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Customers' perceptions and expectations of service quality in hotels in western tourism circuit, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Quality management is important in any establishment since it enhances organization's performance and profitability in the long run. Subsequently, quality has been a focus of many successful establishments all over the world, drawing the attention of scholars and researchers alike. However, little has been done to identify customers' perceptions and expectations of service quality within the hospitality industry in Kenya. This study hence investigated hotel guests' perceptions of service quality in hotels within the Western Kenya tourism circuit. Consequently, the study acted as a bridge between the theoretical and practical aspects of service quality by administering questionnaires to customers who are key players in the hospitality industry. Four dimensions of service quality in excellent hotels were generated; "responsiveness and empathy", "reliability", "assurance" and "tangibles". The study contributed to the existing body of literature on service quality within the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Service quality, hotels, Western tourism circuit, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Most establishments nowadays place emphasis on quality as witnessed by the rise in the number of businesses applying for quality awards such as the ISO awards. The service industry has not been left behind and the hospitality industry has produced world renowned establishments via quality awards. In a highly competitive hotel industry, individual hoteliers must find ways to make their products and services stand out among the others. One way to achieve this is for hoteliers to understand their customers' needs and then set out to meet (or exceed) these needs. In general, service quality promotes customer satisfaction, stimulates intention to return and encourages recommendations. Customer satisfaction also eventually increases profitability (Torres & Kline, 2013), market share and return on investment. As a result, and because of increased importance from the service sector, researchers are defining quality from a customer's perspective.

Several studies conducted outside Kenya (Mei *et al*, 1999; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010)

have investigated service quality in the hospitality industry; however, service quality within the hospitality industry in Kenya has not been widely researched. This study thus intended to investigate service quality within the hospitality industry in the Western tourism circuit of Kenya by getting primary data from hotel guests.

Literature review

Service quality

High quality contributes to increased profitability and competitiveness (Yoo & Park, 2007). In addition, successful service quality enhances business growth and prosperity. The competitive pressures faced by many service industries today are compelling them to seek competitive advantage, efficiency and profitable ways to differentiate themselves from others (Mei *et al*., 1999). The hospitality industry and hotels in particular too have
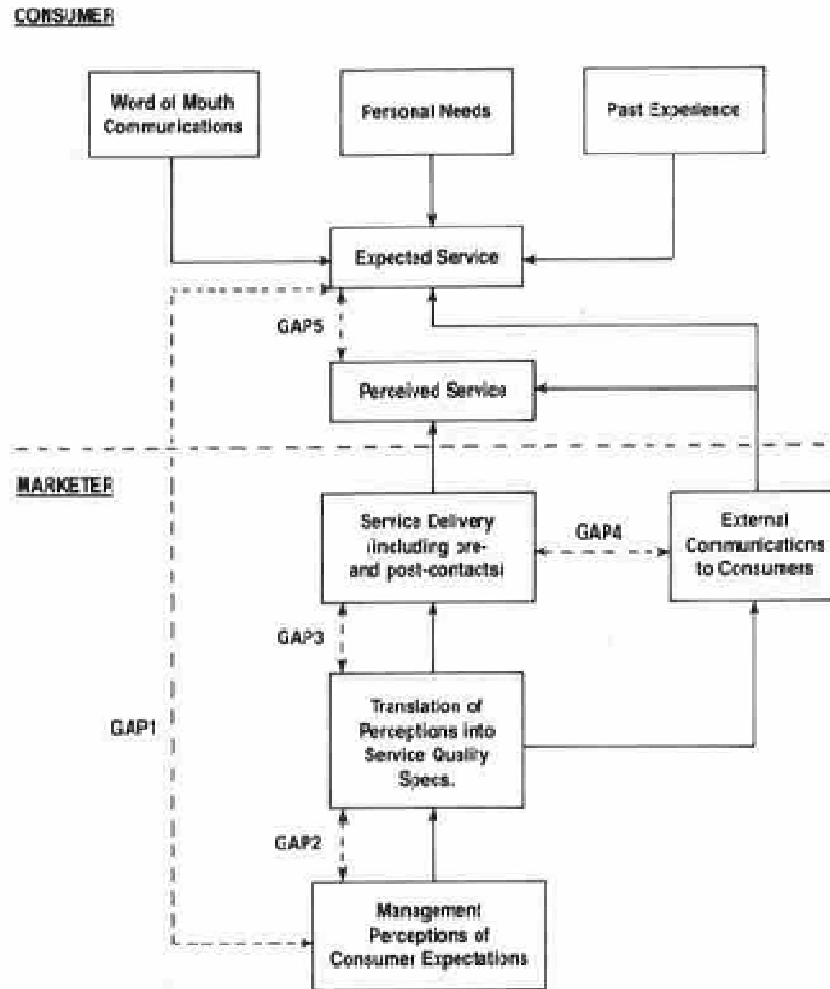
Figure 1. Conceptual model of service quality
Source: Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., Berry, L.L. (1985)

witnessed increasing competition for high service quality and customer satisfaction (Parayani *et al.*, 2010). With this knowledge the hospitality sector must make sure that they are always ahead of the competitors.

Service quality is defined as "global judgment or attitude relating to the overall excellence or superiority of the service" (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Employees are major determinants of service quality (Kusluvan *et al.*, 2010). Mohsin & Lockyer (2010) similarly found that management and employee commitment are prerequisite to successful provision of service quality. This is because satisfied employees are more committed to continuous improvement and quality (Matzler *et al.*, 2004), and thus they are more likely to be committed to delivering quality service. Studies have in addition shown that satisfied employees are highly motivated and have good morale at work (Eskildsen & Dahlgarrd, 2000). Customers too are important in delivering quality service (Crick & Spencer, 2010) and focus on customers in total quality management enhances customer satisfaction (Kotler *et*

al., 2003; Sit *et al.*, 2009). Stevens *et al.* (1995) similarly posit that restaurant customers will select restaurants that meet their quality and value standards; and restaurateurs that ignore this will see customer traffic decline as guests support competing restaurants. The customer's perception of this service quality has at least two elements – satisfaction with what was provided; and the way in which this was delivered by the front line employee (Chapman & Lovell, 2006). Customer satisfaction on the other hand is often used by managers to predict repeat patronage, which leads to brand loyalty and new customers (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002).

Measuring service quality-servqual model

Parasuraman *et al.*, (1985) developed the SERVQUAL model for measuring service quality, that is, the gap theory. The SERVQUAL model gaps are five. "Gap one is the difference between actual customers' expectations and management's perception of customers'

Figure 2. Map of Western tourism circuit, Kenya

expectations. Gap two is the difference between manager's perceptions of service quality and service quality specifications. Gap three is the difference between service quality specifications and actual service delivery. Gap four is the difference between service delivery and what is communicated externally. Gap five is the difference between what customers

expect of a service and what they actually receive" (Douglas & Connor, 2003).

The SERVQUAL model views service quality as the gap that exists between guest expectations and perceived performance. According to Parasuraman *et al.*, (1988), the SERVQUAL measurement scale uses five generic dimensions: "tangibles (the appearance of

Physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communications materials); reliability (the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately); responsiveness (the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service); assurance (the competence of the system and its credibility in providing a courteous and secure service); and empathy (the approachability, ease of access and effort taken to understand customers' needs)".

"The original SERVQUAL scale was composed of two sections with the first section containing 22 items for customer expectations of excellent firms and the second section containing 22 items for consumer perceptions of service performance of the firm being evaluated, and the results from the two sections being compared and used to determine the level of service quality" (Nadiri & Hussain, 2005). The SERVQUAL model has however received criticism. One of the main criticisms is that most research studies do not support the five-factor structure of SERVQUAL put forward by Parasuraman et al., (1988, 1991). Babakus & Boller (1992) maintain that the dimensionality of service quality may depend on the type of services under scrutiny. But according to Parasuraman et al., (1991, 1994), he contended that the SERVQUAL scale using the expectation/performance gaps method is a much richer approach to measuring service quality than any other method.

Mei et al, (1999) used a modified version of the SERVQUAL model which they called the HOLSERV scale. The HOLSERV scale focused on the employees as being the most important dimension of service quality. Mei et al, (1999) went on to identify three dimensions of service quality that included employees, tangibles and reliability.

This study focuses on the fifth gap of the sub gap model and the SERVQUAL model, the perception gap, or the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Study area

The study was conducted in the Western Kenya tourism circuit which is a region in the Western part of Kenya that the Kenyan government and other tourism stakeholders have in the recent past focused on in developing tourism, by investing heavily in tourism infrastructure and advertising the region's tourism products and facilities. The region hosts counties such as Bungoma, Busia, Homa Bay, Kakamega, Kisii, Kisumu, Migori, Nyamira, Siaya, and Vihiga. The region also has great potential for both domestic and international tourism and boasts of attractions such as beautiful landscapes, forests, flora, fauna, wildlife and the rich culture of the local people.

Research design

The researcher used survey research design through the administration of questionnaires on sample representatives. An effective population should have certain qualities that include representativeness, accessibility and knowledge of the issue being studied (Cohen et al, 2007, pp. 108-110). The population of study was hotel guests in Western tourism circuit in Kenya. The study sample consisted of both international and domestic customers visiting at least three star hotels located in this region in June, July and August 2012. The 120 hotel guests on whom questionnaires were administered were selected on the basis of a non-probability convenience sampling technique. At the end of the study, 78 usable questionnaires had been filled.

Questionnaire development

The questionnaires had open and closed questions on the guests' perceptions of service quality in the hotels. Likert scales, which measure attitudes (Clark et al, 1998), were used. Scales with seven degrees of relative agreement with values of 1 to 7, (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) were thus used in the study. 4 was the midscore and neutral option and any scores below 4 indicated negative values while scores above 4 indicated positive values.

The questionnaire used in this study was a modified version of what Babakus & Mangold (1992) used in adapting the SERVQUAL scale to hospital services. The reliability of this instrument was therefore determined through piloting and the cronbach's alpha. Twelve guests, who were later excluded from the study, were selected for the pilot study. However, no corrections were made on the questionnaires. Besides, the scale on perceptions towards excellent hotels had a cronbach alpha of .893 while that on actual service at the hotels had an alpha of .859. The questionnaire was thus considered reliable since the scores were above the recommended value of .7 (Field, 2006, pp. 667-680).

Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed and presented quantitatively. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and percentages were computed. Means and paired sample t-tests, which were calculated to test for the significant difference between expectations and perceptions, formed the basis of comparison between the guests' responses. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify the most and least important dimensions. Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring was used to identify key dimensions since the study intended to generate service quality dimensions in the hotels. The Keyser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values recorded

were .883 for the scale on excellent hotels and .79 for the scale on the hotels where the study was conducted, meaning that the sample size was adequate. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity values were also significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Customers' expectations of service in excellent hotels

As shown in Table 1, the customers' expectations of service in excellent hotels under each dimension were established. The statement in the seven-point likert scale "personnel at excellent hotels will be neat in appearance", had the highest mean score under the dimension "tangibles", followed by the statement "the physical facilities at excellent hotels will be visually appealing" then "materials associated with service in excellent hotels will be neat in appearance" and lastly "excellent hotels will have modern looking equipment".

The statement in the seven-point likert scale "when a client has a problem excellent hotels will show a sincere interest to solve it", had the highest mean score under the dimension "reliability", followed by the statement "when excellent hotels promise to do something by a certain time, they will do it" then "excellent hotels will provide their services at the time they promise to", "excellent hotels will insist on error free records" and lastly "excellent hotels will get things right the first time". The statement in the seven-point likert scale "personnel at excellent hotels will provide prompt services to customers", had the highest mean score under the dimension "responsiveness", followed by the statement "personnel in excellent hotels will always be willing to help customers", then "personnel at excellent hotels will tell customers exactly when services will be performed" and lastly "personnel in excellent hotels will never be too busy to respond to customers". The statement in the seven-point likert scale "customers of excellent hotels will feel safe in their dealings with the hotel" had the highest mean score under the dimension "assurance", followed by the statement "the behaviour of personnel in excellent hotels will instil confidence in customers" then "personnel in excellent hotels will be consistently courteous with customers" and lastly "personnel in excellent hotels will have the knowledge to answer customers". The statement in the seven-point likert scale "excellent hotels will have customers interests at heart" had the highest mean score under the dimension "empathy", followed by the statement "excellent hotels will have staff who give customers personal attention", then "excellent hotels will give customers individual attention", "excellent hotels will understand the specific needs of their customers" and lastly "excellent hotels will have operating hours convenient to all customers". Items with the highest mean scores focused on "neatness of appearance of personnel

and materials at the hotels", "the hotels instilling confidence in customers", " the hotels providing guest safety in dealings", "the hotels providing prompt service" and "the hotels building on the visual appeal of facilities", all indicating that customers expected these factors more than the other factors. However, "the hotels insisting on error free records", "the hotels responding to customers' requests" and "the hotels having convenient hours of operations" had the lowest mean scores indicating that customers expected these factors less than the other factors. This can be explained by the customers understanding that no human can be perfect and errors may be inevitable. Similarly, not all hotels can fulfil all guests' requests nor can the hotels operate at hours that are convenient to all customers.

Customers' perceptions of service in the hotels they were in at the time of the study

As illustrated in Table 2, the customers' highest perceptions of service in the hotels they were in at the time of the study under each dimension were established. The statement in the seven-point likert scale "this hotel has physical facilities that are visually appealing" had the highest mean score under the dimension "tangibles", followed by the statement "personnel at this hotel are neat in appearance", then "this hotel has modern looking equipment" and lastly "materials associated with service in this hotel are neat in appearance". The statement in the seven-point likert scale "when a client has a problem this hotel shows a sincere interest to solve it" had the highest mean score under the dimension "reliability", followed by the statement "this hotel provides their services at the time it promises to" then "when the hotel promises to do something by a certain time they do it", "this hotel gets things right the first time" and lastly "this hotel insists on error free records". The statement in the seven-point likert scale "personnel in the hotel tell customers exactly when service will be performed", had the highest mean score under the dimension "responsiveness", followed by the statement "personnel in this hotel are always willing to help customers" then "personnel in this hotel are never be too busy to respond to customers requests", and lastly "personnel at this hotel provide prompt services to customers".

The statement in the seven-point likert scale "customers in this hotel feel safe in their dealings with the hotel" had the highest mean score under the dimension "assurance", followed by the statement "the behaviour of personnel in this hotel instils confidence in the customer", then "personnel in this hotel have the knowledge to answer customers questions" and lastly "personnel in this hotel are consistently courteous with customers".

The statement in the seven-point likert scale "this hotel has operating hours that are convenient to all customers" had the highest mean score under the dimension "empathy", followed by the statement "this

Table 1. Customers' expectations of service in excellent hotels

CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS OF SERVICE	Mean	SD
Tangibles		
Excellent hotels will have modern looking equipment	6.18	1.23
The physical facilities at excellent hotels will be visually appealing	6.32	1.13
Personnel at excellent hotels will be neat in appearance	6.47	.67
Materials associated with service in excellent hotels will be neat in appearance	6.31	.81
Reliability		
When excellent hotels promise to do something at a certain time they do it	6.10	1.244
When a client has a problem excellent hotels will show a sincere interest to solve it	6.30	1.02
Excellent hotels will get things right the first time	5.79	1.53
Excellent hotels will provide their services at the time they promise to	6.09	1.29
Excellent hotels will insist on error free records	5.81	1.38
Responsiveness		
Personnel in excellent hotels will tell customers exactly when services will be performed	6.18	1.09
Personnel at excellent hotels will provide prompt services to customers	6.36	.91
Personnel in excellent hotels will always be willing to help customers	6.33	.92
Personnel in excellent hotels will never be too busy to respond to customers requests	5.94	1.38
Assurance		
The behaviour of personnel in excellent hotels will instil confidence in customers	6.49	.67
Customers of excellent hotels will feel safe in their dealings with the hotel	6.50	.78
Personnel in excellent hotels will be consistently courteous with customers	6.27	.92
Personnel in excellent hotels will have the knowledge to answer customers questions	6.12	1.24
Empathy		
Excellent hotels will give customers individual attention	6.08	1.31
Excellent hotels will have operating hours convenient to all customers	5.97	1.15
Excellent hotels will have staff who give customers personal attention	6.09	1.03
Excellent hotels will have customers interest at heart	6.19	.99
Excellent hotels will understand the specific needs of their customers	6.05	1.19

1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree; N=78

hotel has staff who give customers personal attention, then "this hotel has customers interest at heart", "this hotel gives customers individual attention" and lastly "this hotel understands the specific needs of the customers".

Items with the highest mean scores focused on "the hotels saying exactly when services will be performed", "the hotels helping customers", "the hotels responding to customers' requests", "the hotels providing customers' safety in dealings", "the hotels emphasising on visual appeal of physical facilities", "the hotels instilling confidence in customers" and "the hotels boosting staff knowledge", indicating that the customers felt that the hotels in the Western tourism circuit in Kenya paid more attention to these elements in service delivery. However items such as "the hotels insisting on error free records", "the hotels getting things right the first time", "the hotels doing things at exactly the time promised" and "the hotels understanding specific needs of customers" had the lowest mean scores showing that the customers felt that the hotels paid less attention to these factors.

Service gaps

Service quality is the difference between customers'

Table 2. Customers' perceptions of service in the hotel they were in at the time of the study

CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE	Mean	SD
Tangibles This hotel has modern looking equipment	5.46	1.55
This hotel has physical facilities that are visually appealing	5.65	1.31
Personnel at this hotel are neat in appearance	5.49	1.39
Materials associated with service in this hotel are neat in appearance	5.32	1.35
Reliability When this hotel promises to do something at a certain time they do it	5.21	1.50
When a client has a problem this hotel shows a sincere interest to solve it	5.50	1.32
This hotel gets things right the first time	5.12	1.37
This hotel provides their services at the time it promises to	5.31	1.32
This hotel insists on error free records	5.09	1.40
Responsiveness Personnel in this hotel tell customers exactly when services will be performed	6.19	18.22
Personnel at this hotel provide prompt services to customers	5.47	1.29
Personnel in this hotel are always be willing to help customers	5.78	1.11
Personnel in this hotel are never be too busy to respond to customers requests	5.62	1.31
Assurance The behaviour of personnel in this hotel instils confidence in customers	5.63	1.21
Customers in this hotel feel safe in their dealings with the hotel	5.65	1.22
Personnel in this hotel are consistently courteous with customers	5.58	1.15
Personnel in this hotel have the knowledge to answer customers questions	5.63	1.09
Empathy This hotel gives customers individual attention	5.38	1.23
This hotel has operating hours that are convenient to all customers	5.54	1.26
This hotel has staff who give customers personal attention	5.47	1.34
This hotel has customers interest at heart	5.44	1.30
This hotel understands the specific needs of the customers	5.21	1.31

1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree; N=78

perceptions and expectations of service (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985). It is also meeting and exceeding customers' expectations. The goal of every firm should be to minimize the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality.

As shown in Table 3, the service gaps for the five dimensions were calculated as well. The findings indicated that actual service was less than expected service in all the variables apart from the variable "the hotel tells the guests the exact time that service will be performed" (gap score=0.01) However, paired t-test showed that only 18 of the 22 variables had statistically significant differences at 0.05 level. The attributes on "the

hotels saying exactly when services will be performed", "the hotels never being too busy to respond to customers' requests", "the hotels knowing answers to customers' questions" and "the hotels having convenient operating hours" were not statistically significant at 0.05 level.

The largest significant gap scores, which moreover indicated the poorest service quality levels and thus the highest customer dissatisfaction levels, were on "neatness of employees at the hotel", "neatness of materials at the hotel", "the hotel keeping time", "the hotel instilling confidence in customers", "promptness of service at the hotel" and "customers feeling safe in their dealings with the hotel", meaning that for hotels in the

Table 3. Gap mean difference of customers' perceptions of service in the hotels they were in at the time of the study and their expectations of service in excellent hotels

SERVICE ASPECTS	Perception Mean	Expectation Mean	Gap Per-Exp	t-value	AvgGap score
Tangibles					-0.84
Modern appearance of hotel's equipment	5.46	6.18	-0.72	3.26*	
Visual appeal of hotel's facilities	5.65	6.32	-0.67	3.38*	
Neatness of employees at hotel	5.49	6.47	-0.98	5.37*	
Neatness of materials at hotel	5.32	6.31	-0.99	5.37*	
Reliability					-0.77
Hotel keeping time when they promise	5.21	6.10	-0.89	3.88*	
Hotel sincerely solving problems	5.50	6.30	-0.80	4.02*	
Hotel getting things right first time	5.12	5.79	-0.67	3.04*	
Hotel giving service at promised time	5.31	6.09	-0.78	4.05*	
Hotel having error free records	5.09	5.81	-0.72	3.93*	
Responsiveness					-0.43
Personnel telling exact time when services will be performed	6.19	6.18	0.01	-0.01	
Promptness of service	5.47	6.36	-0.89	5.35*	
Personnel willingness to help	5.78	6.33	-0.55	3.67*	
Personnel never being too busy to respond to customers requests	5.62	5.94	-0.32	1.76	
Assurance					-0.72
Personnel instilling confidence in customers	5.63	6.49	-0.86	5.17*	
Personnel behavior making customers feel safe	5.65	6.50	-0.85	5.08*	
Personnel being courteous to customers	5.58	6.27	-0.69	4.31*	
Personnel knowing answers to customers' questions	5.63	6.12	-0.49	2.67	
Empathy					-0.66
Hotel giving customers individual attention	5.38	6.08	-0.7	3.56*	
Hotel having convenient operating hours	5.54	5.97	-0.43	2.82	
Hotel giving customers personal attention	5.47	6.09	-0.62	3.47*	
Hotel keeping customers interests at heart	5.44	6.19	-0.75	4.43*	
Hotel understanding specific needs of customers	5.21	6.05	-0.84	5.18*	

*1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree; *t-test two-tail probability<0.05*

Western Kenya tourism circuit to meet some of their customers' expectations, they need to pay more attention to these factors. For example, the hotels may need to build on their physical evidences including the appearance of staff and the hotels' interiors and exteriors, by focusing on staff dressing, the appearance of menus, linen, furnishings and grounds. The hotels may also have to train their employees on service delivery and customer relationship management in order to increase their service speed and enhance their rapport with guests. These will boost customers' confidence in the hotels and their dealings. The findings further showed that actual service was less than expected service in all the dimensions (tangibles =-0.84, reliability=-0.77, responsiveness=-0.43, assurance=-0.72 and empathy=-0.66). Responsiveness had the lowest service gap followed by empathy, assurance, reliability then tangibles. This suggests that hotels in the tourism circuit generally need to improve their service quality levels by probably focusing more on the tangibles aspect of service quality and training employees in order to improve their responsiveness, understanding, assurance and dependability.

Importance of the service quality dimensions

The most important dimension for customers was reliability since 22 customers indicated that they mostly appreciate personnel who are knowledgeable, courteous and have the ability to convey trust and confidence. However, the guests indicated tangibility as the least important dimension as illustrated by the appearance of the hotels' physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials (n=27). These findings confirmed the crucial role that employees play in quality service delivery as is posited by researchers such as Mohsin & Lockyer (2010).

Factor analysis on customers' expectations of service in excellent hotels

The researchers also conducted factor analysis using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation aimed at identifying the key quality dimensions of excellent hotels. This data is presented in Table 4. Six factors were extracted and they accounted for 62.03% of the total variance. Factor one accounted for 20.26%, factor two 12.54%, factor three 10.59%, factor four 10.36%, factor five 4.49% and factor six 3.78%.

Factor one (Responsiveness and empathy)

The nine variables that loaded onto factor one were "when customers have a problem, excellent hotels will have sincere interests in solving it", "excellent hotels will provide services at the time they promise to", 'excellent hotels will provide prompt services", "personnel at excellent hotels will always be willing to help customers", "personnel at excellent hotels will never be too busy to respond to customers' needs", "personnel at excellent hotels will be consistently courteous with customers", "personnel at excellent hotels will give customers individual attention", "personnel at excellent hotels will give customers personal attention" and "personnel at excellent hotels will have customers interests at heart". These items were linked to the hotels' reactions towards customers. The factor was consequently labelled "responsiveness and empathy".

Factor two (Reliability)

The four items that loaded onto factor two were "personnel at excellent hotels will tell customers exactly when services will be performed", "personnel at excellent hotels will have knowledge to answer customers' questions", "excellent hotels will have operating hours convenient to customers" and "excellent hotels will understand specific needs of the customers". These items related to the hotels' assurance in service delivery, so the factor was named "reliability".

Factor three (Assurance)

The three items that loaded on factor three were "excellent hotels will have modern looking equipment", "excellent hotels will get things right the first time" and "excellent hotels will insist on error free records". Two of these items were associated with the hotels' abilities to deliver what they promise. As a result, the factor was named "assurance".

Factor four (Tangibles)

The four variables that loaded onto factor four were "facilities at excellent hotels will be visually appealing", "materials in excellent hotels will be neat in appearance", "personnel in excellent hotels will be neat in appearance" and "customers in excellent hotels will feel safe in their dealings with the hotel". Most of these items reflected the facilities' physical appearance. Thus, the factor was named "tangibles". One item loaded onto factor five; "when excellent hotels promise to do something at a certain time, they will do it" while one variable loaded onto factor six; "the behaviour of personnel at excellent hotels will instil confidence in customers". These results showed that the SERVQUAL model needs to be slightly modified to the hotel industry in Kenya since the traditional five dimensions were not generated from the data on excellent hotels. Instead four significant dimensions were generated. These findings as well reflected Parasuraman *et al*. (1988) views that even if it may be necessary to reword or modify some of the items, the SERVQUAL scale is still applicable in a wide range of business services. Akan, (1995) likewise suggests the modification of the SERVQUAL instrument in research. Akan (1995) concludes that "users of four or five star hotels surveyed in Turkey expected to get friendly, courteous, clean expert service but without special, personalised attention. Social surroundings and the perception of the value of the service were additional considerations". Besides, service quality perceptions vary with different cultures and previous studies, for example Crick and Spencer (2010), reveal that customers' value of service is also constantly changing, hence the need for continual adaptation of service quality.

Factor analysis on customers' perceptions of service in the hotels they were in at the time of the study

With regard to guests' perceptions of service at the hotels they were in at the time of the study, four factors were extracted after conducting exploratory factor analysis as illustrated in Table 5.These factors accounted for 67.81% of the total variance. Factor one accounted for 22.5%, factor two 20.08%, factor three 17.96% and factor four 7.26%.

Table 4. Factor analysis on customers' expectations of service in excellent hotels

CUSTOMERS' EXPECTATIONS OF SERVICE	Factor					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Excellent hotels will have modern looking equipment			.637			
The physical facilities at excellent hotels will be visually appealing				.563	.	
Personnel at excellent hotels will be neat in appearance				.744		
Materials associated with service in excellent hotels will be neat in appearance				.814		
When excellent hotels promise to do something at a certain time they do it					.671	
When a client has a problem excellent hotels will show a sincere interest to solve it	.615					
Excellent hotels will get things right the first time			.734			
Excellent hotels will provide their services at the time they promise to	.520					
Excellent hotels will insist on error free records			.721			
Personnel in excellent hotels will tell customers exactly when services will be performed		.532				
Personnel at excellent hotels will provide prompt services to customers	.810					
Personnel in excellent hotels will always be willing to help customers	.835					
Personnel in excellent hotels will never be too busy to respond to customers requests	.574					
The behaviour of personnel in excellent hotels will instil confidence in customers						.567
Customers of excellent hotels will feel safe in their dealings with the hotel				.573		
Personnel in excellent hotels will be consistently courteous with customers	.626					
Personnel in excellent hotels will have the knowledge to answer customers questions		.573				
Excellent hotels will give customers individual attention	.655					
Excellent hotels will have operating hours convenient to all customers		.687				
Excellent hotels will have staff who give customers personal attention	.580					
Excellent hotels will have customers interest at heart	.518					
Excellent hotels will understand the specific needs of their customers		.709				

1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree

Factor one (Tangibles and Reliability)

The eight items that loaded onto factor one were "this hotel has modern looking equipment", "this hotel has physical facilities that are visually appealing", "this hotel has personnel who are neat in appearance", "this hotel has materials that are neat in appearance", "when this hotel promises to do something at a certain time they do it", "when a client has a problem this hotel shows a sincere interest to solve it", "this hotel provides their services at the time it promises to" and "this hotel insists on error free records". These items related to the physical appearance of the facilities and the hotels' care towards customers. Hence, the factor was named "tangibles and reliability".

Factor two (Empathy)

The six variables that loaded onto factor two were "personnel in this hotel provide prompt service to customers", "this hotel gives customers individual attention", "this hotel has operating hours convenient to customers", "this hotel has staff who give customers personal attention", "the hotel puts customers' interests at

Table 5. Factor analysis on customers' perceptions of service in the hotels they were in at the time of the study

CUTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE IN THIS HOTEL	Factor			
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**
This hotel has modern looking equipment	.772			
This hotel has physical facilities that are visually appealing	.736			
Personnel at this hotel are neat in appearance	.833			
Materials associated with service in this hotel has are neat in appearance	.668			
When this hotel promises to do something at a certain time they do it	.566			
When a client has a problem this hotel shows a sincere interest to solve it	.595			
This hotel gets things right the first time				.596
This hotel provides their services at the time it promises to	.593			
This hotel insists on error free records	.599			
Personnel in this hotel tell customers exactly when services will be performed				.567
Personnel at this hotel provide prompt services to customers		.565		
Personnel in this hotel are always willing to help customers			.613	
Personnel in this hotel are never be too busy to respond to customers requests			.690	
The behaviour of personnel in this hotel instils confidence in customers			.824	
Customers in this hotel feel safe in their dealings with the hotel			.627	
Personnel in this hotel are consistently courteous with customers			.572	
Personnel in this hotel have the knowledge to answer customers questions			.562	
This hotel gives customers individual attention		.649		
This hotel has operating hours that are convenient to all customers		.589		
This hotel has staff who give customers personal attention		.847		
This hotel has customers interest at heart		.594		
This hotel understands the specific needs of the customers		.721		

1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree

heart" and "this hotel understands the specific needs of the customers". These variables portrayed the hotels' personalised treatment of customers. The factor was thus labelled "empathy".

Factor three (Assurance)

The six items that loaded onto factor three were "personnel in this hotel are always willing to help customers", "personnel in this hotel are never too busy to respond to customers requests", "the behaviour of personnel in this hotel instils confidence in customers",

"customers feel safe in their dealings with the hotel", "personnel in this hotel are consistently courteous with customers" and "personnel in this hotel have knowledge to answer customers questions". These items were linked to the personnel commitment to serving customers. Consequently, the factor was labelled "assurance".

Factor four (Accuracy)

The two factors that loaded onto factor four were "this hotel gets things right the first time" and "personnel in this hotel tell customers exactly when services will be

performed". These items were associated with the hotels' personnel accuracy in their work performance. So the factor was named "accuracy".

These results showed that the hotels in the Western Kenya tourism circuit mostly focused on tangibles and the reliability of service when serving customers and paid less attention to the accuracy of activities. This shows that the hotels can benefit more from service quality if they ensure that their employees are attentive to detail in their operations and better still communicate with their customers. After conducting factor analysis, the dimensions, "empathy", "assurance", "tangibles" and "reliability" emerged in both excellent hotels and in the hotels surveyed during the study period, even though each was given different weightings. For example, "responsiveness and empathy" accounted for the largest percentage of total variance in excellent hotels, yet "tangibles and reliability" accounted for the largest percentage of total variance in hotels used in the study. These subsequently reveal that service in hotels within the Western Kenya tourism circuit to a small extent matched that offered in excellent hotels, even though the hotels may not have considered their customers' prioritized service quality expectations.

CONCLUSION

From the study, it is evident that a gap exists between customers' perceived and expected service quality standards of hotels in the Western Kenya tourism circuit in Kenya. The findings indicated that actual service was less than expected service in 18 variables. Four dimensions emerged as having the greatest impact on customers and as being indicators of the service quality levels of excellent hotels; the dimensions "responsiveness and empathy", "reliability", "assurance" and "tangibles". The dimensions "tangibles and reliability", "empathy", "assurance" and "accuracy" emerged as the dimensions that customers felt the hotels they were in at the time of the study offered. The findings indicated that the hotels have room to improve their service quality and adapt to customers' expectations, so as to generate increased customer satisfaction and the resultant competitiveness. The study has implications for hospitality practitioners who are always interested in meeting and exceeding customers' expectations. However, further research should be conducted on the service quality perceptions and expectations of guests with difference cultural backgrounds. This area has been thinly researched yet plays a crucial role in service marketing.

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