Employee Perceptions of Service Quality in the Housekeeping Departments of Graded Hotels in Bloemfontein

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Abstract

This study sought to determine perceptions of employees with regard to service quality, specifically within housekeeping departments of selected hotels in Bloemfontein, Free State. The study employed a quantitative approach, using the service quality model (SERVQUAL). Seventy housekeeping employees from participating 3-, 4-, and 5-star-graded hotels, completed a 4 Likert-scale servqual questionnaire. The findings reveal that Tangibles and Reliability are the most important dimensions in determining service quality. The main findings show that employee perceptions are lower than expectations, resulting in overall negative gap scores of all service quality dimensions. This implies that the overall service quality fell below employees' expectations. Additionally, areas that were highlighted to receive more attention and improvement included the provision of adequate equipment under the tangibles dimension. Also, the need for improved management support and dependability in providing services the first time and at the promised time under reliability dimension was revealed.

Keywords: Bloemfontein, employee perceptions, housekeeping, service quality (SERVQUAL), Servqual Dimensions

Introduction

One of the largest industries in the world is tourism. It is defined as a temporary move of residents between dwellings for social, professional, or recreational reasons (Revfine, 2021; Skripak, 2018). According to Page (2019), the tourist sector provides 10.4% of the global GDP, with South African tourism comprising 3% of that figure (STATS SA, 2021). This sector includes a variety of subsectors, including transportation, travel agents, lodging, and tourist attractions (Business Partners, 2016). The hospitality sector of the tourism business, specifically the hotel housekeeping division, was the subject of this study. Hotels, motels and inns produced an income of 56.2 million in 2018 and employment increased by 4.3%, from 98 346 people in 2015, to 104 714 people in 2018 (STATS SA, 2018). The figures declined during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, 62 million jobs within the tourism industry were lost (Aharon et al., 2021), and 77% of hotels were forced to suspend or terminate their workers either permanently or temporarily (AHLA, 2021). However, since the strict COVID-19 restrictions were withdrawn from 2021 onwards, recovery within the hospitality industry and improvements within the tourism industry are seen (Writer, 2022). One of the most fundamental conceptions within the hospitality industry is service quality (Al-Ababneh, 2016). Service quality impacts an organization's reputation, and the amount of quality offered frequently determines what consumers perceive of an organization, resulting in its reputation being increased or deteriorated (Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017). It has been reiterated numerous times that the quality of service is a core strategy within the hotel industry that has a direct and positive effect on competitiveness (Abdullah et al., 2022; Al-Ababneh, 2017; Qualtrics, 2020). Service quality is also stated as one of the crucial "pull" factors that motivate customers to travel to a destination (Gany, 2017: 47). According to Kumar & Singh (2015), the housekeeping department is regarded as the heartbeat of a hotel and the best way to deliver service; hence the level of service quality should be high, especially within the housekeeping department, which attract guests to return (Mbasera, 2012). Unfortunately, poor service delivery is a challenge in developing countries such as South Africa (Makumbirofa & Saayman, 2018). Mostly, customer perceptions and expectations have been afforded more attention in research studies (Musaba et al., 2014; Al-Ababneh, 2016). It is also vital to examine perceptions and expectations from an employee's perspective. Employees with negative perceptions may hamper a company's image (Adams, 2016), particularly due to the fact that employees have a great influence on customer satisfaction (Pirnar et al., 2010). Previous studies that explored the issue of service quality from an employee perspective, specifically within the housekeeping department in Bloemfontein, were not found. Therefore, this study attempted to contribute towards the generally few studies on employee perceptions of service quality in South Africa and to the non-existent studies on Bloemfontein hotels pertaining to the housekeeping department.

Literature review
Service quality
Service quality, customer satisfaction and customer value are, to date, highly investigated topics within the hospitality industry (Kim, 2017). These are main factors of success within the hospitality industry. Service quality is the value of service offered to a customer, which is determined by need, expectations, and perceptions of customers (Spacey, 2017). It is the extent to which service providers can satisfy the needs of customers and meet or exceed their expectations (Al-jazzazi & Sultan, 2017). Service quality can further be defined as the capability of efficiently achieving customer satisfaction to improve on the performance of

the service industry (Ramya et al., 2019). It is hence vital to measure, as it is a determinant of whether a business can survive or not (Poor et al., 2013). Various service quality measuring tools have been developed and utilised to evaluate the perception of service quality and the one found to be popular within the hospitality industry is the SERVQUAL model (Kensbock et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2017). Thus, Servqual was employed for this study.

Importance of employee perceptions in service quality delivery
Employees are described as the most easily accessible people within a business organisation who may contribute valuable information and feedback pertaining to strategic plans that have an influence on customer satisfaction (Shahani-Denning, 2001). It is therefore vital for employees to understand clearly what service quality involves and to be involved in developing processes of service quality (Pirnar et al., 2010). According to Ramphal & Nicolaides (2014), employees that are able to listen to guests with empathy and solve problems or suggest alternatives when they are unable to offer exactly what guests want, can set a hotel apart from its competitors, as well as maintain a positive relationship with tourists based on quality and service delivery. The authors further state that the success or failure of measures to improve a hotel industry business will be determined by employee acceptance of the quality culture that a business wishes to implement. If employees' perceptions in terms of level of service quality is higher than those of customers, meeting customer expectations or rendering good quality service may be unattainable (Dedeoğlu & Demirer, 2015). Hence, perceptions of employees need to be measured and monitored to uphold the image of a business establishment (Adams, 2016).

Measuring service quality
Over the years, numerous instruments for measuring service quality have been developed. These include Service Performance (SERVPERF), Internal Service Quality (INTERSERVQUAL), Hotel Service Quality (HOLSERV), Casino Service Quality (CASERV), and DINESERV for dining establishments. The most common or prevalent service quality measurement model used in the tourist and hospitality sectors, as well as a key indicator of how customers perceive the quality of the services, is called SERVQUAL (Kensbock et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2017; Al-Ababneh, 2016; Colby, 2015; Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011). Service quality measured in the context of the SERVQUAL model is "the degree and direction of discrepancy between consumer perceptions and expectations" (Grigoroudis & Siskos, 2010:69). The SERVQUAL model was developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1985. The model originally comprised ten elements/dimensions and 97 items, minimised to five dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles) and 22 items/statements over the years. The intention of these 22 items/statements was to measure people's perceptions and expectations, using a seven-point Likert scale (Fick & Ritchie, 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1988). The reliability dimension describes the consistency and accuracy of performance by the business during service delivery. Responsiveness relates to the willingness to offer assistance and to deliver service promptly. Assurance refers to how knowledgeable employees are in creating trust and confidence with customers. Empathy entails caring and individualised attention towards customers. Tangibles depict physical facilities, equipment, appearance, and conduct of personnel (El Saghier, 2015; Ramya et al., 2019; Kobiruzzaman, 2020). In addition to the SERVQUAL dimensions, underpinning gaps of SERVQUAL exist. These gaps emphasise the importance of communication between service providers and customers. Service quality specifications set by a business may not always be delivered properly according to the customers' expectations and satisfaction (Stejerean, 2016). It is therefore vital to measure service quality and identify broken service delivery/gaps to combat guest dissatisfaction.

Housekeeping department, employees, and service quality
As mentioned, the housekeeping department plays a vital role in establishing delivery of service quality. The housekeeping department oversees maintaining and caring for perishable products and generates at least 50% of a hotel's revenue (Singh & Amandeep, 2017). It is the primary department that is connected to all other departments in a hotel, either directly or indirectly, so it must always maintain cordial relationships with these other departments and ensure that the hotel guest rooms to be sold are as per the required standards (BNG Hotel Management, 2020). A hotel's service standards have a significant impact on whether or not visitors choose to stay there, and the hotel's housekeeping management decides what kind of service to offer to guests (Tuzon-Guarin, 2016). The main key players within the housekeeping departments are the 'cleaners', professionally known as room attendants (employees). Employees' interactions with guests have a significant impact on company operations, especially when it comes to delivery of service quality. Employees must have a thorough understanding of what service quality comprises, because it is one of the key factors in customer satisfaction.

Methodology
The study followed a quantitative research approach to achieve its objectives. Research participants were selected based on a total or complete/whole-frame population sampling. All accommodation establishments in Bloemfontein that conformed to the TGCSA (Tourism Grading Council of South Africa) description of a "hotel" and graded by TGCSA were selected. A self-administered servqual questionnaire was administered to 70 housekeeping employees from six participating 3-, 4-, and 5-star-graded hotels in Bloemfontein. Section one assembled demographic data of the employees, while section two collected data aimed to measure the employees' perceptions of service quality using the SERVQUAL model. The questions were based on the 22 original statements as per five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles) founded by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The questionnaire was modified and reduced to fit the study and be hand delivered by the researcher to the relevant managers of each participating hotel. A pilot study was administered to six

housekeeping staff members to ensure the clarity of the questionnaire. The pilot study was undertaken in an accommodation establishment similar to the participating hotels in the study under the same conditions of the main study. For the purpose of data analysis, SPSS 27 was utilised.

Results and discussion

Demographics

As indicated in Table 1 below, participants' composition comprised 67.1% females and 32.9% males. The majority (42.9%) of the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old, followed closely by the age range between 35 and 44 years. Respondents' ages ranged between 18 and 24, as well as between 45 and 54 years at 7.1%. Only 1.4% of the respondents' ages ranged between 55 and 64 years. The racial group of most of the respondents were African (97.1%), then Coloured (1.4%) and Asian (1.4%). 74.3% of the respondents had obtained a high school certificate; 12.9% had a college certificate; 8.6% had a university certificate; and only 4.3% respondents did not complete secondary school. The majority (71.4%) of the respondents were employed on a permanent basis; 18.6% on a casual basis; 5.7% on a contractual basis; and 1% of the respondents were employed on a fixed-term basis. Only 1.4% of the respondents had the highest job tenure of more than 20 years, followed by respondents employed for a period of 10 to 20 years (8.6%), while 35.7% have been employed for period of five to nine years. Most of the respondents have been employed for a period of one to four years. Also, the majority (84.3%) of respondents' positions were room attendants.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	47	67.1
	Male	23	32.9
Age	18-24	5	7.1
	25-34	30	42.9
	35-44	29	41.4
	45-54	5	7.1
	55-64	1	1.4
Racial group	Black	68	97.1
	Coloured	1	1.4
	Asian	1	1.4
Education level	Primary School	3	4.3
	High School	52	74.3
	College	9	12.9
	University	6	8.6
Employment status	No response	2	2.9
	Casual	13	18.6
	Contract	4	5.7
	Fixed	1	1.4
	Permanent	50	71.4
Years of employment	No response	1	1.4
	Below 12 months	10	14.3
	1-4 years	27	38.6
	5-9 years	25	35.7
	10-20 years	6	8.6
	Above 20 years	1	1.4
Positions	No Response	2.9	2.9
	Manager	4.3	7.1
	Room Attendant	84.3	91.4
	Maintenance	8.6	100.0

Empirical analysis

Table 2 below displays the findings of the analysis using paired t-tests. The mean perception scores are subtracted from the mean expectations to determine the gap scores (P-E). The gap scores make it possible both to quantify existing gaps and to understand the quality of the current services. For each comparison, the t-value, p-value, and Cohen's d-effect were computed. If the p-value for a paired t-test is less than 0.05 ($p < .05$), it is considered statistically significant. For each paired t-test comparison, the Cohen's d-effect size was also determined. A numerical indicator of the amount of the difference between two means is the Cohen's d-effect size. The Cohen's d-effect was interpreted according to the following general principle: A value of 0.20 represents a small effect size; a value of 0.50 represents a medium-effect size, and a value of 0.8 represents a large effect size (Cohens, 1992; Cumming & Calin-Jageman, 2017).

Reliability dimension

The reliability dimension's individual item gap ratings were all negative. As indicated above in Table 2, meaning expectations were not being met. A statistically significant difference between expectations and perceptions ($p < .05$) was found for Items 3: the department is reliable to perform services the first time (0.012); 4: the department provides services at the time promised (0.001); and 5: the department can provide guests with correct information (0.024). These three criteria had the biggest gaps in ratings, at -0.243, -0.357, and 0.214, respectively, indicating that the department needs to place more emphasis on dependability, delivering services to clients on schedule, and giving visitors accurate information. Employees appear to be relatively impressed with the department's earnest effort in resolving issues brought up by customers (Item 2, lowest gap score of -0.086).

Responsiveness dimension

Also shown in Table 2, the responsiveness dimension's individual item gap scores were all negative, indicating that expectations were greater than reality. Item 8: the department is always willing to help customers – had both the highest mean expectation score (3.629) and the highest mean perception score (3.571). As with the other items, there was no statistical significance. With the second-highest mean anticipation score of 3,514 and the mean perception score of 3.343, only Item 7: the department delivers prompt services to customers, obtained the widest gap score of -0.171 (p < .05). Therefore, the department's promptness in providing services to consumers needs to be improved the most under the responsiveness dimension to ensure that requests not addressed do not result in complaints.

Table 2: Gap mean difference between expectations and perceptions of SERVQUAL

Description of Items	Mean Expectation Scores		Mean Perception Scores		Gap Scores (P-E)		t-value (df=69)	p-value	Cohen's d*
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
RELIABILITY DIMENSION	**3.417**	**0.449**	**3.206**	**0.538**	**-0.211**	**0.620**	**-2.852**	**0.006**	**0.620**
1. When the department promises to do something within a certain timeframe, they do	3.286	0.617	3.129	0.721	-0.157	0.828	-1.588	0.117	0.828
2. The department shows sincere interest in solving Problems raised by customers	3.486	0.531	3.400	0.689	-0.086	0.717	-1.000	0.321	0.717
3. The department is dependable to perform services the first time	3.371	0.663	3.129	0.797	-0.243	0.788	-2.578	0.012	0.788
4. The department provides services at the time promised	3.371	0.745	3.014	0.860	-0.357	0.901	-3.315	0.001	0.901
5. The department can provide guests with correct information	3.571	0.604	3.357	0.781	-0.214	0.778	-2.304	0.024	0.778
RESPONSIVENESS DIMENSION	**3.493**	**0.470**	**3.404**	**0.455**	**-0.089**	**0.310**	**-2.410**	**0.019**	**0.310**
6. The department informs customers exactly when service will be performed	3.357	0.660	3.300	0.709	-0.057	0.611	-0.782	0.437	0.611
7. The department provides prompt services to customers	3.514	0.558	3.343	0.587	-0.171	0.450	-3.191	0.002	0.450
8. The department is always willing to help customers	3.629	0.569	3.571	0.579	-0.057	0.376	-1.270	0.208	0.376
9. The department is never too busy to assist customers	3.471	0.756	3.400	0.710	-0.071	0.520	-1.150	0.254	0.520
ASSURANCE DIMENSION	**3.436**	**0.521**	**3.298**	**0.539**	**-0.138**	**0.432**	**-2.673**	**0.009**	**0.432**
10. The department can be trusted by customers	3.629	0.569	3.529	0.675	-0.100	0.486	-1.721	0.090	0.486
11. The department's staff is polite to customers	3.543	0.606	3.514	0.583	-0.029	0.416	-0.575	0.567	0.416
12. The department receives enough support from management to do the job well	3.353	0.728	3.118	0.907	-0.235	0.775	-2.504	0.015	0.775
13. Customers' behaviour inspire confidence in the department's staff	3.200	0.754	3.014	0.825	-0.186	0.839	-1.852	0.068	0.839
EMPATHY DIMENSION	**3.446**	**0.519**	**3.357**	**0.586**	**-0.089**	**0.446**	**-1.673**	**0.099**	**0.446**
14. The department gives individual attention to customers	3.507	0.633	3.478	0.609	-0.029	0.453	-0.532	0.597	0.453
15. The department has customers' best interests at heart	3.478	0.609	3.522	0.584	0.043	0.435	0.830	0.409	0.435
16. The department understands the needs of customers	3.551	0.607	3.449	0.607	-0.101	0.489	-1.722	0.090	0.489
17. The department's working hours are convenient	3.229	0.854	3.086	0.897	-0.143	0.597	-2.003	0.049	0.597
TANGIBLES DIMENSION	**3.218**	**0.637**	**2.943**	**0.668**	**-0.275**	**0.719**	**-3.201**	**0.002**	**0.719**
18. The department equipment is up to date	3.086	0.864	2.714	0.965	-0.371	1.010	-3.078	0.003	1.010
19. The appearance of the workplace facilities is attractive/visually appealing	3.400	0.646	3.186	0.839	-0.214	0.849	-2.111	0.038	0.849
20. The staff in the department is neat and well-dressed	3.000	0.901	2.743	0.958	-0.257	0.943	-2.281	0.026	0.943
21. The work environment in the department is comfortable	3.420	0.628	3.159	0.740	-0.261	0.760	-2.850	0.006	0.760

Assurance dimension

It is shown under the assurance dimension in Table 2 that only Item 12: the department receives enough support from management to do the work well, had the largest gap score of -0.235 out of the four items. A statistically significant difference between expectations and perceptions was found in Item 12 (p < .05). It has been demonstrated that managerial support helps to raise service quality. According to a study by Ogbonnaya (2019), managerial assistance creates committed employees, passionate employees with a positive attitude, employees who participate in positive word-of-mouth marketing about their place of employment, and employees who feel appreciated at work. As a result, it is necessary to close the gap between expectations and perceptions of Item 12. Item 10 had the greatest mean expectation (3.629) and perception score (3.529) with

p > .05 (the department can be trusted by customers). This is encouraging, because being trustworthy is one of the responsibilities of room attendants, as stated before. Item 13: customers' behaviour inspire confidence in the department's workers, received the lowest anticipated score. This is expected because managers are often the ones that inspire and motivate their teams (Heathfield, 2021). It should be emphasized, nevertheless, that all gap scores for the assurance dimension's individual items were negative, indicating that expectations were greater than reality.

Empathy dimension
Table 2 above then shows that for three of the items, Item 14: the department gives individual attention to customers; Item 15: the department has customers' best interests at heart; and Item 16, the department understands the needs of customers – there was no statistically significant difference (p > .05) between expectations and perceptions. The positive gap score of +0.043 for Item 15 indicates that perceptions were higher than expected. When perceptions exceed expectations, it may indicate that there are more input resources than needed for a service. Perhaps management can allocate fewer resources to areas where customers' perceptions of service quality are above average and concentrate more on areas where there are significant disparities in service quality. The highest mean expectation scores (3.551) were found in Item 16; Item 14 came in second (3.507). This is likely due to the nature of the hospitality industry. Providing individualized service to visitors ensures their return (Morais, 2019). Item 15 (3.522) had the highest perception mean score, followed by Item 14 (3.478). Item 17, the department's working hours are convenient, obtained the highest gap score and was not statistically significant (p < .05). Therefore, the department's main area for improvement is the discrepancy between expectations and perceptions of suitable working hours.

Tangibles
All gap scores under tangibles dimension were substantially large, which is disconcerting. There was a statistically significant difference between expectations and perceptions for every item in the tangibles dimension, as indicated by the p values, which were all less than .05. The two items with the two highest mean expectation ratings were Item 19, the appearance of the workplace facilities is attractive (3.400), and Item 21, the work environment in the department is comfortable (3.420). Item 19 (3.186) and Item 21 (3.159) also had the highest mean perception scores. The tangibles dimension does not live up to expectations. It is necessary to make significant upgrades to the tools, personnel appearance, workspaces, and technology.

Summary of the five dimensions
The grand mean score, including gap score calculations for each service quality dimension are indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Profile of participants

Description of Items	Mean Expectation Scores		Mean Perception Scores		Gap Scores (P-E)		t-value df=69	p-value	Cohen's d*	Effect size
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD				
TANGIBLES	3.218	0.637	2.943	0.668	-0.275	0.719	-3.201	0.002	0.719	Medium
RELIABILITY	3.417	0.449	3.206	0.538	-0.211	0.620	-2.852	0.006	0.620	Medium
ASSURANCE	3.436	0.521	3.298	0.539	-0.138	0.432	-2.673	0.009	0.432	Small
EMPATHY	3.446	0.519	3.357	0.586	-0.089	0.446	-1.673	0.099	0.446	Small
RESPONSIVENESS	3.493	0.470	3.404	0.455	-0.089	0.310	-2.410	0.019	0.310	Small

Table 3 above demonstrates the gaps in service quality. Overall expectations were not reached, as evidenced by the fact that all gap scores – for all five dimensions – were negative. Expectations and perceptions differed statistically significantly (p < .05) for four out of the five service quality dimensions. Furthermore, it is noted that the tangibles dimension has the biggest gap score (-0.275) with a medium effect size. This is a major concern, because one of the major factors influencing client decision-making and achieving customer satisfaction is tangibility (Panda & Das, 2014). The reliability dimension (-0.211) had the second-largest gap score and a medium-effect magnitude. Next followed the assurance dimension, with a gap score of -0.138 (small effect). This demonstrates that reliability and tangibles are the most crucial factors. These dimensions need to be considered to improve customer satisfaction. The least important dimensions were empathy (-0.089) and responsiveness (-0.089), both with a small effect size.

Discussion
The primary objective of the study was to examine employees' perceptions of service quality of housekeeping departments of graded hotels in Bloemfontein. The results signify that housekeeping employees' perceptions were lower than expectations. The negative gaps mean that service quality delivery is not met and improvement is necessary. It also suggests that the general level of service quality falls short of what the staff members would want. The results of this study can be used by hotel managements to investigate the causes of the negative gaps that could result in customer dissatisfaction. As a result, managements can work to enhance the provision of high-quality service. General challenges were highlighted in the following items:

- Items 3 to 5 (the department is dependable to perform services the first time; the department provides services at the time promised; the department can provide guests with correct information), under reliability dimension.
- Item 7 (the department provides prompt services to customers), under responsiveness dimension.
- Item 12 (the department receives enough support from management to do the job well), under assurance dimension.
- Items 17 to 21 (the department's working hours are convenient; the department equipment is up to date; the appearance of the workplace facilities is attractive/visually appealing; the staff in the department is neat and well-dressed; the work environment in the department is comfortable), under tangibles dimension.

Evidence from the study demonstrates that, when considering service quality, attention must be paid to tangibles (the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, employees, and communication materials) and reliability (the capacity to deliver the promised service dependably and accurately) dimensions. The items highlighted above fall under tangibles and reliability and require the most attention. As revealed in Meshack & Prusty's (2021) study, customers' satisfaction and tangibles are related. A company's lack of attention to service quality is implied by a lack of adequate physical facilities, cleanliness of the place, staff appearance, and technology. According to Radwan (2022), customers will perceive a favourable and memorable experience with the services and facilities if the physical conditions are imaginative, appealing, and distinct from ordinary hotels. Customers will undoubtedly have a positive experience due to both tangible and intangible features of the service environment. Therefore, within housekeeping departments, regular maintenance, material upgrades, and current technology should be given top priority. Technology will aid in productivity and time management, improve the assistance needed by room attendants to clean the guestrooms, improve housekeeping operations, and use better, more affordable methods of handling laundry, among other things. Being behind or outdated in terms of what the millennial customer expects is one of the numerous difficulties faced by housekeeping departments (Mogelonsky, 2018). As a result, the hospitality sector should be able to adjust to changing consumer and travel trends. It is crucial to draw in the next generation of technophiles, or those who are passionate about new technology (Kansakar et al., 2018).

Unreliability consequently has a detrimental impact on the overall delivery of service and may cause customers to lose their allegiance. If the department lacks in service delivery, the provision of services at the appropriate time as promised and the provision of accurate information, the quality of work and performance of employees would suffer. It is to be noted that even if a company offers excellent services, its unreliability will not increase customers' overall satisfaction. Customer loyalty, which is vital element for the survival of hotels (Radwan, 2022), is put at risk when the promised consistent and prompt service is not delivered to guests. After the COVID-19 epidemic, hotel expert Fernandez emphasizes that consistency is more conducive to enhancing service quality. Hotels should be able to maintain consistency in the face of unique circumstances, and staff members must be knowledgeable about how to do so (Fernandez, 2021). Another issue worthy of attention is management support in the assurance dimension. The quality of the work produced by employees will suffer from managements' lack of support, and inconsistent performance will follow. However, when given organizational support and training, individuals use the knowledge gained to boost employee engagement and impact their work positively (Shen & Tang, 2018). An emphasis on service quality is crucial for a business entity like hotels to survive in the increasingly competitive service sector. Customers prefer to stay at hotels that deliver their promises, especially when it comes to service (Meshack & Prusty, 2021). Therefore, service quality needs to be controlled better for management to maintain consistency in service delivery and to fulfil guest expectations effectively.

Conclusion and recommendations

Employee perceptions of service quality in the housekeeping departments of graded hotels in Bloemfontein were examined, and to reach findings, this study applied a quantitative research approach using the SERVQUAL model. Findings of this study will enable housekeeping managements of the selected Bloemfontein hotels to quantify the gaps that exist and combat service quality delivery challenges within the housekeeping departments. The study focused solely on Bloemfontein 3-, 4-, and 5-star-graded hotels and therefore the findings will be geographically bound. This means that the results of this study cannot be generalised to all other 3-, 4-, and 5-star hotels, excluding Bloemfontein hotels. Further research is advised for other areas.

To guarantee consistency in service delivery, it is recommended that all housekeeping employees be recruited on a permanent basis. Non-permanent personnel may, unfortunately, not be fully devoted to their work and affect service delivery or performance negatively. The recruitment process should prioritize qualified candidates. Higher-educated workers are more productive and have greater informational comprehension. A study by Singh & Amandeep (2017) indicates that there will be a rise in the demand for specialized workers in hotel sectors within the housekeeping department. People having a housekeeping certificate, a diploma in hospitality management, or any other certification related to hotel and housekeeping services, or management may be targeted. Tools used in housekeeping, such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, polishing machines, ironing equipment, etc., tend to degrade over time and require regular maintenance and upgrades. Therefore, one of the many approaches to maintaining long-lasting facilities and/or equipment, preventative maintenance and routine inspection of facilities and equipment to ensure continued smooth operation, is highly advised. This could be accomplished by utilizing computerized maintenance management systems (CMMS). For instance, the ironing machine gearbox would need to be oiled every 2 500 hours, or after a predetermined number of uses, and the dust that collects in flat/industrial ironing machines should be cleaned once a month. The CMMS can have this scheduled. It is simple to access and document all expenses and work done on all

facilities and equipment. Additionally, management is responsible for making sure that each employee has adequate equipment. This will guarantee that the execution of tasks is completed without delay.

Furthermore, managements of Bloemfontein hotels are advised to put innovations into place in the housekeeping divisions. Voice-command applications are one example of a new technology that may help customers control amenities in their rooms, such as opening curtains and turning off lights, as well as requesting assistance from housekeepers and other staff members via an app. Another example is the SmarTap, which allows guests to control the flow, temperature, and duration of their showers, also assisting the management to monitor the usage of water and to detect any water leakages within the hotel. It is strongly advised that housekeeping staff members receive training to assist them to understand processes and procedures to fulfil customer needs better and meet or surpass their expectations. Therefore, it is suggested that the housekeeping staff undergo training in all hotel service areas, including the outdoor surrounding areas and services, as well as knowledge and awareness of all hotel facilities. The staff should be able to provide customers with any information about the hotel, including service hours, service locations, instructions to other departments or nearby services (e.g. hospitals, malls, etc.). To ensure extended life and minimal maintenance, proper use of equipment according to manuals is essential. Employees ought to take ownership of and care for any equipment used. Furthermore, standard operating procedures (SOPs) training will show staff step-by-step how to do each duty (e.g. proper way of making a bed, proper way of cleaning the bathroom, etc.). Since cleaning has typically been behind the scenes and less connected with customers, training in customer service and communication skills would be valuable. Housekeeping employees should be able to converse with and guide guests in a professional manner. Additionally, COVID-19 should be taken into account when preparing for training. After the epidemic, recruitment and training can never be the same again, according to Shahane & Fernandes (2021). As staff numbers were reduced, hotel workers were forced to adapt to a new normal that included multi-tasking, working in PPE kits, tightening safety, and hygiene regulations, utilizing new technologies like sensors, as well as multitasking. As a result, housekeeping staff members should receive digital training, enhance their emotional and social abilities, and be prepared to adapt to change. They should feel at ease using technical tools. Training in quality control is also advised.

In the selected Bloemfontein hotels' housekeeping divisions, management support needs to be strengthened. According to Karatepe (2014), employee retention and performance are increased because of improved supervisor support. Therefore, it is proposed that housekeeping managements hold weekly meetings to exchange any new ideas or innovations as well as to address difficulties and obstacles experienced by personnel in the performance of their daily activities. This platform might also be used to provide personnel with feedback on their work and point out areas that might need improvement. Daily pre-briefings should also be held to inform housekeeping staff of any particular requests made by guests and to reaffirm the significance of attending to these demands. Additionally, they might receive a briefing on recent news and events that are pertinent to the hotel's surroundings. This will enable employees to be informed and responsive to any inquiries guests may have. Understanding employees' views of service quality and trying to meet and manage expectations are some of the outcomes of utilizing the Servqual model to analyse service quality from the perspective of the employee. Implications include strengthening service quality supervision by classifying regions with flaws or deficiencies to meet and satisfy consumers.

Limitations and suggestions for further studies

The 3-, 4-, and 5-star hotels in Bloemfontein were the only hotels that were the subject of this study; hence the results are restricted by location. As a result, it is not possible to generalize the findings of this study to all other 3-, 4-, and 5-star hotels in the Free State or South Africa; consequently, additional research is required in other places. Another restriction was the unwillingness of other hotels to participate in the study. Similarly, the COVID-19 epidemic significantly reduced the number of housekeeping employees in the hospitality sector, which directly reduced the number of study participants. Future studies recommended would be to compare with the current study and generalize the results, conclusions, and recommendations to a larger population. Therefore, a comparable study with a bigger sample size from housekeeping departments at hotels in other provinces should be carried out. The study might also concentrate on specific hotel star ratings, such as only looking at 5-star hotels, or only looking at 3-star hotels. Also, the interrelationships between service quality and employee-important elements (such as age, tenure, level of education, staff satisfaction, etc.) could be investigated to see which of the factors are effective in enhancing the delivery of service quality. Lastly, the study may be conducted using a qualitative methodology to assess how the employees perceive the housekeeping departments.

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