

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Star Hotels: Evidence from Madurai, India

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of service quality on guest satisfaction in star rated hotels of Madurai District, Tamil Nadu, India. Primary data was collected from 425 domestic and international tourists using a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, ANOVA and Factor analysis was used to analyze data. The study identified front office services, room facilities, housekeeping, staff behavior, and food and beverage as the five important factors affecting guest satisfaction, in that order. The three dimensions of service quality, namely ambiance, convenience, and sustenance are identified from the factor analysis. Significant difference in the satisfaction of some service attributes between domestic and international tourists is observed through the ANOVA. This study provides a framework to researchers in respect of service quality dimensions specific to the context of star hotels in new emerging tourism destinations. In this research the practical implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Service quality, customer satisfaction, star hotels, Madurai, hospitality industry.

Introduction

Tourism industry contributes significantly to a destination image of tourists, especially in terms of accommodation and other tourism-related services. Star rated hotels form a main part of this sector and thus competing largely on the basis of service quality and customer satisfaction. Hospitality is a service-intensive industry and service forms the core of the industry, since most services are intangible. Services are most often produced and consumed simultaneously and so the customer cannot segregate the experience of purchasing the service from that of consuming it and service quality depends on employee performance. Hence it has become imperative for the industry to treat service quality concept as a main factors influencing customer satisfaction and orientation strategy.

India's tourism sector has experienced an extraordinary growth supported by better infrastructure, more domestic tourists and the flow of international travelers. Along with this expansion star category hotels have been set up mostly in big cities and also in new tourist locations of religions, heritage and cultural significances of tourist segments who service appraisal and expectation might be very different from those in usual urban hotel markets. Literature review has proved that service quality and customer satisfaction are two concepts closely related to each other in the hotel industry. However most of the empirical research has been conducted on luxury hotels and international chains located in major city or resort tourism destinations. Little attention has been paid to star hotels in cultural tourism destination in developing countries where production of services, market segments and competitive conditions of a major city may be significantly different. Therefore it becomes important to have empirical evidence on the aspects of service quality that lead to customer satisfaction in such situations. The present study aims to fill this gap by empirically examining customer perceptions of service quality as well as their effects on overall satisfaction within star hotels in an emerging tourism destination, India. Dimensions of service quality examined in this study include front office services, room facilities, food and beverage services, housekeeping and infrastructure and staff attitude.

The objectives of this study are:

1. Determine service quality in star hotels of Madurai District
2. To study the dimension of service quality and customer satisfaction
3. To set critical factors of service quality to customer satisfaction.

Literature Review

The hospitality industry has remained a prime subject of research partly due to its labour-intensive nature and significant impact in boosting tourism. Research so far has pointed out that service quality is a major determinant of customer perception, satisfaction, and loyalty in the hotel setting (Parasuraman et al. 1988; Grnroos, 2000). Since hotels offer intangible and experiential products, customers rely on both service performance and service environment to judge the quality of service (Kotler et al. 2017). On the one hand, one of the multifaceted nature of service quality in the hotel sector is that the dimensions of the constructs of this concept have been discussed by different researchers. Parasuraman et al. (1988) proposed the SERVQUAL model, which includes the five key dimensions of service quality, namely tangibles reliability responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions have been utilized extensively to study the quality of service in hotels since they reflect the tangible as well as intangible attributes of services (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Zeithaml et al. 2018). Tangibles refer to physical facilities, services in the rooms, cleanliness, and ambience of the room; intangibles refer to staff help, communication skills, and service speed.

These present studies have demonstrated the role of service quality and customer satisfaction in the hotel industry, particularly in new tourism areas. Researches done in the framework of developing countries have revealed that overall service quality, encompassing aspects such as responsiveness and assurance, tangibility/cleanliness, and reliability, significantly and positively influences customer satisfaction and their repurchase intention (Ali et al. 2019; Ladhari et al. 2020). A reflection on these papers reveals the way staff behavior influences the emotions of guests during their stay. Giving personal attention also helps in creating meaningful memories. Several recent studies have examined customer satisfaction in star-rated hotels in emerging and tier-II tourism destinations. One of these studies by Prentice et al. (2020) and another by Rather et al. (2021) have pointed out that the aspects of service quality greatly impact emotional satisfaction and customer loyalty in the case of hotels located in tourism developing regions. Besides highlighting that front office efficiency, housekeeping quality and room comfort are the main predictors of overall satisfaction for four-star hotels, the studies also brought to light the role of service quality factors in influencing customer emotional satisfaction and loyalty.

With the post-COVID hospitality scenario, it has been revealed that hygiene, cleanliness, and safety perceptions are crucial aspects of customer satisfaction (Griffin et al. 2020). On top of that, hospital immigrant studies in India have reported that service quality remains the major driver of customer satisfaction in star hotels; along with other factors like infrastructure quality and staff professionalism which are instrumental to tourism development in newly recognized destinations (Singh & Srivastava, 2022; Kumar et al. 2023). Few large hospitality studies have shown that the top-quality service is a major reason for customer satisfaction. Oliver (1997) explained customer satisfaction as a situation where the reality of the service matches the expectations made by customers. Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000) and Ryu et al. (2012) observed that front-office service, staff professionalism, and consistent service delivery can be used as the crucial determinants of overall satisfaction in hotel customers, which triggers loyalty to hotels. Front office operation is the one that makes first impressions on the customers, so it is very important in terms of influencing the overall customer judgement about various hotel services.

Besides, accommodation-related factors such as the comfort of the room safety cleanliness and maintenance have been identified as the major factors that influence star-rated hotel stay (Lockyer, 2005; Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010). Housekeeping and cleanliness are considered as primary determinants of guest satisfaction because they have a close link to comfort, health and security (Barber & Scarcelli, 2010). Food and beverage-related aspects are another major contributor to hotel service quality. It has been shown based on previous studies that the quality of food, the variety of the menu, the level of cleanliness, and the speed of service have a positive

impact on perceived value and guest satisfaction in a hotel setting (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Kim et al. 2013). Since star hotels' main evaluation criterion is most probably the quality of services, food and beverage services are potentially very important.

Alongside transport services, communication facilities, and recreational facilities, supporting facilities and infrastructure also contribute to improving hotel services as a whole. Studies show that infrastructure and supporting facilities lead to increased recommendation and discussion of hotel services as they are not only a major factor but also a positive one in customer delight and guest satisfaction (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Besides that, the behaviour of employees such as their politeness, empathy, and responsiveness, as well as their professional attire, have been found time and again to be a major factor in the guest's evaluation of hotel service because of the continuity of the guest-hotel relationship (Bitner et al. 1990; Ladhari, 2009). Numerous studies have been done on how characteristics of customer profile influence perceived value and overall satisfaction. It is the nationality income educational level, trip purpose, and trip length that are the segments that could alter a customer's hotel and other service expectations (Pizam & Ellis, 1999; Alegre & Garau, 2010). Nevertheless, the firm results have made a number of researchers to appeal for further similar samples and factors affected by destination-specific and adjusted for emerging tourism destinations.

Most previous studies about service quality and customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector have a lot of focus on major cities, international luxury hotel chains, or well-known tourist areas. Very few research works are available about customer perception and satisfaction in star hotels in emerging tourism destinations (in India). Besides, hardly any comprehensive studies have been done on different service quality factors and customer factors in a single empirical framework. This research paper intends to fill this research gap by studying customer perception and satisfaction with the services of star hotels in a developing Indian tourism destination. The intention of this paper is to add to the richness of studies in the hospitality industry by concentrating on some important dimensions of service quality such as front office services, accommodation/services, F&B services, housekeeping, and infrastructure, complemented with staff behavior issues related to the services provided by star hotels in a developing Indian tourism destination.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and empirical research design to examine customer perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding service quality dimensions in star-rated hotels. This approach is appropriate as it focuses on analyzing customers' opinions, attitudes, and satisfaction based on their actual service experiences during their stay. The research was conducted in Madurai District, Tamil Nadu, a prominent tourism destination in Southern India known for its cultural, religious, and heritage significance. The region attracts a large number of domestic and international tourists throughout the year and hosts several star-rated hotels catering to diverse customer segments.

The study population consists of both domestic and foreign tourists staying in star-rated hotels in Madurai District during the research period. A convenience sampling method was employed, as respondents were easily accessible within hotel premises and willing to participate. A total of 425 valid questionnaires were collected, which is considered adequate for conducting multivariate statistical analysis and ensuring the reliability of the findings. Primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire administered directly to hotel guests after their stay, enabling the capture of post-service perceptions. Secondary data were sourced from books, academic journals, research papers, reports, and official tourism publications.

The questionnaire was structured into sections covering demographic details and key service quality dimensions, including front office services, accommodation, food and beverage, housekeeping, infrastructure, transportation, and staff behavior. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," allowing for the assessment of varying levels of satisfaction. A pilot study was conducted to ensure reliability, with Cronbach's alpha used to test internal consistency, while content validity was established through literature review and alignment with existing service quality models. The collected data were

coded and analyzed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics, ANOVA, MANOVA, and factor analysis to identify significant service quality factors influencing customer satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Respondents

The profile of 425 respondents, showing the demographics and travel status, is summarized in Table 1. The data indicated that 56.0% of the visitors were domestic and 44.0% international tourists. This shows that Madurai is attractive to people from all over the world. The largest number of international visitors was from the USA (4.2%), the UK (3.8%), France (3.5%), and Germany (2.8%), followed by Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Table 1: Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents (N=425)

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Type of Tourist | Domestic | 238 | 56.00% |
| | International | 187 | 44.00% |
| Age Group | Below 25 | 159 | 37.40% |
| | 25-50 | 234 | 55.10% |
| | Above 50 | 32 | 7.50% |
| Gender | Male | 324 | 76.20% |
| | Female | 101 | 23.80% |
| Occupation | Government Employment | 132 | 31.10% |
| | Private Employment | 91 | 21.40% |
| | Professional | 88 | 20.70% |
| | Business | 59 | 13.90% |
| | Others | 55 | 12.90% |

Source: Primary data

Based on the profile, the dominant demographic characteristics of the respondents were their age group (the majority are between 25 and 50 years old, 55.1%), sex (mostly males, 76.2%), marital status (mostly single, 52.5%), overall occupation (more government employees, 31.1%), the nature of work (more in the private sector, 21.4%), and income earned (the majority receive below 5K per year, 58.1%). The profile indicates that the star hotel clientele group in Madurai is mostly made up of middle-income earning professionals / business travellers as well as government employees, who are visiting Madurai either for business or pilgrimage.

Travel Behavior and Preferences

The travel behaviour analysis showed clear trends. Tourism was the main reason for arrival for 41.2% of international and 30.7% of domestic tourists (Table 2). A major surprise was that the domestic market had high repeat visitation (50% on the 4th plus time) while the international market had high first-time visitation (31.6% on the first-time visit) (χ^2 (3, N=425) = 19.572, $p < .05$). There is strong loyalty within the domestic market, but there is a large opportunity to convert international first-time visitors.

Table 2: Purpose of Visit by Tourist Type

| Purpose of Visit | Domestic (N=238) | International (N=187) |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Tourism | 30.70% | 41.20% |
| Business | 21.90% | 26.70% |
| Conference | 26.50% | 15.50% |
| Convention | 21.00% | 16.60% |

Source: Primary data

Accessibility was the most influential factor in selecting a hotel (26.8%), followed by tariff (20.9%) and brand image (18.8%). Yet most of the customers stayed in a single room (55.5%) or a twin room (39.8%). Chi-square (χ^2) analysis revealed significant associations between nationality and frequency of visit (H_{02} rejected, $p < .05$), type of room (H_{03} rejected, $p < .05$), and type of bed preferred (H_{04} rejected, $p < .05$); therefore, this underscores the high relevance of segmented market-orientated services.

Analysis of Service-Specific Satisfaction

Front Office Services

As indicated in Table 3, guests generally have high satisfaction and agreement on many items related to the front office operation; strong agreement (>78% combined agree/strongly agree) was found for "cordial staff" (FO5), "courteous staff" (FO9), "helpfulness of the bell desk" (FO10), "professional and friendly staff" (FO11), and "early check-in" (FO13). Still, a one-way ANOVA (Table 4) indicates a significant difference ($*p < .05$) between domestic and international guests on six of the nine attributes, including reception ambience (FO1), staff attire (FO3), communication skills (FO4), performance of the front desk (FO14), interaction with front office staff (FO15), and operational efficiency (FO16). Therefore, H_{05} is rejected for these six attributes; although the base service can provide fairly high satisfaction, international guests are more critical of front office professionalism and operational efficiency.

Table 3: Customer Satisfaction on Selected Front Office Attributes (%)

| Attribute (Code) | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|
| Ambience of reception is pleasant (FO1) | 44.7 | 40.9 | 9.2 | 5.2 |
| Front office staff are cordial (FO5) | 33.6 | 45.2 | 16.9 | 4.2 |
| Staff have good communication skills (FO4) | 38.4 | 39.3 | 15.3 | 7 |

Source: Primary data

Table 4: ANOVA Results for Front Office Satisfaction by Nationality (Selected Items)

| Variable | F-value | Sig. (p) | Inference |
|----------|---------|----------|-----------------|
| FO1 | 12.734 | 0 | Significant |
| FO3 | 8.82 | 0.003 | Significant |
| FO4 | 16.839 | 0 | Significant |
| FO5 | 0.091 | 0.764 | Not Significant |

Source: Primary data

Room Facilities: One-sample t-tests on each of the twelve responses, with the neutral value (3) as a test value, further established the high levels of satisfaction experienced across all fifteen room facility attributes ($*p < .05$).

< .05). A large positive deviation from the midpoint was observed for "cot/mattress/pillow standard" (RF1: $t(424) = -23.791, p < .001$) as well as for "attached bath cleanliness" (RF9: $t(424) = -22.357, p < .001$). It can therefore be concluded that room facilities are indeed a major satisfier for guests at the star hotels in Madurai.

Food & Beverage Services: Descriptive ranking of F&B attributes revealed that "price within expectations" (CF5) and "complimentary food" (CF9) were top priorities, while "dining area cleanliness" (CF1) was ranked last. MANOVA results (Pillai's Trace = 0.099, $F = 4.532, p = .000$) indicated a significant overall multivariate effect. However, an examination of the tests of between-subject effects and estimated marginal means suggested that while differences exist, the practical satisfaction level for both groups was high, with no single dimension showing a large, practically significant gap.

Ancillary Services (Laundry, Bar, Transport): Laundry customer satisfaction also revealed nationality differences – significant for punctuality (LF1: $F=4.934, p=.002$) and linen performance (LF4: $F=4.674, p=.003$) but non-significant for bar services (e.g., seating, lighting, brand displays; LF6; all $p > .05$) and transportation services (e.g., vehicle comfort, quality of drivers; LF7; all $p > .05$).

Overall Satisfaction and Key Determinants

Ranking overall satisfaction for seven service areas (shown in Table 5), respondents ranked Laundry Services first and Infrastructure and Bar Services second. An important managerial diagnosis from the overall ranking is that the front office ranked last. This is a paradox for the front office manager, as individual front office elements ranked relatively high; however, combined, the front office was last. This indicates that the check-in/out experience was sufficient on a functional level but not smooth or emotional enough to produce a top-ranked impression.

Table 5: Ranking of Overall Satisfaction by Service Domain

| Service Domain | Mean Score | Rank |
|-------------------|------------|------|
| Laundry Services | 2.31 | 1 |
| Infrastructure | 2.16 | 2 |
| Bar Services | 2.1 | 3 |
| Catering Services | 2.09 | 4 |
| Room Services | 1.93 | 5 |
| Housekeeping | 1.85 | 6 |
| Front Office | 1.81 | 7 |

Note: Less means more satisfied (1=Highly Satisfied, 5=Highly Dissatisfied).

Factor Analysis: Identifying Core Service Dimensions

To identify what aspects of the service drive satisfaction, a PCA with Varimax rotation was performed on the 31 service attributes. The KMO (0.941) and Bartlett's test ($\chi^2 = 10325.71, p < .001$) confirmed sampling adequacy. The scree plot (see Figure 1) visually confirms that three factors should be extracted, with a point of inflection (elbow) at the third component, after which eigenvalues are less than 1 and level off.

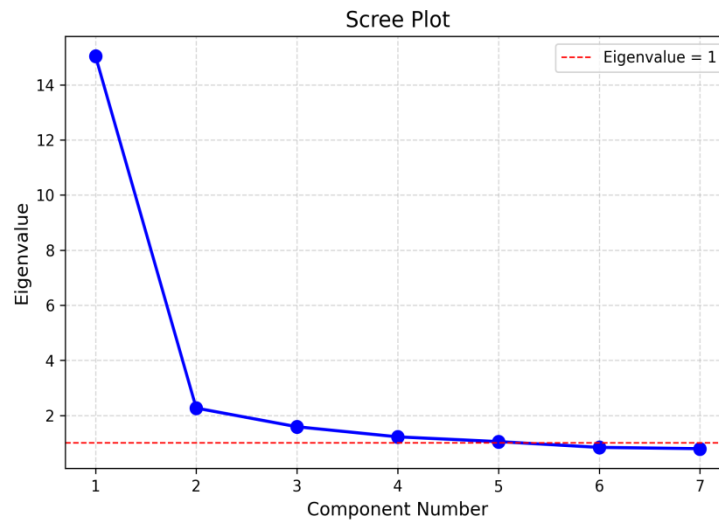


Figure 1: Screen Plot for Factor Analysis of Service Qu

Note: The magnitude of the Eigen values for each component is plotted. The elbow at component 3 suggests that the maximum number of factors to retain is 3.

The analysis extracted three major factors accounting for 68.28% of the variance (Table 6). Loadings from the rotated component matrix were readily interpretable, and the factors were labeled accordingly.

Table 6: Rotated Factor Matrix and Factor Interpretation

| Factor | Key Variables Loading >0.6 | Variance Explained | Interpretation |
|----------|--|--------------------|----------------|
| Factor 1 | Staff communication, cordiality, efficiency, guidance (FO items) | 18.76% | Ambience |
| Factor 2 | Bed/bath cleanliness, amenities, furniture, Wi-Fi (RF items) | 17.15% | Convenience |
| Factor 3 | Food quality, staff behavior, hygiene, service (CF items) | 15.72% | Sustenance |

Source: Primary data

The three dimensions—ambience, convenience and sustenance—may be the barest essentials for STARHotels customer satisfaction at Madurai. They are comparable to but slight variations of classic SERVQUAL dimensions, emphasising a unique blend of professional customer staff interaction, followed by important core product needs, and finally the experiential F&B aspect as the key to success in this up-and-coming cultural destination.

Discussion

This research offers a detailed analysis of service quality and customer satisfaction drivers in star hotels operating in an emerging Indian destination for cultural tourism. The three core service dimensions (ambience, convenience, and sustenance) provide a more granular depiction of the SERVQUAL model in heritage tourism environments outside metropolises. Here, convenience, in terms of room hygiene and new-age essentials like Wi-Fi, becomes a "hygiene factor" that must be met (Barber & Scarcelli, 2010). The finding that was most significant was the 'Front Office Perception Paradox' – here, customers associate high ratings on some select separate attributes, like courtesy, with the front office department's lowest overall rank. This demands that travellers

perceive this department holistically – more than simple counter transactions, as the place where memories are created and culture is mediated (a demand perhaps stricter for foreign tourists), as validated by the second hypothesis.

This taps into Ladhari (2009), who considers the front office primarily a value co-creation arena and not merely a department. Highly significant associations between nationality and three individual preferences strongly corroborate the moderating role of culture (Pizam & Ellis, 1999). However, the fact that nationality influences only a few consumers' satisfaction with core products like F&B and transportation indicates that it is possible to standardise the offerings to a high, universally accepted level – a major managerial feat in an emerging market. Finally, the prominence of accessibility and tariffs in influencing hotel choice over brand image demonstrates the pragmatic, value-focused nature of the tourists in this segment, unlike the glamour rush in luxury destinations (Khan & Rahman, 2020). Tourism marketers must adjust their message accordingly.

Conclusion and Implications

Theoretical Contribution: Two contributions emanate from this research. First, the development and validation of a context-specific service quality triad (Ambiance-Convenience-Sustenance) for nascent cultural destinations, moving away from direct generic-model application. Second, recognition and conceptualisation of the "Front Office Perception Paradox", which is an unexplored and unknown disparity of attribute-level performance and overall department-level judgement. The paradox reveals the inadequacy of attribute-level service quality reporting and the importance of an integrated experience index versus an attribute-silo report of scores within hospitality research.

Managerial Implications: Address the Front Office Paradox: Frustrate the "courteous" front-office staff with structural support that frees them from the paradigm of politeness and equips them with the skills and confidence to act as local experience curators. Provide training in proactive problem-solving, cultural intelligence, local destination knowledge and timeliness. Streamline processes and reduce friction of transactions. Take Advantage of and Market the Core Strengths: Actively promote higher standards of relative cleanliness (convenience) and responsiveness of laundry service in advertising and on the internet. Implement Segmented Customisation: Adjust room configurations (bedding, toiletries) and menus (cuisine choices) for volume-creating international source markets (e.g., USA, UK, Sri Lanka). Reformat and Reposition Strategy for Outreach: Convert strategic benefit statements (location, price, service) into traditional marketing initiatives rather than relying on intangible "brand" recognition. Achieve and Communicate Value-Added Factors: Assure consistent delivery of highest-ranked value-adds: high speed Wi-Fi Internet, in-room refreshment facilities and ambiance of room care.

Policy Implications: As for destination management organizations, several strategic actions could be taken. The first one concerns the capacity to enhance destination accessibility by investing in more efficient way finding systems linked with local integrated transport options and setting up more comprehensive bilingual signage. Such developments would serve to increase the location advantage that hotels have available as a major choice criterion. Another valuable strategy would be the enhancement of specialized human capital, as specific training schemes, conducted in cooperation with local or regional tourism authorities, hotel associations and universities, should be developed. Front office staff should acquire better skills in cross-cultural communication and destination experience management. Another important direction to be explored is to encourage repetition among visitors: favorable actions should be taken to ensure the future return of tourists in the destination by setting up attractive thematic circuits toward the main attractions and other hidden destinations. Sequential cultural and seasonal events should also be active in order to lengthen the average length of stay.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the empirical and theoretical frameworks offered by the present study are useful for a better understanding of contemporary emerging tourism destinations, the study has a number of limitations as well, however. First, the research was restricted to only one emerging tourism destination, the Madurai district. Future

studies could test and validate the framework developed here in other tourism settings such as coastal resorts, hill stations, wildlife tourism destinations, metro cities, etc., where travellers may have different motivating factors and service expectations and consumption patterns in tourism. Second, this study used a cross-sectional design of research, and causal inferences of the relation between dimensions of perceived service quality and customer satisfaction cannot be firmly established. Since service encounters and tourists' expectations are subject to change over time, longitudinal research is needed to investigate effects of time on satisfaction as well as the long-term effect of service quality improvement on customer loyalty. Thirdly, the study used a purely quantitative approach using a structured questionnaire. This method lends itself to statistical generalisation but may not assess the emotional, symbolic and experiential factors involved in hotel stay experiences and may not explain the discrepancies found between attribute-level performance and overall perceived performance of the front office.

Further research, using a mixed method or qualitative methodology such as in-depth interviews, focus groups or observational methods, should explore the psychological and contextual factors influencing customer judgement. Fourth, the conceptual model reflected common service quality dimensions (e.g., front office services, accommodation, F&B services, housekeeping and infrastructure). In other words, other technological service factors, like digital service quality, mobile application convenience, online booking capabilities, and social media presence, were left out for consideration. Future research could consider overhauling the model by including online reviews and technological factors, such as Smartphone applications, to accommodate recent hospitality consumption circumstances. Lastly, though customer satisfaction was analysed as the main outcome variable, most likely future research could extend their analysis by including behavioural and performance consequences such as revisit intention, eWOM, online review ratings, direct booking, and customer lifetime value. Empirical tests on the influence of the three identified service dimensions (ambience, convenience, and sustenance) on those consequences would further the development of theory and business relevance.

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