

Guest Satisfaction at Commercial Hospitality Training Facilities in South Africa

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Abstract

Hospitality training facilities are the laboratories in which students are exposed to experiential learning in real environments. These establishments aim to produce employable graduates and generate revenue to ensure financial sustainability. Despite the importance of service excellence in hospitality training facilities, this has not been effectively measured by existing studies. The study sought to determine guest profiles and satisfaction levels at these establishments. The methodology implemented was quantitative, surveying 300 guests at commercial establishments at two hospitality training facilities in South Africa. Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The findings revealed that training facilities are frequently patronised by a youthful market who are educated, either work or study at the facility and visit mainly for meetings or business events. Significantly, the study found that most guests did not experience high levels of satisfaction, revealing gaps in the products and services delivered to them. The most important factors that influenced this were responsiveness, reliability, tangibility, empathy and assurance. These low levels of satisfaction should be addressed through improvements in service delivery and product quality. The results of the study provide valuable insights in ensuring the future success of hospitality training facilities and the effective training of future employees.

Keywords: Hospitality training; guest satisfaction; commercial training facilities

Introduction

Ruhanen (2006) defines hospitality training facilities as places where academic and practical training are blended to improve graduates' employability through a combination of theory-based hospitality management programs and industry-specific skills. These facilities offer a platform for scholarly exploration of the similarities between practical, hands-on higher education hospitality delivery and business operations in modern contexts (Ruhanen, 2006). Over recent years, the nature of hospitality training facilities has evolved from facilities serving limited meals, resembling a cafeteria to cutting edge units offering contemporary meals (Reale, 2020). Today's commercial hospitality training facilities, serve a significant captive market (Garg, 2014) which has grown due to increased enrolment, better economic conditions, and a captive market (Smith et al., 2020).

Guests patronising commercial hospitality training facilities expect more than just quality food, and their tolerance for subpar food has decreased (Gramling et al., 2005). These guests have expectations of their experiences, which are individual predictions of what they desire or anticipate, representing their ideal wants for the encounter (Agbenyegah et al., 2022). Where these expectations are met, the result is guest satisfaction which ensures repeat visitation, future sustainability and viability of the establishment (Hassanaian et al., 2013). A plethora of papers has been written about guest expectations and satisfaction levels in the

hospitality industry (Nadzirah et al., 2013, Hassanain et al., 2016; Wooten et al., 2018). Despite this, guest expectations and satisfaction levels at hospitality training facilities remain under-researched and minimal literature is available on this topic (King & Tang., 2020). Comprehension of guests' satisfaction levels in hospitality training facilities is essential as this ensures the future sustainability of these establishments, the production of work ready customer facing graduates and the development of strategies to ameliorate service. The current article is grounded in the following objectives: firstly, to determine the profile of guests patronising commercial hospitality training facilities in South Africa; secondly, to determine whether guest expectations of service quality at commercial hospitality training facilities are met; and finally, to determine the levels of guest satisfaction at these facilities. The findings of this paper contribute to the existing limited knowledge on commercial hospitality training institutions, thus empowering these establishments to enhance their training programs in alignment with the fast-paced industry.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Commercial hospitality training facilities

Since the creation of the first hotel school, the Ecole Hoteliere de Lausanne in Switzerland in 1893, the hospitality sector has regarded practical hospitality training facilities as the perfect model for offering education and developing skills for future managers in the sector (Yong, Damien & Giuliano., 2019; King & Tang, 2020). Industry leaders and scholars have long advocated for the establishment of practical hospitality training facilities to bridge the gap between hospitality curricula and industry requirements, which emphasise a balance between theory and practice (Tse, 2014). Balancing theory and practice has been a historical challenge in hospitality curricula (Tse, 2014), and to address this, experiential learning approaches such as practicums and internships in commercial facilities have been suggested to better prepare hospitality students for success in the industry (LeBruto & Murray, 1994).

Guest satisfaction

There is currently no universally accepted definition of guest satisfaction (McCollough, 2000), and ongoing debates exist on the extent to which it is a cognitive process or an emotional state. Howard and Sheth (1969:55-66) define guest satisfaction as “the patron’s cognitive state of being adequately or inadequately rewarded for the sacrifice he has undergone.” Anwar and Louis (2017) add that guest satisfaction is a term that elaborates on a measurement of services or products that are provided to meet guests’ expectations. According to Engel and Blackwood (1982), guest satisfaction is “an evaluation (cognitive) that the chosen alternative is consistent with prior beliefs with respect to that alternative”, while Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) posit that satisfaction refers to a judgement made by guests about whether a product or service feature (or the product or service itself) delivers a level of consumption-related fulfilment that is enjoyable. Guest satisfaction was elaborated by Choi and Chu (2001), as the evaluation made by guests that the food or service they have received is at least as good as they expected it to be. Considering these varying definitions, it is evident that satisfaction is a complex process that involves various psychological dynamics, including those that are both cognitive and affective (Oh & Parks, 1997).

The guest satisfaction conundrum is exacerbated by the fact that the hospitality industry has become highly competitive, due to various obstacles, including fluctuations in seasonal bookings, frequent changes in guest expectations, high operational costs, and the experiential aspect of services (Nainggolan et al., 2022). In such a demanding landscape, achieving high levels of guest satisfaction is crucial to gain a competitive edge (Li & Ryan, 2020). Therefore, it is vital for hospitality establishments to understand their guests' emotions towards the

services they provide and identify the key factors that influence their satisfaction (Mabila et al., 2023).

The confirmation-disconfirmation model

The confirmation-disconfirmation model suggests that guests use a personal standard to evaluate a new service experience. Their perception of the service is determined by how well it meets this standard. The model assumes that guests make purchases based on their expectations, attitudes, and intentions (Oliver, 1980). After experiencing the service, guests evaluate the performance, and compare it to their pre-experience standard or expectation. This evaluation process leads to confirmation, satisfaction, or dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1980).

The SERVQUAL model

During the delivery of service in service organisations such as commercial hospitality training facilities, the assessment of service quality is conducted through an interaction between the guest and a service representative, which in this case is either a staff member or a hospitality student (Parasuraman et al., 1985., Parasuraman et al., 1988, 1991). Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988, 1991) proposed five essential dimensions of service quality (SERVQUAL) that are necessary for guest satisfaction in the service delivery process, which are reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness (see Figure 1).

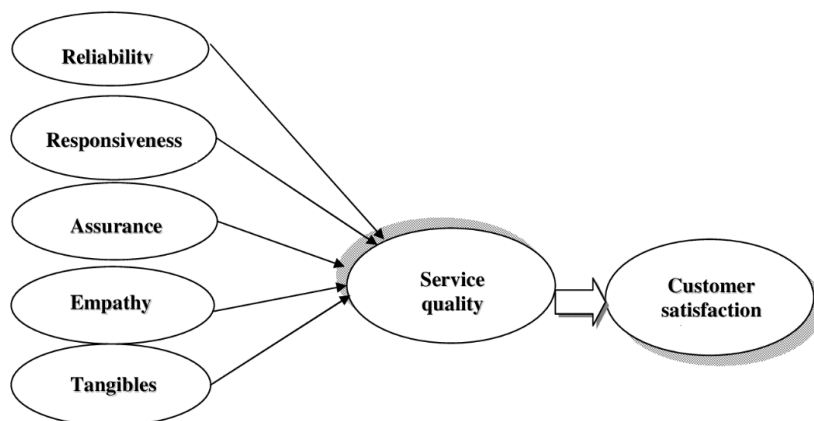


Figure 1: The SERVQUAL model
Source: Parasuraman et al. (1985)

In the SERVQUAL model, reliability pertains to the ability to deliver the promised service accurately and dependably. Responsiveness involves providing prompt service and demonstrating a willingness to assist guests. Assurance is conveyed through the knowledge, courtesy, and ability of employees to instil trust and confidence in guests. Empathy involves providing individualised attention and care to guests. Finally, tangibles refer to the physical appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Using these dimensions, the adjusted SERVQUAL model was adopted for this study to unpack guests' expectations and their perception of service at commercial hospitality facilities.

Research design and methods

Participants and data collection

The current study was quantitative in nature. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire from guests patronising commercial hospitality training facilities at two universities in South

Africa, in Johannesburg and Mbombela. The Universities were selected because they are prominent universities in South Africa located in prime tourist destinations. The survey questionnaire developed for the purposes of the study consisted of two sections. The first section was based on respondent demographics and the second on perceptions of service quality based on the SERVQUAL model dimensions. Questions related to service quality were based on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree. Systematic sampling was employed and the formula, $N = p(100-p) z^2/E^2$, Gill et al. (2010), was adopted to calculate sample size. Following ethical approval from the University of Johannesburg School of Tourism and Hospitality Ethics Committee, data was collected face-to-face at the study sites from 300 respondents.

Data analysis

Data gathered was analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The analysis involved two levels of statistical analysis: univariate and bivariate. The univariate analysis encompassed the examination of the guests' demographic characteristics and the primary study variables. This provided a description of the distribution of responses on the various variables. The second level of analysis, bivariate analysis, focused on examining the relationship between the independent and dependent variables of the study. The first bivariate analysis involved determining the relationship between guests and their expectations of service delivery at the facilities. The second bivariate analysis examined the relationship between guests and their perceptions of service quality after their visit. These analyses were conducted to determine if significant differences existed among guests in relation to the services they expected or anticipated to receive upon their visit to the facilities and subsequently upon their stay. A further bivariate analysis was conducted to determine the significant relationship between guests and their overall expectation of the quality of services. The last analysis focused on establishing the relationship between guests and their satisfaction with the individual measures of service delivery. Along with this, the study used chi-square tests to assess the relationships between the variables, and to identify those that were found to be statistically significant.

Results and discussion

Profile of respondents

According to Kotler and Keller (2006), hospitality managers must be familiar with the characteristics of their guests to make effective marketing, promotional and operational decisions to raise guest satisfaction. In addressing this, the study developed a profile of the guests at commercial hospitality training facilities in South Africa which is presented in Table 1 below. Fifty seven percent of the respondents were male and 42.3% female. Respondents were largely youthful between the ages of below 25 years and 45 years, with most being South African (80.3%), or from other African countries (13.3%). Most respondents were either an employee (49%) or a student (24.7%) at the universities where they were surveyed. Most held a university degree (78.8%), which is in keeping with previous studies which found that on-campus guest profiles tend to exhibit a higher level of qualification (Spielberg, 2005). Along with the above, most respondents (85.7%) were visiting the facility surveyed for the purpose of attending a seminar, conference, meeting, or business meeting, highlighting the importance of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) market at these establishments. Tichaawa (2017) suggests that this segment should be considered a 'golden goose' for these facilities due to their high purpose of visit percentage in comparison to leisure guests and others. Respondents were more likely to be repeat visitors rather than first time



visitors, indicating that the universities have an existing captive market that form the nucleus of their guests.

Table 1: Respondent profile (n=300)

Variable	Percentage
Gender	
Female	57.7
Male	42.3
Age	
Below 25 years	21
25-35 years	35.5
36-45 years	25.7
46-55 years	13
Over 55 years	5
Nationality	
South African	80.3
African	13.3
Asian	3.3
American	2.3
Other	0.7
Occupation	
University employee	49
Student	24.7
Other	12.3
Private business owner	10.3
Government employee	4
Highest level of education	
University	78.8
High school	14.3
College	6
Primary school	1

Service quality and guest satisfaction at commercial hospitality training facilities

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with several statements regarding their expectations and perceptions of service quality at the commercial hospitality training facility at which they were surveyed. Drawing on the SERVQUAL model, the dimensions of service quality included in the survey were tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, the results of which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 presents that guests at commercial hospitality training facilities ranked assurance (mean score of 4.47) as the most important variable impacting satisfaction, followed by responsiveness (mean score of 4.46), tangibility (mean score of 4.44), empathy (mean score of 4.42), and reliability (mean score of 4.41) respectively. The multiple regression analysis conducted indicated that perceived service quality is an important antecedent of overall guest satisfaction. Respondents perceived empathy (mean score of 4.24), as the highest performing dimension followed by tangibility (mean score of 4.22), assurance (mean score of 4.15), reliability (mean score of 4.14) and responsiveness (mean score of 4.07) respectively. The results revealed strong, positive and significant relationships between the combination of perceived service quality dimensions and overall guest satisfaction, implying that highly perceived levels of empathy, tangibles, assurance, reliability and responsiveness lead to higher overall guest satisfaction in the hospitality training facilities. This finding is supported by existing research (Akan, 1995., Choi & Chu, 2001; Mabila et al., 2023) which found that most common factors of perceived service quality appear to be assurance, employees, and tangibles. The results of these studies and the current study indicate that guests at commercial hospitality training facilities perceive high service quality as service that is reliable, without errors,



delivered courteously, professional, delivered by neat employees and delivered in physically appealing facilities.

Table 2: Guest expectations and perceptions of service quality

Tangibility Dimension	Guests' Expectations	SD	Guests' Perceptions		Gap	P-Value
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D		
1. The facility has modern buildings and good structure.	4.38	0.764	4.23	0.762	-0.15	
2. Signage including health & safety signage is visible.	4.42	0.747	4.19	0.826	-0.23	
3. Employees are well groomed and look professional.	4.52	0.752	4.3	0.803	-0.22	
4. Service materials such as menus and brochures are visually appealing.	4.3	0.891	3.92	1.023	-0.38	
5. The décor compliments architectural design ambiance of the building.	4.44	0.771	4.25	0.834	-0.19	
6. There is modern equipment in all areas.	4.44	0.731	4.17	0.827	-0.27	
7. There is adequate COVID-19 health and safety equipment.	4.45	0.802	4.21	0.853	-0.24	
8. Cleanliness is of a high standard.	4.55	0.745	4.47	0.769	-0.08	
Overall Tangibility Mean Score; gap; P-value	4.43	0.605	4.22	0.611	-0.21	<0.001
Reliability						
1. Service is provided well the first time.	4.48	0.778	4.26	0.842	-0.22	
2. Information provided at the service desk is accurate.	4.43	0.8	4.14	0.891	-0.29	
3. Staff are proactive, understand guests' requirements and provide service at the promised time.	4.51	0.747	4.33	0.819	-0.18	
4. Problems are solved sincerely in a professional manner.	4.39	0.8	4.03	0.788	-0.36	
5. Records are correct and error-free.	4.35	0.822	4.03	0.834	-0.32	
6. Equipment functions well and wifi speed is good.	4.33	0.867	4.01	0.871	-0.32	
7. Meals are of high quality and all listed menu items are readily available including dietary requirements.	4.36	0.876	3.97	0.937	-0.39	
8. Staff has impressive product knowledge.	4.35	0.858	4.14	0.853	-0.21	
Overall reliability mean score; gap; p-value	4.41	0.67	4.14	0.594	-0.27	<0.001
Responsiveness						
1. Staff pay attention to individual needs.	4.5	0.725	4.11	0.804	-0.39	
2. Staff anticipate guest needs and inform them exactly when service will be provided.	4.43	0.808	4.04	0.851	-0.39	
3. Staff are always willing to help you.	4.54	0.714	4.26	0.789	-0.28	
4. Guest complaints are taken seriously and resolved promptly.	4.48	0.778	4.15	0.772	-0.33	
5. The staff has adequate skills to provide service.	4.47	0.769	4.21	0.787	-0.26	
6. Guests are always informed of promotions, loyalty programmes and new schemes.	4.32	0.966	3.68	1.173	-0.64	
Overall Responsiveness Mean Score; gap; p-value	4.46	0.639	4.07	0.643	-0.39	<0.001
Assurance						
1. There is adequate security and access control.	4.47	0.851	4.11	0.919	-0.36	
2. The staff demeanour is courteous, reassuring and instils confidence.	4.44	0.78	4.17	0.802	-0.27	
3. Management is visible and easily accessible.	4.42	0.791	4.08	0.881	-0.34	
4. Staff is knowledgeable about the facility and answers service questions well.	4.46	0.76	4.11	0.839	-0.35	
5. Guests feel safe when transacting with the facility.	4.51	0.72	4.29	0.853	-0.22	
Overall Assurance Mean Score; gap; p-value.	4.47	0.643	4.15	0.681	-0.32	<0.001
Empathy						
1. Staff is calm and measured when dealing with difficult situations.	4.4	0.866	4.16	0.84	-0.24	
2. Management goes out of their way to ensure the guests are happy.	4.39	0.778	4.15	0.852	-0.24	
3. The facility has adequate paraplegic access.	4.43	0.857	4.21	0.792	-0.22	
4. Guests are treated in a caring fashion.	4.5	0.752	4.33	0.772	-0.17	
5. Attention to individual needs and special requests is a norm.	4.46	0.811	4.27	0.784	-0.19	
Overall Empathy Mean Score; gap; p-value	4.42	0.714	4.24	0.633	-0.18	<0.001

The overall mean expectation results ranking assurance, responsiveness, tangibility, empathy and reliability in that order confirm the findings of Markovic and Jankovic (2013) that guests have high satisfaction with tangible dimensions and low satisfaction with reliability dimensions. According to Bitner (1992), guests' responses to their physical environment are cognitive, emotional, and physiological in nature. Put differently, the way guests perceive the quality of their physical surroundings can cause them to behave in certain ways based on their internal reactions. The findings align with this, indicating that all elements of the physical environment have an indirect impact on guest satisfaction. As per Table 2, empathy received the smallest gap (-0.18) thus confirming the findings of Torres et al., (2013) that guests have greater satisfaction with empathy and competence of staff and lower satisfaction with reliability

dimensions. This is corroborated, by Fah & Kandasamy (2011), who found that empathy, competence of staff, and reliability were the most important expectations dimensions of hospitality guests.

Standard deviations for expectations ranged from 0.7 to 0.9 while average deviations for experiences ranged from 0.71 to 0.9. The deviations show that the gap between what the guests expected service to be at these facilities was very close to what they experienced. The study calculated the average standard deviations of 0.65 for expectations and 0.63 for experiences and found that guests' scores for hospitality, service quality, and ambiance were clustered closely to the average means for these attributes. Following this, a gap analysis was conducted by calculating the difference between the mean experience and the mean expectation score for each attribute, which indicates any discrepancies between the guests' experiences and expectations. The perceptions-expectations gap, also known as the external gap or 'moment of truth,' refers to the difference between the guest's perception and expectation (Abdullah et al., 2022). The gap scores for each attribute were determined by subtracting the expectation means from the experience means. All the gaps for the five service quality dimensions were negative (Table 2), suggesting that the perceived quality provided by students did not meet the guests' expectations. Despite this, in all these cases, the gap was minimal, indicating that guests' service perceptions were close to their expectations. The smallest gap was assurance (0.18), followed by tangibility (0.21), reliability (0.27), assurance (0.32) and responsiveness (0.39). These findings support those of similar study conducted by Smith et al. (2020), which found there to be a positive significant relationship between guest satisfaction and behaviour and the various elements of the hospitality service facility and operations that were examined. Further statistical tests revealed that the gaps were statistically significant as indicated by the p-values lower than the level of significance. What is evident is that the contradiction between guests' expectations and experience is minimal. The empathy gap was ranked the smallest (0.18), thus confirming the perception analysis that the guests largely felt staff went out of their way to look after their needs at the hospitality facilities. The reliability (0.27) and assurance (0.32) gaps were ranked moderate. It would therefore appear the guests felt just satisfied with the reliability and assurance variables. The tangibility gap was ranked the second smallest (0.21), meaning guests were largely satisfied with the physical attributes of the facilities. The guests surveyed rated responsiveness (0.39) as the largest gap highlighting areas that management needs to ameliorate as discussed in further detail below. The gaps again confirm that guests usually perceive service quality as reliable and error-free, with courteous, professional and neat employees and visually appealing physical facilities. The findings indicate that although respondents felt that the facilities offer a fair level of service there are gaps that should be addressed to increase their satisfaction, particularly in terms of décor, food quality and the visibility of managers.

The findings show that the most important factor in predicting hospitality training facilities guests' overall service quality evaluation was assurance, followed by responsiveness, tangibility, empathy and reliability. Tangibility overall achieved a mean score of 4.22/4.33, reliability a score of 4.14/4.41, responsiveness a score of 4.06/4.46, assurance a score of 4.15/4.47, and empathy a score of 4.24/4.42. This illustrates that although the guests felt that the overall service fell short of their expectations, there was some level of satisfaction with some variables of the service value chain. This finding is supported by King and Tang (2020) who found that in their focus on providing students with practical experience and gaining revenue, hospitality training facilities often fall short of meeting guest expectations and ensuring guest satisfaction.

Overall, the findings indicate that guest satisfaction in commercial hospitality facilities is based on an amalgam of how guests perceive versus how they experience these facilities and is dependent on the variables of tangibility, reliability responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Implications and conclusions

Reflecting on the results of the study and the discussion presented above, it is evident that commercial hospitality training facilities largely fall short in terms of ensuring guest satisfaction. Managers at these facilities who want to increase guest satisfaction levels should focus on providing reliable and accessible service that is delivered by empathetic and competent blended staff in visually appealing facilities (King & Tang, 2020). Along with this, identifying the expectations of guests, as well as the dimensions of service quality that guests use to evaluate the quality of a hospitality training facility, is crucial for improving quality and guest satisfaction (McCollough, 2000). McCleary and Swan (1996) argue that having such knowledge would assist managers in enhancing the service quality in hospitality training facilities. To improve guest satisfaction at commercial hospitality training facilities, managers should also not only focus on the tangible aspects of facilities but also pay attention to intangible dimensions such as interpersonal skills, courtesy, competence and willingness to assist guests. Along with the this, to address gaps in service, hospitality training facilities should adopt dynamic guest feedback platforms as a standard practice.

Despite not satisfying guests, commercial hospitality training facilities still experience high instances of repeat visitation due to the purpose of visit. As most guests are MICE visitors, they often return to the facility to attend meetings and not of their own choice. MICE tourism is a valuable contributor to the global tourism and hospitality industries, encompassing a substantial portion of international tourist arrivals. It is estimated to reach an \$1.3 trillion by 2028, growing at a rate of 21.3 % from 2021 to 2028 (Tichaawa, 2017). South Africa and other countries have recognised this important segment as a driver for the growth and development of the hospitality industry, with goals of job creation, local economic development, and poverty alleviation (Tichaawa, 2017). Commercial hospitality training facilities should therefore continue to capitalise on this but going forward, target a greater portion of the market external to the university.

Future research in this field could consider commercial hospitality training facilities across a broader geographical area in South Africa and beyond to gain a better understanding of a wider range of commercial hospitality training facility guests and their satisfaction levels. These evaluations of guest satisfaction levels should be conducted regularly to promote a culture of continuous improvement within training facilities. This can further assist these establishments in their marketing efforts and in building a strong reputation in the hospitality industry. Future studies could also focus specifically on guest satisfaction at commercial hospitality training facilities relating to MICE events and the MICE market.

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