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Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Loyalty: Evidence from Star-Rated Hotels in North Rift, Kenya

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Abstract:

The tourism and hospitality sector in North Rift Kenya have grown tremendously since 2013 due to several factors, the main being the onset of the devolved systems of Government which has helped to bring more resources closer to the people. However, this progress has not been accompanied by a corresponding improvement in the quality of services offered. The results of this mismatch have been the low occupancy levels and subsequent investor frustrations. Therefore, the study sought to find out whether or not attempts to keep loyal customers through effective relationship marketing practices can provide sustainable solutions to the prevailing state of tourism and hospitality in the North Rift region. Based on the study, this paper examines the link between service quality and customer Loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift. The utilised a descriptive survey research design. The target population for the study was made of 1416 loyal customers from the fifteen (15) star-rated hotels in North Rift region of Kenya. The sample size was 455 guests obtained using a stratified random sampling method. Data was collected using a questionnaire. Structural Equation Model (SEM) was applied with R value being estimated to analyse and test hypotheses. The study found that service quality played a significant role in achieving customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in the study area ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the study recommends that hotels should enhance their service quality so as to achieve higher customer loyalty. Strategies such as appealing equipment, customer service refresher training, and competitive pricing were found to bring about better relational benefits to the customers.

Keywords: Service quality, customer loyalty, star-rated hotels, Kenya

1. Introduction

Contemporary business is becoming extremely competitive and challenging, as such continuous development of mutual long-term relationship strategy with consumers has been a major concern for majority of organizations (Abdullah, Putit & Teo, 2014). According to Nakhleh (2012), Relationship Marketing (RM) is a tactic that helps organizations to foster customer loyalty, interaction, and long-term engagement. RM is an approach that focuses on customer retention than customer acquisition (Huang & Wang, 2012). It assists the business to cultivate strong links with the customers and leads to enhanced oral chatter, recurrent purchase and willingness of customers to provide information to the company (Nakhleh, 2012). RMP supports decision-making processes in order to bolster ardent customer loyalty (CL) (Raza & Rehman, 2012). Academicians and professionals are presently paying increasing attention to relationship marketing due to economic benefits linked to retaining existing as opposed to finding users (Ndubisi, 2007; Tefera & Govender, 2017).

In Kenya, a number of investigations have examined the issues of RM. Among the studies is that of Mang'unyi, Khabala and Govender (2017) on electronic Corporate Relationship Management (eCRM) and CL among the commercial bank customers. The study found that before-service, during and after-service experiences of eCRM features influences customer loyalty. In their study Tarus and Rabach (2013) found that relationship marketing practices (service value, service quality [SQ], social pressure) affect customer loyalty, and that corporate image moderates relationship between the relationship marketing practices and CL. Auka's (2012) study revealed that RMP (customer satisfaction, SQ and customer value) are high predictors of customer loyalty. Further, he states that customer loyalty is important in achieving and maintaining competitive advantage in service industry. Agyei and Kilika (2013), in a study on telecommunication industry, revealed that company image is the predictor of loyalty.

The hotel industry in Kenya makes a large contribution to the country's entire economy, implying that a drop-in business in this segment is bound to affect Kenya's general economic output. The Economic Impact 2015 report for Kenya by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) reveals that the tourism sector's total input into the GDP, comprising expected and unplanned-for proceeds, was KSh561.8bn (US\$6.2bn) in 2014. Even though total value went up to KSh462.8bn (US\$5.09bn) in 2013, the sector's share of GDP has fallen from 12.1% to 10.5 (WTTC, 2015).

Meanwhile, room revenue in the hospitality industry has been in decline since 2012, shrinking by 7.1% in 2014 to US\$540m. From the year 2011, accruing from lodging uses has reduced in general by 16%. Kenya also suffered a 5.3% drop in stay unit nights in 2014. Moreover, occupancy rates have been declining as well. In all categories of services, the mean occupancy levels for Kenya was registered at 55.4% in 2014, a drop from 59.5% in 2013 and 66.1% in 2011. PwC projects a further decline to 50.7% by 2016 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014).

1.1 Service Quality and Customer Loyalty

Service quality (SQ) is a critical factor since it makes customers feel satisfied. A customer will directly judge the service that the company provides if it makes him/her feel satisfied. SQ is indispensable in businesses (Yusoff et al., 2010). Many studies in the service industry have delved into SQ (Bakti & Sumaedi, 2013; Prentice, 2013; Alshurideh, Al-Hawary, Saed Mohammad, Mohammad & Kurdi, 2017; Wang & Chou, 2013). A customer can feel positive to a service, which leads to the customer loyalty (Kihara & Ngugi, 2014; Onditi, Oginda, Ochieng & Oso, 2012). In present-day competitive-market environment, service quality delivery is an essential strategy for excellence and relevance of firms and instrumental in aggressive marketing (Sandhu & Bala, 2011). Service quality is one of the determinants of customer loyalty. High level of service value leads to the high satisfaction of customers, which makes them remain with the organization for long.

Rahman, Khan and Haque (2012) identified the two kinds of service value as technical quality and utilitarian quality. Technical quality is the actual service acquisition of customers in the provision process while functional quality is the service delivery pattern from the service provider (Rahman et al., 2012). According Rahman et al.(2012), analysing the way a customer thinks of the service quality is quite challenging compared to evaluating how they think of the product quality. The perception of SQ is defined by the consumer's expectations in connection to the service received. Therefore, SQ is the weighing of the process of offering service.

In literature, service quality encompasses five components, namely dependability, sensitivity, guarantee, empathy, and physical deliverables and they are the most popular and acknowledged SQ components (Cheserek, Kimwolo & Cherop, 2015; Prentice, 2013; Markovic & Raspor, 2010; Kiran & Diljit, 2011; Hassanzadeh et al., 2010). Numerous perspectives of service quality have diverging impacts on client loyalty, and the degree of loyalty differs across sectors (Prentice, 2013). Among these dimensions are dependability, sensitivity, empathy, physical deliverables and SQ.

Reliability is about performing the assured act reliably and precisely (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2006). Reliability is the most important factor in the perception of SQ (Cheserek et al., 2015). The achievement of this attribute requires business enterprises to meet their promises and reduce uncertainty among their customers (Lynch, 2005). Reliability stresses the provision of the performance and reliability in the company. It implies that the firm should not only undertake the assured act appropriately but also fulfil their assurances for their clients (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). This is the employees' readiness to assist clients in the availing of prompt services (Zeithaml et al., 2006). It affects client Loyalty by reflecting the enthusiasm of the seller demonstrated in the consumer's wish. Readiness is a disposition and it relies on knowledge confidence and empowerment (Lynch, 2005). It involves urgency of service provision (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985).

Assurance is the employees' familiarity, consideration, and capacity to elicit trust and assurance (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Assurance eliminates the feeling of vulnerability, uncertainty and doubt (Parasuraman, et al, 1985). It provides clients with security, discretion and proficiency always. It also generates a feeling of physical effect on client custody (Lynch, 2005). Empathy is about the caring personalised service offered to customers (Zeithaml et al., 2006). It keeps the clients back by embodying esteem and reinforcing excellent self-concept (Lynch, 2005). Empathy conveys the customers' specific and unique needs to the business via client service. The firm with empathy may as further be regarded as having a big advantage to develop its business (Wilson & Mummalaneni, 2006).

Tangibles comprise the physical tools, materials, staff and documented resources. As service provider, businesses can attract customers by applying both standardized and personal reasons (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Cheserek et al. (2015) report that the integration of tangibility, reliability, sensitivity, guarantee and empathy all have substantial impact on client satisfaction. The study, however, failed to address customer loyalty. In addition, the study only concentrated on quality of service and client satisfaction. Cheserek et al.(2015) looked into the fiscal field. The present study filled this lacuna by looking at the SQ as the independent variable and customer loyalty as dependent variable in hospitality field.

Onditi, Oginda, Ochieng and Oso (2012) noted that SQ is a crucial force behind client loyalty for users who had not operated accounts in the same bank for at least two years. The study further affirmed that customer loyalty could be increased by manipulating the service quality. Al-azzam (2015), on the influence of service quality features on client satisfaction in Arab bank, found that the more improved the SQ, the higher the client's satisfaction and that the bases of SQ have a critical place in this construct. Moreover, the investigation uncovered that these determinants positively disrupts consumer satisfaction. Al-azzam further indicates that the SQ is a vital indicator of productivity in the banking business.

Tefera and Govender (2016) conducted a study on structuring and authentication of an alternative hotel quality instrument. The study was done in cluster-graded hotels in Ethiopia. The outcomes showed that HOTSPERF was both a reliable and precise estimator of clients' perspectives on hotel SQ. Tefera and Govender (2017) found that significant relationship existed between the overall service quality and consumer satisfaction, and between purchaser satisfaction and Loyalty. Dubey and Srivastava (2016), found a positive effect of provision quality on customer relationship management and customer loyalty. This is in agreement with the results of (Sabir & Irfan, 2013; Poku, Ansah & Lamptey, 2014; Iddrisu, 2011). Tangibility was the dimension that showed a great impact on the loyalty. The findings were in agreement with those of Agyei and Kilika (2013) who reported that service quality has a positive relationship with customer loyalty.

Service quality is an aspect that has aroused considerable interest and sparked debate in current research literature, because of the difficulties in both defining and measuring it with no consensus emerging on either issue (Wisniewski, 2001, as cited in Kleynhans & Zhou, 2012). Service quality is defined as the consumer's rating of the overall excellence or superiority of the service offered (Ueltschy et al., 2004, as cited in Kleynhans & Zhou, 2012). The perceived relative service quality is crucial to the success of any service organization. Since customers participate in delivery and consumption of services, they interact closely with various service aspects in organizations. This knowledge gives them the opportunity to assess critically the services provided by organizations.

Customers assess service quality by comparing the level of service they receive with their desired level of service. Hence, excellent service quality plays a critical role in adding value to the overall service experience (Shahin & Debestani, 2010, as cited in Kleynhans & Zhou, 2012). Service quality is an attitude towards or a global judgment on the provision of superior service. To be globally competitive service industries need to offer a quality of service that exceeds customers' expectations. Service quality determines an organizations success or failure (Abang & Rozario, 2009). These authors further state that service quality is influenced by expectations, process quality, and output quality. In other words, the standard of service is dependent on the customers who have experienced such service and who use their experience and feelings to make a judgment. Avelini-Holjevac (2002) gives a profound conceptualisation of service quality in the hospitality sector: "Quality means achievement of estimated standards and their constant maintenance, that is, an ongoing process."

Service quality as defined by Parasuraman et al. (1988) results from the comparison of customers' expectations with perceived performance of services. Santos (2003) describes service quality as the customers' overall judgment of the excellence of service offering. In this study, service quality was operationalized as a consumers' judgment of the excellence and superiority of the service encounter" (Kim, Holland & Han, 2012). It was measured using five dimensions, namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. All of these components are the most popularly accepted service quality dimensions (Cheserek, et al., 2015; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Markovic & Raspor, 2010; Landrum et al., 2009; Kiran & Diljit, 2011; Hassanzadeh et al., 2010; Nejati & Nejati, 2008).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

With business competition becoming more intense, the most important issues that sellers face are on providing excellent quality products or services and keeping loyal customers to ensure long-term profit to their organizations (Omenye, 2013). As such, the development and sustainability of customer loyalty is important in creating and maintaining competitive advantage (Yap et al., 2012). The tourism and hospitality sector in North Rift Kenya have grown tremendously since 2013 due to several factors, and mainly the onset of devolved systems of Government, which brought national resources to the lower ranks (Tourism Regulatory Authority, 2015). However, this growth has also shown a mismatch with the quality of services offered; so that investors concentrate more on increasing bed capacity rather than improving service quality (TRA, 2016). This leads to low occupancy levels and hence investor frustrations. Further, hotels in North Rift are unable to attract visitors from outside the area due to tendency to recruit untrained staff and overpricing of their services, while others are located in noisy areas (TRA, 2015).

Few scholars have looked into the moderating variables of antecedent factors of relationship marketing but instead most of the studies solely focused on direct and isolated relationships of consumer Loyalty and other outcomes (Auka, 2012; Tayyab & Rajput, 2014; Srivastava & Rai, 2014; Al-Jader & Sentosa, 2015; Al-Azzam, 2015; Susanty & Kenny, 2015). Therefore, this study was based on researchers' construct of relationship marketing practices (RMP) antecedents for creating, developing and sustaining customer loyalty with moderating power of hotel characteristics. Based on the study, this paper examines the link between service quality and customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift Kenya.

2. Materials and Methods

The research used descriptive survey research design. The investigation was done in North Rift region of Kenya. The region was selected because it was the first to seek classification of hotels after more than a decade (thirteen years) according to the Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA, 2016). The population for the study were the loyal customers from all the star rated hotels in Uasin Gishu County. The target population was based on bed capacity, and this consisted of 1416 beds from the fifteen star-rated hotels. These hotels comprised Boma Inn Eldoret, The Noble Conference Centre, Cicada Hotel, Hotel Sirikwa, Hotel Comfy, Kenmosa Resort, Hotel Winstar, Poa Place Resort, Starburcks Hotel and Restaurant, Hotel Horizon, The Pearl Tourist Hotel Ltd, Wagon Wheel Hotel and Asis Hotel. According to the Kenya Gazette (2015), thirteen (13) of these firms were categorised in September 2015, in addition to the two (Sirikwa and Asis Hotel) that had been ranked earlier coming up to a sum of fifteen hotels.

The researchers adopted stratified random sampling method. Each hotel was treated as a stratum. To pick out the elements from the strata the researchers used random sampling. The study considered loyal guests as those who would have visited and stayed for three times or more in a year in a particular hotel. The loyal consumers were marked out with the assistance of hotel staff. The sample composed of 455 loyal users of the participating firms. This sample size formed 32% of the target population. It was calculated based on Yamane's (1967) formula.

The data collation tool was a questionnaire. To manage data collected in this study, two statistical techniques were adopted. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20 was deployed to manage the preliminary data and provide descriptive analyses about study sample. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using R 3.3.4) using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was adopted to examine the measurement model. The first stage was the evaluation of the measurement model while the second stage involved the evaluation of the structural one. Structural equation

modelling software (R-SEM) was used to explore statistical relationships among the items of each factor and between the factors of independent (provision quality) and dependent variable (loyalty).

3. Results

The study examined various parameters used to measure service quality, namely tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

3.1. Analysis of Tangibility in Service Quality

Tangibility in service quality was measured using four items, which were coded as TANG1, TANG2, TANG3, and TANG4.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev	Minimum	Maximum
TANG1	308	4.11	.804	1	5
TANG2	308	4.14	.774	1	5
TANG3	308	4.09	.791	1	5
TANG4	308	4.02	.786	1	5
AVERAGE MEAN		4.09			

Table 1: Descriptive Results of Tangibility Constructs on Service Quality
Source: Researchers (2018)

The participants were subsequently asked to provide their ratings on tangibility constructs. There were four constructs on tangibility. The first construct was "the appearance of hotel physical facilities is good" with a mean of 4.14. This was followed by "The hotel equipment quality was appealing and good" with a mean of 4.11. The next construct was "the appearance of the hotel employees was perfect" with a mean of 4.09. Lastly, the construct on "the appearance of hotel materials looks good" had a mean of 4.02, as shown in Table 1. The average mean was 4.09. This meant that from the study, most of participants were in agreement with all the constructs. However, few respondents disagreed strongly or were neutral.

3.2. Analysis of Reliability Constructs On Service Quality

Reliability in service quality was measured using five items, which were coded as RLB5, RLB6, RLB7, RLB8 and RLB9.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev	Minimum	Maximum
RLB5	308	4.087662	0.7542132	1	5
RLB6	308	3.983766	0.7927169	1	5
RLB7	308	4.129870	0.7716584	1	5
RLB8	308	4.029221	0.7964437	1	5
RLB9	308	3.766234	0.8899893	1	5
Average Mean		3.999935			

Table 2: Descriptive Results of Reliability Constructs of Service Quality
Source: Researchers (2018)

This survey sought to discover how well hotels served their customers. From the questionnaires administered, participants were asked to rate the services offered. There were five constructs that were used to rate the reliability of the service provided. Table 2 shows the results of how the reliable the hotel services were rated by the respondents. The constructs examined were: RLB5 "The hotel honoured the promises it gave by timely delivering on its promises" (Mean=4.09); RLB6 "The hotel was earnest to solve my problems" (Mean=3.98); RLB7 "The hotel offered first time right service" (Mean=4.13); RLB8 "The hotel gave out timely services as it has promised." (Mean=4.03), and RLB9 "The records of the hotel were accurate (error free)" (Mean=3.8). If the hotel performance was more efficient than expected they were asked rate by selecting 5 (strongly agree). If the hotel did worse than expected, then they were supposed to select 1. Table 2 shows that the average mean for all the constructs was approximately 4 (agree). This showed that a good number of the participants were in agreement that the hotel services were reliable.

3.3. Analysis of Responsiveness Constructs of Service Quality

Reliability in service quality was measured using four items, which were coded as RSP10, RSP11, RSP12, and RLB13.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Minimum	Maximum
RSP10	308	3.905844	0.6117008	1	5
RSP11	308	4.025974	0.7862669	1	5
RSP12	308	4.081168	0.7285942	1	5
RSP13	308	3.866883	0.8979568	1	5
AVERAGE MEAN		3.969967			

*Table 3: Results of Responsiveness Constructs on Service Quality
Source: Researchers (2018)*

The participants were also requested to give their ratings (using Likert scale from: 5 for Strongly Agree, 4 for Agree, 3 for Neither agree nor disagree, 2 for Disagree, 1 for Strongly Disagree). The following constructs with regards to quality of service in hotels were used: RSP10 "The hotel told you when exactly services will be performed" (Mean=3.01); RSP11 "I received prompt services from hotel employees" (Mean=4.02); RSP12 "The hotel employees were willing to help me" (Mean=4.08), and RSP13 "The hotel employees were never too busy to respond to my request" (Mean=3.87). Table 3 indicates that the results of those interviewed agreed (mean = 4) that they received prompt services from the hotel employees (RSP11). Furthermore, it was found that the employees of hotels were eager to help them (RSP12). The average mean was 3.97, meaning that most of participants agreed that the employees were quick to act in response to their needs. It was also established that neither of the respondents agreed nor disagreed that the hotel would tell you exactly when the services would be performed (mean = 3).

3.4. Analysis of Assurance Constructs of Service Quality

Reliability in service quality was measured using four items, which were coded as ASS14, ASS15, ASS16, and ASS17.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
ASS14	308	4.003247	0.780455	1	5
ASS15	308	4.081169	0.7150563	1	5
ASS16	308	4.116883	0.6891249	1	5
ASS17	308	4.051948	0.7423197	1	5
AVERAGE MEAN		4.063311			

Table 4: Descriptive Results of Assurance on Service Quality
Source: Researchers (2018)

The study also aimed to understand how the hotels served its customers. Four constructs were used to measure assurance of hotel service quality. They were scaled using Likert scale (from 1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree). The first construct was ASS14 "the employee actions instilled confidence in me" (Mean=4.003247) as shown in Table 4 above. The second construct was ASS15 "I felt safe in transacting business with the hotel employee" (Mean=4.081169). The third construct of assurance was ASS16 "The hotel employees were courteous to me" had a Mean=4.116883. The last construct of assurance was ASS17 "The hotel employees' were able to answer my questions" (mean=4.051948). The average mean for assurance was 4.063311. This implied that the respondents agreed (4-Agree from the scale) that the employee actions instilled confidence in them, that they felt safe in transacting business with the hotel employee, that the hotel employees were courteous to them, and that the me hotel employees were capable of answering their questions.

4.5. Analysis of Empathy Constructs of Service Quality

Reliability in Service Quality was measured using four items, which were coded as EMP18, EMP19, EMP20, and EMP22.

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Minimum	Maximum
EMP18	308	3.412338	0.8629793	1	5
EMP19	308	4.847273	0.7366247	1	5
EMP20	308	3.918831	0.8090908	1	5
EMP21	308	3.990260	0.7887044	1	5
EMP22	308	4.022727	0.7632455	1	5
AVERAGE MEAN		4.038285			

*Table 5: Descriptive Results of Empathy on Service Quality
Source: Researchers (2018)*

The other way to understand hotel service quality was using empathy response from the interviewed respondents. The constructs were rated by 5 for strongly-Agree, 4 for Agree, 3 for Neither agree nor disagree, 2 for Disagree and 1 for Strongly-Disagree. The first construct used to measure empathy was EMP18 (I received individual

attention from the hotel employees). Table 5 shows that this construct had a mean =3.412338, implying that the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that they received individual attention from the hotel employees. Moreover, EMP19, "The hotel operating hours were convenient", had a mean of 4.847273, which showed that the respondents strongly agreed that the hotel operating hours were convenient.

The other constructs, EMP20, EMP21 and EMP22, were: "I received personal attention from employees of the hotel", "The hotel took care of my best interests at heart" and "The hotel employees were able to understand my specific needs", respectively. The results in Table 5 indicate that EMP20, EMP21 and EMP22 had means scores of 3.918831, 3.990260 and 4.022727, in that order. These scores show that the respondents "agreed" on the constructs used since these means were approximately 4 (Agree). The Average mean was 4.038285. This confirmed that the participants were in agreement with the constructs that they received individual attention from the hotel employees, the hotel operating hours were convenient, they received personal attention from employees of the hotel, the hotel took care of their best interests at heart and that hotel employees were in a position to comprehend my specific need.

4.6. Hypothesis Test Results

The study hypothesized that there is no significant influence of service quality on customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya. To test the hypothesis, the Structural Equation Model was used. The SEM results of the test for both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty were as presented in Table 6 below.

Service Quality				
	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z	P > Z
Behavioural Loyalty				
Behavioural Loyalty	3.8528	0.0432	89.28	0.0000
Reliability	4.0877	0.0429	95.27	0.0000
Assurance	4.0032	0.04434	90.17	0.0000
Tangibility	4.1104	0.0457	89.91	0.0000
Empathy	3.9123	0.0491	79.69	0.0000
Responsiveness	4.0812	0.0414	98.46	0.0000
Attitudinal Loyalty				
Attitudinal Loyalty	3.8019	0.0486	78.08	0.0000
Reliability	4.0877	0.0429	95.27	0.0000
Assurance	4.0032	0.0450	90.17	0.0000
Tangibility	4.1104	0.0457	89.91	0.0000
Empathy	3.9123	0.0490	79.69	0.0000
Responsiveness	4.0812	0.0414	98.46	0.0000

Table 6: Results of Structural Equation Modelling for Customer Loyalty

5. Discussion

The results of the SEM estimation showed that there was positive and significant link between service quality and customer loyalty among star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya (p – value $0.000 < 0.05$) as indicated in Table 6. This was in agreement with the findings of various scholars (Bakti & Sumaedi, 2013; Onditi et al., 2012; Yusoff et al., 2010; Wang & Chou, 2013) who found that service quality has a direct influence on customer quality. The research results showed further that reliability had helpful and significant effect on client loyalty. The other construct of assurance had positive and significant effect. Tangibility was also helpful and significant. Empathy was significant determiner of customer Loyalty. Responsiveness seemed to have a helpful and noteworthy effect on the loyalty of the customers. It was also shown that when services were dependable, customer loyalty was expected to improve by 4.0877 units. Regression results, in the case of tangibility depicted that when tangibility goes up by a single unit, customer allegiance was expected to go up by 4.1104 units. This directional effect was also positive and significant (p – value $0.0000 < 0.050$). The five constructs of quality of service were established to have a significant effect on customer allegiance. There was an agreement between these findings and those of Izogo and Ogba (2015), Tefera and Govender (2017), Ganiyu (2016) and Rajeswari et al. (2017).

In order to do well in the market, it is not enough for businesses to catch the attention of new customers; hotel managers must contemplate on retaining existing clientele and implement effective policies of customer contentment and loyalty. In the hotel industry, customer satisfaction is greatly hooked upon quality of service. A management approach concentrated on customer fulfilment can improve customer allegiance, thereby increasing the positive image of the touristic destination. As such, exploring the importance for customers of hotel attributes in hotel selection is indispensable for formulation of appropriate customer fulfilment and promotional strategies. Neglecting to focus on those hotel attributes considered very important by guests may possibly bring about negative evaluation of the hotel, thus restricting the chance of recurring patronage.

This research adopted the five dimensions (SERVQUAL) model that was employed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) to measure service quality. The five dimensions are empathy (individualized attention and caring), tangibility (appearance of personnel, physical facilities and equipment), reliability (ability to accurately and reliably carry out the promised service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence) and responsiveness (readiness to help clients and offer prompt service). Quality of service, rather than price, has turned out to be the key to a hotel's ability to distinguish itself from its competitors and gain customer loyalty

(Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000, 2003). The hospitality sector recognizes superior quality of service as one of the crucial factors within its control that can put in more value to its product and, subsequently, bring about customer allegiance. Improving the quality of service at every level of service delivery has thus become compulsory for the survival of organizations, irrespective of the changes that may occur inside or outside the firm. Moreover, a study conducted by Heskett et al. (1994) indicated that devoted clientele could not only give bigger profits margin but also cover the losses incurred in dealing with less loyal customers.

In this study, assurance was reported to be having positive and significant influence on customer Loyalty (p – value $0.0000 < 0.050$). This effect implied that if assurance were increased by one unit, customer loyalty increases by 4.0032 units. This effect was also reported in the case of responsibility which was positive and significant (p – $0.0000 < 0.050$) and indicating that when responsibility goes up by a single unit, customer Loyalty is likely to increase by 4.0811 units. The assurance dimension refers to the courtesy and knowledge of employees and their capability to instigate trust and confidence including credibility, competence, courtesy and security (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Therefore, hotels should focus on assurance and reliability, to achieve high levels of satisfaction and service quality. The constructs of assurance (employees' actions instilled, feel safe at the hotel, secure while transacting business, courteous employees and ability to answer my questions) positively affected customer loyalty and satisfaction. The findings were in agreement with those of Zeithmal (2006), Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Lynch (2005) who found that these constructs make the employees give assurance, courteous, ability to inspire, trust, confidence and eliminates the feeling of danger risk and doubt which makes customers develop confidence in the service provider hence remain for long with the organization.

Responsiveness was found to have positive and significant influence on client loyalty. From the regression analysis, it was further documented that when services were responsive customer loyalty was expected to improve by 4.0812 units. This directional effect was also positive and significant (p – value $0.0000 < 0.050$). The responsiveness dimension involves readiness to assist clients and offer prompt services (Zeithaml et al., 1988). It is necessary that front-office hotel staff be enthusiastic and have the ability to assist customers, provide prompt service and meet customers' expectation. The human resource management should arrange in-house training programmes to improve the main work of front office staff and to promote them in their careers. Given the impact of quality of service on customer loyalty, it is important for hotels to comprehend what aspects of quality of service should be monitored and used to develop accountability, customer satisfaction awareness, and customer-oriented work behaviour to acquire and maintain loyal customers. Regarding this, the study suggests the following dimensions: Accessibility; communication, competence; courtesy; credibility; reliability; responsiveness; security; tangibles; and understanding of the customer on the part of employees. This confirms the findings of Lynch (2005) and Parasuraman et al. (1985) that responsiveness influences customer loyalty by reflecting the willingness and readiness of the provider based on customer wishes and timeliness of service promotion. If the employees of the organization are willing to help the customers, and if the services are provided as promised then this will increase client loyalty.

Empathy had significant and positive effect on customer allegiance ($0.0000 < 0.050$). This was evident by the results showing that when empathy increases by one unit, customer loyalty increases by 3.9123 units. Empathy receiving individual attention, convenient operating hours, personalize services, care of my interest and understanding of my specific needs positively determine client loyalty. Zeithmal et al. (2006) found that the concerned individualized attention given to customer's influences customer retention by demonstrating respect and reinforcing positive esteem. The provision of caring and individualized attention to customers is represented in the empathy dimension including the access or approachability and ease of contact, effective communication as well as understanding the customers (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Empathy was shown to be the weakest dimension of customer loyalty. Therefore, hotel management should arrange special courses to improve effective communication of their employees.

The above finding extends those of Abebaw and Endeshaw (2018) who found that the top four major quality dimension gaps are shown on: Staff dressed well, employees who understand the need of their customers, feel safe in receiving service, and staff willing to assist clientele. Satisfaction brings about motivation on employees; as such, the employees have the motivational resources to give out adequate effort and care. Satisfaction of customer empowers employees as well; that is to say, they have the training, resources and responsibilities to comprehend and serve customer wants and demands. Employees who are satisfied have high energy and eagerness to give out good service: at the very lowest, they can give out a more positive perception of the service or product provided. Such employees can provide clients with social account and interpersonal sensibility (sufficient explanations for unwanted outcomes). It has been suggested that these components of interactional justice (quality of interpersonal treatment provided in a negotiation/exchange) have a significant impact on customer satisfaction and hence are able to generate customer loyalty. According to this view, since satisfied employees experience interactional justice, they can give it out; that is to say, employees who are satisfied have enough emotional resources to demonstrate empathy, understanding, respect and concern.

Reliability was found to play a positive and vital part in influencing customer loyalty. The results of regression documented that when services were reliable customer loyalty was expected to go up by 4.0877 units. This directional effect was also encouraging and significant (p – value $0.0000 < 0.050$). The reliability dimension can be defined as the ability of the front office staff of a hotel to offer services accurately and dependably (Dabholkar et al., 1996). Reliable service has to meet and to some extent even exceed customers' expectation. Service must be accomplished right at the first time on time, every time, in the same manner and without errors provision of sincere solutions to problems. This confirms the findings of Cheserek et al. (2015) that reliability is a most important construct in perception of quality of service. According to Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Lynch (2005), it is about keeping the promises we make to the customers. When this happens, the customers remained loyal.

Tangibility was found to have a positive and significant role in influencing customer loyalty. Results of regression documented that when tangible cues were attractive and appealing customer loyalty was expected to improve by 4.1104 units. This directional effect was also positive and significant (p – value $0.0000 < 0.050$). The tangibility dimension encompasses physical aspects like the physical appearance of hotel services, including the tidiness of front-office staff and professionalism of the workforce (Dabholkar et al., 1996). To this end, hotel management needs to maintain the characteristics of tangible service quality at the hotel. Tangibility was shown to be the strongest dimension of contentment. These results were in harmony with those of Dubey and Srivastava (2016) who established that tangibility, was the lone construct that showed a great impact on customer loyalty.

Tangibility constructs were appealing and good equipment; good appearance of hotel physical facilities, appealing and perfect appearance of employees and appealing hotel promotional materials were significant determiners of customer loyalty. Reliability constructs were: Hotel kept promises, sincere solution to problems, right performance of service, and right and timely delivery of service and accuracy of hotel records positively impacted on customer allegiance. Responsiveness constructs were: Timely performance of service, promptness of service provision by employees, employees ready to help and availability of employees to attend my request were positive determiners of customer loyalty were all established to have a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Quality is a substantial factor for businesses in achieving competitive edge nowadays. Therefore, a good definition for quality is necessary. Quality is defined as the collection of features based on the ability to meet the determinate or possible requirements of a service or product. There is presently another concept used together with quality. The concept is highlighted as service quality in literature. Quality of service is descriptively defined as the comparison of service expectations of customers with the real performance. The significance of quality of service has been emphasized by many writers (Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010; Ganesan-Lim, Cheryl, Russell-Bennett, Rebekah., Dagger, Tracey, 2008; Gržinić, 2007; Douglas & Connor, 2003; Santos, 2003; Carneiro & Costa, 2001).

Customer contentment refers to the way the customer perceives service provision. Client fulfilment is a function of service performance comparative to the expectation. As such, it is significant to comprehend how customer expectation is formed so as to identify the factors of service satisfaction in the hotel sector. As different clients have diverse expectations, based on their knowledge of a product or service (Reisig & Chandek, 2001). This can be implied that a client may guess what the service performance will be or may think of what the performance ought to be. If the performance of the service contends or exceeds customers' expectation, satisfaction becomes the result.

Earlier research explored client satisfaction with regards to the service quality of all areas in the hotel so that the hotel can measure the customer perception. This study provided five factors of service quality through focusing on the front office staff alone, and explored the customers' expectations and levels of perception of the services. The results of this quantitative evaluation of service quality may give some insights into how clients rate the service quality and assessed customers' satisfactions.

The rationale of this study was to look at the association between services quality and customer loyalty star-rated hotels in North Rift, Kenya, and to scrutinize cause on client satisfaction, brand image and customer Loyalty. The result suggested that services of high quality enhance the client contentment and then this satisfaction will strengthen the client loyalty, our findings also looked similar with Brodie et al. (2009). These results support the study by Saleem and Raja (2014) who found that strong customer loyalty was directly related to strong hotel image in the case of Pakistan. The finding of the above study helps the hotel sector to focus more on the research progress to increase the service quality and customer satisfaction by considering it as the hotel management objective. Moreover, the results help the academia to comprehend the variables, which increase the brand loyalty. For further study, the larger sample-size should be considered so as to comprehend the variety of customer's perception and attitudes.

In order to do well in the market, it is not enough to bring new clients; managers need to contemplate on retaining the existing clients by implementing effective policies concerning customer satisfaction and loyalty. In hotel sector, customer contentment is greatly hooked up on quality of service (Dominici & Guzzo, 2010). A management approach focused on satisfaction of the customer can improve customer allegiance, thus increasing the positive image of the touristic destination. Therefore, exploring the significance of hotel characteristics in the selection of a hotel is indispensable. Research on the subject of guest satisfaction, which translates into the contemplation of whether or not customers will come again to a hotel or advice it to other tourists, is key for the success in the hotel business (Dominici & Guzzo, 2010).

The hotel sector significantly contributes to Ghana's development (Poku, Zakari & Owusu, 2013). However, they encounter the challenge of having to meet and exceed their customers' expectations through providing high quality service in order to ensure client loyalty, which remains the bedrock of any business. In their study, Poku et al. explored how service quality have an impact customer Loyalty in Golden Tulip, a four-star hotel; Miklin Hotel, a three-star hotel and Lizzie's Hotel, a two-star hotel in Kumasi, a leading city in Ghana. In total, 50 clients looking for lodging and boarding services were selected randomly and five members of staff were purposively selected from every hotel for the study. By the use of the SERVQUAL model through interviews and survey questionnaire, the study revealed that customer contentment is not solely based on the classification/rankings of the hotels but on service quality, which gives value for money that in turn produces customer Loyalty. Miklin Hotel gave out the most satisfied and loyal customers, then followed by Golden Tulip Hotel and then Lizzie's Hotel contrasting the classification order. Adding to "responsiveness", service quality variable for Miklin, "empathy" and "assurance" variables made significant impact on customer allegiance for guests from Miklin and Golden Tulip hotels, while "reliability" accounts for the Loyalty of guests from Lizzie's Hotel. This is in conformity with the direct relationship between customer loyalty and satisfaction. "Tangibility" does not have any significant role in enhancing client loyalty for all the hotels because the visitors were less satisfied with it and are likely to take it for granted in their quest for change. The study recommended that hotel classification should not mainly be based

on the tangible factors only but somewhat on comprehensive service that give value for money and impact on client loyalty.

A service can be defined as an economic activity that creates value and gives benefits for clients at specific times and places by producing a desired change on behalf or in the service recipient. Even though the process may be attached to a physical product, the performance is transitory, often intangible in nature and does not usually result in ownership of any of the production factors (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004). Conversely, being able to satisfy given wants reflects the value (or quality) of the service or product to the customer, including the economic value, reliability, safety and maintainability (Garvin, 1989). According to others, service quality may also be defined as the difference between expectations of the customers for the service to come across and the perceptions of the received service (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2006; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Munusamy, Chiellah & Mun, 2010). According to Suman and Garg (2012), clients will judge quality as 'low' if the performance does not meet their expectations and quality as 'high' when performance exceeds expectations.

Clients were requested to give an evaluation of the perceived quality of service (reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness) and their allegiance (endorse willingness, purchase intentions, cognitive exclusiveness, and identification) towards the star-rated hotel services. Empirical results supported the alternative hypothesis that there exists a significant connection between perceived quality of service and customer allegiance. The conclusion was that in today's diverse era of civilization and competitive environment, quality of service is a very critical strategy which shapes the customers' perception concerning the services and they take firm decisions in future purchases. Therefore, the reliability, assurance, empathy responsiveness and tangible dimensions of perceived quality of service construct should be well focused in strategizing the service quality of hotel sector to encourage the retention and sustain loyalty of the customers.

A study of the subject of guest satisfaction, which translates into the contemplation of whether or not clients will come back to a hotel or advice it to other tourists, is pivotal for the success of the hospitality industry. Neglecting to give heed to those attributes of hotel considered most essential by guests might bring about negative evaluation of the hotel, thereby restricting the chance of repeat patronage.

6. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the study concludes that quality service plays a great role on loyalty of the customer. The look of hotel physical facilities and materials, quality of hotel equipment, delivering promises made, solving the problems sincerely, providing services at the time promised, accurate records, delivering services promptly, willingness to help, security, knowledgeable employees, being courteous, attentive to customers, and understanding customer needs are among the variables the study found to have a role in creating customer Loyalty. Therefore, hotels should embrace the variables that improve on service quality; in return, this will enhance customer loyalty.

7. Recommendations

From the findings on service quality, the study recommends that hotels both star-rated and non-star-rated should provide quality equipment that are attractive and appealing, decorate physical facilities and appearance and should provide attractive and quality uniforms. Additionally, hotels should provide advertising materials that are quality, good and appealing. The study also recommends refresher training for hotel employees on customer care, and how to deal with the customers effectively. Hotels should also ensure that services are delivered as promised, when it happens that the service is not delivered as promised then the client needs to be communicated to immediately to explain the reason why the service is not offered.

This research provides an all-inclusive in-depth knowledge of the connection between perceived quality of service and customer loyalty among customers of hotels that are star-rated in Kenya's North Rift region. The result of this research can be utilized by hotel managers to handle customers so as to acquire new customer and maintain existing ones. The management of hotels that are star-rated could investigate other factors apart from service quality that leads to customer loyalty. Travel agents should dictate the significance of service quality dimensions and put emphasis on them in order of their importance to improve service quality and customer loyalty.

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