A qualitative analysis of service experience, perceptions of service quality and service management

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A qualitative analysis of service experience, perceptions of service quality and service management

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Abstract: By applying qualitative, grounded theory approach, the author analysed guests' reviews of hotels in Arusha (Tanzania) and ascertained guests' service experience and perceptions of service quality. Perceptions of service quality are formed as a result of experiences with service components. Guests perceive quality of services related to rooms and facilities to be most important in evaluating overall service quality. Management can use online reviews for: service quality evaluation, resourcing, competitive positioning, targeting and prioritising service improvement, especially when resources are scarce. Further studies should explore nature, content and motive of managerial response to reviews and implications of managerial responses on customer satisfaction and business performance. This is a maiden study on service experience and service quality, grounded on electronic word of mouth concept. A conceptual scaffold to define and manage service quality in hotels is advanced.

Keywords: service experience; perception; service quality; service management.

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1   Introduction

The power of online reviews to foster or devalue any business where online review is applicable cannot be downplayed (Phillips, 2016). Managers of businesses in the hospitality and tourism sectors are investing resources to harness the power of online reviews to further their businesses. A good online review is likely to increase sales (Ye et al., 2008), and negative reviews reduce sales. The relationship between online reviews and sales is particularly stronger for experience goods. This is because the quality of such experience goods is often unknown beforehand (Ye et al., 2008).

According to Luo and Qu (2016), Prince and Khaleq (2013) and Mbise and Tuninga (2016), quality of services are more difficult to define, measure, and manage. This is because of the unique characteristics of services. Services are identifiable, but are often not tangible (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012; Mbise and Tuninga, 2016). "Measurement problems have a risen from the intrinsic difficulty of defining a service" [Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.62]. Important to note also is that problems or challenges for which services are a solution change over time, thus solutions must evolve or change dramatically to stay relevant. Previous studies (Banki et al., 2016) document relationships between service quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction and guests' behavioural intention in the hotel industry. The way customers perceive value affects the way a customer perceives satisfaction arising from consuming a service (Banki et al., 2016).

Management needs to have strategies to respond to market situations, if they are to grow their businesses. According to Prince and Khaleq (2013), development of strategies for businesses and sectors in which such businesses belong primarily depends on assessing the market opportunities and constraints and devising means for exceeding customer satisfaction. Knowing customer's expectations of quality of a service enables management to respond to such expectations, through systematically and innovatively applying marketing strategies. To be able to apply marketing strategies, strategic variables need to be quantified and measured.

The service sector is growing in importance as exemplified by its contribution to overall global trade. Also, its contribution to international gross domestic product (GDP) now surpasses the contributions of other sectors (Ostrom et al., 2010; Calabrese and Spadoni, 2013). The importance of the service sector globally necessitates strategising and positioning for marketing services if firms are to gain from service marketing. This can be done when management has a deeper understanding of customers' service experience and perceptions of service quality.

The objective of this paper was to analyse reviews posted by users of Tripadvisor of hotels in Arusha (Tanzania) and ascertain guests' service experience, perceptions of service quality and from such analysis, derive practical implications for marketing strategy and management.

There are a number of studies on service quality (Gijsenberg et al., 2015; Calabrese and Spadoni, 2013). These studies were done in the infrastructure sector (Gijsenberg et al., 2015), in the field of information technology (IT) (Piercy, 2014), education (Mbise and Tuninga, 2016) and in the field of production (Calabrese and Spadoni, 2013). There is limited research on service quality especially in the field of hospitality and marketing (e.g., Prince and Khaleq, 2013; Chen and Chen, 2014).

This study sheds light on guests' service experience and perceptions regarding quality of services that hotels in Arusha offer and thereby fills an information void for improving

managerial strategies on customer care and meeting customers' expectations. In addition, this study is the first of its kind to apply theoretical frameworks of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) to explore online reviews so as to ascertain service experience and service perceptions. Therefore, this study broke the ground for future researchers to use related approaches. Lastly, this study also adds to the body of literature on e-WOM, hospitality, and marketing and managing service quality.

A review of related literature is presented in Section 2. Sections 3 and 4 present qualitative research methodologies applied and findings/results and discussions respectively. Conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2   Literature review

In this section, literature related to e-WOM, service quality, value and customer satisfaction, as well as literature related to service marketing and strategies are reviewed. The conjectured linkages between these concepts are explored.

Consumers use word of mouth (WOM) to interpersonally, informally and orally communicate their experiences of using products, as well as evaluations of their experiences (Yang et al., 2012). Cheung and Thadani (2010, p.1581) defined e-WOM communication as "Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, and former customers about a product or a company via the internet". Evolution of e-WOM is inspired by the advent and advance of internet (Cheung and Thadani, 2010), which is making it possible for consumers to share product experiences.

While e-WOM is a fairly new discipline, research on e-WOM or online reviews has come a long way (Cheung and Thadani, 2010; Yang et al., 2012). In its short lifespan, e-WOM has demonstrated its importance especially in consumer marketing and the great impact it can have on influencing consumer's decision making (Hu et al., 2008; Cheung and Thadani, 2010; Yang et al., 2012). The works of Yang et al. (2012) documents disciplines in which studies on e-WOM has been applied. These include: business and management; computers and information system; communication; hospitality, leisure, sports and tourism and in public environmental occupational health. A distribution of e-WOM articles by years of publication shows rising tends; from two articles in 1999 to 120 in 2011 (Yang et al., 2012); confirming the growing relevance of e-WOM as an important area of research interest (Cheung and Thadani, 2010).

A literature analysis of the eminence of e-WOM research [Cheung and Thadani, (2010), p.1584] revealed, "There is no single theory dominating the e-WOM research". Cheung and Thadani, (2010) documented some of the research frameworks used in e-WOM studies to include: social structure, psychological model, social presence theory, resonance marketing, hyper differentiation, network economics, self selection bias and information processing theory. Later studies (Yang et al., 2012) document e-WOM dogmas to be based on transaction cost economics (TCE) theoretical framework. This study is also based on TCE theoretical framework.

"TCE specifies why a certain transaction is conducted in a particular form" [Hu et al., (2008), p.7]. When potential consumers or users of a service or product view or read user-generated or expert reviews, such potential customers are looking for comments on features of services or service quality that they perceive relevant and (or) of most importance to them. "When consumers purchase experience goods, they first form a quality evaluation based on a combination of product information, their own personal

tastes, and recommendations from friends or relatives" [Hu et al., (2008), p.9]. According to Yang et al. (2012, p.337), "Reading e-WOM information could help reduce search costs, uncertainty, and risks associated with the purchase of unfamiliar products".

There is a persuasive effect and an awareness effect of online user reviews (Duan et al., 2008). Also, reviewers may express their opinions concerning the subject being reviewed (Duan et al., 2008). Clients announce numerous service let downs on sites often reviewed by other potential clients. Often, when let down, clients narrate very "Descriptive, persuasive and credible story, often motivated by altruism or, at the other end of the continuum, by revenge" [Sparks and Browning, (2010), p.3]. In the case of hotels or restaurants, these narratives from let down customers tend to carry the supremacy to sway the actions of other prospective guests to take or not to take the property in question. Basuroy et al. (2003) and Hu et al. (2008) postulated, "Both positive and negative reviews are correlated with revenues. However, impact of negative reviews diminishes over time" [Hu et al., (2008), p.5]. Also, negative reviews do have a damaging effect, on business performance, more than positive reviews. e-WOM explains total sales and sales within specified periods of time (Liu, 2006). Late sales are associated with critical reviews but critical reviews do not have significant relationships with early sales (Eliashberg and Shugan, 1997).

Reviews are to be considered as exogenous factors (especially when done by other reviewers), but can also be endogenous (especially when it is consumer generated). Reviews are both influencing and are also influenced by the subject being reviewed (Duan et al., 2008).

There is a relationship between reviewer quality and reviewer exposure. According to Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), the impact of reviews from a renowned reviewer is greater that such impacts from a less well-known reviewer. However, consumers who know a certain retailer and their products are less likely to be affected by negative reviews of such retailer's products. Both satisfied and disgruntled customers post reviews and hence the average rating does not necessarily show the totality of good and bad aspects of a product (Hu et al., 2008). Many positive reviews serve to significantly reduce consumer's uncertainties and hence increase sales and revenues (Yang et al., 2012). The volume of reviews adds to the power of the reviews in influencing the consumer (Liu, 2006; Chen et al., 2004).

Satisfaction and service quality are connected but disparate. Satisfaction can only be described as: the difference between how a person feels after experiencing a service, compared to the feeling before experiencing a service. "Satisfaction is a function of relative level of expectations and perceived performance" [Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.63]. Consumption experience is a psychological process, which enables a consumer assess satisfaction (Boshoff and Gray, 2004). Quality is "The extent to which a product or service meets and/or exceeds customer expectations" [Sebastianelli and Tamimi, (2002), p.444]. "Quality of a service can only be defined from the perspective of the consumer and occurs at the point where the consumer comes into contact with the service" [Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.63]. Also, "Perceived service quality is the degree and direction of discrepancy between the consumer's perceptions and expectations" (Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.63].

"The key to success of a service enterprise lies in the quality of services they deliver" [Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.61]. Competing on value, meeting and exceeding customers' expectations, saving customers' time and effort, and generosity are additional

precepts that need to be added to fundamental precepts in service marketing. While service quality and efficiency are two important trajectories of corporate strategy (Calabrese and Spadoni, 2013), quality of services could be a single competitive strategy for enterprises (Mbise and Tuninga, 2016). Because of the difficulty in defining and measuring quality of services, focus of initiatives to satisfy a customer should be on enabling customers to "Experience the various tangible elements associated with the service" [Mbise and Tuninga, (2016), p.62].

The emphasis on service quality and the inevitability to guarantee quality of service stems from a focus on customer orientation, in which a customer is seen as central in the marketing of both products and services. Increasing productivity and mass production may lead to a reduction in service quality, and yet competition requires that companies increase productivity, while remaining technically efficient. For this reason, companies have to trade-off service quality and efficiency (Calabrese and Spadoni, 2013). Customer retention remains a key objective for competing firms and this is determined by customer satisfaction and by delivering services, which are cost effective. A service provider "Can modulate the magnitude of the productivity-quality trade-off through an incentive system" [Calabrese and Spadoni, (2013), p.6604]. At this points to the relevance of human resource management systems as a means to incentivise and reward performance of good quality of service.

Much as companies strive to deliver services of good quality, and thereby retain customers, service failure, which may be caused by technical, managerial or nature, may still occur. Service failures have profound effects on customers (Gijsenberg et al., 2015), resulting to performance losses, which may negatively affect service quality, in both the short and long run. Also, "The impact of service failure on customers depends on prior trend in objective service performance" [Gijsenberg et al., (2015), p.642].

Whereas the debate concerning the major determinants of service quality is still raging (Mbise and Tuninga, 2016), there is often a gap between expected service quality (ESQ), service performance and perceived service quality (PSQ) in different dimensions of service quality (Prince and Khaleq, 2013). Service failure is one among many possible explanations of the gap. Managing service gap and service failures is relevant, if a high level of service quality is to be attained. These calls for management action, to diagnose possible sources of failures, prescribe actions and execute such actions. Actions may be curative or preventive.

Acording to Akaka et al. (2013) and Bettencourt et al. (2014), service is the basis of all exchange and postulated that marketing services is now a legitimate discipline. There is an acknowledgement that service marketing is different from conventional marketing and there is also an acknowledgement that some level of service marketing knowledge exists within firms. However, there is limited application of the knowledge of service marketing (Kauppinen-Räisänen and Grönroos, 2015). Skålén (2009) suggests that one of the practices of service marketing is to enhance the pro-activeness of front-line employees. Czaplewski et al. (2002) point out the importance of an orientation session for employee as a component of an employee empowerment policy.

Customer service is a powerful rebranding and marketing strategy. By serving customers, service providers connect with and meet customers' demand. The research of Murphy and Kielgast (2008) exposed the relevance of use of websites for marketing and how poor marketing planning limits enterprises to use websites for marketing.

Frösén et al. (2016) propose that market orientation (MO) and marketing performance measurement (MPM) constitute two most prevalent strategic marketing concepts

practitioners often use. MO and MPM are complementary as the level and focus of both concepts vary across firms. Zeriti et al. (2014) hinted on the various macro and micro environmental factors that marketing managers face, which prompts them to adjust their strategies.

From the array of literatures reviewed above, it can be deduced that management can use online reviews to predict guests' service experience and perceptions concerning service quality as well as to identify guests' service preferences and thereby strategise to satisfy such preferences. Measurement of premeditated variables enables management to strategise. Having reviewed literature on e-WOM, service quality, as well as literature related to service marketing and strategy and relationships between these concepts, the following section presents how data was sourced and analysed.

3   Methodology and approach

This study adopted a qualitative, grounded theory approach. In qualitative studies, idealism and constructivism are the main paradigms and in this study realities are constructed basing on various points of view of hotel reviewers (Slevitch, 2011). Such reviews also carry reviewers' subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2012; Slevitch, 2011). A qualitative research approach was chosen because it is suitable for studying human aspects (Saldana, 2011; Javalgi et al., 2011) such as experience and perceptions of service quality, which constitutes the gist of this study.

Purposeful and criterion-based sampling techniques were used. The researcher purposively chose reviews of people who experienced service quality and hence developed perceptions on such aspects of quality of services (Guarte and Barrios, 2006). The researcher chose reviews dating from 2011 to 2016 because most recent reviews serve to add relevance to the study. For each hotel, the researcher collected the first 14 reviews. The use of criteria to select reviews ensured adequate variety and diversity in the kind of reviews and the number of reviewers selected ensured adequate saturation in the amount of reviews (Erickson, 2012).

Saldana (2011) and Morrow (2005) documents varying opinions concerning the sample size in qualitative research. The researcher collected data from 141 reviews of 12 hotels in Arusha. Creswell (2007) says that 20 reviews is more than enough to achieve saturation. A sample of 141 reviews provide a situational diversity, which is adequate for identifying thematic patterns in the data, which are concerned with service experience and perceptions on service quality, hence increasing trustworthiness of this study.

Reviews posted by service users (hotel guests) concerning experiences they encountered while residing at various hotels in Arusha constituted the data for this study. Reviews were obtained from trip advisor website (https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g297913-Arusha_Arusha_Region-Hotels.html). Reviews are qualitative hence provide qualitative data. A structure was developed to guide data collection (see Annex). Using this structure the researcher copied the reviews from the trip advisor website and pasted it in Microsoft Word so as to derive text versions of the reviews.

The researcher coded and analysed guest reviews and in Section 4 (results and discussion section), the researcher quoted reviewer codes. This was done so as to comply with ethical and confidentiality principles of qualitative research.

Data was analysed using NVivo, software for analysing qualitative data. Use of software in analysing qualitative data adds rigor to the qualitative research process (Kikooma, 2010). The researcher followed a framework of analysis adopted from Punch (Punch, 2005). The framework involved: data documentation and collection, data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification, and the actual analysis. The unit of analysis is guest review/post on TripAdvisor, which elicits service experience and perceptions on quality of a service. During data documentation and collection the researcher ensured adequacy and richness in variety of data. Data reduction involved transcription and coding and looking for patterns in the data. A word version of the reviews was uploaded into NVivo. The researcher used coding functions on NVivo to create nodes and code data accordingly. Data display involves drawing and presenting data (see Figure 1). Data reduction and data display was done using map functions of NVivo. Figure 1 produced by the software is interpreted systematically. During the analysis, the researcher used query functions to search for text and word frequency. To ensure the truth-value, the researcher did collect additional evidence of the findings from literature – a concept commonly referred to as triangulation. The researcher used such evidence from literature to verify findings.

Figure 1   Conceptualisation of service quality and experience (see online version for colours)
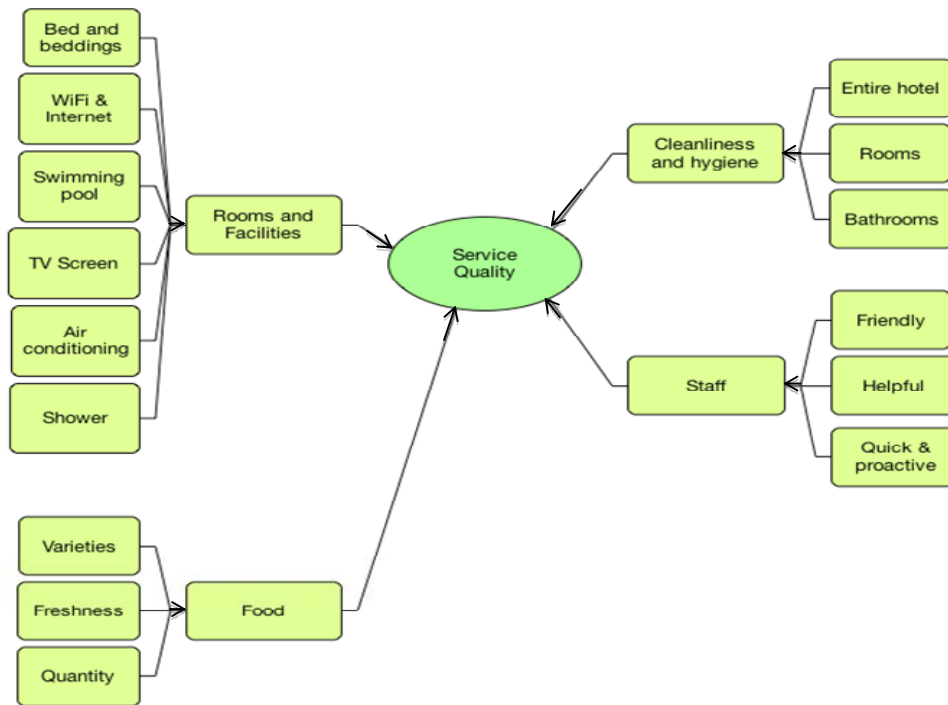
In qualitative research such as this, credibility and utility are relevant (Spencer et al., 2003; Denscombe, 2007). Credibility is enhanced by a proper documentation of the entire research processes. The researcher achieved this through keeping a proper memo (Morrow, 2005) of the analysis process using the memo function of NVivo software. Also, extensive review of literature and an understanding of alternative theories and

reasoning was useful to minimise the researcher's biases. The researcher triangulated preliminary findings with literature review and made references to literature concerning various aspects of findings.

In qualitative research, it is impossible to eliminate researcher's influence on the research process (Saldana, 2011; Nailer et al., 2015) and the eventual outcome of the research. Although there is an implication that elements related to nature and scenery (i.e., watching the sunset, watching Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Meru, watching animals and birds, sunshine, etc.) added to the positive experience of guest, the researcher left out and did not include such service aspects in the analysis because such elements of service quality are provided by nature and can not be influenced by managerial action.

4   Results and discussions

Reviews manifest concepts of PSQ and ESQ advanced in literature (Prince and Khaleq, 2013; Gijsenberg et al., 2015). Guests attain a perception of service quality after reading posts of other reviewers (Hu et al., 2008). Also reviews enable guests to form their own expectations of service quality. Thereafter, guests validate their own perceptions and expectations of service quality against the actual service quality they have experienced as evidenced in reviewers' statements quoted below.

> "With regard to the road to the hotel, this is not as bad as some have described, but rather standard for many neighbourhoods in Arusha." [Reviewer 043]

> "As mentioned by other reviewers, the bathtub design lets some rooms down as all the water run off from the wall pools around the edges and then spills onto the bathroom floor." [Reviewer 014]

> "I experienced everything the other reviews have reported, absolutely wonderful place to stay with superb service." [Reviewer 085]

There is evidence asserting that quests assess quality of service basing on more than a single aspect of service (Reviewer 107). Also, guests may assess quality of service by combining aspects of a service and the price they paid for the service to assess the value they derived from such a service (Reviewer 096). Lastly, guests compare services they receive in one hotel, perceived to be of lesser rating, to services they could have got in a hotel of a higher rating (Reviewer 041). But also, guests are willing to pay more for better services, especially when they sense a likelihood of exposure to perceived risks (Reviewer 025).

> "Service is great and you have laundry service too." [Reviewer 107]

> "Meals and service was decent for the price I paid per night." [Reviewer 096]

> "Once in awhile, as we travel, we are fortunate enough to receive 5 star service at 3 star hotels." [Reviewer 041]

> "This is Africa and you either sleep with bugs and mites or you pay more and get clean and appropriate accommodation." [Reviewer 025]

Service qualities and experiences commonly described in guest reviews can be conceptualised and grouped in four broad categories, namely: cleanliness and hygiene, staff, food, rooms and facilities. The overall service quality is perceived to be a sum total of qualities from the four components. Similarly, total service experience, is derived from

summing experiences from each of the four components. The four components have points where guests come into contact with services (Mbise and Tuninga, 2016) and where guests can experience service quality. At these four components, service quality is evaluated, measured and benchmarked.

Some guests value some components of a service more than other components. For instance, some guests value cleanliness, more than quality of staff, food or rooms and facilities. However, on the overall, guests' perception of service quality is positive, as expressed in affirmative words like *excellent, good* and *great*. Most, guests perceive service components related to rooms and facilities to be most important to elicit a positive service experience. This is followed by service elements related to staff, food and beverages and cleanliness and hygiene. Also, guest reviewers have different preferences for service quality at each sub component. For instance, within the component of food, some guests' value varieties of cuisines, more than quantity or freshness of food.

Basuroy et al. (2003) and Hu et al. (2008) postulated, the effect of both positive and negative reviews on revenues. According to these authors, positive reviews lead to higher revenue and negative reviews leads to lower revenues. Because of differences in preferences in components and sub components of services, it is likely that one negative review, especially on an aspect of a service a particular guest considers most relevant may ruin the possibility of such a guest booking with the hotel in question. Therefore, it is inconclusive; weather the overall positive review of a particular component may eventually have a positive impact on sales and revenue.

Critical elements in staff, that most guests value are: staff friendliness, staff being helpful, staff being quick and staff being attentive when they speak to them. Critical elements in food and beverages that most reviewers consider important are: that food is delicious, good and that food is of many varieties. Components of cleanliness and hygiene that most guests value are: cleanliness of the entire hotel, cleanliness of the rooms and cleanliness of the bathrooms. Aspects of rooms and facilities that most guests value are: quality of the rooms, beds, bathroom and shower, WiFi and internet, swimming pool, TV screen and air conditioning (AC).

Management's own proclamations concerning their services and service quality are replica of the concept of objective service performance (OSP) advanced by Prince and Khaleq (2013) and Gijsenberg et al. (2015). OSP is a level of service performance that management perceives can be attained or can be provided. Some guests tend to evaluate if the services they obtain measures up to management's own proclamations concerning services and service quality.

> "This self-proclaimed 'neo-Africanised' hotel is in fact done with style, and great rooms including the largest (comfortable) bed I've ever seen."
> [Reviewer 109]

Indeed, there is a linkage between qualities of service and repeat guests (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012; Chen and Chen, 2014). Services of good quality are likely to lead to more repeat clients (Reviewer 094). Also, one good aspect of a service may compensate for other bad aspects, leading to a positive net effect (Reviewer 057). Verbatim quotes from the reviewers, which confirm these avowals, are as below.

> "I have also been here several times as I have been to other places and I love it because of the service." [Reviewer 094]

> "The lobby elevator was out of service for part of our stay but it didn't matter because someone always carried our stuff – without being asked. They just appeared and took it." [Reviewer 057]

Because of relationships between quality of service and customer loyalty (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012; Chen and Chen, 2014), many marketing literatures emphasise satisfying a customer for the reason that an unsatisfied customer spreads negative messages to a multitude of others, thereby disrupting the reputation of the business. However, findings of this study provide evidence to suggest that even a satisfied customer spreads good messages, thereby, promote the business. Improving services for a satisfied customer also improves sales because guests who receive good services will return to the same hotel another time and (or) will recommend the hotel to others.

> "I can only recommend her place and her services whole-heartedly." [Reviewer 040]

> "To summarise, it is a great hotel if you want something clean and to be in the centre and do not want to pay too much." [Reviewer 082]

It is often difficult to single out a service from the person who offered or provided the service (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012), hence the relevance of the quality of staff in service provision (Skålén, 2009). Some guests are concerned with the management style and how a good style may lead to good staff performance and good quality of service guests get from hotel staff. Such guests are observing the relationship between management and staff and how management treats staff.

> "To me, it seemed the staff members all loved their jobs because she is a great boss. They enjoyed pleasing her as she offered a smile and praise each time. When the staff is happy, things run smoothly." [Reviewer 042]

Staff ability to communicate with guests is important to enable them deliver a good service. It is emerging that guests consider language versatility of staff and their being able to converse with staff as a service component that gives them a positive experience.

> "The staffs were very obliging and helpful and spoke English very well." [Reviewer 105]

> "Friendly and very helpful staff especially those that one can readily converse with in English." [Reviewer 106]

Staff ability to solve guests' problems, staff pro-activeness, and additional information or knowledge that staffs have is considered good elements of service experience.

> "The staff is generally very quick to act and react, or even proactively take care of business – all in a really nice and friendly manner. It is been a pleasure working with them." [Reviewer 109]

> "Friendly helpful staff with good advice on safari tours." [Reviewer 079]

There are some desirable personalities that enable staff deliver services of a good quality. Also guests compare quality of service that staff provides in a particular hotel, with quality of services they obtained in other hotels.

> "The staffs are extremely friendly and very helpful. It was the staff that really made our stay memorable." [Reviewer 081]

> "The staffs were all truly friendly and helpful and not like many of the big name lodges…just out to get a bigger tip." [Reviewer 051]

Facilities included bed and beddings, WiFi, swimming pool, TV screen, AC, showers and internet. Some repeat guests do seem to follow up on the changes or improvements, which management may have undertaken or things which have changed since their last visits. Such guests are appreciative, if they find there are some changes, especially if they evaluate such changes to be innovative and for the better.

> "I noted the addition of TV and an overhead fan in the rooms since my last visit. It was like coming home to know where I would be staying at this hour of the night, and appreciated the simple white serene decor and the comfortable sleep again." [Reviewer 082]

The above findings have broad implications for service quality evaluation and management, resourcing service provision, targeting and prioritising service improvement. The following paragraphs explain implications of these findings.

In line with concepts of MO and MPM (Frösén et al., 2016), Figure 1 presents a framework or an approach, which management can use to define and manage service quality for the main components of services. Management can focus efforts to define and manage service quality by defining PSQ at each of the service components. It is documented in literature (Gijsenberg et al., 2015) that PSQ is one of the most important metrics in services because it relates directly to customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and firm value. This study documents how guests define, evaluate and benchmark service quality, which can be taken as a starting point for developing systems to gauge and manage service quality.

Management can use online reviews, whether positive or negative, to create and co-create value (Akaka et al., 2013) and improve value in services and to make such values known to the potential guests, through online means such as search engine marketing (SEM), to make their hotels (services and products) more visible and easier to find for existing and potential customers (Murphy and Kielgast, 2008).

All components of service quality require resourcing, so as to be able to deliver services of good quality. Resourcing can be grouped under human and financial. The right staff (with good personality and skill set), needs to be selected (Armstrong, 2009), oriented (Armstrong, 2009; Czaplewski et al., 2002) and motivated (Armstrong, 2009). This research identified qualities that staff must poses (i.e., friendly, willing to help, serves with a smile on the face, etc.) so as to deliver good service experience to guests. In fact, some guests show keenness to know how management treats staff.

> "Something not usually in a hotel review, but was impressive to me was the Manager/Owner. I watched how she runs the hotel, is available to guests and I saw her positive interactions with her staff." [Reviewer 042]

The other components of services (cleanliness, rooms and facilities, and food) require financial resourcing and diligence in procurement and purchasing. Food, for instance, is perishable and logistics are needed to keep food fresh.

This study revealed that whereas some guests value some components of a service more than other components, most guests perceive service components related to rooms and facilities to be most important to elicit a positive service experience. Also, for each service component, there are elements that guests value highly. This finding serves to guide management, interested in upgrading or improving services to prioritise improving rooms and facilities. Also for each sub component, aspects to prioritise are drawn.

During the course of this study, relevant themes emerged, which are relevant and need to be explored further. There were hotels, where management responded to some of

the client's online reviews and complaints. However, it was not possible in this study, to articulate if such managerial responses or managerial attempts were actually successful. This study recommends that future studies should explore nature, content and motive of managerial response to reviews and implications of managerial responses in the short run, on customer satisfaction, and in the long run, on overall business performance (i.e., sales, revenue) etc.

5   Conclusions

Guests assess value of a service by combining aspects of a service and the price they paid for the service; by comparing services they receive in one hotel, perceived to be of lesser rating, to services they could have got in a hotel of a higher rating, and what others had said about the service in previous reviews (Hu et al., 2008). On the overall, guests' perception of the quality of service they received from hotels in Arusha is positive. However, service experience is considered as a sum of experiences encountered with different aspects of services. It is inconclusive; whether a positive review may have a positive impact on sales. Whereas preferences for specific aspects of services differ from guest to guest, most guests consider service components related to rooms and facilities to be most important.

Management can use online reviews for a number of managerial and strategic functions (Xu et al., 2013), which include: service quality evaluation and management, to create, co-create and communicate value, as well as targeting and prioritising service improvement. Management can use the postulated framework to define, measure, and manage service quality for the main components and sub components of services. Lastly, the conceptual framework could be replicated in further studies.

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Annex

Tool for collection of data on reviews of hotels

1   Background information
- name of the hotel
- contact information
- ranking (out of 40 hotels)
- number of reviews

2   Guest reviewer's particulars/details
- code
- name
- location
- contribution level
- reviews
- hotel reviews
- helpful votes

3   Customers' perception of quality – positive reviews

4   Customers' perception of quality – negative reviews/complaints.