Developing a service quality questionnaire for budget category hotels

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Abstract

To the average customer, quality is an requisite and important item, but they also wish to be satisfied. Customers generally always try to select and buy products and services of high quality. The concept of service quality in the hotel industry is considered to be a central stirring factor for the successful operation of a business. The study is intended to formulate an appropriate service quality questionnaire for measuring service quality in budget category hotels. A summary of various studies on service quality in hotels reveals that the measurable attributes under various dimensions were modified specifically to the context of the study. Searches for additional attributes which guests find important ensures the validity of each specific dimension of service quality. The method employed to gather the research resources was adopted from the SERVQUAL model which is generic in measuring perceived service quality. In this context, the study sought to investigate whether SERVQUAL dimensions are pertinent to the budget category hotels run by Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation. After a thorough review of major extant literature, a questionnaire with various attributes was constructed specifically to examine the service quality in the budget category hotels. The instrument consisted of five dimensions, namely tangibles, responsiveness & assurance, reliability; empathy and technology. The results of the study demonstrate that SERVQUAL is indeed a reliable and valid tool to measure service quality in the budget category hotels. In light of the results, possible managerial implications are discussed and future research subjects are recommended.

Keywords: Service Quality, Budget Hotels, Questionnaire, SERVQUAL, Measurement scale.

Introduction

In India, as in many of the developing countries, the service industry has emerged as one of the significant economic drivers and plays a predominant role in the development of the country. The direct and indirect contribution of tourism to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country is 9.2 percent and total contribution to total employment of the country is 8.1 percent in the year 2018 and supported 42.673 million jobs (Travel & Tourism Economic Report - India, World Tourism & Travel Council (WTTC) 2018). Harnessing its direct impacts on the generation of employment and national income, tourism and travel industry has gained considerable attention in India.

The hotel sector is an integral component of tourism due to its role in providing accommodation, recreation, and other related services to tourists. The Indian hotel industry has recorded healthy growth due to the massive inflow of foreign tourists as well as increased domestic tourists' movement. For instance, Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India witnessed a growth rate of 5.20 percent during 2018 with 10.56 million Foreign tourists compared to the FTAs of 10.04 million during 2017 (IBEF, 2019). Additionally, the substantial growth rate was observed in the domestic tourism sector as the domestic tourist visits were 1652.49 million during the year 2017, witnessed a growth of 2.3 percent over 2016 (India tourism statistics, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018). These notable changes in the tourist inflow highly facilitated the Indian hospitality sector to become one of the leading players in the global market. The sector has shown a steady growth rate of over 14 percent in the last five consecutive years and a similar growth trend is predicted in upcoming years (Vardharajan &

Rajan, 2013). According to IBEF (2018) report on Indian hospitality presents that the current scenario of Indian tourism and the hospitality industry with market size of around $234 billion is expected to reach around $420 billion by 2025. Realizing the demand-supply scenario and enormous potential in the Indian hospitality market, many domestic and foreign players are proposed to increase the investment. The Central Government directions on allowing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the service industry aggravated the investment to a greater extent. (Research and Market report on the Hotel Industry in India, 2015). International hotel chains are increasing their presence in the country, as it will account for around 47 percent share in the Tourism & Hospitality sector of India by 2020 & 50 percent by 2022 (IBEF, 2019).

Managing the hotel industry with a principle of delivering quality service ensures the achievement of gaining a competitive advantages. Wang and Ahmed (2001), state that service quality management in the present context emerged as one of the significant and enduring strategies. It ensures the very survival of organizations and further, lays a fundamental route to business excellence (Nicolaides, 2008). Hotels have to strive to deliver their guests, not only the products and services but also 'quality' and 'satisfaction' that may lead to long-lasting survival and profitability (Ramsaran, 2006). Thus, the ultimate aim of every organization is to focus on delivering quality service and the tourism and hospitality industry cannot expel from this arena.

The concept and the conceptual models of service quality measurement are indispensable to understand the genesis of service quality. The management task related to the identification of potential gaps in service delivery is also crucial as far as the hotel industry is concerned. 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 indispensable to accomplishment for any service operation. Customer satisfaction clearly results from a service encounter and by evaluating if expectations are met when likened to actual performance in for example, a restaurant or hotel (Nicolaides, 2008; 2012).

Ironically, the guest feedback and comments on services are the ultimate source of information for assessing the service quality in hotels. Therefore, considering difficulties in measuring the service quality, hotel industries heavily rely on analyzing the guest's perceptions of service quality to get reliable results. Major studies on service quality intended to achieve the purpose by incorporating the guest's perceptions, comments, and feedback on service quality. Those purposes have been effectively attained through carefully designed methodology and surveys.

The measurement of service quality in intangible service industries has proved to be more difficult than the measurement in tangible manufacturing industries. This is mainly because, in service industries, consumption and evaluation of service quality offered at the same time, and more often in the presence of the service provider. The SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al., (1985; 1986; 1990; 1991) has been unanimously accepted by scholars and thus, widely used in several studies for assessing the service quality. Furthermore, the five dimensions gap instrument has been widely explored in a different perspective by researchers across the world with modified constructs suitable to the context (Saleh & Ryan, 1991, Bojanic & Rosen, 1993, Tsang & Qu, 2000; Nicolaides, 2008).

In general, service quality is acknowledged only by luxury hotels, but, a study undertaken by Hua, et al., (2009) reveals that service quality and its attributes remain a core area of customer expectation in the budget hotels of China. Hence, it is noted that research and challenges in assessing service quality in the hospitality industry continue in a different context from the luxury hotels to budget category hotels. After due consideration of major sources, the present research gives insights into the potential scope for developing a questionnaire to access the guests' perceptions of service quality in a state-owned budget category group of hotels.

Background

The concept of service quality has aroused considerable attention and interest in the research literature due to its indefinite nature and difficulties in both defining and measuring (Wisniewski, 2001). It is generally observed that service quality is one of the principal elements which plays a decisive role in determining and distinguishing the hospitality establishments but failed to generate universally accepted constant definition (Presbury et al., 2005). However, attempts were made by many researchers in defining service quality in many ways. Presbury (2005) presented the formation of service quality in two different perspectives, where service is divided based on three components via technical, functional and image; and another is to determine the service quality by its nature of suitability to internal and external customers.

"Quality is a measurement or indicator of scope, i.e. the term for the usability of a product or service for meeting specific needs at a certain place and time when the product or service is confirmed as goods through the process of exchange" (Injac, 1998: 64). Gronross (1984), Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), Nicolaides, (2008) and Johnston (1995) defined the service quality in terms of customer satisfaction, i.e. "the degree of fit between customers expectations and perceptions of service". The general view of service quality states "Quality is simply conformance to specifications, which would mean that positive quality is when a product or service-specific quality meets or exceed preset standards or promises" (Ekinci et al., 2004). However, definitions particularly related to the hospitality industry states that service quality must be guest-oriented (Ekinci et al., 2004). Avelini-Holjevac (2002: 63) defined the service quality in the hotel industry as "Quality means the achievement of estimated standards and their constant maintenance, i.e. an ongoing process. High-class hotels render highest standards and highest quality products and services, with the most extensive scope of expensive hotel service". Service quality provision goes through evolutionary stages and in the initial stages of a hospitality business's development it is reactive and instinctive, rather than proactive or planned. It can however be a very strong contributor to price/value perceptions with effective communication playing a crucial role in the overall servicing of the guest" (Ramphal & Nicolaides, 2014).

Economy class hotels offer products and services of lower quality, with a limited scope of less expensive service. Assessing the service quality of the product or services is primarily based on the customers' perceptions related to pre and post-purchase scenario. The primary study initiated by Parasuraman et al. in 1988 on measuring the customer perceptions of service quality was instrumental for many researchers to contemplate the core area of service quality in various industries, followed by many studies with due consideration on service industries such as tourism, hotel, and hospitality.

Development of SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL model is the widely used multi-item instrument by practitioners in service industries to measure service quality. Parasuraman et al. (1985) asserted that delivering consistently good service is the challenging part, at the same time, it plays a vital role in sustaining the business firm to be profitable. Therefore, they sought to determine the major factors which affect the level of importance in service quality delivery and then ascertain if any gaps in service can be identified. They attempted to develop a conceptual model of service quality. The first part of their conceptual paper explains the distinct characteristics of service and difficulties of measuring the service quality because of its intangible nature. To develop an effective service quality model, four service firms were selected to undertake the in-depth executive and focus group interviews.

As a result, five major gaps were highlighted from the service provider perspective, which are likely to affect the service quality (Nicolaides, 2008). The ten key categories such as, reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communications, credibility, security, understanding, tangibles are labelled as "service quality determinants" with 97 items, which

consumers use in generating expectations about and perceptions of services. The major insights gained through the research are the development of a conceptual service quality model that will hopefully spawn both academic and practitioner interest in the area of service quality. Thus, the beginning of establishing the SERVQUAL model to study service quality measurement.

Parasuraman et al., (1988) the next level of research was initiated with three service industry to empirically test the significance of conceptual service quality model. The refining process made to reduce the existing 97-item instrument using the factor analysis. A total of 200 respondents were asked to share their perceptions of service provided by those major three service industries. The analysis was made assessing the alpha value of items to purify the scale by deleting some items which have insignificant alpha values and resulted in a set of 54 items, with acceptable alpha values ranging from .72 to .83 across 10 dimensions. The next stage of scale purification was carried out with 54 items on different dimensions, resulted in a reduction of 34 items under 7 major dimensions, with total scale reliability of .94. After analysis, purification and deletion of various items and merging of dimensions, the SERVQUAL instrument developed with a 22-item scale under five different dimensions. Eventually, it described as a "concise multiple-items scale with good reliability and validity", to be used in assessing "consumer expectations about and perceptions of service quality" across service industries. Parasuraman et al., (1988) asserted that "Consumers' perceptions on quality are influenced by a series of gaps occurring in an organization during service delivery". It was highlighted that the central focus of the model is a "gap analysis" which compares the customers' expectations and their perceptions of service quality with five major dimensions: tangibles; reliability; responsiveness; assurance; and empathy. Johns (1993), "the major advantage of SERVQUAL is that it indicates the relative importance and understanding of consumer expectations to the different service quality dimensions".

Researchers have asserted that the reliability and validity of the SERVQUAL instrument is reliable to measure the service quality in the hospitality industry (Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995; Nel & Pitt, 1993). Notwithstanding criticisms made by a variety of authors, the model continues to be the most appropriate and practical model for the measurement of guests' perception of service quality as described elaborately in the available literature. Besides, the SERVQUAL model is "simple, inexpensive, and easy to implement" (Heung, Wong & Qu, 2000) in the service industries. Asunbonteng et al., (1996) "Until a better but equally simple model emerges, SERVQUAL will predominate as a service quality measure". It seems to be a more practical model currently available in the literature to measure the service quality (Cuthbert, 1996).

Numerous studies on service quality in tourism, hotel, and hospitality were published adopting the SERVQUAL model. Oberai and Hales (1990) took it to assess service quality in the conference hotels in the United Kingdom; Fick and Ritchie (1991) used this model to examine the UK tourism industry; Saleh and Ryan (1992) assessed the hotels in Ireland; Ekinci (1998) studied the resort hotels; Tsang and Qu (2000) assessed the perceptions of international tourists about service quality in hotel industry of China; Getty and Getty (2003) developed new scale with ten dimensions. Akbaba (2006) evaluated Turkey's business class hotels; Wilkins et al (2007) explored hospitality services; and Mohsin and Lockyer (2009) looked at luxury hotels in India. Despite the replication, criticism, and uncertainty on the SERVQUAL model in service industries, it continued to be the most advisable tool for measuring the service quality.

Methodology

The SERVQUAL model as described above varies based on the study context and it was modified by many researchers from a different perspective, especially in the service industries including tourism and hospitality. Over the period, the explosion of research papers across several disciplines has developed criticism on SERVQUAL. In response, the original SERVQUAL model underwent statistical scrutiny with slight modifications. However, the

criticism flourished and some of the alternative models like SERVPREF, HOLSERV were developed by the researchers to measure the service quality, especially in the hospitality and tourism industry. Conversely, the adoption of the SERVQUAL model with appropriate constructs continues to be higher in the academic arena. Furthermore, researchers across the service industry argued that the SERVQUAL model is most reliable when it used periodically in combination with other service quality determinants, such as customer feedback or complaints, the internal environment of the organization and human resource related issues in service delivery. They further focused on developing appropriate measures and creating market-focused strategies to meet customer's expectations and current competitive pressure.

Existing literature on service quality has been extensively reviewed to explore the theoretical roots of various models underpinned for service quality measurement in budget hotels. A good number of studies were carried out by adopting the SERVQUAL gap model with appropriate modification in the dimensions based on the context of the study. A summary of various studies on service quality in hotels reveals that the measurable attributes brought under major dimensions were modified according to the nature of the study. Therefore, the importance of measuring various attributes from guests' perceptions invariably determines which service quality dimensions have the greatest influence on satisfaction and revisit intention.

Data Collection

A questionnaire was administered for this purpose to collect primary data from the guests during their period of stay in Hotel Tamil Nadu. Interviews and participatory observation methods were incorporated to access the respondents after ethical aspects were considered. The modified and finalized research instrument (questionnaire) was administered to collect the primary data through face-to-face interactions. The respondents of this study were the guests visiting and staying in TTDC Hotels for various purposes. A total of 480 respondents were approached in all the twenty fours Hotels of TTDC located in various tourists' destinations in Tamil Nadu. Thus, out of 480 questionnaires administered, it was found that some of the questionnaires remained unfilled by the reluctant respondents.

On closer scrutiny, a total of 412 (85.8 percent) filled-in questionnaires were considered to be valid and used for the primary data analysis. Out of 412 respondents, 228 were male and 74 were the female respondents, 363 (88 percent) respondents are from India and 49 (12 percent) are foreigners. The collected primary data with the help of questionnaire were fed into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) is used to analyse the data through appropriate statistical tools to check the reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

Reliability and Validity test

Reliability is an assessment of the degree of internal consistency between multiple measurements of variables (Hair et al. 1998). As suggested by Hair et al. (1998), Cronbach's Co-efficient Alpha is used to test the scales for both item-specific and overall reliability. Further, the items with co-efficient alpha scores of less than .50 are indicating that poor performance in capturing the construct and that has to be excluded. The items with acceptable alpha scores of more than .50 are correlated well and accepted for the final questionnaire (Churchill, 1979). Alpha scores of .70 or more than .70 have the confidence interval and researchers can proceed to use reliable scales with greater confidence (Dawn & Adam, 2003). Based on the degree of consistency gained in the pilot study, the instrument underwent statistical modifications wherever necessary with the deletion of insignificant items. The final questionnaire used for the study had the following section-wise reliability.

Table 1. Reliability of scales

Sl. No.	Scale	No. of Attributes	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Tangibles	25	.967
2	Responsiveness and Assurance	08	.972
3	Reliability	10	.959
4	Empathy	07	.973
5	Technology	12	.963
	Total	**62**	**.988**

Results and Discussions

The major findings of the principal components analysis of the five service quality dimensions constructed for the study i.e., tangibles, responsiveness and assurance, reliability, empathy, and technology are presented below. Also, the research with KMO value denoted that the index with values of more than 0.9 is marvellous, 0.8 meritorious, 0.7 middling, 0.6 mediocre, 0.5 miserable and less than 0.5 unacceptable (Graetz, 2001).

Tangibles

The findings provided an understanding of various variables loaded in the tangible dimension. The analysis of 25 items representing the tangible parts of the hotels in the extraction of two major factors with a record of Eigen values: 13.986 and 1.023 respectively. The two extracted major components explain a total of 64.03 % of variance. Component one in the Matrix table explains relationship among various tangible items such as interior & exterior décor, lawn & garden, appearance of front office staff, attractive lobby, furniture, cleanliness, atmosphere, spacious room, room amenities, quality of in-room items, quality of food, safety of the hotels, convenient hotel location, accessibility and sufficient parking. Component two of the matrix table explains the items dealing with the location factors such as convenient hotel location, accessibility and sufficient parking. Majority of variance explained by tangible factors of the hotel brings the fact that they play a crucial role in creating positive perceptions of service quality towards Hotel Tamil Nadu.

Responsiveness and Assurance

The significant value of Bartlett's test of Sphericity is less than 0.05 with a 28 degree of freedom, clearly indicates that there is a significant relationship among the variables. The analysis of the eight items under the responsiveness and assurance dimension resulted in the extraction of one major factor with a record of Eigen values: 6.69 explain a total of 83.66 percentage of variance. The component matrix table explains the relationship among various items in the responsiveness and assurance dimension such as knowledge, experience, communication skill, helping tendency, friendliness, patience, the responsiveness of the staff working in Hotel Tamil Nadu group. Majority of variance explained by this factor brings the fact that the responsiveness and assurance nature of the staff working in the hotels play a vital role in creating positive perceptions about service quality.

Reliability

The findings show the significant value of Bartlett's test of Sphericity is less than 0.05 with 45 degree of freedom, which indicates that there is a significant relationship among the variables. The analysis of the ten different attributes under the reliability dimension resulted in the extraction of one major factor with a record of Eigen values: 7.35 explain a total of 73.58 percent of the variance. The component matrix explains the relationship among various items in reliability dimension such as adequate number of staff, behaviour of staff, quick check-in

and check-out process, accuracy in tariff, billing, food orders and delivery, timely housekeeping service, transport services and reliable message services. Majority of variance explained by this factor brings the fact that the reliability dimension plays a pivotal role in creating positive perceptions about service quality.

Empathy

The findings of the Empathy factor explains the significant value of Bartlett's test of Sphericity is less than 0.05 with 21 degree of freedom, clearly indicates that there is a significant relationship among the variables. The analysis of the seven items under the empathy dimension resulted in the extraction of one major factor with a record of Eigen values: 6.02 explain a total of 86.08 percent of the variance. The component matrix explains the relationship among various items in empathy dimension such as curiosity of employees in understanding the needs of the guest, their attentiveness and association with guests, quick handling and problem-solving ability. The only one extracted component has an Eigen value of 6.02 and accounted for 86.08 % of the total variance. The total variance explained by this factor highlights that empathy relates to positive perceptions about service quality among guests.

Technology

The significant value of Bartlett's test of Sphericity is less than the acceptable value 0.05 with 66 degree of freedom, and projects that there is a significant relationship among the variables. The analysis of the twelve items under the reliability dimension resulted in the extraction of one factor with a record of Eigen values: 8.57 explain a total of 71.42 percent of the variance. Component Matrix explains the relationship among various items in technology and innovations dimension such as maintenance of TTDC website, updated information, online facilities, necessary details about the hotels, map of the hotels, pictures and clips, online reservations, acceptance of cards, money customer database, online feedback service and customer care services. The extracted component has an Eigen value of 8.57 and accounted for 71.42 % of the total variance. The total variance explained by this factor highlights that the role of technology and innovations in contemporary business eventually brings positive perceptions about overall service quality among guests.

Table 2. Service quality Dimensions for Budget Category Hotels	
Dimension 1 : Tangibles (Location, Physical Facilities, Equipments & appearance of Hotel)	
1	Convenient hotel location
2	Easy accessibility
3	Sufficient parking provision
4	Appealing interior and exterior décor
5	Garden and lawn are neatly maintained
6	Way of welcoming the guest is appreciated
7	Neat & professional appearance of front office staff
8	Attractive lobby
9	Equipped with modern and comfortable furniture
10	Room tariff is reasonable
11	Rooms are very clean and comfortable
12	Rooms are in quiet and calm atmosphere
13	Rooms are spacious
14	Rooms are neatly decorated and highly facilitated
15	Rooms are technically equipped with television, phone, and internet connection.

16	Room Items like A/C, refrigerator, lighting, fan, Toilet are in working condition
17	Rooms are furnished with all basic amenities like toothpaste, soap, shampoo, towels, toilet papers, stationery, tea, coffee, drinking water etc.,
18	Beds are cleaned and arranged with washed blankets
19	Hygienic bathrooms and toilets
20	Bath fittings, water and sanitation are proper
21	Easy accessible of restaurant, pub and bar
22	Good quality and delicious food are offered in restaurant
23	Choices of menu, buffet, beverages are available
24	Provision of children's facilities (parks, play area, garden and swimming pool etc.,)
25	Safe and secure hotel

Dimension 2: Responsiveness and Assurance (Quality of staff and their willingness to provide prompt said services)

1	Well-trained and knowledgeable staff
2	Professional and experienced staff
3	Staff with good communication skills
4	Staff always willing to pay attention to Guest
5	Immediate responsiveness to customer request
6	Staff are nurtured with helping nature
7	Staff are very friendly
8	Staff are with patience

Dimension 3: Reliability (Performance of Service dependably and accurately)

1	Adequate staff are available to provide services
2	Behaviour of staff while delivering service is fine
3	Quick check-in and check-out process
4	Advance and accurate information about room tariff
5	Accuracy in food orders and delivery
6	Accuracy in billing
7	Timely housekeeping services
8	Arrangement of transport services
9	All mentioned ancillary services are provided at right time
10	Reliable message services

Dimension 4: Empathy (Caring and understanding of Guest's feelings, Thoughts etc.,)

1	Curiosity of the employees to know the specific needs of guest
2	Employees are very much attentive and observe verbal and non-verbal behavior of guest.
3	Employees associate themselves with the guest
4	Listening carefully to the complaints
5	Employees are nurtured with quick problem solving ability
6	Quick handling of guest problem
7	Employees to have guests best interest at hearts

Dimension 5: Technology (Involving Technological Innovation in Services)	
1	Attractive and user friendly Websites
2	Hotel accommodation details and related information are available on website
3	Websites are updated frequently
4	Pictures and video clips of hotels are available
5	Easy online booking options
6	Easy payment of money and online transaction option
7	Accepts debit, credit and international Cards
8	Fully computerized services
9	Good customer care services
10	Proper maintenance of customer database
11	Online feedback system
12	Immediate response to e-mail queries

Conclusion and Implications

The primary objective of the study was to analyse the relevance of the SERVQUAL framework in measuring the service quality in budget category hotels. (Ekinci, 2002) The SERVQUAL model dimensions are not constant, the ideal number and type of service quality dimensions may be different depending on the study context. Concurrently, quite a good number of studies were carried out on these issues in different countries with different categories of hotels ranging from five to one star. Various service quality determining factors were reviewed for the purpose and framed appropriate constructs for the present study. The results of factor analyses statistically proved the consistency among the variables and found significant relevance. The results of this study ensured that the reliability of a modified SERVQUAL framework as a measurement instrument for assessing service quality in budget hotels with adequate modification on context-specific. The results indicate that multidimensional construction is significant and facilitates the management to understand productive key attributes to enhance service quality. The result of the study indicated that the guest's preferences change over time and thus, periodic assessment of the dimensions should be carried out based on the study context. Further research can be concentrated to validate the present model in various categories of hotels to measure service quality.

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