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Does Customers' Expectation on Star Rating Always Predict Satisfaction? A Study Done in Kenyan Restaurants

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Abstract

Star rated restaurants serve different types of customers with preconceived ideas of what they expect to receive in terms of service. The study examined customers' expectations in relation to food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price which results to satisfaction in a meal experience. The results indicated that food quality and ambience was the key attribute for customer satisfaction and perceived price an attribute of dissatisfaction in five star rated restaurants. On the other hand, service quality and perceived price were the main attribute of customer satisfaction in three star rated restaurants. Overall satisfaction results indicated that the three star rated restaurant had the highest mean scores (10.45) followed by four star rated (9.98) and finally five star rated restaurants (9.90). The study recommends improvement on food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price for restaurants to gain competitive edge. The study also suggests that customers' views should be considered when rating restaurants.

Keywords: Customer expectations, star rating, customer satisfaction, Kenyan restaurant

1. Introduction

Customers visiting rated restaurants will always have expectations in relation to food quality, service quality, attractive ambience and fair perceived price. If their expectations are met or exceeded, they get satisfied. Customer satisfaction is considered to be the key success of many hospitality establishments. In order to guide potential guests on the nature of facilities and services offered at various hotel, star rating is used which usually vary between one and five for both hotels and restaurant. In Kenya however, the star rating system of restaurants ranges from three to five. The higher the rating, the higher the expected level of service and facilities will be (Pizam *et al.*, 2016).

According to Agusaj *et al.* (2017) the rating system focus primarily on objective, tangible criteria such as the availability or size of facilities and service, rarely on subjective tangibles such as cleanliness and state of repair and rarely on service quality or food quality which contribute greatly to customer satisfaction. Customers can visit a highly star rated restaurants and leave dissatisfied after the meal experience. Hensen *et al.* (2011) observed that conventional rating system have not been very successful in assessing and communicating the quality of hotels in a way that provides a realistic expectation to prospective customers. Little is still known about the underlying relationship between restaurant rating system dimensions and customer satisfaction. The study is therefore conducted to investigate customers' expectations of restaurant star rating system in relation to satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer Expectations

Customer expectations can be divided into three levels: The desired service level is the service the customer hopes to receive, the adequate service level that the customer considers just acceptable (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991) while predicted service level is the service the customer believes will occur (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). The "zone of tolerance" is the level of service that consumers consider acceptable during a given service encounter with any service provider (Zeithaml *et al.* 1993).

It is therefore necessary for service providers to deliver what they state they will (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991), so that consumer perceptions do not fall short of their expectations - causing service gap (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). The smaller the gap between what the customers expect to occur the more satisfied the customer will be with the service/product.

2.2. Hotel and Restaurant Rating System

Most countries have national standard rating systems which are determined by either private or government organization (Tafera and Govender, 2015). In Europe hotels and restaurants are ranked on a scale of one to five stars with five being the highest rating possible. Star rating in Europe are determined by local Government agencies or independent organization and they vary from country to country. In Kenya the classification is done by ministry of tourism.

Star rating systems both in hotel and restaurant offer benefits to various sectors such as travel agencies, tour operators, hotels, restaurants, governments and consumers (WTO and IH&RA, 2004). The travel agents and tour operators are able to select hotel and restaurants for their clients. The system allows the customers to choose the restaurant of their choice. The Government on the other hand uses these ratings to regulate the industry with tariffs and taxes.

Various hotel and restaurant rating system has however received criticism from various authors. This includes.

- The diverseness of the supply among regions and among countries especially for the intermediate categories (3- 4 star). The five-star level is the only is the only category that has a certain uniformity from the international point of view (Minazzi, 2010).
- At times there is lack of correspondence between the hotel rankings and the service offered based on customer expectations. Classification using star points out the price level of hotels but does not necessarily meet customer expectations (Lepez and Serrano, 2004).
- More attention to quantitative and technical elements (room size, bars and restaurant equipment etc.) rather than service aspects that are more than service aspects that are more difficult to measure or quantify (Briggs *et al.*, 2007).

2.3. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is customer's evaluation of a good or service in terms of whether it has met their needs and expectations. A customer will be dissatisfied if a product's performance is not up to their expectations. On the other hand, a customer will be satisfied if the product performance meets their expectations (Kotler and Armsrong, 2012). Customer satisfaction in a meal experience is based on four elements; food quality, service quality, ambience and customer's perceived price.

2.3.1. Food Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Food quality has been stated by Sulek and Hensley (2004) as the most important dimension of the restaurant experience. It is an essential requirement to satisfy the needs and expectation of customers (Peri, 2006). Namkung and Jang (2007) evaluated the relationship of individual attributes that constitute food quality with customer satisfaction and behavioural intention. The findings indicated that food presentation, taste and temperature were significantly related to customer satisfaction whereas food presentation, taste and healthy options were significantly predictors of behavioural intention. In this study, food quality was measured based on three dimensions as pointed out by Sulaiman and Harun (2013). These are food presentation, Sensory characteristics (colour, smell and temperature) and menu variety.

2.3.2. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service quality is an important determinant of customer satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2009) Service quality retains and attracts new customers, enhances corporate image and above all guarantees survival of an organization (Ladhari, 2009). Kivela *et al.* (2000) confirmed that the service quality dimensions contributed strongly to customer satisfaction and intention to return to a given restaurant. The following five dimensions of service quality were therefore measured in this study as they are important in maximizing customer satisfaction, these are; reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles.

2.3.2.1. Reliability

Reliability is defined as the "ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately" or delivering on its promises (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). Reliability in restaurant according to Andaleeb and Conway (2006) means fresh food delivered at the correct temperature and accurately the first time. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) pointed out that reliability can be characterized by reservation of tables, adherence to customer requests regarding the preparation of menu items and accurate billing among others.

2.3.2.2. Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to willingness of service providers to help customers and provide prompt service (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). This emphasizes attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customers request, questions, complaints and problems (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2003).

2.3.2.3. Assurance

Assurance relates to knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. This dimension becomes important when patrons feel uncertain about services offerings of a particular restaurant (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2006). Assurance relates to knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006).

2.3.2.4. Empathy

Empathy is defined as the caring individualized attention the firm provides to its customer (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). The customer is treated as if he is unique and special. There are several ways that empathy can be provided for example knowing the customer's name, his preferences and needs. In restaurant, empathy may be important to ensure customer loyalty as the server knows the customers likes and dislikes.

2.3.2.5. Tangibles

This dimension is defined as the physical appearance of facilities, equipment, staff and written materials. It translates to the restaurant's interiors, the appearance and condition of the cutlery, tableware and uniform of staff, the appearance and design of the menu and restaurant signage. (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). Tangibles are used by firms to convey image and signal quality (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006) to customers.

2.3.3. Ambience and Customer Satisfaction

The importance of attractive ambience is to create an image and to influence customer behaviour in the restaurant industry (Ryu and Jang, 2008). Several authors (Hueng and Gu, 2012; Ryu *et al.*, 2012) have emphasized on the positive effect of attractive ambience on customer satisfaction and return intention. Wells and Foxal, (2012) identified three primary dimensions of quality ambience in restaurants which influence customer satisfaction. These are ambient conditions (elements related to aesthetic appeal); spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbol and artefacts which were used in this study to measure ambience.

2.3.4. Perceived Price Fairness and Customer Satisfaction

Perceived price fairness is considered an important factor for customer satisfaction and revisit intention (Samaedi, Bakti and Metasari, 2011) because customers evaluate the value of service on the basis of price they pay. Kim, Lee and Yoo (2006) also reported that price fairness is an important predictor of relationship quality, trust and satisfaction and if customers believe that prices of a restaurant are reasonably high and there are no justifications for such prices, the chances of them visiting lessen. In regard to price and value, Xi and Shuai (2009) posited that food service operator needs to emphasize on good value for the price, appropriate portion size of food and beverage for the price, and overall value of the dining experience to their customers. Appropriate portion size of food, appropriate amount of beverage, good value for the price, price compared to prices of competitors and overall value of the meal experience was therefore used in measuring price perception in this study.

3. Methodology

A cross sectional survey study was adopted. This type of study was preferred as it gathers a large scale of data at one point in time and explains phenomenon representing wide populations then simply reports what has been found in a variety of ways (Cohen, 2011). The study was conducted in Nairobi and Coastal region of Kenya. These areas were selected because they receive the largest number of both domestic and international tourists (Kenya bureau of statistics, 2012). The star rating of restaurants in Kenya ranges from three to five stars (Kenya gazette, 2003).

The target population was all customers, restaurant managers and waiters from all rated restaurants in Nairobi and Coastal region. Simple random sampling technique was employed in gathering data from the customers. The study was done on all (31) existing rated restaurants since twenty five had closed down.

The sample size of 384 customers was calculated according to Fisher, Storman and Heaton, (1998) formula which is used in social sciences studies in determining the sample size (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003).

The study employed self administered closed ended, five point Likert scale questionnaire comprising of two sections. The first section which had thirty two (32) questions sought to establish the level of satisfaction in relation to food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price fairness. The second section which had six (6) questions sought to find out customers' level of agreement as regards to overall satisfaction to the restaurants.

Pretesting of instrument was done as it familiarizes the researcher with respondents' fieldwork arrangement and time constraints while executing survey. To test for validity, the instruments were scrutinized by a group of experts and corrected to ensure clarity. To ensure reliability, Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett test of sphericity was used to the appropriateness of applying factor analysis (Pallant, 2005). Items of factors were retained if the factor loading was greater than or equal 0.5. $0.5 < \text{KMO} < 1$ (Trong and Ngoc, 2008).

The questionnaires which had been completed successfully were analyzed using SPSS version 21. ANOVA test was used in analyzing the data. ANOVA mean plots were used to show the level of customer satisfaction in various star rated restaurants.

4. Results and Discussions.

4.1. Customer Satisfaction In Relation to Restaurants' Rating

Customers will usually have different expectations on the meal experience in relation to the rating of the restaurant they visit. The findings indicate the level of customers' satisfaction on food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price on different star rated restaurants.

4.2. Food Quality and Restaurants Star Rating

Figure 1 depicts that the respondents of five star restaurants rated food quality highly (25.50) compared to their counterparts in four (22.50) and three star (21.60). Trailing of mean scores in four star rated restaurants could have been attributed to dissatisfaction of one or more food quality dimensions.

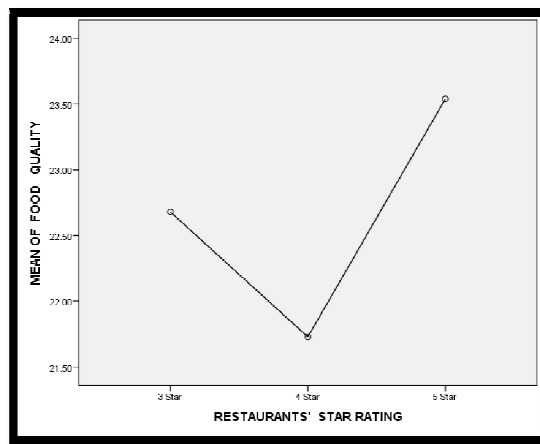


Figure 1 One way ANOVA mean Plot for Food Quality and Rated Restaurants

Sulaiman and Harun (2013) confirmed that taste and presentation dimensions were the two greatest contributors of customer satisfaction. Other authors (Haghghi *et al.*, 2012) confirmed that smell of food and food variety contributed greatly to customer satisfaction compared to other food quality dimensions.

4.3. Service Quality and Restaurants Star Rating

The figure 2 depicts that the respondents of three star restaurants rated service quality highly (15.75) compared to their counterparts in four (14.75) and five star (15.50). This is an indication that the expectations of most of the four and some of the five star respondents were not met leading to dissatisfaction in relation to service quality.



Figure 2: One Way ANOVA Mean Plot for Service Quality and Rated Restaurants

All dimensions of service quality (Tangibles, empathy, reliability, assurance, and responsiveness) lead to customer satisfaction (Al- Tit, 2015). However Diab *et al.* (2015) argue that to satisfy and retain customers, restaurant managers should pay attention only to empathy and tangibles while Zafar *et al.* (2012) posit that the tangible dimension was the only one that impacts customer satisfaction in restaurants. This implies that the low mean scores in four star rated restaurant could have been attributed to dissatisfaction of one or more of service quality dimensions.

4.4. Ambience and Restaurants Star Rating

The respondents from five star restaurants rated ambience with the highest mean scores (18.50) compared to their counterparts in three (17.90) and four star restaurants (16.50) (Figure 3). The results clearly shows that expectations of most respondents in four stars and some of the respondents in three star rated restaurants were not met in relation to the restaurants' ambience. Customers visiting star rated restaurants expect quality ambience. The higher the rating is, the more expectation of the customers is. Customers may judge overall ambience based on the various dimensions of ambience. For instance a customer who is uncomfortable with the temperature of the restaurant may be affected psychologically when the temperature is either too hot or too cold (Kurzl and Clow, 1998).

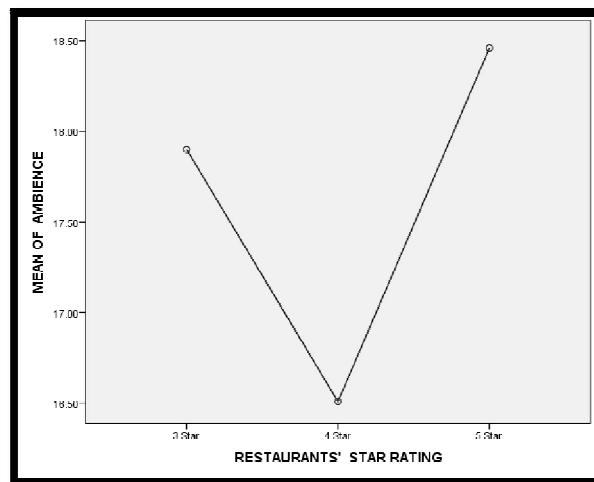


Figure 3 One Way ANOVA Mean Plot for Ambience and Rated Restaurants

Similarly if the music in the restaurant is not in tune with the target audience' mood and choice, then this would destroy the whole concept of ambience (Wood and Allen, 2012). This could have been a case in the four star rating restaurant.

4.5. Perceived Price and Restaurants Star Rating

In terms of perceived price, the three star rated respondents rated perceived price with the highest mean scores (8.25) compared to four (7.55) and five-star (7.25) respondents (Figure 4). Most respondents in five and four star rated restaurant could have perceived that the prices were too high which fell below their expectations leading to low mean score rating.

The price of the items on the menu has the capability of attracting or repelling customers (Moroos, 1990). When prices are not in accordance with expectations, customer satisfaction declines. This is because customers have internal reference prices stored in their memories (Grewal *et al.*, 1998). If the prices on the menu are higher than what the customers expects, then satisfaction will be adversely be affected (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006). This could have been the case of five star rated restaurant, leading to the lowest mean scores compared to other star rated restaurants.

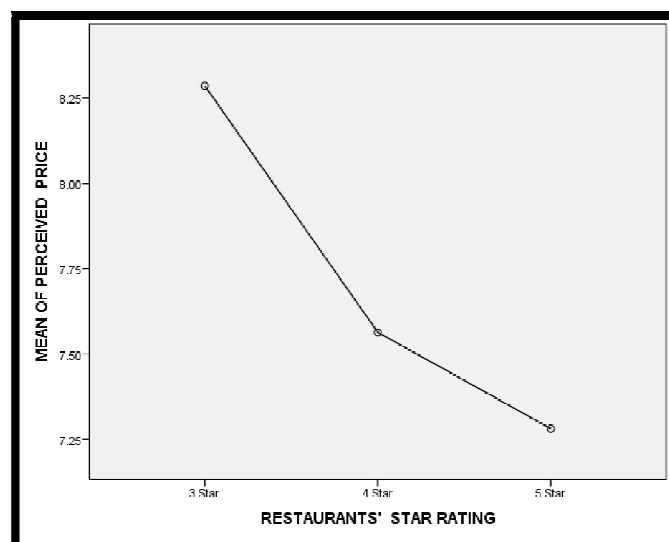


Figure 4 One Way ANOVA Mean Plot for Perceived Price and Rated Restaurants

4.6. Overall Satisfaction in Star Rated Restaurants

The three star restaurants had the highest rated mean scores (10.45) compared to four (9.98) and five (9.90) star restaurants in relation to overall customer satisfaction (Figure 5). Service quality and perceived price could have contributed greatly to the leading of high mean scores of the three star restaurants.

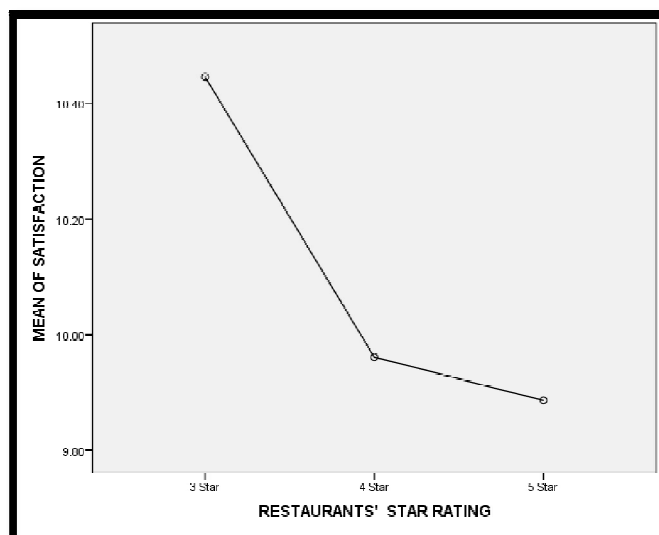


Figure 5 One Way ANOVA Mean Plot for Overall Satisfaction of the Rated Restaurants

Comparative results of the four attributes (food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price) of customer's meal experience indicates that price perception strongly influenced the overall customer satisfaction in five star rated restaurants.

If restaurant excessively emphasizes on quality of service with relatively expensive prices, customers may not be satisfied with the meal experience regardless of the high quality service because they will feel that the prices are unfair. Rothenberger (2015) also found out that customer perception on unfair prices lead to negative outcome such as higher degree of dissatisfaction, lower levels of repurchase intention, negative word of mouth and increased complaints. This could have resulted to the lowest mean scores of five star rated restaurants.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study showed that food quality received the highest mean scores (21.60 – 25.50) from the customers while perceived price received the lowest mean scores (7.25- 8.25) in all the star rated restaurants. The lower mean scores implied that the customers were dissatisfied with the prices charged in the restaurants. This was clear evidence especially in the five star rated restaurants which led to the lowest mean scores in overall satisfaction. The restaurateurs should therefore provide customers with reasonable prices that are consistent with the reference prices that customers have internalized through previous dining experience at restaurants of similar type. Attributes like service quality and ambience need also improvement in all star rated restaurants in order to gain competitive edge.

Customers' views in terms of service delivery should also be considered when classifying restaurants using star rating system. Customers views on established website for instance tripadvisor.com and yelp.com should not be ignored as they give a reflection of the intangible service being offered on a certain restaurant.

As is the case with any research, this study had limitations. The study was carried out on star rated restaurants only. Therefore caution should be paid when applying the findings of this study to unrated restaurants. The study only tested food quality, service quality, ambience and perceived price. There might be other variables within customer's expectations in rated restaurants that serve as antecedents of customer satisfaction for instance location, security or other customers. These were not covered as they were not within the scope of the study. These limitations of this study leave avenue for further research.

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