

A study of hotel guest perceptions in Mauritius

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Abstract

Hotels in Mauritius have faced difficult times during the 1990s because of changing customer demands and increasing competition from other tourist destinations like the Seychelles, the Pacific and Caribbean islands. The country's hospitality and tourism sectors are trying to augment and offer more than the traditional "sea, sun and sand" concept which, until recently, has formed the core of the tourism product. Hotels have also not responded satisfactorily to the demands of customers owing to lack of management and staff training in service quality. The purpose of this study was to assess customers' expectations and perceptions of service provided by hotels of Mauritius and to highlight how the service factors were related to customer satisfaction. The hotel managers' perceptions of tourists' expectations and the tourists' actual expectations were also evaluated. Factor analysis with Varimax rotation was carried out and nine service quality dimensions were derived of 39 service attributes. The results also showed that customers' perceptions of service quality in the hotel industry for Mauritius fell short of their expectations, with the "empathy" dimension having the largest gap.



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Introduction

Mauritius has emerged as an important tourist destination in the Indian Ocean. In 1980, the number of tourist arrivals was, with tourists spending around US\$110 million (Bank of Mauritius Statistics, 2000). In year 2000, 20 years later, tourist arrivals increased by 560 per cent, to 656,453, and foreign exchange earnings increased by 430 per cent, amounting to US\$475 million. Tourism receipts in 1980 represented 7.2 per cent of the country's GNP as against 20.6 per cent in 2000. According to the estimates of the Central Statistical Office (2001) estimates, Mauritius attracted around 700,000 tourists by December 2002, thus generating a total of US\$0.5 billion. Hotel development was regarded as one of the main priorities of the Government and has seen a dramatic increase from 43 in 1980 to 95 in 2000, with an overall growth rate of 182 per cent.

The tourist industry in Mauritius has become the second most important foreign exchange earner after the manufacturing sector. The main objective of the Government and of the Mauritius Tourism and Promotion Authority (MTPA) has been to continue to attract "high spending" visitors whose economic impacts are acknowledged to be more beneficial to the economy than low spending visitors (Wing, 1985). In the 1970s, the promotion of Mauritius as an international tourist destination emphasised the uniqueness of its beaches, but such campaigns proved to be ineffective. An effort was made in the 1990s to relaunch the tourism sector in the country and the emphasis of the campaign was on the total tourism product concept in terms of the friendliness of the host population, the shopping experience, the quality and variety

of the food and the relative safety of the visitors (Wing, 1985).

In tandem with the above governmental attempts to promote Mauritius, the hotel industry has also contributed by embracing the idea of "quality management" and initiating various programmes to improve the quality of service to meet with international hotel standards (Nield and Kozak, 1999; Ministry of Tourism, 1998). Some hotels have already been accredited with the ISO 9000 certification and others are striving towards achievement of this goal (Sun Resorts, 1996).

Despite these initiatives, according to the Mauritian Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (1999) a substantial proportion of tourists remain dissatisfied, expressing a need for improved service quality in hotels. Specifically, complaints pertain to high food and beverage prices, a limited variety of food served and poor language and communication ability of staff. Unfortunately, most service quality studies conducted in hotels of Mauritius provide little help. They lack detail and little empirical evidence has been forthcoming on the evaluation of service quality from the perspective of the customer. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that hotel managers rarely undertake research into the area of service quality and thus have an impoverished idea of their customers' expectations and experiences. Therefore, there would appear to be an urgent need for research that takes account of customer perceptions and experiential impressions, plus a comparative view of service quality from the perspectives of managers and customers.

The present authors concur fully with Saleh and Ryan's (1992) notion that other factors are responsible for tourists' appraisal of hotel service quality (location, climate and

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so on). However, the focus of the present study is on “controllable” service elements. In other words, the ability to create a satisfactory experience for guests (and hopefully encourage repeat business) will depend on the hotels’ tangible and intangible service-related variables.

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

- 1 To assess the customers’ expectations and perceptions of service quality in hotels of Mauritius and to identify the gap (if any) between those expectations and perceptions.
- 2 To identify and compare the perceptions of hotel managers who are responsible for managing quality and the customers in these hotels who experience and judge it.

Context

In the service industry, definitions of service quality tend to focus on meeting customers’ needs and requirements and how well the service delivered meets their expectations (Lewis and Booms, 1983). In order to deliver and maintain service quality, an organisation must first identify what it is that constitutes quality to those whom it serves (Grönroos, 1984). Grönroos (1984) classified service quality into two categories: technical quality, primarily focussed on what consumers actually received from the service and the functional quality focussed on the process of service delivery. Similarly, Klaus (1985) proposes that service quality may be explained in physical, situational and behavioural terms; that is, what is delivered, the circumstances for the delivery, and how it is delivered. He argues that service quality standards are commonly determined by providers’ past experience and that they most often reflect the physical and technical aspects of a service because these are most easily measurable.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) identify over 200 attributes of service quality. The pool of attributes was derived from an extensive series of interviews with customers in four different commercial services. Using factor analysis five main dimensions of service quality were identified. They were:

- 1 tangibles;
- 2 reliability;
- 3 responsiveness;
- 4 assurance; and
- 5 empathy.

An explanation for each of these dimensions follows in Table I.

The importance of the above dimensions in understanding service quality cannot be underestimated. However, comparing service expectations with service perceptions has offered a more insightful perspective. Perceptions of quality by those who provide services and those who consume them often have been reported to differ (Klaus, 1985; Reynolds and Jamieson, 1954; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). In such cases, attributes are transformed by management into service standards, which may not be consistent with consumers’ perceptions and experiences (La Page, 1983). Solomon *et al.* (1985) concluded that a customer assesses quality by his or her perception of the way in which the service is performed. As a result, service quality has been defined as the outcome of a comparison between expectations of a service and what is perceived to be received (Czepiel *et al.*, 1985; Klaus, 1985; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). The gap between expectations and perceptions of performance determines the level of service quality from a consumer’s perspective.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) developed the gaps model and the subsequent SERVQUAL instrument designed to identify and measure the gaps between customers’ expectations and perceptions of the service received. Service quality from the consumer’s perspective depends on the direction and degree of difference between the expected service and the perceived service. Thus by comparing customers’ expected service with customers’ perceived service, hotels, for example, can determine whether its service standard is appropriate

The SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1991) has proved popular, being used in many studies of service quality. This is because it has a generic service application and is a practical approach to the area. A number of researchers have applied the SERVQUAL model to measure service quality in the hospitality industry, with modified constructs to suit specific hospitality situations (Saleh and Ryan, 1992; Bojanic and Rosen, 1993; Getty and Thompson, 1994; Lam and Zhang, 1998; Tsang and Qu, 2000). Similarly, the present study uses a modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument to assess the quality of hotel services in Mauritius.

The study aims to assess the perceptions and expectations of hotel customers in Mauritius and find out if the service quality gaps exist. The results of the quantitative assessment of service quality may provide some insights on how customers rate the service quality of a particular hotel.

Methodology

Mauritius was chosen as a holiday destination in which selected hotel managers and customers had demonstrated their commitment to improve service quality by completing the questionnaires, which formed part of the research design. Questionnaires were designed according to the SERVQUAL model of measuring the gaps between managers' and customers' expectations and perceptions. In particular, the questionnaire design enabled two major gaps suggested by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) to be explored:

- 1 Gap 1. The management perception gap.
- 2 Gap 5. The perceived service quality gap.

A descriptive research design and a cross sectional survey were used in the study. A self-administer survey questionnaire was used to collect data from the targeted samples.

Amended SERVQUAL instrument: questionnaire

Following an extensive literature review (LeBlanc, 1992; Reisenger and Waryzsack, 1994; Lam and Zhang, 1998; Choi and Chu, 2000) and exploratory interviews with ten hotel managers of different categories of hotels (classification based on number of bedrooms[1]) and 25 tourists of different nationalities, a construct of 39 service quality attributes relevant to the hotel industry of Mauritius was developed to identify and analyse service gaps between hotel guests' expectations and perceptions, and this constituted a major part of the questionnaire. To improve the readability of the questionnaire by tourists of different nationalities, the instrument was printed in two languages; namely, English and French.

The data collection instrument used consists of a four-part self-administered

questionnaire. The first section measures hotel guests' expectations of service quality in the hotel of their stay. Respondents are asked to indicate this level based on a Likert-type scale from 1 (very low expectation) to 7 (very high expectation). The second part of the questionnaire examines the hotel customers' perceptions of service quality, while the third part ascertains the overall level of satisfaction with the level of service quality experienced in the hotel. The last part of the questionnaire elicits filter data such as demographics. Hotel managers were also asked to complete the first part of the questionnaire so as to assess their perceptions of customers' expectations in hotels with the customers' recorded perceptions and to determine whether differences exist.

Pilot test

An appropriate pilot test study was conducted with 30 tourists in hotels of Mauritius, which was sampled on the basis of the number of bedrooms[1]. The results of the pilot test provided valuable information and the instrument was amended accordingly.

The target population of the study consisted of all the international tourists who stayed in the different categories of beach hotels of Mauritius and hotel managers working in those respective hotels. A stratified sampling method was used during the period from October 1999 to May 2000. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed to hotel customers with a personally addressed letter requesting customer participation and 410 responded positively. The customers were also instructed to complete the questionnaire and to leave it at the reception in the envelope provided to ensure confidentiality. In total, 401 questionnaires were found to be usable in the

Table I

Dimensions of service quality

Tangibles represent the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel and presence of users. Tangibles can create an atmosphere. The tangible aspect of a service is one of the few dimensions that a potential service patron can know and evaluate in advance of participation

Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Promises made to an organisation's promotional efforts can contribute to participant expectations. Consistency of performance at the highest standard is crucial to reliability

Responsiveness is the willingness to help participants and provide prompt attention. Hotel patrons expect their requests to be handled quickly and accurately

Assurance indicates courteous and knowledgeable employees who convey trust and confidence. Assurance contains elements of the organisation's credibility, competence and security

Empathy dimension includes caring and individual attention to users. Empathy expresses an understanding of the participants' needs

Source: Parasuraman *et al.* (1985)

study representing a response rate of 57.28 per cent.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using factor analysis, *t*-tests and ANOVA. Paired *t*-test was employed to test the significant differences between the two means of expectations and perceptions. The 39 service quality variables in relation to their gap scores (perceptions minus expectations) were factor analysed to determine the existence of underlying dimensions of service quality. A principal component analysis with orthogonal VARIMAX rotation was conducted on the 39 items measuring the service quality of hotels in Mauritius. The objective of the analysis was to summarise the information contained in the original 39 variables measuring service quality of hotels in Mauritius into smaller sets of explanatory composite factors, which define the fundamental constructs assumed to underlie the original variables. Factors with an eigenvalue equal to or greater than 1 were chosen for interpretation. Only variables with factor loading coefficients of 0.40 were considered; that is, items with less than 0.4 were excluded. A reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was performed to test the reliability and internal consistency of each of the perception and expectation attributes.

Results

The study findings are presented in the following order:

- 1 Identification of service quality dimensions.
- 2 Customers' perceptions.
- 3 Hotel managers' perceptions.
- 4 Profile of the hotel customers.

Identification of nine service quality dimensions

Data from 401 questionnaires were analysed and nine factors were identified which, between them, accounted for 61.7 per cent of the variation in the data from the original 39 variables. The first two factors accounted for approximately around half of the total variance. Nine factors with 36 variables were defined by the original 39 variables that loaded most heavily on them (loading 0.40). These factors were regarded as theoretically appropriate, corresponding to the "tangibles", "responsiveness", "reliability",

"assurance", and "empathy" identified by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), plus the emergence of new factors such as:

- "food and service related factors";
- "extra room amenities factors";
- "staff communication skills and additional factors";
- "room attraction and décor factors";
- "staff outlook and accuracy factors"; and
- "hotel surroundings and environmental factors".

Furthermore given the current sample size (*n* = 401), the reliability test indicated that the alpha co-efficients for the attributes were high, ranging from 0.7 to 0.9, well above the minimum value of 0.5, which is considered acceptable as an indication of reliability (Nunally, 1967).

The nine dimensions of service quality and gap analysis

Table II lists the mean scores on the expectations and perceptions scales for each of the 39 service quality attributes and the mean gap score. The paired *t*-test was used to test the significant mean difference (gap) between tourists' expectations and expectations of service quality.

Gap analysis (gap 5)

A total of 36 attributes had relatively high expectation scores (*M* ≥ 5.00) and three had expectation scores of *M* ≤ 5.0; namely, "visually appealing promotional brochures", "hotel's proximity to events and attractions" and "provision of tea- and coffee-making facilities in the rooms". The perceptions scores were consistently lower than the expectations scores except with regards to two attributes; namely, "provision of utmost privacy to the guests" and "visually appealing promotional brochures". The attributes, which had the lowest, mean scores (*M* ≥ 3.9) was "provision of tea- and coffee-making facilities in the rooms", "projection of quality service by the hotel" and "hotel's proximity to events and attractions". A comparison of the overall mean expectation and perception scores also indicated a statistically significant difference between the groups.

The largest gaps were found in the service quality dimensions such as "empathy" and "staff communication skills and additional requirements". The smallest gap was for "extra-room facilities" due to primarily lowest expectations in this area. The nine perceptions scores of service quality in hotels of Mauritius were consistently lower than the expectation scores. The dimensions that

Table II

Service quality gap between tourists' perceptions and expectations in hotel industry of Mauritius ($n = 401$)

Attribute	Expectations mean (SD)	Perceptions mean (SD)	Gap a	t-Value
1. Appealing décor	6.43 (0.65)	6.17 (1.07)	-0.26	4.623*
2. Provision of utmost privacy to guests	5.43 (1.83)	5.68 (1.55)	+0.25	1.978**
3. Provision of clean beaches	6.73 (0.62)	5.99 (1.39)	-0.74	10.024*
4. Neat appearance of staff	6.67 (0.80)	6.26 (1.16)	-0.41	6.273*
5. Visually appealing promotional brochures	4.84 (1.97)	5.30 (1.67)	+0.46	3.631*
6. Respect of environmental norms (recycling bins and stationery materials in rooms)	6.17 (1.13)	4.90 (1.76)	-1.27	13.787*
7. Attractiveness of room	6.38 (1.09)	5.68 (1.40)	-0.70	8.775*
8. Spaciousness of rooms	5.11 (1.85)	5.00 (1.76)	-0.11	0.866
9. Availability of non-smoking rooms	5.20 (1.82)	4.50 (2.03)	-0.70	5.499*
10. Cleanliness and comfort of bathrooms	6.62 (1.00)	5.89 (1.36)	-0.73	8.626*
11. Cleanliness and hygiene of rooms	6.59 (1.08)	5.92 (1.47)	-0.67	7.376*
12. Hotel's proximity to events and attractions	4.42 (1.87)	3.85 (1.92)	-0.57	4.477*
13. Provision of tea and coffee making facilities in the rooms	4.57 (1.92)	3.22 (2.38)	-1.35	8.652*
14. Provision of good seating arrangement in restaurants and bars	5.85 (1.64)	5.24 (1.78)	-0.62	5.148*
15. Regular maintenance of lawn and green space by hotel	5.77 (1.82)	5.70 (1.85)	-0.07	0.652
16. Staff to communicate in a friendly and personal manner	6.47 (1.30)	6.00 (1.54)	-0.47	4.727*
17. Staff to be ever willing to help	5.78 (1.88)	5.64 (1.70)	-0.14	1.04
18. Staff to be never too busy to respond	6.06 (1.50)	5.58 (1.63)	-0.48	4.646*
19. Staff to instill confidence in the guests	6.02 (1.59)	4.31 (2.38)	-1.72	12.482*
20. Hotel to ensure timely completion of tasks promised to guests	6.46 (1.11)	5.84 (2.42)	-0.62	5.012*
21. Hotel's employees to make helpful suggestions to guests	6.41 (1.31)	5.75 (1.31)	-0.41	4.246*
22. Consistent courtesy of staff	5.75 (1.90)	7.74 (1.52)	-0.01	0.07
23. Staff to have in depth knowledge of the hotel	6.41 (1.15)	5.85 (1.28)	-0.56	6.475*
24. Hotel to provide effective solution to guests' problems	6.41 (1.15)	5.86 (1.28)	-0.55	6.446*
25. Performance of the right service the first time	6.07 (1.64)	5.58 (1.57)	-0.49	4.452*
26. Hotel to provide error free bills	6.09 (1.73)	5.16 (2.03)	-0.94	8.837*
27. Hotel to provide healthy menus	6.43 (1.13)	5.80 (1.43)	-0.63	7.210*
28. Hotel to provide menus for diet-conscious guests	5.55 (1.71)	4.08 (2.10)	-1.47	10.523*
29. Hotel to provide timely service	5.97 (1.64)	5.52 (1.71)	-0.45	4.220*
30. Hotel to tell guests when service is to be completed	5.53 (1.90)	4.92 (1.82)	-0.60	5.913*
31. Hotel to ensure safety of its environment	6.41 (1.31)	5.87 (1.51)	-0.54	5.657*
32. Hotel to ensure security of hotel guests	6.48 (1.17)	5.62 (1.61)	-0.86	8.644*
33. Hotel to have guests' interests best at heart	6.40 (1.18)	5.68 (1.68)	-0.72	6.273*
34. Hotel to have knowledgeable staff to answer questions about local events and shopping	6.39 (1.80)	5.85 (1.41)	-0.54	6.584*
35. Hotel to anticipate customers' needs	5.98 (1.60)	5.51 (1.66)	-0.47	4.594*
36. Gracious handling of complaints and problems by the hotel	6.48 (1.06)	5.78 (1.43)	-0.70	7.772*
37. Hotel to have sufficient resources to offer good service	6.07 (1.37)	5.56 (1.72)	-0.51	4.982*
38. Projection of quality service image by the hotel	5.85 (1.79)	3.79 (2.21)	-2.06	15.837*
39. Promotion strategies to project the image of the hotel	6.15 (1.46)	5.70 (1.52)	-0.45	4.775*
Overall (combined scale of 39 attributes)	6.09 (0.55)	5.44 (0.789)	-0.65	12.077**

Notes: Mean gap a: A negative gap indicated that tourists' perception of service was not meeting tourists' expectations. A positive gap showed that tourists' perception of service in hotels of Mauritius was exceeding the tourists' expectations; b: perceptions scores are measured on a seven-point scale on which the higher the number, the better the perception about the service; c: service quality scores are the difference between the perception and expectation scores (P-E) with a possible range of values from -6 to +6; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test); ** $p > 0.01$ (two-tailed t-test)

were rated highest for actual service were "room attractiveness and décor", on which hotel guests showed the highest expectations also and "assurance". The average gap for all

of the nine dimensions was -0.65 and the overall results revealed that hotels in Mauritius are not meeting tourists' expectations.

Managers' perceptions of customers' expectations and customers' recorded expectations (gap 1)

The main focus of this section is to provide an assessment of the measurement of perceived service quality by studying the service providers' perception of service quality in the hotel industry of Mauritius. It highlights the determinants of service quality in the hospitality industry from the customer and provider viewpoints and identification of gaps which exist between the perceptions of customers and those of providers. Regarding the managers' perceptions of the customers' expectations, it was found that for 28 of 39 items, differences between management and customers' mean scores were not statistically significant. For the remaining of these items, management had overestimated customers' expectations in the following items, the:

- hotel has visually attractive brochures;
- hotel has spacious rooms;
- hotel has good seating arrangements in restaurants and bars;
- hotel's staff are ever willing to help; and
- hotel projects a high quality service image.

Wherever management's perceptions of customers' expectations are lower than customers' actual expectations, it means that management does not realise the importance of these variables. It is to be noted that for the service quality variables where management has underestimated the customers' expectations, these are intangible in nature and resemble the functional qualities of Grönroos (1994).

Demographic profile of respondents

Among the 410 questionnaires received, 401 were completed and usable. The sample of international tourists included more women (50.4 per cent) than men (49.6 per cent) among which 59.3 per cent of tourists had a tertiary education. As for the age group classification, the majority of tourists (32.4 per cent) were between the age group of 25-34 years of age. Regarding the purpose of visit to Mauritius, about 67 per cent of tourists was essentially on an all leisure trip. It has also been observed that 63.3 per cent of tourists surveyed had come to Mauritius for the first time. Among the 36.7 per cent who had visited Mauritius before (frequency of visit), 59.6 per cent had visited the country on a moderate basis that is they have come to the country three-four times. Only 29.5 per cent of them were accompanied by their children.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of the study reveal that the customers' perceived service quality provided by hotels of Mauritius suffered from a shortfall, implying that customers' expectations of service quality were not met. Overall evaluation of service quality in hotels was determined largely by two factors; namely, "assurance factors" like security and safety of hotel guests and effective handling of complaints and problems by hotel staff and "reliability" factors like the hotel to complete tasks of what has been promised to guests and finding right solutions to guests' problems. It may be argued that this finding has major implications for management of hotel operations and perhaps also for other types of service operations. More importantly, it deviates from the "zero defects" approach frequently advocated in the total quality management literature. The findings also suggest that it is only by focusing on these factors, that hotels can achieve high levels of satisfaction and service quality. In the light of these findings, managers should aim equally at reaching the "good enough" level of quality for the non-core aspects and concentrate attention and resources on those areas that have the highest importance for overall satisfaction and service quality ratings in hotels of Mauritius.

Nine factors emerged as dimensions of service quality in the Mauritian hospitality industry and four of these are similar to the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). From the factor analysis, "reliability" factors held the greatest gap scores, indicating disparity between what hotel guests expected and their perceived service quality. Overall, the underlying implications stresses the need for customer service programmes to ensure that hotel staff show consistent courtesy and make helpful suggestions to guests to align service quality with consumer expectations. In order to achieve this, hotels will have to implement long-term resource strategies to recruit, train and develop qualified employees. In addition, systematic monitoring and control policies may appear to be important in this endeavour.

The present study considers the expectations and perceptions of hotel guests as a whole in Mauritius. The overall gap score of -0.65 shown in Table II would indicate that the overall customers' perceptions of service quality provided by the hotel industry in Mauritius were falling below their expectations. The results from

the customers' expectations indicate that those staying in hotels of Mauritius had high expectations regarding the status of the hotel, courtesy of staff, extra amenities in rooms and aspects of safety and security. In Table II, it is seen that the perceptions scores were consistently lower than the expectations scores except with regards to two attributes; namely, "provision of utmost privacy to guests" and "visually appealing promotional brochures". The attributes which had the lowest mean scores ($M \geq 3.9$) was "provision of tea- and coffee-making facilities in the rooms", the "hotel's proximity to events and attractions" and "projection of quality service image by the hotel".

The study has also found that the biggest gaps appearing were in the order of projection of quality service image by the hotel, hotel staff to instill confidence in the guests, provision of tea- and coffee-making facilities in the rooms and respect of environmental norms among others. The gaps ranged from -2.06 to -0.70 (Table II) and were all statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). These shortfalls will require the careful attention of hotel managers to make further improvements in future.

It was further revealed that the quality gap scores were largest in "empathy" and "staff communication skills and additional requirements". Such findings seem to suggest that customers who have stayed in the hotels of Mauritius feel, among other things, that the hotel staff do not instill confidence in the guests and possess in depth knowledge of the hotel and that the hotel's menu do not take into account the need of diet-conscious customers. While a myriad of implications may be drawn from these findings, three of them seem to warrant special attention. The first challenge is for the hotel to focus on improving their service quality by giving their guests more individual attention and ensuring that employees always have guests' interests best at heart. Such goals could be achieved if training is delivered and employees are happy with the hotel environment. The more the employees understand how the organisation functions the more "at home" they feel and the better service the customers will receive. The results of such data may, therefore, provide hotel companies with information about the distinctive aspects of services that are worthy of attention.

Second, the information obtained from this study can aid the management of the hotel industry in Mauritius in planning its marketing strategies and in making improvements in the standards and quality of service in some particular areas.

According to the results of the gap analysis, hotel guests identified many shortfalls in the service quality variables, the largest gaps being in two factors; namely, "empathy" and "staff communication skills and additional amenities sought". The shortfall seems to suggest that international tourists who have stayed in the hotels of Mauritius feel their expectations were not met in those areas.

Third, the results of the study have practical implications for managers in the hotel industry of Mauritius. From a managerial viewpoint, if identification could be made between the mismatch between what hotel guests expect and what management provides, management would be able to anticipate and, if necessary, amend its service provision. The identification of such gaps could provide managers with a clear direction on how to address service quality in the hotel industry of Mauritius. In addition; identification of service failures could help management in setting its objectives and future actions.

Finally, with the findings of this analysis it can also be implied that for hotels in Mauritius there was an overall congruence between hotel managers' perceptions of guests' expectations with guests' actual expectations except in 11 cases, where statistical differences were revealed. A number of strategies have to be taken by hotels of Mauritius to upgrade facilities given to customers to close Gap 1, which arises mainly due to differences in perceptions of hotel managers with that of their customers. The gap raises some issues about how managers should monitor quality and prioritise resources to enable better anticipation of guests' needs effectively. Questions might also be asked about the extent to which the managers of these hotels are really aware of the needs of their guests, through personal experience of their product. Hotels in Mauritius have embarked on various programmes, with a view of improving service quality (Sun Resorts, 1999). Examples are "Feel-Like-A-Guest" (FLAG) and "Feel-Like-A-Mauritian Expert" (FLAME) programmes where hotel employees actually sleep in the guests' bedrooms. They are given the opportunity to stay in the hotel as guests and also obtain training on the geographical and historical aspects of Mauritius to ensure helpful suggestions to guests at all times. But they might still find it difficult to replicate their guests' relationships with staff or their holiday mood. Hotels in Mauritius should build long-term relationships with their customers by communicating expectations. To facilitate this, hotel companies will have

to maintain a dialogue with customers, finding out exactly what they are looking for in a holiday experience, making sure that guests know they will find it at a given hotel, and checking back to ensure that the guests' expectations were met.

Drawing together the findings reported in this study, several conclusions emerge. It is argued that success in any business depends on understanding the key issues that affect customer needs and also how well the businesses meet or exceed customer needs. The hotel industry is unique in the sense that customers "live" the experience when staying in a hotel. Hotel managers and hotel employees must ensure that all moments of contact between the hotel and the guests result in a positive experience for the guests. A high quality of service does not mean doing one thing 100 per cent right, rather doing numerous things 1 per cent better. As hotels in Mauritius are competing fiercely for a larger and more stable market share, the marketing focus for hotel managers is to increase the number of repeat customers and to prolong the length of their stay by meeting their needs more effectively. By analysing perceptions about service quality with respect to different customer segments, hotel organisations can develop and formulate marketing strategies to meet the needs of each specific segment more effectively. Once customers' requirements are clearly identified and understood, hotel managers are likely to be able to anticipate and cater for their customers' desires and needs, rather than merely reacting to their dissatisfaction. Using the results revealed in this study, hotel providers can plan effective marketing strategies to target international tourists to Mauritius, satisfying them when they first visit and then developing customer loyalty of the hotel's services and facilities afterwards.

In the quest for improved quality, hospitality industry managers often face two major obstacles:

- 1 they do not know what aspects the guests considers to be important when evaluating the hotel experience; and
- 2 they do not have reliable and valid instruments for measuring service quality perceptions.

The present study has analysed the expectations and perceptions of hotel guests staying in hotels of Mauritius. As service quality is becoming a major part of business practice, it is important to measure and research its effectiveness. The purpose of this research was to examine the gap between the perceptions and expectations of customers staying in hotels of Mauritius. It was also

important to determine the service quality dimensions which best predict overall service quality in the hospitality industry by applying a modified version of the SERVQUAL instrument. This kind of information has practical implications for managers of hotels as they can direct their resources to improving weak service dimensions and to refining their marketing efforts so that customer expectations are met by the service delivered.

By comparing customers' perceptions of service quality with consumers' expectations, hotels in Mauritius will be able to determine whether it is exceeding, meeting or falling below expectations. Other valuable applications include segmenting consumers into groups. It is possible to segment the market into high, medium and low service quality seekers based on their expectation scores. This may also serve as a good feedback for advertising and sales efforts. The scale also can be effective in showing a hotel company how it compares with its competition on service quality. Management can learn how they are positioned and how they are competing.

This study has shown that the application of the SERVQUAL instrument, in order to measure service quality in hotels of Mauritius, is valid and serves as a useful method for managers to identify the differences in terms of expectations and perceptions. This will lead to a better allocation of resources and a more effective design of marketing strategies such as communications mix and pricing components to ensure a proper level of service quality in hotels. Employees must be empowered to resolve the guests' problems quickly and do whatever it takes to provide "instant satisfaction". The responsibility for ensuring high quality guest services and accommodations rests primarily with employees.

Directions for future research

There are several opportunities to extend this study. For example, further studies on service quality measurement must focus on issues on how different socio-demographic variables impact on service quality dimensions. In this context, research can attempt to address demographic variables such as gender and nationalities as in Mauritius differences may exist in consumer perceptions and expectations based on nationality. Another factor that might have to be considered in future research is whether the factor structure proposed in this

Table III

The sampling size of respondents and managers as per different categories of hotels in Mauritius

Category of hotels (classified on the basis of number of bedrooms)	Number of bedrooms	Number of respondents	Number of hotel managers	Per cent of response of hotel guests	Per cent of response of hotel managers
Category A ₁ hotels	Above 200 bedrooms	140 respondents	8	34.1	44.4
Category A ₂ hotels	100, 99 rooms	115 respondents	5	28.0	27.8
Category A ₃ hotels	66-99 rooms	95 respondents	3	23.2	16.7
Category A ₄ hotels	0-66 rooms	60 respondents	2	14.6	11.1
Total number of respondents		410 respondents (out of which nine were discarded)	18		

study is valid in other classes of accommodation such as guesthouses and private bungalows in Mauritius. Other research may also look out whether the perceived quality levels differ by countries in the Indian Ocean region, e.g. Seychelles, Comores, Reunion and Rodrigues. Further avenue to extend this research would be to perform longitudinal studies to enhance the usefulness of the data collected during this research. Studies of the remaining gaps identified in the SERVQUAL model would be instructive and potentially beneficial to the hotels to isolate issues affecting perceptions-expectations differences.

Note

- 1 It is to be noted that there exists no star ratings of hotels in Mauritius. The Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (1988, p. 2) uses the number of bedrooms in hotels to determine whether hotels can be described as "large", "medium" and "small". As such, the classification of "large" hotels reads as follows "large hotels are well established beach hotels of over 80 rooms". For the purpose of the present study, the sample of hotels was based on the number of bedrooms and 18 hotels formed part of the survey. The profile of the hotels and customers surveyed is shown in Table III.

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