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PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY THROUGH INTERACTION, PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND OUTCOME QUALITY OF HOTEL SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The current study measures the customer satisfaction level of service quality through interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality in three-, four- and five-star hotels of North Cyprus, and presents a hypothesized model for customer satisfaction using performance-only scale. For this purpose the measuring instrument was administered to 371 hotel customers. The results of the path analysis evidenced that interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality exert significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. The hypothesized model and results are discussed in detail.

KEYWORDS: Customer satisfaction, interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality, and hotel services

INTRODUCTION

Service quality has been shown to be a difficult construct to understand and measure due to the inherent intangibility (Shostack, 1977), inseparability and heterogenic (Booms and Bitner, 1981) characteristics of services. It is the most debated and controversial topics in the literature on services marketing concern the conceptualization and measurement of service quality perceptions (Athanassopoulos, 2000).

Service quality promotes customer satisfaction, stimulates intention to return, and encourages recommendations (Arasli, Ekiz and Katircioglu, 2008; Nadiri and Hussain, 2005). Customer satisfaction increases profitability, market share, and return on investment (Hackl and Westlund, 2000; Barsky and Labagh, 1992; LeBlanc, 1992; Stevens et al., 1995; Legoherel, 1998; Fornell, 1992; Halstead and Page, 1992). According to the Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL model, service quality can

be measured by identifying the gaps between customers' expectations of the service to be rendered and their perceptions of the actual performance of the service. SERVQUAL is based on five dimensions of service (Parasuraman et al., 1988): tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

Past research shows that Parasuraman et al.'s (1985, 1988) conceptualization is well accepted, and dominates the empirical service quality literature. Since then, several researchers have sought to define and measure the concept of service quality (Carman 1990; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Teas 1994) and brought some criticism. For example, Cronin and Taylor (1992) criticized the validity of the disconfirmation paradigm within the service quality conceptualization. It has been argued that the number of dimensions and the nature of SERVQUAL construct may be industry specific. The fit of five-dimensions of SERVQUAL carried out in different service activities has always been an important question in several studies that these dimensions proposed by SERVQUAL do not replicate. Many times the SERVQUAL scale has been found uni-dimensional (Angur, et al., 1999; Babakus and Mangold, 1992; Babakus and Boller, 1992) and sometimes with even ten dimensions (Carman, 1990) and in some cases, it has been found to be two-dimensional (Karatepe and Avci, 2002; Ekinci, et al., 2003, Nadiri and Hussain, 2005).

It has also been argued that performance-only (SERVPERF) measure explains more of the variance in an overall measure of service quality than SERVQUAL instrument (Cronin and Taylor, 1994). Although it is apparent that subjective perceptions of service quality are based on multiple dimensions, there is no general agreement as to the nature or content of these dimensions. However, service quality evaluation is a highly complex process that may operate at several levels of abstraction (see: Carman, 1990). The missing link appears to be a unifying theory, or conceptualization, that reflects this complexity and the hierarchical nature of the construct (Chen et al., 2003).

Brady and Cronin (2001) recently proposed a hierarchical conceptualization of service quality that focuses on three primary dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality. Interaction quality deals with the dimensions of attitude, behavior and expertise of the customers and salesperson. The physical environment encompasses ambient conditions, design, and social factors of the service

area. Outcome quality deals with social factors, waiting time, tangibles, and valence. Valence is a relative capacity to unite, react or interact. The hierarchical study of Brady and Cronin (2001) helps to establish this present study of service quality. Brady and Cronin (2001) also suggest that there is still work to be done in this area. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap by implimenting this hierarchical approach of service quality in North Cyprus hotel industry. Thus, the study aims to measures the customer satisfaction level of service quality through interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality in three-, four- and five-star hotels of North Cyprus.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Service quality perceptions are multilevel and multi-dimensional (Dabholkar et al., 1996). The hierarchical approach model by Brady and Cronin (2001) in figure 1 is the most recent conceptualization of perceptions, multilevel and multi-dimensional, of service quality. It was created from integrating previous conceptualizations with a new approach that acknowledges that the service encounter operates on various hierarchical levels. Previous research made Brady and Cronin consider two views of the concept of service quality. The first view is what Brady and Cronin call the "Nordic" perspective (Gronroos, 1984). In this perspective, dimensions of service quality are defined in global terms as consisting of functional and technical quality, and management is mainly via "internal marketing" of a pro-customer service culture to the employees of the service firm. The second, the "American" perspective (Parasuraman, et al., 1988), uses service encounter characteristics (reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurances, and tangibles). To manage service quality, managers must calibrate, track and influence such characteristics.

In Brady and Cronin's (2001) integration, elements of both the Nordic and American perspectives are incorporated (see Figure 1). Furthermore, for each dimension, Brady and Cronin (2001) urge the managers of service firms to pay attention to reliability, responsiveness, and empathy of service providers.

This hierarchical model suggests that each of the primary dimensions of service quality (interaction, environment, and outcome) has three sub-dimensions. Customers aggregate their evaluations of the sub-dimensions to form their perceptions of an organization's performance in each of the three primary dimensions. Then those perceptions lead to an overall service

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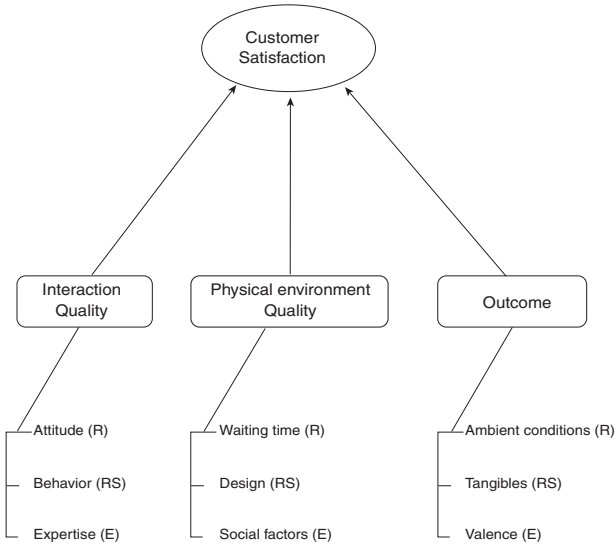

Note: R=Reliability, RS=Responsiveness, E=Empathy

"Figure 1: Hierarchical model of hotel service quality" HERE!

Interaction Quality	The employee-customer interactions that take place during service devilery.
Attitude	The attitude and personality of the service personal.
Behavior	The service personal's behaviors during service delivery.
Expertise	Whether the service personnel really know their job.
Physical Environment Quality	The surrounding environment in the service encounter.
Ambient conditions	Ambient conditions pertaining to non-visual aspects, such as temperature scent, music etc.
Design	Facility design refers to the layout or architecture vof the envionment and can be either functional or aesthetic.
Social factors	ocial factors refer to the number of type of the people evident in the service setting as well as their behavior.
Outcome Quality	What the customer is left with when when service is rendered.
Waiting time	Service puntuality.
Tangibles	Customers use any tangible evidence of the service outcome as a proxy of judging performance.
Valence	Valence captures attributes that control whether customers believe the service outcome is good or bad, regardless of their evaluation of any other aspect of the experience.

Source: Adapted from Brady and Cronin (2001).

quality perception (perceived service quality). Figure 1 shows the developed model for the current research for hotels, which measure service quality as the service provider's overall performance, which is evaluated in three aspects: interaction, environment, and outcome. And each of these aspects is in turn evaluated by another three aspects respectively, thus, this categorization yields nine distinct sub-dimensions that are divided evenly among the three primary dimensions, which define the basis of perceived service quality.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Interaction quality

Services are often inextricably entwined with their human representatives (Brady and Cronin, 2001). In many service fields, a person is perceived to be the service. Service quality is produced in the interaction between a customer and elements between the service organizations (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Since services are an essential or permanent attribute and characterized as being inseparable, therefore the interpersonal two way flow that takes place during the service delivery often have the greatest impact on the service quality perceptions (Brady and Cronin, 2001). These interactions are identified as the employee-customer interface and the key to element in a service exchange. Therefore, the following hypothesis was generated:

H_1: Perceptions of interaction quality will have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.

The presented model shows that interaction quality is composed of three distinct factors: attitude, expertise, and behavior.

Physical environment quality

A number of studies have considered that physical or built environment has an influence on customer service evaluations (Crane and Clarke, 1988; Bitner, 1992; McAlexander et al., 1994). The intangibility of service the customers are often required to be present at the premises during the process, the surrounding environment can have a significant influence on the on perceptions of the overall quality of the service encounter (Ekiz and Arasli, 2007). Parasuraman et al. (1985) were perhaps the first to identify several environmental considerations. Therefore, it is clear that the physical environment plays an important role in the formation of service quality perceptions. Thus, the following hypothesis was generated:

H_2: Perceptions of physical environment quality will have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Three factors influence the perceived quality of the physical environment: ambient conditions, facility design, and social factors.

Outcome quality

Consumer usually evaluates a service encounter performance in two ways. These two ways are technical quality and functional quality. The technical quality describes what the customer receives from a service provider during a service encounter or transaction. Therefore, the technical quality of a service encounter significantly affects customer perceptions of service quality (Arasli, Ekiz and Katircioglu, 2008; Gronroos, 1984). Brady and Cronin (2001) reports that technical outcome is referred to as the "actual" service and posit that it is a determinant in assessing the quality of a service encounter, and also they further reported that the service outcome is referred to as the "service product" and suggest that it is the relevant feature customers evaluate after service delivery. Therefore the Three factors influence the perceived quality of the outcome quality: waiting time, tangible elements, and valence.

HYPOTHESIZED MODEL

After a careful observation and evidence from complaints of dissatisfaction among North Cyprus hotel industry customers, the present study sets out to address this problem by measuring customer satisfaction level through perceptions gained on interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality of North Cyprus hotel services by employing a performance-only scale. The model proposes that interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality influences customer satisfaction (figure 2).

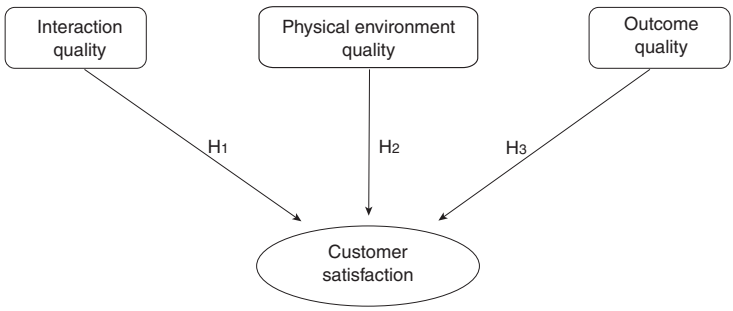

Figure 2: Hypothesized model

METHODOLOGY

The sample

The hypothesized relationships were tested using data collected form foreign customers who were staying in three-, four- and five-star hotels in North Cyprus. There are seven five-star, six four-star, and eighteen three-star hotels in North Cyprus (Tourism and Planning Office, 2006). The total bed capacity in these hotels is 13,755. Data for the study were collected between April and June 2006 through the use of judgmental sampling. Judd et al. (1991, p.136) define judgmental sampling or purposive sampling as "picking cases that are judged to be typical of the population in which we are interested, assuming that errors of judgment in the selection will tend to counterbalance one another".

After confirming the understandability of the scale in the study, 500 questionnaires were personally distributed by the research team to foreign hotel customers. Respondents were requested to fill out the questionnaires in a self-administered manner and return them directly to the research team. 371 usable questionnaires were personally retrieved from the respondents for a response rate of 74.2% of the original sample. The instrument was prepared in English language.

The instrument

For this study, a modified version of performance-only items was used to measure customer's perceptions of the hotel services in North Cyprus. The self-administered questionnaire composed of 10 questions and some demographic questions; age, gender, education, length of stay and country of origin. All items were adopted from Brady and Cronin (2001). To modify the instrument, as recommended by Angur et al. (1996), respondents asked to group the items with which they perceived to have high resemblance. The resulting instrument was comprised on four dimensions; interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality and customer satisfaction. This procedure is also recommended by Hemmasi et al. (1994) in order to fine tune any measurement instrument.

RESULTS

As demonstrated in Table 1, the respondents were almost equally distributed as male and female (51.8% - 48.2% respectively). Majority of the respondents (62.0%) were older than 47 years. More than sixty percent of the respondents had either vocational school or undergraduate education.

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With respect to the duration of stay, 67.7% of the respondents stayed for more than 10 days for their holiday. Additionally, more than sixty percent of the respondents were British.

Table 1: Demographic breakdown of the sample (n=371)

	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	179	48.2
Male	192	51.8
Total	371	100.0
Age		
18-27	22	5.9
28-37	50	13.5
38-47	69	18.6
48-57	126	34.0
58 and above	104	28.0
Total	371	100.0
Education		
Primary school	6	1.6
Secondary and high school	88	23.7
Vocational school	140	37.7
Undergraduate	104	28.1
Graduate/doctor	33	8.9
Total	371	100.0
Duration of stay		
1-5 days	31	8.4
6-10 days	89	23.9
11 and above	251	67.7
Total	371	100.0
Nationality		
British	225	60.7
Scottish	42	11.3
German	56	15.1
Others (from Europe and Asia)	48	12.9
Total	371	100.0

Table 2 shows scale items, reliability analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis results. The overall reliability of the scale is found to be coefficient alpha 0.90 at the aggregate level. This means that the overall coefficient alpha exceeds 0.70 cut-off value recommended by Nunnally (1978). As for the reliability coefficients for each variable in the model depicted in

Figure 2, coefficients alphas are 0.85, 0.79, 0.79, and 0.89 for interaction quality, physical environment quality, outcome quality and customer satisfaction, respectively. All coefficient alphas are deemed acceptable, above the suggested level.

A rigorous test was undertaken for the issues of convergent and discriminant validity, and dimensionality of the scale. Specifically, confirmatory factor analysis was employed to provide support for the issues of dimensionality, convergent and discriminant validity of the instrument. Table 2 indicates a reasonable fit of the seven-factor model to the data on the basis of a number of fit statistics. As also demonstrated in Table 2, the majority of the factor loadings are above 0.70, and all t-values are significant. Overall, these results provide support for the dimensionality, convergent and discriminant validity of the scale (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

Table 2: items, reliability analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis results

Scale Items	Average variance	_* loadings	Standardized	t-values
Interaction quality (INTQ)	0.71	0.85		
Overall, I'd say the quality of my interaction with this hotels' employees is excellent.			0.75	16.01
The attitude of this hotels' employees demonstrates their willingness to help me.			0.77	16.43
This hotels' employees respond quickly to my needs			0.86	19.04
Physical environment quality (PEQ)	0.66	0.79		
I would say that this hotels' physical environment is one of the best in its industry.			0.78	16.02
I would rate this hotels' physical environment highly.		0.85	17.56	
Outcome quality (OUTQ)	0.73	0.79		
I always have an excellent experience when I visit this hotel.			0.73	14.96
I am satisfied with the quality that this hotel provides to its guests.			0.82	17.05
Customer satisfaction (CSAT)	0.68	0.89		
This hotel provides a superior service.			0.79	11.93

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I am satisfied with the quality that this provided.		0.89	20.64
Overall, I am satisfied with the service of this hotel.		0.83	18.50
Fit indices:			
X^2/df=	4.81	CFI=	0.95
GFI=	0.95	NFI=	0.94
AGFI=	0.89	NNFI=	0.91
RMSEA=	0.046	Overall reliability =	0.90

Note: *Cronbach Alpha score, all scores are greater than the recommended value of 0.70. Each item is measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). All loadings are significant at the .01 level or better.

Additional assessment was undertaken using composite scores. Specifically, composite scores for each study variable were calculated by averaging scores across items representing that dimension. As demonstrated in Table 3, all correlations among the study variables are significant at the 0.01 level. The correlations among the study variables range from 0.41 (interaction quality and physical environment quality) to 0.69 (outcome quality and customer satisfaction). Means and standard deviations of composite scores of the study are also given in Table 3. Overall, these results provide additional support for the discriminant validity of the scale.

Table 3: Correlations, means and standard deviations of the study variables

Variables		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Interaction quality	(INTQ)	1.00			
Physical environment quality	(PEQ)	0.41	1.00		
Outcome quality	(OUTQ)	0.51	0.57	1.00	
Customer satisfaction	(CSAT)	0.58	0.56	0.69	1.00
Means		4.12	3.78	3.81	4.15
Standard deviations		0.62	0.74	0.71	0.71

Notes: Composite scores were calculated by averaging core across items representing that construct. The scores ranged from 1 to 5. A higher score indicates a more favorable response. All correlations are significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The hypothesized relationships demonstrated in the preceding parts were tested using path analysis (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1996). The hypotheses refer to the effects of quality perceptions on customer satisfaction are

supported. Specifically, the hypotheses refer to the effects of interaction quality, physical environment and outcome quality on customer satisfaction are found to be acceptable, see figure 3.

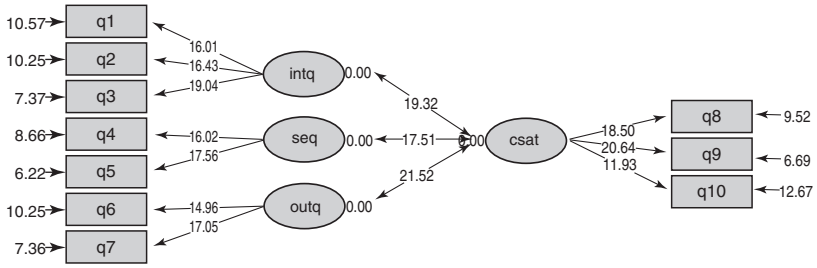

Figure 3: Model with t-values

A careful examination of Table 4 reveals that interaction quality (INTQ) has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction (CSAT). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported. Table 4 also shows that physical environment quality (PEQ) exerts a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction (CSAT) which reveals support for hypothesis 2. Additionally, findings demonstrate that outcome quality (OUTQ) depicts a significant a positive relationship with customer satisfaction (CSAT). Thus, hypothesis 3 is also supported. Quality perceptions; interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality, jointly explain 50.4% of the variance in customer satisfaction.

Table 4: Path analysis results

	Standard parameter estimates (ML)*	t-values**	Significance
Impact on Customer satisfaction			
H1 INTQ _ CSAT	0.74	19.32	0.0001
H2 PEQ _ CSAT	0.78	17.51	0.0001
H3 OUTQ _ CSAT	0.79	21.52	0.0001
Explained variance R^2=0.504			

Note: *Maximum likelihood. **p<0.05. All hypothesized relationships are significant and supported.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study revealed the analysis of customer satisfaction level through interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome

quality of foreign customers using North Cyprus hotel services. It is found that interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality influences customer satisfaction in the hotel industry setting. The findings also support for the contention put forth by researchers that service quality is an important influencer of customer satisfaction (cf. Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000).

According to the results of path analysis, interaction quality exerts significant positive effect on customer satisfaction; the Hypothesis (H_1) is supported. Physical environment quality exerts significant positive effect on customer satisfaction, the hypotheses (H_2) is supported, and outcome quality exerts significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the path analysis results suggest that the major predictors of customer satisfaction were interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality. The study shows that the customer satisfaction reflects the customer's feelings about multiple encounters and experiences with the hotel industry, whereas service quality may be tempered by perceptions of value or by the experiences of others that may not be as good.

The results point to one general recommendation for managing service offerings and several specific conclusions for managing customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. Overall, the organizing framework for managing customer evaluations of a service offering should focus first on service quality dimensions of interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality. These three dimensions yield clean and convincing directions for designing service offerings which will result into customer satisfaction. Managers should also be aware that customer satisfaction is based on service quality and other aspects of the service offerings. Managers should probably consider the value or contribution to customer satisfaction of each dimensions of the service quality and allocate the services accordingly.

The hotel managers should have a clear concept of what service quality means before they can attempt to measure service quality. Also quality improvements by management should not just focus on improving customer satisfaction but also target on improving the customers' perception of service quality. In other words the service providers should try to continuously improve both service quality and customer satisfaction. In this era of intense competition, satisfying customers may not be sufficient.

One of the apparent limitations of this study is the low sample size, if the sample size of the population is increased, the analysis could provide

maybe improved results. Another limitation is also related with the sample size that the exploratory factor analysis was found to be uni-dimensional in this study.

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