

*A Study Into
Guests' Perceptions Of
Service Quality And
Loyalty In Hotel
Restaurants In
Harare*

Marvellous Mangwiro

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Chinhoyi
University of Technology, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe*

Rejoice Martha Marimo

*Department of Hospitality and Tourism, Chinhoyi
University of Technology, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe*

Agatha Olga Ndlovu

*Department of Tourism and Hospitality
Management, Midlands State University, Gweru,
Zimbabwe*

ABSTRACT

This study was aimed at establishing the perceptions of guests towards service delivery in selected hotel restaurants and to ascertain loyalty levels among guests in hotel restaurants. Qualitative methodologies were used to establish customer perceptions of service quality and loyalty in selected hotel restaurants in Harare. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 guests. Using thematic analysis, four themes emerged as guests' most important attributes for evaluating service experiences. These are customer service and attitude of service personnel, cleanliness of staff and of the physical environment, price and food quality. From the study, it can be concluded that the features of a restaurant establishment are not equally important to guest when evaluating their restaurant experience but rather the product itself and how it is delivered. It can be recommended that hotel restaurants in order to improve guests' perceptions of service experience and loyalty, need to motivate and empower customer contact employees so that a smooth service is delivered to the guests. Further studies should be done in the form of a comparative study using qualitative and quantitative methodologies to see if they can arrive at the same conclusion.

Keywords: Service quality, Loyalty, Perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's hospitality business, hotels that have embraced the service quality concept have shown an increased growth in guest satisfaction and ultimately improved profitability (Nicolaidis, 2008; Markovic & Raspor, 2010). However, in trying to reach the highest level of service quality in hotels, hotel managers are often faced with problems of an inadequate measuring instrument of this quality (Mason *et al*, 2006). The primary cause of this problem is that hotel restaurant managers do not know what their guests consider as important when evaluating the quality of hotel products and very often they do not have reliable methods for determining the expectations and perceptions of their guests on the issue of service quality (Untaru *et al*, 2010).

The restaurant business has shown so much potential in USA reaching sales of \$604 billion in 2011 which is 4 percent of the US gross domestic product (National Restaurant Association, 2011). With this robust growth in sales, restaurants now need to understand the uniqueness of their customers so that they can be able to retain existing ones, attract new customers and at the same time remain competitive and profitable (Mack *et al.*, 2000; Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010).

Customer perceptions of service quality have a strong influence on both purchase intentions and customer satisfaction (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1998, Stanton *et al.*, 2001, Iwarere & Fakokunde, 2011) and this in turn influences profitability and customer loyalty (Zhang, 2009). Perceptions can be defined as the process by

which an individual selects, organises and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world (Iwarere & Fakokunde, 2011). According to Bruhn & Georgi (2006), when guests' perceptions of a service exceed their expectations, they perceive a high service quality and when guests' perceptions of a service fail to meet their expectations, they are dissatisfied. Hence, guest service expectations and perceptions are determinants of service quality in the hospitality industry.

Service quality is therefore a result of the comparison that customers make between their expectations about a service and their perception of the way the service has been performed (Gronroos, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; 1988; Caruana, 2002). Robinson (1999) defines service quality as an attitude or judgment about the superiority of a service. Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985) defined service quality as the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' service perceptions and expectations. Zaithaml (1998) defined service quality as the customer's judgment about a product's overall excellence. For the purpose of this study, service quality is defined as 'the result of the comparison that customers make between their expectations about a service and their perceptions of the way the service has been performed' (Caruana, 2002; 813).

However, the problem with perceptions is that people view the world differently and as such this presents a huge challenge for service firms to come up with a uniform service quality that is accepted by all (Iwarere & Fakokunde, 2011). It therefore becomes imperative for food and beverage managers understand and interpret correctly the perceptions that guests hold. Studies done in the area of service quality and loyalty have concluded that an increase in service quality results in guests' satisfaction which eventually influences loyalty and thus improved profitability (Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010, Markovic & Raspor, 2010, Ramanathan & Ramanathan, 2010). As such, restaurant operators should aim at improving their service offering in order to enjoy a better share of the restaurant market.

Eliwa (2006)'s study in the USA focused on fine dining restaurants and was aimed at examining the relationship between customer loyalty and the image of fine dining restaurants from the customers' point of view. The study employed a cross sectional survey design and distributed 650 questionnaires to guests in fine dining restaurants. The findings showed that among the satisfaction and image variables, customers' perception on the overall impression, quality, menu variety of food and beverage, and friendly/attentive service contributed the most to patronage overall satisfaction, intentions to return and recommendation to other customers. Eliwa (2006) concluded that restaurant loyalty is one of the most important competitive survival tools for fine dining restaurants because loyal customers provide repeat business, higher market shares, referrals, and competitive advantages.

In South Africa, Cant & Erdis (2012)'s study in restaurants in the Tswane area was aimed at establishing a criterion for excellent customer service as a benchmark for establishing relationships with customers. The study used a self-administered questionnaire which was distributed to restaurant patrons in selected

restaurants in the Tswane area. The findings suggested that excellent customer service in a restaurant has the potential to differentiate the restaurant from the competing ones and that could create a competitive advantage (Cant & Erdis, 2012). Based on their research results, it was noted that customer satisfaction also leads to customer retention, loyalty and ultimately profitability for any restaurant business.

Several studies done to date on service quality and loyalty have mainly focused on the use of quantitative methodologies to reach their conclusions (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Hu *et al.*, (2009; Kandampully *et al.*, 2011; Cant & Erdis, 2012). Shahin (2002) observes that the SERVQUAL instrument has been the predominant method used to measure service quality in many studies. This quantitative approach has been a very useful technique which has brought so many insights into how guests perceive service quality (Kandampully & Surhatanto, 2000). However, the use of numbers, although useful, it has its own drawbacks. The most common weakness with this approach lies in that the right the questions are not asked correctly or rather are used to measure the wrong thing (Mason *et al.*, 2006). Mason *et al.*, (2006) suggests that richer data can be obtained from more personalized and intimate approaches with guests as is the case with qualitative approaches.

In Zimbabwe, studies on service quality and loyalty have mostly focused on the Banking sector (Kaseke & Charira 2012; Kaseke *et al.*, 2012) and very little has been done in other sectors. It is with this in mind that similar studies concluded elsewhere are tested their applicability to the Zimbabwean context to see if the same conclusions can be drawn. In light of the above, this study therefore adopted a qualitative approach to identifying guests' perceptions of service quality and loyalty among hotel restaurants in Harare. This study was primarily motivated by the qualitative methodologies used by Mason *et al.* (2006) on a study on guests' perceptions of hotel loyalty. Untaru *et al.* (2010)'s study also used qualitative methodologies to analyze the perceptions of restaurant managers regarding the quality of products and services offered to consumers.

2. METHODOLOGY

Exploratory research design was used for this study. Exploratory research helps determine the best research design, data collection method and selection of subjects (Zhang, 2009). The study also made use of cross sectional research design. According to Olsen & St George (2004), in cross sectional design, the entire population or a subset thereof is selected, and from these individuals, data is collected to help answer research questions of interest. Qualitative methodologies were used to assess service quality and loyalty in hotel restaurants.

The study was carried out using three selected hotel restaurants in Harare. Harare was conveniently selected for this study as it is the capital city of Zimbabwe and also represents the hub of activity in terms of hotel and restaurant business. In terms of terms of population, the city had 1 743 727 residents as of August 2012

(Zimbabwe Statistical Office, 2012). In terms of hotels, Harare has 26 registered hotels (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2012). Of these registered hotels, there are only 8 hotels rated 3 to 5 star (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, 2012). This study used a convenient sample of three hotels out of the eight 3 to 5 star hotels. The hotel restaurants' employees were selected using judgmental sampling technique. Aaker *et al* (2004) defined judgmental sampling as a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects units to be sampled based on their knowledge and professional judgment.

For the purpose of this study a convenience sample was drawn only from those guests who were willing and available to take part in this study. Ten guests in each of the selected hotel restaurants were targeted for interviews. All the hotels used in this study share the same characteristics which are; they are all city hotels, they attract the same clientele, that is, business customers and they all belong to a hotel chain group.

Data for this study was collected through the use of semi structured interviews guides and personal observations. An interview guide was also administered to guests in the selected hotels. Covert personal observations were also carried out during the dining experience. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview responses. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method of identifying, analysing and reporting common recurring issues or patterns within data.

3. RESULTS

3.1 GUESTS PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Perceptions of service delivery varied significantly among guests in hotel restaurants used in this study. Analysis of the guest interviews showed that guests' perceptions of service delivery in hotel restaurants can be narrowed down to four key themes namely; customer service and attitude of service staff, cleanliness of staff and the physical environment, price and food quality. These four themes are summarized in the pie chart below;

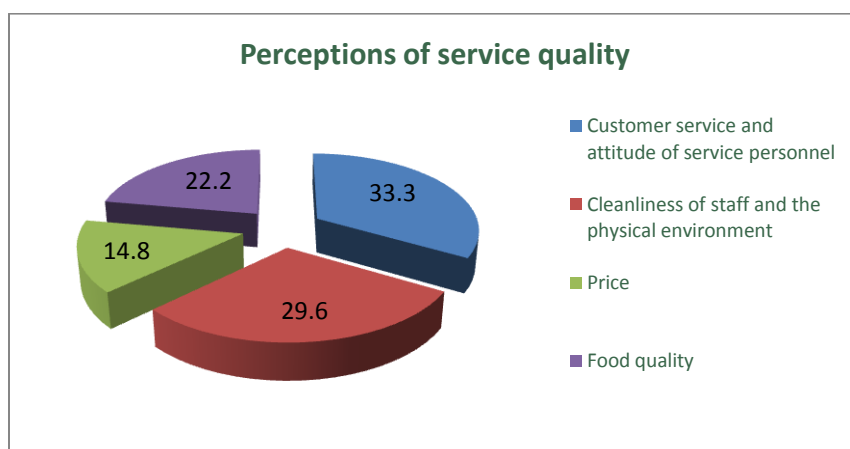


Fig 3.1: Guests' perceptions of service delivery

Customer service and the attitude of service personnel emerged as the most dominant theme in terms of guests perceptions of the service experience. In terms of customer service and attitude of service personnel, guests in all three hotel restaurants indicated that the level of service offered was generally excellent and employees were eager to assist guests in the restaurant. It was noted that guests interviewed in the hotel restaurant felt the restaurants put the customer first and staff was also willing to go that extra mile to ensure guests received a high service offering. Some guests mentioned that employees seemed well trained, competent and experienced, whilst some mentioned that staff was able and willing to provide guests with information regarding the menu, ingredients and methods of preparation. In terms of the attitude and courtesy of the service personnel, guests in the hotel restaurants perceived the restaurant highly over all the other hotels. From the personal observations, the researcher observed that employees were always available serving guests and in instances where one waiter was overwhelmed, another waiter would come in to assist.

The cleanliness of the facility as well as that of personnel also emerged as another key driver of guests' perceptions. Guests in all three hotels highlighted that the hotel restaurant in terms of cleanliness was generally clean in line with the hotel star rating. The interviewees noted that the hotel restaurants had interiors that were in line with the hotel's theme and suited well with their physical setting. In terms of cleanliness of the service personnel, all guests indicated that service personnel were generally well dressed. However, only one guest indicated that hotel restaurants needed to improve on corporate wear especially for front line staff. He said, "It is fine that restaurant waiters can wear black and white clothes instead of uniforms but it would be better if all these service people can put on some uniforms that communicate the theme of the restaurant." Further observations revealed that in all the three hotels, almost all waiters wearing black and white uniforms were actually short term contract employees.

In terms of food quality, the majority of the guests said that the quality of food served in their hotel restaurants was excellent and showed that it had been prepared by a professional. Three quarters of the respondents felt the food served was of the right flavor, temperature and quality. Contrastingly, two guests in one of the restaurants highlighted that the food served in the restaurant was not fresh. Another guest in the other restaurant complained that her food was not appealing and actually thought the food served was recycled from the previous day. The researcher cross checked both scenarios and indeed, some of the food on display did not look appealing. However, it was further observed that the appearance of the food was not because the food was not fresh, but rather, it was due to the fact that it was towards the end of the service period and the food had lost its fresh appearance. Three quarters of the guests interviewed in the three restaurants highlighted that lack of variety in terms of the menu affected their future purchase intentions. Two guests in one of the restaurants said they had been staying at the hotel for more than one week, and the dishes prepared have just been the same. One of the guests said, "The menu is now monotonous, there is so much repetition of the food being served." The guest said that an ideal situation would be to have different dishes

being served on each service period. However, it was observed that two of the hotel restaurant used the buffet style of service and the other one hotel restaurant used the 'a la carte' style of service were food is prepared to order. With the 'a la carte' style of service, guests had a choice to choose from a list of available dishes. Contrastingly, the buffet style of service does not focus on individual customer wants, but rather food is prepared with the expectation that guests would like it.

In terms of pricing of meals, all the hotels used in the study charged a minimum \$20 for lunch or dinner per person. As has been highlighted before, two restaurants operated on an assisted buffet style of service whilst the other restaurant used an 'a la carte' style of service. Most guests expected that the higher the price, the better the service delivered. Eight guests interviewed perceived that the price for a meal was too high, but others felt the price was fair due to the expertise involved in the production of the meal as well as the service. The skills involved in the 'a la carte' style of service involve preparation and service of food to order within the shortest period of time. However, some guests perceived that the price charged was not commensurate with the service delivered. Generally, guests were of the view that hotel restaurants charged high prices for their food and drink but the food and drink served did not provide value for money.

3.2 GUESTS LOYALTY TO HOTEL RESTAURANTS

In terms of loyalty, fig 3.2 below shows the likelihood of guests returning to the hotel restaurant.

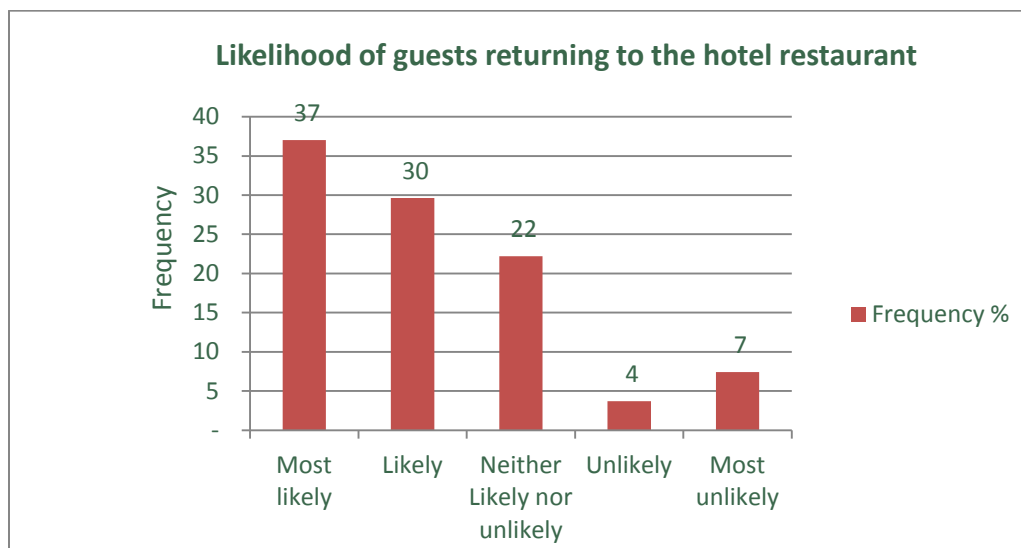


Fig 3.2: Likelihood of guests returning

Fig 3.2 above show that 37% of the guests in hotel restaurants indicated that they were loyal to their hotel restaurant and they would continue to come back to the restaurant. One guest said, "It is not that the restaurant provides the best meals, but I feel staff here now understand my expectations, something that I will not find elsewhere." Another interviewee said, "I have an emotional attachment to this restaurant." Another guest in the same hotel restaurant also said, "I will always come back here, especially for the Greek salad." 22% of the

guests said that they were not sure whether they would come back to the restaurant, whilst 7% indicated that they will not return to the restaurant. One of the guests who were uncertain said, "I do not see any difference in terms of the service offering compared with other hotels with lower star ratings." These sentiments suggested that more guests were loyal to their hotel restaurant as compared to those who were not. Participant observation also showed that the majority of guests in the restaurants were in fact repeat customers as evidenced by the service staff knowledge of most guests by name and also knowledge of their tastes and preferences.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings showed that guests perceptions of service quality in hotel restaurants can be narrowed down to four themes namely customer service and attitude of service staff, cleanliness of staff and the physical environment, price and food quality. However, a closer look at these major themes that emerged from the study show that they all fit into the broader DINESERV dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Stevens *et al*, 1995). The findings from this study also conforms with Frater (2006)'s findings that consumers hold a set of expectations, based on previous or similar experiences which are primarily influenced by communications, including word of mouth and advertising.

The attitude and behavior of employees especially of those customer contact employees offer to the guest an assurance of the quality of service to expect from the restaurant. The manner in which employees welcome the customers, recommend the dishes and beverages according to the customers' expectations and an impeccable dress code represent just a few of the criteria a restaurant that aims to offer high quality products and services to its customers needs to fulfill (Frater, 2006). Dogdubay & Avcukurt (2005) highlights that front line employees who are in customer contact are in a powerful position to influence buying decisions, particularly in services where there are a few tangibles which customers can use to evaluate alternatives. Such employees become the most tangible evidence of the quality of the service of the organisation and its products. Han & Ryu's (2009) study showed that some employees were not sympathetic when something goes wrong, for example, in cases where food was undercooked, overcooked, over seasoned or when guests were wrongly billed. This implies that employees did not have customers at heart and some would not listen to customers when they make their requests.

In terms of cleanliness of staff and of the physical environment, guests felt employees dressed professionally and reflected the image of their hotel, and the hotel environments were also generally clean. These minor but contentious issues have a strong effect on the guests' future purchase intentions. In patronizing hotel restaurants, some guests associate the experience with self-actualization, however, if the service delivered does not match up the status of the hotel, a guest would be dissatisfied and can easily switch the service

provider. Cleanliness of staff and facilities also falls into the tangibles dimension of service quality (Stevens *et al*, 1995). Stevens *et al* (1995) included the physical environment under tangibles and covers items of the service that can be touched or felt, for example, equipment, buildings and appearance of staff. According to Stevens *et al* (1995), tangibles refer to the appearance of the physical facilities, equipment and service personnel.

Some customers perceived that the price was unreasonable in some hotel restaurant, and they negatively evaluated their experience with the restaurant. As Lim (2010) suggested, the price of a product was highly related to its perceived value. Lim (2010) referred to perceived price as the customer's acceptable, reasonable and fair judgment about a service's average price in comparison to its competitors. However, customer may still not hold strong behavioral intentions unless they are satisfied with their experience at the restaurant. As Donkoh *et al* (2012) notes, customers were likely to come back again and again if prices were perceived to be fair. However, if guests perceive that the price is unfair they will complain and finally defect to other restaurants. Customers are therefore not willing to revisit a restaurant when they believe that the prices on the menu were unreasonably high. Thus, Han & Ryu (2009) suggests that providing pleasing and innovative atmosphere and high quality of service or food to restaurant customers is necessary to improve price perception.

In terms of guest loyalty, despite the negative perceptions, about three quarters of the respondents indicated that they will remain loyal to their hotel restaurants even if they are not satisfied with the service provided. Restaurant operators also believe that it is cheaper to retain an existing customer than to attract a new customer. Also of note is that, one said, "guests who say out their grievances are better than those who keep quiet because you do not know how many people the guest will tell about their bad experiences," thus spreading negative word-of-mouth. Restaurant managers should therefore realize that loyal customers are worth a great deal more than just casual customers even if those once in a while customers. Results from this study indicate that all features of a restaurant establishment are not equally important to the customer and the most important factors determine loyalty for individual guests.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study show that guests perceived the quality of service offered by hotel restaurants in Harare as generally high. Four themes emerged as the guests' criteria for evaluating restaurant experience, these are, customer service and the attitude of service personnel, food quality, cleanliness of staff as well as the physical environment and the price of meals. Amongst these service quality attributes, customer service and the attitude of service personnel emerged as the most dominant attribute used by guests in evaluating their restaurant experience. It can be concluded that the features of a restaurant establishment are not equally

important to guest when evaluating their restaurant experience but rather the product itself and how it is delivered. On the other hand, guests hold different perceptions towards hotel restaurants depending on the previously held experiences with the restaurants.

It was also observed that customer loyalty is a direct result of customer satisfaction. When guests perceive a higher service quality, they will ultimately turn into loyal guests of the hotel restaurant. Restaurant management wants to improve the loyalty of customers, which can be achieved by improving customer satisfaction and consequently overall service. It can therefore be concluded that overall service quality perceptions are determined by the four dimensions which are under the control of the hotel restaurant management. It was also discovered that despite the negative perceptions of a few guests, the majority of guests expressed that they would remain loyal to their hotel restaurants and would also recommend others to the same hotel. The loyalty levels for each hotel restaurant were high and this could be as a result of the service individual guests received. It was observed that loyal customers, especially those who are known to the restaurant would receive preferential treatment than the less loyal and first time guests. This preferential treatment would include discounts, complementary meals and other loyalty programs offered by the hotel, for example, the frequent guest program offered by Crowne Plaza Monomotapa Hotel.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for training and motivation of customer contact employees so that they develop a service culture which would increase guest satisfaction and ultimately customer loyalty. Customer contact employees need training in such areas as attitude training and up-selling as these help the waiters to develop confidence and believe in the product they are selling and also make them proud to be working for the hotel restaurant. Motivation therefore would allow waiters to execute their duties diligently as they know their efforts would be rewarded. Offering some performance incentives can be used to motivate waiters, for example, an incentive for the most outstanding waiter would motivate some waiters to perform their duties with all their heart as they know their performance and contribution to the overall restaurant performance will be rewarded.

Restaurant managers also need to know that 'charity begins at home' therefore they first need to create a loyal employee. A loyal employee can then help the hotel restaurant to create loyal customers and more business can be realized from loyal customers. Restaurant managers also need to develop trust and confidence with their employees as they the ones who are in constant contact with the guests. If a manager trusts his subordinates, they in turn deliver can deliver a service that is next to none as they know that if they do not perform well that trust the manager has with them will be lost. On the other hand employee empowerment is also crucial in the hotel restaurant. Employee empowerment gives privileges to some service personnel to handle guest complains and not unnecessarily wait for a superior to come and solve minor service problems.

Employee empowerment reduces significantly the time a guest has to wait in order to have their query resolved. However, it must be observed that this form of empowerment must be done with some caution as some employees may abuse the confidence bestowed upon them.

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