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Measurement of Service Quality in the Hotel Industry

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the study was to measure hotels' service quality performance from the customer perspective. To do so, a performance-only measurement scale (SERVPERF) was administered to 234 customers stayed in three, four and five star hotels in Cappadocia. The results of the study demonstrate that SERVPERF is a reliable and valid tool to measure service quality in the hotel industry. The instrument consists of four dimensions, namely "tangibles", "assurance-responsiveness", "empathy", and "reliability". Hotel customers are expecting more improved services from the hotels in all service quality dimensions. However, hotel customers have the lowest perception scores on tangibles. It is also revealed that empathy is the most important dimension in predicting hotel customers' overall service quality evaluation. In the light of the results, possible managerial implications are discussed and future research subjects are recommended.

KEY WORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The interest in service quality has increased noticeably, and the studies revealed that service quality is a prerequisite for success and survival in today's competitive environment (Ghobadian, Speller and Jones 1994). Especially in recent years, the key to sustainable advantage lies in delivering high quality service that results in satisfied customers (Shemwell, Yavas, and Bilgin 1998). Also, service quality is vital for the hotel industry (Fick and Ritchie 1991) and hotels with high service quality can improve their market share and profitability (Oh and Parks 1997). But first, service quality level of existing services should be measured based on customers' perspective by a reliable and valid measurement tool.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1988) have developed and refined (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1991, 1994) an instrument called SERVQUAL to measure service quality in service organizations. According to the SERVQUAL service quality can be measured by identifying gaps between customers' expectations of the service and their perceptions of the actual performance of the service providers. If expectations are met or exceeded service quality is perceived to be satisfactory. SERVQUAL is initially based on ten original dimensions of service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1985). These dimensions were further collapsed in to five generic dimensions, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al. 1988).

SERVQUAL scale has been widely used to measure service quality in general service sector or particularly in the hotel industry. However, despite its value and popularity, it has received important criticisms since it was developed. A considerable number of criticisms about SERVQUAL focused on the use of expectations as a comparison standard in the measurement of service quality. Many researchers (Cronin and Taylor 1992, 1994; Babakus and Boller 1992; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin and Zeithaml 1993; Brady, Cronin and Brand 2002) emphasized that expectations doesn't provide extra information in measuring service quality. Thus, they suggested that service quality can be measured using a performance-only approach not the gap-based SERVQUAL scale. Especially in recent years, SERVPERF scale was used for measuring service quality in different service establishments, including hotels. (Some of the literature on this subject is mentioned in the literature review below). In parallel with this trend and the comments mentioned above, the study aims to measure hotels' service quality performance from the customer perspective, with a performance-only measurement scale (SERVPERF).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1991, and 1994) emphasized that expectations are one of the most widely used comparison standards in the evaluation of service quality. However, many researchers pointed out that the measurement of expectations is problematic and not necessary in measuring service quality. For example, Carman (1990) emphasized that a major shortcoming of the SERVQUAL is the treatment of expectations. Finn and Lamb (1991) examined the usefulness of SERVQUAL in a retail setting, and concluded that SERVQUAL can't be used to assess perceived service quality in retailing. Brown, Churchill, and Peter (1993) reviewed and examined the three psychometric problems (reliability, discriminant validity, and variance restriction) associated with the use of difference scores to measure service quality. Liljander and Strandvik (1993) emphasized that despite the importance of expectations, their usage are vague and needs to be refined. Teas (1994) drew attention to some validity problems arise when expectations are used as a comparison standard. He indicated that expectations are dynamic in nature and may change according to customer's experiences and consumption situations.

Also, Buttle (1996) specified that the term expectation is polysemic and customers use standards other than expectations to evaluate service quality.

In parallel to the criticisms mentioned above, some researchers (Cronin and Taylor 1992, 1994; Babakus and Boller 1992; Boulding et al. 1993) have argued that measurement of expectations doesn't provide additional information in measuring service quality. Cronin and Taylor (1992, 1994) emphasized that service quality was directly influenced only by perceptions of service performance. Accordingly, they developed an instrument of service performance (SERVPERF) that seems to produce better results than SERVQUAL. Similarly, Boulding et al. (1993) rejected the use of expectations as a comparison standard and recommended performance-only measurement of service quality. In their more recent replication study of SERVPERF; Brady et al. (2002) suggested that service quality can be measured using a performance-only approach as opposed to the gap-based SERVQUAL scale. In this direction, many researches given below revealed that SERVPERF scale was more suitable for measuring service quality in several service industries, including hotel industry.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) conducted a study in fast food, banking, pest control, and dry cleaning industries and concluded that SERVPERF was superior to SERVQUAL. They posited that performance-only items explain more variance in perceived service quality than do difference scores. These results were supported by some other studies conducted in different service industries, namely dental healthcare (dentistry) (McAlexander, Kaldenberg and Koenig 1994; Paul 2003a, b), entertainment park, aerobic school, and investment consulting firm (Lee, Lee and Yoo 2000), fast food restaurants (Jain and Gupta 2004), and hotels (Luk and Layton 2004). On the other hand, Marshall and Smith (2000) demonstrated that SERVPERF had construct validity in the context of retail shopping. Jain and Gupta (2004) compared SERVQUAL and SERVPERF scales in fast food context. They found that the SERVPERF scale was more convergent and discriminate valid scale than SERVQUAL in the measurement of service quality in fast food restaurants. Johns, Avci, and Karatepe (2004) measured service quality delivered by travel agents using a SERVQUAL scale. However, they indicated that performance-only scores (SERVPERF) showed better reliability and validity than difference scores. Zhou (2004) used performance-only measurement of service quality (SERVPERF) in retail banking. Yoo (2005) used SERVPERF to measure service quality of hospitals. Gaur and Agrawal (2006) pointed out that the SERVQUAL fails to serve as univocally reliable and valid measure of retail service quality. Brochado and Marques (2007) compared the performance of five alternative measures of service quality in the high education sector, and they concluded that SERVPERF scale had one of the best results in terms of criterion validity, convergent validity, and explained variance.

Armstrong, Mok, Go and Chan (1997) conducted a cross-cultural study of service quality perceptions in the hotel industry. They concluded that performance-only scale (SERVPERF) provides a better method of service quality measurement. Karatepe and Avci (2002) used SERVPERF to measure service

quality in the hotel industry. Luk and Layton (2004) had a similar study in the hotels. They determined that performance scores outperform gap scores in terms of reliable measurement of service quality. Nadiri and Hussain (2005) used SERVPERF scale to measure service quality provided by the hotels. Results of the study support that SERVPERF is a better predictor of service quality, and performance-only measurement of service quality is sufficient.

METHODOLOGY

A self-administrated questionnaire was used and the SERVPERF scale (performance-only items) was employed in this study. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections; the first section was designed to measure service quality perceptions of the hotel customers. In addition, there was one item for measuring overall service quality level of the hotels with customers' perspective. The second part of the questionnaire includes questions relating to demographic data (nationality, gender etc.) about respondents. Since some researchers (Babakus and Mangold 1992; Karatepe and Avcı 2002) pointed out that five point scale work better and increase response rate and response quality, a five point scale (1=very low and, 5=very high) was preferred for data collection, not the seven point scale on SERVPERF.

The sample of the study consisted of hotel customers staying in three-star, four-star, and five-star hotels in Nevşehir. The province of Nevşehir is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Cappadocia Region, Turkey. According to the Directorate of Culture and Tourism (2008), there were 25 tourism operation licensed hotels. These include three five-star hotels, 16 four-star hotels, and three three-star hotels. Permission had been gained from the hotel managers. Due to some data collection difficulties, a convenience sampling approach was employed and respondents were requested to fill out the questionnaires after their check-out transactions. The guests completed the questionnaires in accompaniment of the researcher as possible and completed questionnaires were taken by the researcher after the completion. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed during July to August 2008. Sixteen questionnaires were eliminated because of incompleteness, and 234 (93%) were found to be useful for analysis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The demographic profiles of the sample are given below (Table 1). More than half of respondents (52%) stayed in four-star hotels. With respect to nationality, 19% were French and Spanish separately, 14% were German, 13% were Japan, 12% were Italian, and 23% were other nationalities (American, Australian, British, and Korean etc). In terms of gender and age, 59% of the respondents were males and 24% were aged between 35-44 categories. The largest group (57%) of respondents had a graduate degree, and 43% of respondents held professional qualifications (doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and so on), and 22% were self employed.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents (n=234)

	Frequency	Percent (%)
<i>Category of the hotels</i>		
3 star	41	17
4 star	121	52
5 star	72	31
<i>Nationality</i>		
French	44	19
Spanish	44	19
German	32	14
Japan	30	13
Italian	29	12
Others	55	23
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	139	59
Female	95	41
<i>Age</i>		
18-24	23	10
25-34	36	15
35-44	55	24
45-54	51	22
55-64	43	18
65 and over	26	11
<i>Education level</i>		
Secondary or high school	33	14
Vocational school	63	27
Graduate degree	134	57
Postgraduate	4	2
<i>Occupation</i>		
Self employed	51	22
Professionals	101	43
Retired	41	18
Students	26	11
Others	15	6

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Psychometric properties of the instrument (reliability and validity) were tested. Reliability and validity are the important criteria that are used to determine the goodness of an instrument. To test the internal consistency among the items and convergent validity of the overall scales, a reliability analysis was used (Sekaran 2003). The overall reliability (Cronbach alpha) score of the instrument was 0.96, at quite high level. Also, the reliability scores calculated for each of the four factors were quite high. This shows that there was good internal consistency among the items within each factor. So, the instrument can be considered to be reliable.

Validity is defined as "the extent to which a scale fully and unambiguously captures the underlying unobservable, construct it is intended to measure" (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Sekaran 2003). There are several different forms of validity (such as face, convergent, construct, and discriminate validity). In

assessing the face validity of an instrument, it was necessary to see how the items were selected (Cavana, Corbett and Lo 2007). The items were the same as the original SERVPERF, is regarded as one of the leading measures of service quality. Further, the items of the instrument were pre-tested with a pilot study. As Fornell and Larcker (1981) mentioned the level of variance extracted is a measure of construct validity. The higher the variance extracted, the more valid is the measure. The instrument used in the study for measuring perceptions produce high level of variance extracted. Also, the high alpha value for the overall scale indicated that convergent validity was met (Parasuraman et al. 1991). So, the instrument can be considered to have validity.

Dimensionality of the Instrument

SPSS 13.0 was used for data analysis. An exploratory factor analysis was performed in order to assess the dimensionality of the instrument. The principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was employed. Factors with eigen value greater than 1.00 and, items with factor loading greater than 0.50 were considered significant and included in the analysis. The reliability analysis was employed to assess the overall reliability score of the instrument and reliability scores for each factor. Only two items with factor loading lower than 0.50 were deleted. As can be seen in Table 2 below, the factor analysis results show that four factors emerged as dimensions of perceived service quality in the hotels. These four factors explained 78% of the total variance. Each factor was labeled in accordance with its composing items and consisted of five items. The first factor (tangibles) explained 59% of the total variance. So, tangibles were particularly important contributor to service quality perceptions in the hotels. The second factor (assurance-responsiveness) explained 8% of the total variance. The third factor (empathy) explained 6%, and the fourth factor (reliability) explained 5% of the total variance.

As can be seen from Table 3, hotel customers have the highest perception score (mean=3.81) related to reliability followed by assurance-responsiveness (mean=3.78), empathy (mean=3.73), and tangibles (mean=3.57) factors, respectively. Also, a reliability item "when you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it" has relatively higher perception score (mean=3.88) than others. However, interestingly two items from other factors have second and third the highest scores. Namely, an empathy item "employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer your questions" has second highest perception score (mean=3.87), and an assurance-responsiveness item "you feel safe in your transaction with the hotel" has third (mean=3.86). In parallel to general factor mean score (tangibles have the lowest), a tangibles item "the hotel has modern-looking equipment" has the lowest perception score (mean=3.53) between items.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was used to investigate the relative importance of the four service quality factors in predicting overall quality. The four service qual-

Table 2. Results of Factor Analysis (n=234)

Factor Name and Items	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Reliability
1. Tangibles		12.98	59.03	0.97
The hotel has modern-looking equipment	0.87			
The hotel's physical facilities are visually appealing	0.86			
The hotel's employees are neat-appearing	0.82			
Materials associated with the service are visually appealing at the hotel	0.83			
The hotel has operating hours convenient to all its customers	0.81			
2. Assurance-responsiveness		1.89	8.61	0.92
Employees of the hotel are never too busy to respond to your requests	0.81			
Employees of the hotel are always willing to help you	0.81			
Employees of the hotel give you prompt service				
You feel safe in your transaction with the hotel	0.78			
Employees of the hotel tell you exactly when services will be performed	0.70			
3. Empathy		1.35	6.17	0.92
The hotel has employees who give you personal attention	0.82			
The hotel has your best interest at heart	0.78			
The hotel gives you individual attention	0.76			
Employees of the hotel understand your specific needs	0.75			
Employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer your questions	0.56			
4. Reliability		1.08	4.93	0.90
The hotel performs the service right the first time	0.75			
When you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it	0.73			
The hotel provides its services at the time it promises to do so	0.71			
When the hotel promises to do something by a certain time, it does so	0.68			
The hotel insists on error-free records	0.56			

Note: KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy:0.94, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 5704.929, $p < 0.001$.

ity factors used as independent variables and overall service quality as dependent variable in the analysis. Analysis results (Table 4) indicated that the regression model was statistically significant. Variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values were examined to test the multicollinearity in the model. Generally, a tolerance value less than 0.10 or VIF value greater than 10 indicates significant multicollinearity problem (Hair et al. 1998). Since, all VIF values were less than 10 and tolerance values were greater than 0.10 there was no evidence of multicollinearity. In addition, Durbin-Watson test score (=1.896) showed that there was no autocorrelation in the analysis. Four factors explained 0.63% of the variance in overall service quality. Empathy was the most important factor (Beta=0.356) in predicting hotel customers' overall service quality perceptions.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Mostly, the same or adapted to original SERVQUAL formats (Parasuraman et al. 1988, 1991) have been used to measure service quality in the hotels. However,

Measurement of Service Quality in the Hotel Industry

Table 3. Mean Values of the Factors and Items

Factor and Items	Means	Standart Deviations
<i>Tangibles</i>	3.57	
The hotel has modern-looking equipment	3.53	0.87
The hotel's physical facilities are visually appealing	3.55	0.86
The hotel's employees are neat-appearing	3.57	0.86
Materials associated with the service are visually appealing at the hotel	3.60	0.81
The hotel has operating hours convenient to all its customers	3.61	0.78
<i>Assurance-responsiveness</i>	3.78	
Employees of the hotel are never too busy to respond to your requests	3.77	0.79
Employees of the hotel are always willing to help you	3.78	0.76
Employees of the hotel give you prompt service	3.77	0.78
You feel safe in your transaction with the hotel	3.86	0.80
Employees of the hotel tell you exactly when services will be performed	3.73	0.74
<i>Empathy</i>	3.73	
The hotel has employees who give you personal attention	3.69	0.73
The hotel has your best interest at heart	3.70	0.75
The hotel gives you individual attention	3.74	0.78
Employees of the hotel understand your specific needs	3.65	0.76
Employees of the hotel have the knowledge to answer your questions	3.87	0.75
<i>Reliability</i>	3.81	
The hotel performs the service right the first time	3.85	0.82
When you have a problem, the hotel shows a sincere interest in solving it	3.88	0.87
The hotel provides its services at the time it promises to do so	3.82	0.86
When the hotel promises to do something by a certain time, it does so	3.81	0.86
The hotel insists on error-free records	3.70	0.81

there are not many published research about the performance-only measurement (SERVPERF) of service quality in the hotel industry. This study supports the argument of some researchers (cited in the literature review above) that a performance-only measurement (SERVPERF) is a good predictor of service quality, and sufficient. Also, some researchers highlighted administration difficulties of SERVQUAL. Bouman and van der Wiele (1992) claimed that respondents appear to be bored and sometimes confused by two administrations (before-and-after approach to measure expectations and perceptions) of SERVQUAL. Similarly, Buttle (1996) pointed out that those two administrations of SERVQUAL cause boredom and confusion. Since SERPERF

Table 4. Results of Regression Analysis

Independent variables	Beta	t- values	Significance	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)		1.361	0.17		
Tangibles	0.119	2.069	0.04	0.462	2.164
Assurance-responsiveness	0.188	2.959	0.00	0.380	2.633
Empathy	0.356	6.045	0.00	0.441	2.268
Reliability	0.245	3.571	0.00	0.325	3.075

Adjusted R square=0.63, F=104.220, Sig.=0.00, Durbin-Watson test score=1.896

instrument is a less time consuming (it reduces by 50% the number of items), more user friendly, reliable, and valid measurement tool, it can be preferred to SERVQUAL.

In this study, service quality performance of three, four and five star hotels in Cappadocia is analyzed based on customers' perspective, using a performance-only measurement scale (SERVPERF). The results of the study demonstrate that the scale consists of four dimensions: tangibles, assurance-responsiveness, empathy, and reliability. It is found that tangibles are particularly important contributor (explained more than half of the total variance) to service quality perceptions in the hotels. It is not surprising, since services are intangible; hotel customers may use tangible cues of the services they received as the main indicators of service quality. However, interesting way hotel customers have the lowest perception scores on tangibles with respect to dimensions and items. The results also demonstrate that the most important dimension in predicting hotel customers' overall service quality evaluation is empathy, followed by reliability, assurance-responsiveness, and tangibles respectively.

Despite, Parasuraman et al.'s (1988, 1991) claim that five-dimensional structure of service quality (SERVQUAL) are general, one of the major criticisms about SERVQUAL is relating to dimensionality of the instrument. Criticisms include the number of dimensions, and their stability from context to context (Bouman and van der Wiele 1992; Asubonteng, McCleary and Swan 1996; Buttle 1996). Parallel to these criticisms, I found that service quality perceptions consist of four dimensions, namely tangibles, assurance-responsiveness, empathy, and reliability in the hotels. Akan (1995) conducted a study in the hotel industry and examined whether the SERVQUAL dimensions apply in an international environment, specifically in Turkey. She identified seven service quality dimensions of hotels and emphasized that although SERVQUAL is a valuable tool; its dimensions are not generic or universal. The results of two similar studies (Karatepe and Avci 2002; Nadiri and Hussain 2005) showed that SERVPERF scale consists of two dimensions instead of five-dimensional structure in the hotel industry. The studies of Luk and Layton (2004) and Akbaba (2006) conducted in the hotel industry confirmed the five-dimensional structure of service quality, but some of the dimensions were also different. All these findings support the claims that the numbers of service quality dimensions vary depending on the particular service being offered, and different measures should be developed for different service context (Carman 1990; Finn and Lamb 1991; Babakus and Boller 1992; Bouman and van der Wiele 1992).

The results of the study suggest some practical implications for hotel managers. Clearly, the use of SERVPERF scale provides useful information to hotel managers for developing quality improvement strategies, and in order to gain a competitive advantage. As Nadiri and Hussain (2005) mentioned, performance-only scale (SERVPERF) provides a diagnostic value about the level of service performance from the customers' perspective. It also reduces the

cost of service quality survey and facilitates the administration of the survey (Luk and Layton 2004).

In general, the results reveal that hotel customers staying at the hotels in Cappadocia are expecting improved services from the hotels. Thus, hotel managers should take measures to improve service quality provided by the hotels in all service quality dimensions. Dimension scores and item scores within those dimensions give important signals about service areas that need to be improved in the hotels. This might be enabling to a better utilization of limited resources and more effective marketing strategies. Specifically, hotel managers should pay more attention to the tangible aspects of the service quality because of; customers have the lowest perception scores on tangible dimension. With regard to improvement of the tangibles dimension, hotel managers should focus on specific items (improvement areas) related to this dimension. These areas include equipment and physical facilities, appearance of employees, materials associated with the service, and operating hours in the hotels. On the other hand, hotel manager should not forget that empathy was the most important dimension in predicting hotel customers' overall service quality evaluations.

There were some basic limitations in the study that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and a convenience sampling method was employed to collect data. So, the results might not represent the hotel industry in the whole country. Second, only one item was included to the scale to measure overall service quality perceptions of hotel customers. Thus, it was not possible to say something about its reliability. Several research issues for future studies can be considered. For example, to be able to generalize the results a study that would include more hotels at the national level could be made. Performance of the hotels' service quality according to different nationalities (cultural groups) could be analyzed. Also, since performance of the hotels' service quality may be different by the season, the study could be conducted in peak and low seasons, comparatively.

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