

# Customer perceptions of service quality in luxury hotels in Jordan

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**Abstract:** *Providing quality food and beverage services has become one of the critical issues in the tourism industry and several studies have been paying attention to it. On the other hand, there seems to be a paucity of data on service quality Jordanian hotels, making it difficult to fashion an appropriate management intervention. Also, there has been insufficient attempt to relate customers' perceptions of service quality to their socio-demographic characteristics as well as the characteristics of organizations delivering the service. This study, therefore, analyses customers' perceptions of service quality in the food and beverage service department in Jordanian hotels, an essential requirement for customers in Jordan.*

**Keywords:** Service quality, perceived quality, satisfaction, hotels, Jordan

**JEL Classification:** L83, M1, O1

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Food and beverage service quality delivery has become an issue of great concern to nations and F&B managers. It has been argued that it is one of the main challenges facing hospitality managers (Lazer & Layton, 1999). Due to this, it is difficult to correct any defects on the service before it gets to the final consumer. Likewise, the hotel industry is becoming increasingly competitive with customers' attractions and facilities being replicated in various hotels and, consequently, the only thing that puts one hotel ahead of the other is the quality of its service. Nevertheless, quality remains a very subjective concept, which has been defined variously (Reeves & Bednar, 1994).

The importance of food and beverage service quality to emerging customers in hotel industry cannot be overemphasized as quality service is possibly the foremost determinant of success in the tourism and hospitality business (Tsao Fang, 1997). A bad experience during a service encounter will mar the entire vacation experience, which will result in not only a lack of repeated customers but also a negative word-of-mouth publicity for the hotels. Various researches have shown that a customer who is not satisfied will typically inform about eight to ten people about his or her experience (Leboeuf, 1987). A hotel that does not deliver

quality service, hence, likely to suffer reduced patronage and bad publicity and thereby loose its customers to competing hotels. Furthermore, at the micro level, service quality has been found to be related to sales growth and profitability of restaurants (Bernhardt *et al*, 2000). There, nevertheless, seems to be a paucity of credible data on service quality in Jordanian hotels making it difficult to fashion an appropriate management intervention to address the problem because the exact dimensions of the challenge and its causes are not known. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to assess the level of perceived service quality in the hotel by analyzing customers' perceptions and expectations as well as the organizational characteristics of the food service facilities. It is expected that the results of this study will contribute towards filling existing research gaps and to fashion appropriate corrective measures to improve service standards in the hotel industry.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality has been identified as the most important strategic management issue (Fortuna, 1990; Cooper *et al*, 1993; Olsen *et al*, 1998). Despite this, it is a very subjective concept; in

view of this, it has been defined extensively. Reeves and Bednar (1994) identified six different definitions of quality namely, value, conformance to specifications, conformance to requirements, fitness for use, loss avoidance and meeting besides exceeding customers' expectations. Quality has also been defined as conformance to design (Chase & Aquilano, 1992); design and conformance to quality characteristics that are of interest to customers when evaluating the product offered by the firm (Banker *et al.*, 1998); totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that satisfy a customers' needs (British Standards Institute, 1983; Juran 1992). According to Jones and Lockwood (1989), the modern concept of quality is fitness for purpose. Olsen *et al.*, (1998) drawing on the works of Gronroos (1982) and Juran (1992) defined quality in the hospitality industry to mean doing the right thing, right, consistently.

The issue of service quality has received a lot of attention in the hospitality industry (Kotler *et al.*, 2003; Jones & Haven-Tang, 2005). The subject of service quality in the hospitality industry is even more important as it has been linked to the competitiveness of hospitality firms (Kotler *et al.*, 2003, Campos- Soria *et al.*, 2005); and customer purchase behaviour and retention (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Oh & Mount, 1998). There has, however, been little attempt to link service quality to the organizational characteristics of facilities providing services to customers. This is particularly significant in the context of a developing country like Jordan, where most of the hospitality facilities often lack the capacity for reinforcing service quality. In the opinion of Jones and Haven-Tang (2005, xviii) Orthodox approaches to considerations of service quality management do not map on well to the heterodoxy of tourism and hospitality industry due to the inherent characteristics of tourism problems associated with their understanding of service quality and how to achieve it. Characteristics of tourism and hospitality include weak business models, lack of market stability, low levels of capital investment, poor management skills and their resistance to change makes the delivery of service quality difficult to achieve. There have been several attempts to distinguish between 'product quality' and 'service quality' because products differ from services. Whilst goods are produced (tangible), services are performed (intangible) (Olsen *et al.*, 1998). The hospitality industry provides services which have been differentiated from products because they are intangible (Cooper *et al.*, 1993); are simultaneously produced and consumed (Sasser *et al.*, 1978; Bowen, 1990); involve customers in the production process (Olsen *et al.*, 1998); are perishable (Hartman & Lingren, 1993); are perceived by customers to be associated with risk-taking (Sasser *et al.*, 1978) and are variable (Renaghan, 1983). These unique characteristics of services make the issue of service quality particularly imperative because the attainment of 100 percent zero-defect service delivery is almost impossible (Collie *et al.*, 2000).

Even though, there is another school of thought every service has a product component. Gronroos (1982) distinguished between technical quality and functional quality as the components of the service image delivery. Technical quality is what the customer receives from the service provider such as quality of food served in the restaurant. Functional quality, on the other hand, is how the technical component of the service is transferred to the consumer e.g. the

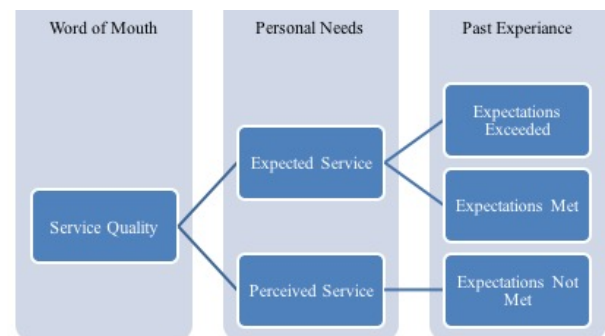
attitudes and behaviour of frontline staff. Kotler *et al.*, (2003) identified a third component of quality, societal (ethical) quality. According to them, societal quality is credence quality which customers cannot evaluate in advance of purchase. In this vein, hospitality businesses concerned about quality service must combine, balance and juggle the tangible and intangible product (Ribeiro, 2003).

Service quality is an ambiguous concept which has received a lot of attention from researchers (Schneider & White, 2004). It goes beyond describing a firm's products or services as excellent or poor to include a range of factors which determine customers' perception of a service (Kwortnik, 2005). However, the most quoted definition is the one provided by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), who defined it as the degree to which a customer's perception of the service encounter equates or exceeds his/her expectations for the service ( $ES \leq PS$ ) where ES is expected service and PS is perceived service.

### 3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Service Quality is what the customer perceives and not what management or workers think (Gronroos, 1990; & Olsen *et al.*, 1998). Perceived service quality is customers' assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of a service (Zeithaml, 1988). Perceived service quality is a subjective concept and accordingly, customers' perception of the level of service quality of a hospitality facility will vary from one customer to another.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model on Customers' Perception of food and Beverage Service Quality



Source: Adapted from Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994)

According to Gronroos (1982), perceived service quality depends on experienced service and perceived service, as indicated in Figure 1. Customers' perception of the service quality of a facility, depends on their own past experiences and perception. The latter is influenced by attributes of the service delivery process (Bolton & Drew, 1991), whilst expectations are influenced by personal needs, word-of-mouth communication and experience (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Consumers' perception of service quality is as a result of an evaluation of the gap between expected service and perceived service (Gronroos, 1982; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). For instance, the gap widens negatively (i.e. Expectations are higher than perception), the perception of service quality

declines. It is, therefore, important to first identify what guests perceive as quality to provide service at the quality level desired by them. Managers must also not promise more than they can deliver and try to deliver their services to match customer's expectations. Parasuraman *et al* (1985) have developed the SERVQUAL instrument for measuring service quality. According to his model, customers perceive service quality in terms of five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The various quality dimensions can be quantified by obtaining measures to represent expectations and perceptions of performance of service attributes which are relevant to each dimension. Differences between expectations and perceptions can then be calculated on these attributes and then averaged across attributes.

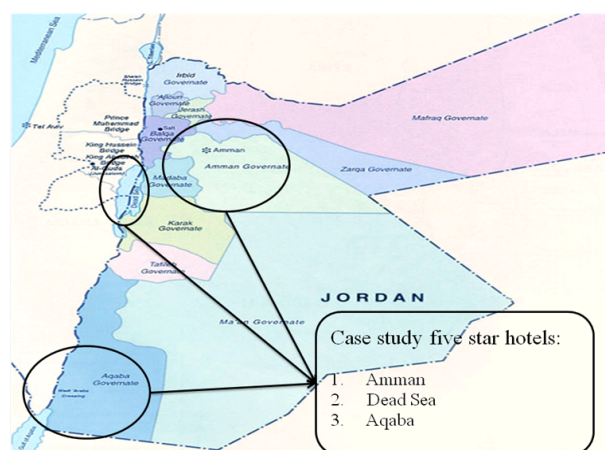
While, the SERVQUAL model has suffered a barrage of criticisms. The criticisms have bothered on the measurement of expectation (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Teas, 1993), the nature and number of dimensions (Finn & Lamb, 1991; McDougall & Levesque, 1994), the relative importance or the weight of service attributes (Carman, 1990, Fick & Ritchie, 1991) and the timing for collection of data on expectations and perceptions (Weber, 1997; Caruana, Ewing & Ramaseshan, 2000; Hudson *et al*, 2004). Cronin and Taylor (1994) argued that asking respondents to indicate their perceptions of performance means they have already compared mentally, perceptions and expectations whilst Teas (1993) questioned the SERVQUAL scale of expectations which are not able to differentiate between types of expectations when they provide evaluations. Finn and Lamb (1991) discovered that the dimensions of service quality change depending on the type of service i.e. product services and pure services. On the SERVQUAL model, Carman (1990) suggested that it should be  $Q = \sum I_i (P_i - E_i)$  instead of  $Q = P_i - E_i$ , where  $I$  is the important service attribute of  $i$ . In view of these criticisms, there have been several modifications to the original SERVQUAL model, including service performance perceptions (SERVPERF) (Cronin and Taylor, 1994); holiday satisfaction (HOLSAT) (Tribe, 1998); Dinning Service Quality (DINESERV) (Bojanic & Rosen, 1994); Lodging Service Quality (LODGQUAL) (Getty & Thompson, 1994); Ecotourists' Quality Expectations (ECOSERV) (Khan, 2003). Nonetheless, different studies have yielded different results in terms of the importance of the five dimensions to customers. Parasuraman *et al* (1991) identified that customers consistently rank reliability as the most important service quality dimension. Getty and Thompson (1994) in a related study on the lodging industry also identified reliability as the most important service quality dimension. Nightingale (1985) in a study of the characteristics of quality perceived by guests in a large city hotel identified availability as the most important dimension to customers. Conversely, in a related study by Farouk and Ryan (1991), business customers in a hotel found that staff attitudes and attention to guests were the most important factors to them

#### 4 STUDY AREA

Jordan, a small country in the Middle East that borders Palestine to the west, Iraq to the northeast, Saudi Arabia to

the south, and Syria to the north (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Jordan, 2012). Jordan has demonstrated that income and employment is generated from tourism which has increased from 2004-2010. The growth has been attributed by the variety of tourism product offerings, particularly its antiquities and religious attractions as well as its natural resources. Despite the tourism growth, little information has been documented about food and beverage services department in Jordanian hotels. Few studies have concentrated on the quality. In recognizing the fact that knowing the importance of F&B services hotel restaurant in can help hotels meet the desired needs of their customers, this study has carefully selected Amman, Aqaba and the Dead Sea as the primary case study sites. Amman was selected as it was the main entry point for foreign tourists into the country, while Aqaba and the Dead Sea were chosen because of the high volume visiting they lure to their attraction sites in Jordan.

Figure 2: Case study of Jordanian hotel locations



Source: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Jordan, (2012)

#### 5 CONCLUSIONS

This study has unearthed customers' perception of food and beverage service quality in Jordanian hotels. The discussions show a negative service gap between customer's expectations and perceptions. Understanding what customers perceive is a logical first step to addressing the issue. The study will provide some data and information on what needs to be changed to improve F&B service quality delivery in food service department. Appropriate management interventions such as the training of staff and upgrading of facilities aimed at arresting the problem should, be pursued. Since F&B service quality is also a subjective concept, the patrons of F&B service facilities in Jordanian hotels place a high premium on the tangible aspects of the food and beverage service, which implies management must invest in their physical facilities as well as train and motivate staff.

The study will have conducted out of the customers' season and, therefore, the perceptions of foreign customers were not adequately captured. It would, therefore, be useful to understand foreigners' perception of service quality in addition, customers' expectations and perceptions of F&B

service quality will derived in one major criticism of the use of SERVQUAL is that respondents are made to complete the survey in one questionnaire. In this regard, managers of F&B need to pay more attention to the technical quality or the tangible aspects of the service and the questionnaire will be distributed during winter October and November in Jordan.

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