotely at the standards I would expect of a 5-star Hotel.” “We arrived at reception, no juice, tea, coffee or water on arrival, as advertised.” “Shut off to any view, not as advertised.”

The following were stated as far as reservations were concerned: “Check-in - had a twin room booked but it wasn’t made available until 9pm when housekeeping finally separated the bed. Room was advertised as available from 2pm.” One example of a customer that narrated disappointment is the following: “Unapologetic and disappointing service, not what I would expect at a 5-star boutique hotel.”

The second most reviews at 40%, referred to negative experiences during the stay at the hotel. The codes lost support and expensive were mentioned 6 times each. The code curtains appeared 4 times and the code gym also appeared 3 times in the reviews.

Customers made it clear that the hotels have lost their support due to poor service as stated by one of the reviewers as follow: “The service was also really lacking. I got an email to request feedback and that has just been ignored as well. It was such a waste of time and money. We will never use their hotel again.” As far as concerns regarding the hotel being expensive, the following was stated: “Very bad terrible experience and low service standard with overpriced rooms.” Curtains were experienced by one customer as: “... curtains coming off rails” There seem to be no gym facilities at a certain five-star hotel according to the comments by this customer: “... offers you access to the Virgin gym up the road which you have to pay. Not really good enough for a five-star hotel.”

Furthermore, the results show that 31% of the cases were related to the hotel location and its environment. The code refurbishment appeared 7 times and maintenance 6 times. The code noise was identified 5 times followed by odour in 4 reviews. As far as these four codes are concerned, the reviewers wrote the following amongst other: “... furniture falling apart, lampshade broken” “the painting covering the safe wouldn't close without help and almost hit me in the face as I walked in. The plaster hadn't been completed on the walls, they were sealed but not painted.” “... incessant noise from the kitchen staff.” And also “... hotel is old and smell bad.”

Lastly, the reviews of poor management of employees were the least and accounted for 18%. The two most used codes were communication in 6 cases and broken promise in 4 cases. The reviews stated the following as far a broken promises were concerned: “The room was not prepared as promised. ... only refunded weeks later than promised ...”

The results show that 64% of the codes identified in reviews related to positive experiences of customers in the 5-star hotels. Most of the codes identified included staff in 13 reviews, reception in 12, return stay in 11 reviews, service in 10, management in 9, and housekeeping in 8 reviews. The positive feedback on reception included the following: “... reception was brilliant...” “... receptionist friendly.” The second theme was related to a good



hotel location and its environment which accounted for 57% of cases. Here the most frequently used codes were food and room mentioned 11 times each, facilities mentioned 10 times, and location 9 times.

The hotel managers responses to the comments posted by customers show that in 92% of the cases the responses were positive relating to the theme employee and management improvement. The most frequent codes were recovery action, mentioned 10 times, thanks and appreciate, mentioned 8 times each and apology, mentioned 7 times. The second theme, poor service delivery was identified in 25% of the cases. Only two codes appeared more than once, namely admit mentioned 5 times and staff mentioned 3 times. Poor communication between staff and customers was referred to in 19% of the cases. The codes relating to this theme were clarification, mentioned 5 times, and dispute and contradict mentioned twice each.

A total of nine themes were identified, emerging from the negative and positive reviews by the customers as well as the managers' responses. The results explained in Table 4, reflect a similar studies by Li (2020) as well as Ramphal (2016).

Table 4: Themes and their explanations

Themes	Explanations
Customer service delivery	The kind of service received by guests during their stay in a hotel.
Employee and management improvement	Employee and management performance action plan.
Negative customer experiences	When the hotel fails to meet customer expectations.
A bad hotel location and its environment	The hotel is situated in an unpleasant or dangerous environment.
Positive customer experiences	When the hotel meets customer needs and expectations.
Good hotel location and its environment	The hotel is situated in an acceptable environment.
Poor management	Results of lack of communication and professionalism.
Poor service delivery from management	Management fails to deliver the required services for the amount paid.
Poor communication between employees and customers	Discrepancy between management and customers on what is said and what is heard.

Customer experiences and management responses reports from the above-mentioned sources were considered and it is important to note that, in some cases, the responses from the businesses were noted down. However, not all the responses were written down unless those deemed complimentary to the respective theme. In some cases, business responses were not written as they were not provided by those respective business respondents.

Conclusion

Customer satisfaction is an essential aspect of customer services. Understanding customer satisfaction and its determinants is important especially in the hospitality context. The study investigated customer experiences reviews on 5-star hotels via online portals. Many customers complained about services offered in hotels in Johannesburg. The descriptive analysis shows that the proportion of positive responses was less than significant to fulfil the research aims. Despite the imbalances of customer experiences, both negative and positive responses were beneficial to hotels as they gave crucial feedback to improve service standard and service delivery. Thus, the results are significant in the explanation of existing gaps in terms of service delivery across different hotels.

The results revealed poor service delivery, poor management and poor communication between hotel staff and the customers as the main causes of customer dissatisfaction. It is concluded that hotels need to improve their services and enhance customer satisfaction to remain competitive in the hospitality industry. It is recommended that more training and development should be provided to employees to improve customer service delivery. Employees should be empowered with knowledge, professionalism and competency to do their jobs efficiently. It is recommended that better communication channels should be established

to prevent errors when bookings are made. There should also be relevant tools of communicating with customers during their stay at the hotel. Management should respond swiftly to any complaints by the customers. This will ensure customers that their opinions matter and help to identify weaknesses in the hotel's service delivery.

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