SERVICE QUALITY IN HOTELS: UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS FOR IMPROVED GUEST SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT
The study aims to explore the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 413 hotel customers from various hotels in Abuja participated in the study, through a convenient sampling. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were used with SPSS Version 24 to analyze the data. The findings revealed that hotel customers in Abuja place a high value on service quality, and their perceptions of service quality are influenced by various factors such as staff competence, responsiveness, reliability, empathy, and tangibles. The study also highlights the importance of addressing customer complaints and providing personalized services to enhance guest satisfaction. The study recommends that hotel managers in Abuja should prioritize service quality as a critical factor for improving guest satisfaction and, ultimately, the hotel's overall performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is a vital sector of the Nigerian economy, and it plays a significant role in promoting tourism and generating revenue for the country. The growth of the hospitality industry in Nigeria has been steady in recent years, with the emergence of new hotels and the expansion of existing ones. However, as the competition in the industry increases, it becomes essential for hotels to deliver high-quality services that meet or exceed customers' expectations. Service quality is critical to the success of any hotel, as it can influence customers' satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to recommend the hotel to others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the Nigerian hospitality industry, with the implementation of travel restrictions and other reactive measures leading to negative consequences. (Sridhar & Rabbani, 2021). The tourism sector, which generated revenue as high as $2 billion in 2018, has experienced a significant reduction of 5.7 million travellers due to the pandemic, resulting in 149,400 jobs at risk and an estimated economic loss of $1.1 billion for

Nigeria. (Hospitality Outlook 2023). In 2020, listed hospitality companies in Nigeria recorded a 56% decrease in net cash investments, dropping from N11.3 billion in 2019 to N4.9 billion. Notably, Transcorp and Ikeja Hotels, two of Nigeria's largest hotel owners, experienced the greatest decline in capital investments, (Nairalytics, 2021).

A 7.0% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) was used to calculate the market size of the global hospitality industry, which increased from $4,390.59 billion in 2022 to $4,699.57 billion in 2023. (Hospitality Global Market Report, 2023). The Russia-Ukraine war hampered the odds of a short-term COVID-19 pandemic-related global economic recovery. Economic sanctions on a number of nations, a rise in commodity prices, and disruptions in the supply chain as a result of the conflict between these two nations have caused inflation in many different markets throughout the world and affected the prices of goods and services. A CAGR of 5.5% is anticipated for the hospitality market's growth to $5,816.66 billion in 2027. (New Telegraph, 2023).

Despite the growing importance of service quality in the hospitality industry, limited research has been conducted on the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria. Existing studies on service quality in the Nigerian hospitality industry have focused mainly on Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria, and other cities. Therefore, there is a research gap on the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja the federal capital, and the factors that impact guest satisfaction in the city. This study seeks to address this research gap by investigating the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers and identifying the factors that influence guest satisfaction. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for hotel managers and policymakers in to improve service quality and enhance guest satisfaction in the city's hospitality industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Service quality and service satisfaction are two terms that are used interchangeable by the service researchers. (Ohida et al, 2023). Service quality is an essential aspect of the hospitality industry, as it directly influences guest satisfaction and loyalty. In the highly competitive hospitality industry, providing high-quality service is critical for hotels to differentiate themselves from their competitors and attract and retain guests. Reliable infrastructural development is crucial for powering businesses, lowering transaction costs, improving market access, and the efficiency of other productive factors (Nadabo, Y. S.2023). Several studies have examined the concept of service quality and its impact on guest satisfaction, with a particular focus on the hotel industry.

In this literature review, the study analyzed the relevant literature on service quality and guest satisfaction in the hospitality industry, with a specific focus on Abuja, Nigeria. Abuja is the capital city of Nigeria and one of the country's most significant economic centres, with a thriving hospitality industry that caters to a diverse range of guests. The study will explore the various factors that contribute to service quality and guest satisfaction in Abuja's hotels, including the quality of the physical environment, the responsiveness of hotel staff, the efficiency of service delivery, and the quality of food and beverages. The findings of this literature review will provide valuable insights into how hotels in Abuja can improve their service quality and enhance guest satisfaction, leading to increased customer loyalty and revenue.

2.1 Service Quality in the Hospitality Industry

Service quality is a multidimensional construct that encompasses various aspects of service delivery, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Berry et al., 1988). According to Parasuraman et al. (1988), Customer satisfaction is accepted as value based

on attributes of product or service in relation with price (Ikotun & Kolawole, 2020). Service quality can be defined as "the degree and direction of a discrepancy between customers' perceptions and expectations of service." Therefore, customers' perceptions of service quality are critical to their overall satisfaction with the service. Several studies have examined the importance of service quality in the hospitality industry. For example, a study by (Lu et al., 2020) found that service quality significantly positively impacts customer satisfaction in the hotel industry. Similarly, a study by (Asnawi et al., 2019) found that service quality is critical in determining customers' behavioural intentions in the hotel industry.

One of the studies conducted by Okoli and Azuh (2016) investigated the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in Nigerian hotels. The study found that service quality significantly influenced customer loyalty, with guests more likely to return to hotels where they received high-quality services. The study also identified that the most critical determinants of service quality were responsiveness, empathy, reliability, and tangibles. Similarly, a study by Ezeuduji et al. (2019) examined the factors that influence service quality in Nigerian restaurants. The study identified several critical factors that affect service quality in Nigerian restaurants, including employee competence, communication, and responsiveness. The study also highlighted the importance of training and continuous development programs for employees to improve service quality in Nigerian restaurants.

Another study by Ogunnaike et al., (2014) evaluated the service quality provided by hotels in Lagos, Nigeria. The study found that the quality of service provided by the hotels was generally satisfactory, with guests reporting high levels of satisfaction with the physical environment and service delivery. However, the study also identified several areas for improvement, including staff responsiveness, empathy, and reliability. In a study by Paraskevas and Buhalis (2002), the authors identified four critical dimensions of service quality in the hospitality industry: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. They noted that providing high-quality services that demonstrate these dimensions is essential for building customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In a similar study, Wang et al., (2018) investigated the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Chinese hospitality industry. The authors identified several dimensions of service quality, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. They found that providing high-quality services that meet customers' needs and expectations can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Gupta and Arora (2019) conducted a study to examine the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in the Indian hotel industry. The authors identified critical dimensions of service quality such as tangibility, empathy, assurance, reliability, and responsiveness. They found that providing high-quality services that demonstrate these dimensions can significantly enhance customer loyalty and business performance.

In a study by Hadi and Mohamad (2017), the authors investigated the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Malaysian hotel industry. The authors identified critical dimensions of service quality, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. They found that providing high-quality services that meet customers' needs and expectations can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.Jang and Namkung (2009) conducted a study to examine the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty in the Korean hotel industry. The authors identified several dimensions of service quality, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. They found that

providing high-quality services that demonstrate these dimensions can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

2.2 Factors Affecting Service Quality in the hospitality industry

Several factors can influence service quality in the hospitality industry. These factors include employee behaviour, service delivery processes, physical facilities, and customer expectations (Kamra et al., 2019) Employee behaviour, such as staff competence and responsiveness, is one of the critical factors that can influence customers' perceptions of service quality (Kang & James, 2004). Service delivery processes, such as speed of service and accuracy, are also essential factors that can impact customers' perceptions of service quality (Liu, Pennington-Gray, & Kim, 2015). Additionally, physical facilities, such as hotel room amenities and cleanliness, can significantly impact guests' perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985)

Customer expectations are also a critical factor that can influence service quality in the hospitality industry. According to(Zeithaml & Berry, 1993) customer expectations are the standards or norms that customers use to evaluate service quality. Therefore, understanding customers' expectations is critical to delivering high-quality services that meet or exceed their expectations.

2.3 Service Quality and Guest Satisfaction in Abuja

Despite the growing importance of service quality in the hospitality industry, limited research has been conducted on the perceptions of service quality and guest satisfaction among hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria. However, some studies have investigated service quality in the Nigerian hospitality industry more broadly. For example, a study by Khoo, (2022) found that service quality significantly positively impacts customer satisfaction in the Nigerian hotel industry. Similarly, a study by Adedokun et al., (2017) found that service quality is a significant predictor of guest loyalty in the Nigerian hotel industry.

However, there is a need for more research on service quality and guest satisfaction in Abuja, Nigeria. A study (Ukenna & Nkamnebe, n.d. 2020) investigated the influence of service quality on customer satisfaction in hotels in Enugu, Nigeria. The study found that service quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction and that staff responsiveness is the most crucial factor in determining customer satisfaction. A study by Mahmood et al., (2018) examined the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction in hotels in Awka, Nigeria. The study found that service quality has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction and that staff competence, responsiveness, and reliability are critical factors in determining service quality Another study by Ali et al., (2021) investigated the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in hotels in Lagos, Nigeria. The study found that service quality has a significant positive impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty and that staff competence, responsiveness, and reliability are critical factors in determining service quality.

Furthermore, a study by O. D. Safi and S. Alagha, (2020) examined the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty in the Nigerian hotel industry. The study found that service quality significantly influences customer loyalty and that staff competence, responsiveness, and empathy are critical factors in determining service quality.

However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja and identifying the factors that influence guest satisfaction.

2.4 Measurement of construct in the study

Tangibles: This dimension will measure the physical appearance of the hotel, including the cleanliness and comfort of the room, the quality of the amenities, and the hotel's overall ambience.
*Reliability:* This dimension will measure the hotel's ability to provide consistent and dependable service, including the accuracy of the booking process, the reliability of the service delivery, and the hotel's ability to fulfil guests' requests.
Responsiveness: This dimension will measure the hotel's ability to respond promptly to guests' needs, including the staff's willingness to help, the speed of service delivery, and the hotel's ability to handle guests' complaints and requests.
Assurance: This dimension will measure the guests' confidence and trust in the hotel, including the hotel staff's competence, professionalism, and courtesy.
Empathy: This dimension will measure the hotel staff's ability to understand and meet guests' needs, including their ability to anticipate guests' needs, their willingness to listen, and their ability to personalize service delivery.

2.5 Conceptual framework
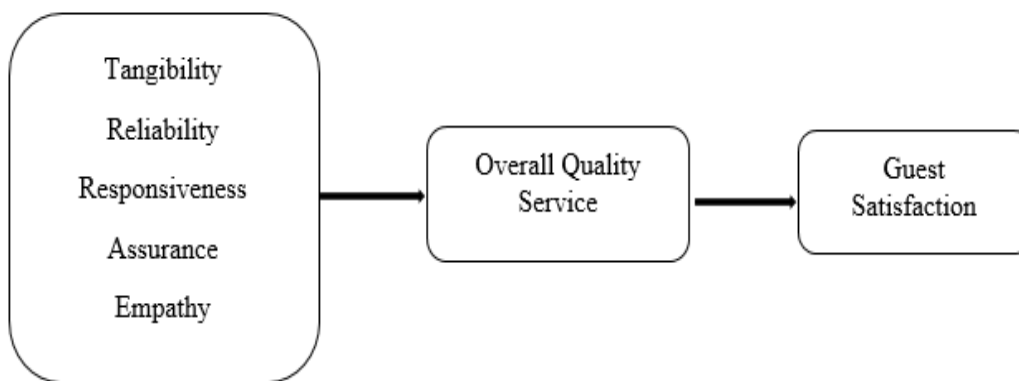
Source: Parasuraman (1988)

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design: This study employed a quantitative research design. Quantitative research is used to gather numerical data that can be analyzed statistically. In this study, a self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from hotel customers in Abuja.
3.2 Sampling: The sample for this study consists of hotel customers from various hotels in Abuja. The sample size was determined using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study.
3.4 Data Analysis:
Data analysis is a crucial step in any research study as it helps to make sense of the data collected and draw meaningful conclusions. In this study, the data collected on guest perceptions of service quality was analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and describe the demographic characteristics of the participants and their perceptions of service quality. The descriptive statistics used in this study are frequency distributions. Descriptive statistics provide a clear and concise way of summarizing large amounts of data, making it easier to understand and interpret. Regression analysis, on the other hand, was used to identify the factors that impact guest satisfaction. Regression analysis is a statistical method

that examines the relationship between two or more variables, to predict the value of one variable based on the values of the other variables. In this study, regression analysis was used to identify the factors that impact guest satisfaction and determine the strength and direction of these relationships.

The regression analysis involved the use of a regression model to test the relationship between guest satisfaction and the independent variables such as service quality, staff competence, hotel amenities, and location. The regression model used in this study was a multiple regression model, which allowed for the analysis of the impact of multiple independent variables on the dependent variable (guest satisfaction).

3.3 Data Collection: Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire comprises both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were used to collect quantitative data, while open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. Section one. This section solicited information about the participants' demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education level, and income. Section two. This section assessed the participants' perceptions of service quality in the hotels they have stayed with a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) based on the service quality dimensions of Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy: Section three. This section assessed the guest' overall satisfaction with the hotel they stayed in Abuja, using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied). Section Four Open-ended questions, this section allows participants to provide additional comments or feedback on their experiences in the hotel they stayed in Abuja. Participants can provide suggestions for improving service quality and enhancing guest satisfaction. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of hotel customers to ensure its validity and reliability.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

From the survey for the respondents Gender, 305 respondents or 48.0% of the total respondents are male, while 108 respondents or 52.0% are female. In terms of Age, 25 respondents or 16.0% of the total respondents fall into the 18-24 years age bracket, while 80 respondents or 40.0% are aged 25-34 years, and 95 respondents representing 24% are between the age of 45 and above. In terms of Education level, 40 respondents or 9.6% of the total respondents have a high school degree, while 118 respondents or 28.6% have a Bachelor's degree, 110 representing 26.6% have a master's degree and 145 representing 35.2 had a Doctorate. For Income level, 30 respondents or 7.2% of the total respondents earn less than NGN 50,000 per month, while 100 respondents or 24.2% earn NGN50,000-100,000, while 203 respondents representing 49.2% earn NGN100,000-150,000 and 80 respondents 19.4% earn NGN 150,000 per month as shown below.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	305	48.0%
Female	108	52.0%

Age (years)		
18-24	25	6.0%
25-34	80	19.4%
35-44	95	23%
45 and above	213	51.6%
Education level		
High school	40	9.6.0%
Bachelor's degree	118	28.6.0%
Master's degree	110	26.6.0%
Doctorate	145	35.2%
Income level (per month)		
Less than NGN 50,000	30	7.2%
NGN 50,000-100,000	100	24.2%
NGN 100,000-150,000	203	49.2%
More than NGN 150,000	80	19.4%

Source: Primary survey

4.2 Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the service quality dimensions and overall customer satisfaction. The results showed that all five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) were significantly related to overall satisfaction, with a combined R-squared value of 0.661. The coefficients for all five service quality dimensions were positive and statistically significant, indicating that higher scores on these dimensions are associated with higher levels of overall satisfaction. The highest coefficient was for reliability (0.188), indicating that this dimension had the strongest impact on overall satisfaction. The coefficients for tangibles (0.114), assurance (0.128), responsiveness (0.186), and empathy (0.185) were also significant and indicate the importance of these dimensions in determining overall satisfaction. The constant term in the regression model (2.181) represents the predicted level of overall satisfaction when all service quality dimensions are equal to zero. Since all five dimensions are always greater than zero, the constant term is not meaningful in this context. As shown in Table 2

Table 2: Regression Analysis Results

Service Quality Dimension	Coefficient	Standard Error	T-value	P-value
Tangibles	0.114	0.034	3.34	0.001
Reliability	0.188	0.031	6.02	0.000
Responsiveness	0.186	0.033	5.62	0.000
Assurance	0.128	0.035	3.62	0.000
Empathy	0.185	0.032	5.72	0.000
Constant	2.181	0.174	12.54	0.000

Source: Primary survey

4.3 Correlation Matrix

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the relationships between the five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and overall customer satisfaction. The correlation matrix shows that all five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) are positively and significantly correlated with overall customer satisfaction. The highest correlation coefficient was observed between reliability and overall satisfaction (0.862), followed by empathy (0.859), responsiveness (0.836), assurance (0.795), and tangibles (0.756). As shown in Table 3

Table 3: Correlation Matrix Results

	Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Overall Satisfaction
Tangibles	1	0.601	0.568	0.519	0.583	0.756
Reliability	0.601**	1	0.695	0.671	0.702	0.862
Responsiveness	0.568**	0.695**	1	0.619	0.722	0.836
Assurance	0.519**	0.671**	0.619**	1	0.680	0.795
Empathy	0.583**	0.702**	0.722**	0.680**	1	0.859
Overall	0.756**	0.862**	0.836**	0.795**	0.859**	1

Source: Primary survey

5. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The regression analysis results provide evidence of a strong relationship between service quality dimensions and overall customer satisfaction. Specifically, the results show that all five service quality dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) are significant predictors of overall satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous research in the hospitality industry, which has also found a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

The coefficients for all five service quality dimensions were positive and statistically significant, indicating that higher scores on these dimensions are associated with higher levels of overall satisfaction. The results also suggest that reliability is the most important dimension in determining overall satisfaction, followed closely by responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles. However, these findings have important implications for hotel managers in Abuja, Nigeria. By improving the quality of service provided in each of these five dimensions, hotel managers can increase overall customer satisfaction and ultimately, improve the financial performance of their hotels. These findings suggest that improving any of the service quality dimensions can have a positive impact on overall customer satisfaction. However, the strongest impact on satisfaction is likely to come from improvements in reliability and empathy. Overall, the correlation matrix provides additional support for the importance of service quality in the hotel industry and emphasizes the need for hotel managers to focus on improving service quality to increase customer satisfaction.

It is noteworthy that the findings of this study are consistent with previous research on service quality in the hotel industry, which has identified reliability, empathy, and assurance as important drivers of customer satisfaction. The current study adds to the body of literature by providing insights into the perceptions of hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria, and by highlighting the need for hotel managers to focus on improving these key dimensions of service quality.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study provides several important conclusions regarding the perceptions of service quality among hotel customers in Abuja, Nigeria and the implications for improving guest satisfaction. Service quality is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction in the hotel industry in Abuja. The high level of service quality perceived by hotel customers is a positive sign, but there is still room for improvement. The reliability and empathy dimensions of service quality were identified as the most important factors influencing guest satisfaction. This suggests that hotel managers should prioritize efforts to improve staff empathy and reliability through training programs and performance evaluations. All five dimensions of service quality - reliability, empathy, responsiveness, assurance, and tangibles - were found to have a significant positive effect on overall customer satisfaction. This underscores the importance of maintaining high standards across all aspects of service quality. The regression analysis highlights the importance of service quality in the hotel industry and underscores the need for hotel managers to focus on improving service quality to enhance customer satisfaction.

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested for hotel managers in Abuja, Nigeria:

1. Hotel managers should prioritize efforts to improve staff empathy and reliability, which were identified as the most important factors influencing guest satisfaction. This can be achieved through staff training programs and regular performance evaluations.

2. Hotel managers should focus on improving physical facilities and amenities offered by hotels to enhance guest satisfaction.

3. Regular customer feedback surveys can help Hotel managers to identify areas for improvement of service quality in the hotel industry in Abuja.

4. Hotel managers should develop a culture of excellent customer service to ensure that guests feel valued and appreciated.

Finally, implementing these strategies by Hotel managers will help maintain high standards across all dimensions of service quality and enhance overall customer satisfaction and increase customer loyalty and repeat business.

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