



# Understanding service experience and its impact on brand image in hospitality sector



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Service quality  
Customer experiences  
Brand image  
Customer Satisfaction  
India

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an understanding of customers' common expectations and other important factors that enhance service experience during guest stay in the three selected four star rated hotels in Jammu, Chandigarh and Delhi, India. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from hotel managers and individual customers. Guest's attitudes, their expected and unexpected feedback in addition to analyzing the important information that helps in finding out particular areas critical to customer service quality are explored. Overall the results indicate that expectations of the guests and actual experiences are at disparity. Viable recommendations to the hotel owners in particular and the hospitality industry overall are made which are likely to improve customer's memorable experience.

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## 1. Introduction

Service experience is defined as the subjective personal reactions and feelings by consumers when consuming or using a service. Service experience has been found to have an important influence on the consumer evaluation of and satisfaction with a given service (Luoh and Tsaor, 2011; Otto et al., 2000). A better understanding of an experiential phenomenon in the tourism and hospitality service is particularly important and will permit the industry perform better. Guest experiences in any hospitality-based businesses have been identified to be critical in the enhancement memories about places (Wang, 1999). The outcome of tourism and hospitality product or service consumption is mostly psychological in nature and involves a variety of experiences that other few sectors can provide (Pine and Gilmore, 1998).

For any organization to have a competitive advantage, the quality of service experience must take centre stage. According to Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (1994), service experience plays a critical role in brand image enhancement. Na et al. (1999) argue that image cannot be measured unless customer perception about the product image and brand image is established. Furthermore, Yi (1990) argued that customer satisfaction is influenced by

experiences and expectations with service performance and quality of the services.

Kim and Kim (2005) observed that “brand image and service quality perceptions share too many features” (p. 556). Aydin and Ozer (2005) found that perceived service quality directly determines the perception of brand image and therefore a study aimed to empirically test this assertion is critical for theory development in this area. Furthermore, whereas service experience is important in establishing performance of different organizations, its underlying factors have not been clearly delineated in the existing literature and this study aims to fill this gap. Several researchers found that service quality had a significant positive impact on image, and a favourable image in turn positively influenced customer satisfaction in the airline, restaurant, retailing, tourism, and telecommunication sectors (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998; Aydin and Ozer, 2005; Chi and Qu, 2008; Park et al., 2005; Ryu et al., 2008; Schlosser, 1998).

In recent years, companies have become convinced of the strategic benefits of quality (Phillips et al., 1983). As a result, many large companies have created quality-measurement programmes that attempt to associate product and service attributes to customer evaluations of quality (Hauser and Clausing, 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1990). Customer satisfaction has become widely accepted as an important concept in marketing and has been used as a benchmark for measuring company performance (Bennet and Rundle-Thiele, 2004). In many service industries, companies have created programmes including surveys to determine service quality. This is carried out by following a feedback loop that allows service changes to be implemented and evaluated with subsequent survey data

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about service quality levels. Quality is the conformance to specifications, though more recently it is taken to mean meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012).

The importance-performance analysis in this study enables an understanding of the service quality dimensions deemed to be important by customers and how hotels have performed based on customers' evaluation. In a case where hotels meet, exceed, or under-perform based on customer expectations hotel managers are enabled to adjust their product in order to effectively serve their target market segments (Wilkins, 2010). Kandampully et al. (2001) suggested that an attempt to have effective service quality management and experiences by the customer is the best way to achieve greater customer contentment. Oakland (2005) and Kandampully et al. (2001) showed that service quality could only be achieved if organizations empower their employees to deliver quality service guided customer previous evaluation of service quality dimensions. These dimensions include tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and the appearance of personnel); reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately); responsiveness (willingness to help customers and offering prompt service); assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence); and empathy (caring, individualized attention offered to customers).

In order to build up the brand image of hospitality and tourism related organizations, provision of quality products and services is one of the competitive requirements. Brand image is important because it gives a business an identity as well as maintains a sustainable growth. It is also a medium through which customers associate with businesses. Brand image is developed over time through advertising campaigns with a consistent theme, and is authenticated through the consumers' direct experience. In order to have an effective brand image, a brand should be simple with the ability to convey intended message.

Furthermore, enhancement of customer satisfaction requires that hospitality service providers offer quality services to customer and make their quality experiences memorable (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Quality of service is generally identified with the help of a few traits like multidimensionality, underlying quality dimensions which change with respect to time, intangibility, which can be accessed through its tangible clues, service processes and services outcomes. Service standards for intangible services in hospitality would be the factors that affect the emotions of guests/customers. These actions are reflected when the tangible aspects of service are delivered effectively in an efficient manner. For example, offering a sincere smile (intangible), to a guest when delivering a cup of coffee (tangible) in a restaurant creates a difference. Other aspects of service that augment service experience would be using appropriate body language, facial expressions, the warmth and tone of voice.

This study explores how customers' common expectations are linked with importance of service quality experience factors. Results from this study help us to understand the impact of customers' common expectations and factors important to provide service quality experience during guest stay. This is explored using data obtained from guests who were staying at 3-star grade hotels. Comparison of the actual customer service quality experience with service quality delivered by the selected hotels is made. The rest of the paper entails the literature review, methodology; findings, conclusion, recommendations and suggested areas for future research.

## 2. Literature review

Since late 1990s and into the early stages of the twenty-first century, marketing literature has grown in studies that have explored "experience" and "experiences" as specific areas of research focus.

Expectations vary from person to person and time to time, and are generally considered as desires or wants of customers. Since customers have a range of expectations rather than a single ideal level of expectations, a zone of tolerance would be confined by desired service – the level that customers believe can and should be delivered, and adequate service – the minimum service level customers are willing to accept. In particular, experience marketing has become a niche area itself (Gilmore and Pine, 2002; Lenderman, 2005; Marconi, 2005; O'Sullivan and Spangler, 1998; Smith and Wheeler, 2002). Additionally, it should be noted that the particular study and use of service quality measures have permeated tourism, hospitality as well as marketing since the 1980s with the work of Parasuraman et al. (1985).

### 2.1. SERVQUAL model

The importance of service quality is reflected in various studies that have been carried out over years in various disciplines. One of the important model code named SERVQUAL predicated on an expectation/disconfirmation paradigm derived from gap theory was developed (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The development of SERVQUAL model improved the general understanding of quality in different aspects of service-based organizations (Saleh and Ryan, 1991). SERVQUAL was developed to measure service quality determined as the difference in scores of the expectation and perceived performance points of a given service in terms of five dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Although the interpretive power of such a comparison is of high diagnostic value for practice, the difference score structure of perceived performance less expectations has been criticized heavily due to issues in using measures of difference scores in research (Watson et al., 1998). Nevertheless the model remains relevant to-date for application in different service based business organizations.

### 2.2. Service quality

In general, service quality is deemed to involve a comparison of expectations with performance. This conceptualization goes back a number of years and is well summarized by Lewis and Booms (1983). The authors referred service quality as a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations. Delivering quality service means conforming to customer expectations on a consistent basis. SERVQUAL is a fundamental model that is still used as a basis of research to determine service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985). The attainment of expectations is always closely matched to other psychological need fulfilment models that examine how attitudes are affected by the congruence between desires and the supplies in the environment (Oliver, 1981). Expected service is based on personal needs of the customer as well as personal and second-hand knowledge about the service provider.

Perceived service is based on communications between the provider and client as well as actual service delivery. A number of service quality determinants go into the formation of perceived service performance and client expectations. These determinants include access, communication, competence, courtesy, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and certain tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

The concept of "quality" has been contemplated throughout history and continues to be a topic of intense interest today. It has been addressed in numerous academic and trade publications, the media and it is perhaps the most frequently repeated mantra among managers and executives in contemporary organizations (Jeong and Oh, 1993; Mei et al., 1999; Jeong et al., 2003). Contemporary organizations in this study are defined as modern organizations which do

not follow the traditional pyramid structure to facilitate the flow of information to all parts of such organization thereby reducing response time to external and internal demands. This is in contrast to traditional organizations, which stress strict division of labour, and top-down decision-making in addition to extensive rules and procedures. Parasuraman et al. (1985) propose a formal definition of customer perception of service quality as “the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers’ service perceptions and expectations”. Sometimes, due to intangibility of the services, guests are not able to evaluate the service quality objectively, so they rely on physical evidence in order to evaluate the quality.

The link between brand loyalty, service quality and service experience is based on the assertion that high levels of brand awareness and a positive brand image should increase the probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater consumer (and retailer) loyalty and decrease vulnerability to competitive marketing actions (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Thus, the view of brand loyalty adopted here is that it occurs when favourable beliefs and attitudes for the brand are manifested in repeat buying behaviour.

The present research adds to the body of knowledge in services marketing in the hospitality industry by improving understanding of the relationships among customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, brand image and service experience. Developing customer loyalty in the service industry constitutes a challenge due to the three defining characteristics of services: intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The intangible nature of the service “product” essentially forces customers to anchor their decision to become loyal on relatively more dependable cues – such as the firm’s image and reputation (Ostrowsky et al., 1993). Since services are performances that are commonly labour intensive (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996), the outcomes are thus heterogeneous. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to standardize a service. Moreover, standardization refers to how much flexibility the system is intended to display in serving the customer. Inseparability denotes that the production and the consumption of a service occur simultaneously. This implies that customers are involved in the process of the production of the service and thus have the capacity to affect, positively or negatively, the outcome of the service (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Given intangibility nature of hospitality services, providers have to develop particular capability to enable them satisfy their guests (Lin and Mattila, 2010). According to Pantouvakis and Lympelopoulos (2008), satisfaction results from the comparison between prior and post service expectations of consumers. Despite service quality model (SERVQUAL) having taken a centre stage hospitality and tourism marketing research Parasuraman et al. (1988), Fick and Ritchie (1991) argue that SERVQUAL scale does not adequately address both affective and holistic factors which contribute to the overall quality of service experience. The quality of service in hotel industry is an important factor of successful business. The existing trend of complete quality management in hotel industry ensures the achievement of competitive advantage of hotel companies and is therefore the subject of contemporary research into service quality in hotel industry.

Tukamushaba et al. (2012) have argued that basically, SERVQUAL as a generic measure could be applied in any of the service sector. However, Carman (1990) showed that SERVQUAL must be customized to the service being evaluated. In the restaurant service sub-sector, a modified version of SERVQUAL, DINESERV was developed to enable restaurant owners calculate service quality (Stevens et al., 1995). They are the instruments for measuring the gap between the services that consumers think should be provided and what they think actually has been provided. SERVQUAL is a generic instrument for measuring perceived service quality that is viewed as the degree and direction of discrepancy between consumers’ perceptions and expectations. Thus, service quality, as

perceived by consumers, stems from a comparison of what they feel service providers should offer with their perceptions of the performance of service provided by service providers. The main objective of any restaurant business is to provide ‘service’. The provision of excellent service is basically to encourage consumers to buy the services and therefore the quality of service can significantly affect their repurchase intentions (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Caruana et al., 2000; Lemon and Wangenheim, 2009).

Otto and Ritchie’s (1996) study provides benchmarks that differentiate service quality and experience quality. Experience quality is subjective in terms of measurement while service quality is objective. The evaluation of experience quality tends to be holistic and gestalt rather than attribute-based, and the focus of evaluation is on self (internal) instead of service environment (external). Focusing on building exceptional quality of guest relationships helps hotels to make valuable, long-term relationships with their guests (Salleh et al., 2009). Several servicescape studies have found that specific atmospheric attributes have a direct effect on customers’ emotions and satisfaction (Bitner, 1992; Lin, 2010a; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Turley and Milliman, 2009) and on employee behaviours (Parish et al., 2008).

### 2.3. Experience quality

Experience quality can be conceptualized as customer affective responses to their desired social–psychological benefits. The scope of experience is reflected in it being more general than specific, the nature of benefit experiential/hedonic/symbolic rather than functional/utilitarian and the psychological representation being affective instead of cognitive/attitudinal. Currently, the hoteliers are becoming more aware of the quality and value of services which they are providing and which generally guests’ desire in an effort to create memorable experiences (Akbaba, 2006; Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012).

Various studies have shown that guest’s satisfaction, service quality perceptions and guests’ decision are significantly influenced by the employee service levels (Bitner, 1990; Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Ekiz, 2009; Schneider et al., 1980; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Employee satisfaction has been found to be one of the systematic moderators that can easily explain the variability in the link between customer satisfaction and customer purchase intentions (Evanschitzky et al., 2011). Therefore each specific service transaction, such as contact with guests who contribute to the actual experience is important in creating service quality perceptions (Chan and Baum, 2007).

Brand loyalty is not to be characterized exclusively by a consumer’s ability to repurchase a brand. Customers’ perceived value, brand trust, satisfaction, repeat purchase behaviour, and commitment are found to be the key influencing factors of brand loyalty (Reichheld, 1993). The benefits of brand loyalty are longer tenure and lower sensitivity to price. True brand loyalty exists when (a) customers have a high relative attitude towards the brand, which is then exhibited through repurchase behaviour; and (b) whether the customer is committed to the brand. According to José and Vargas-Hernández (2012), brand loyalty manifests itself further through four patterns of behaviour: (a) hardcore loyal – who buy the brand all the time; (b) split loyal – loyal to two or three brands; (c) shifting loyals – moving from one brand to another; and (d) switchers – with no loyalty (possibly ‘deal-prone’ or ‘vanity prone’).

Nouwen (1975) and Lashley (2008) contended that all guests should be accepted as equally valued persons regardless of their characteristics. Absolute focus on the concerned relationship marketing through personalized programmes is of utmost importance to make the guests feel special and to make them believe that the hotel has provided them absolutely extraordinary attention (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012). Otto and Ritchie (1996) developed an

experience quality scale with four factors. That is; hedonics, peace of mind, involvement, and recognition using consumer survey data obtained from three tourism service sectors including hotels, airlines, tours and attractions. The four identified factors are critical in providing quality experience to guests in hospitality industry and most measurement items in this study reflect these factors.

Lashley (2008) refers to hospitality as all activities in a hotel that involve display of hosting behaviour with the aim of reflecting courtesy to all guests while providing hotel services. Guests have become increasingly more careful when evaluating which specific attributes are important for their overall dining satisfaction (Ha and Jang, 2010). Furthermore, if the overall satisfaction of a customer is low, then memorable experience tends to be low despite having had a positive encounter with other hotel guests (Vaerenbergh et al., 2012).

The plethora of studies regarding customer attitudes towards services has focused on perceived service quality. Perceived service quality is defined as the customer's assessment of the overall excellence or superiority of the service (Zeithaml, 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) argue that a customer's assessment of overall service quality depends on the gap between expectations and perceptions of actual performance levels. Focusing on developing exceptional quality guest relationships helps hotels to build valuable, long-term relationships with their customers (Salleh et al., 2009). Hotels should have employees who make their guests feel special, build a positive attitude, and work perfect under pressure, thereby providing excellent customer service (Kim et al., 2003).

Both customer satisfaction/disconfirmation and perceived service quality are postulated to be influenced by the gap between expectations and perceptions of performance. Guests actually want to recover the service failure as it occurs and then build a decision about future consumption. Consumers evaluate each step in comparison to their expectations, which may or may not lead to a satisfaction sub judgement (Wang, 2011). Customer delight along with customer satisfaction act as a distinct response which influence guests behavioural intentions (Finn, 2012). However, literature on customer satisfaction or disconfirmation suggests a more elaborate model in which disconfirmation, expectations, and actual performance levels affect customer satisfaction, which, in turn, becomes an input to customers' perceptions of service quality. It helps in measuring customer satisfaction from perceived quality of products or services and is reviewed in this research for measuring customers' satisfaction.

#### 2.4. Relationship between service quality experience and customer satisfaction

Service quality experience has been studied and found to be a key factor that contributes to customer satisfaction (Vavra, 1997). Superior service quality has the ability to foster customer loyalty. The effect of customer satisfaction on loyalty appears to be contingent and it has been suggested that satisfaction will only have a direct effect on loyalty when customers are able to evaluate product quality through their experience with the product and services itself. In other words, customer satisfaction is essential for corporate survival in this modern competitive world. Several studies have given the idea and have found that it costs about five times as much in time, money and resources to attract a new customer as it does to retain an existing customer (Neumann, 1995). This creates the challenge of maintaining high levels of service, awareness of customer expectations and improvement in services and products. Furthermore, customer satisfaction is recognized as of great importance to all commercial firms because of its influence on repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations (Berkman and Gilson, 1986). Satisfaction reinforces positive attitudes towards the brand, leading to a greater likelihood that the same brand will

be purchased again, whereas dissatisfaction leads to negative brand attitudes and lessens the likelihood of buying the same brand again (Assael, 1987).

Gabbie and O'Neil (1996) observed that in today's hospitality environment, the true measure of company success lies in an organization's ability to satisfy customers continually. Customers are increasingly demanding value for money in terms of both price and the quality of product/service being offered. In order to ensure market success, hospitality organizations of all types are being forced to stand back and take a long, hard look at the way they are currently doing business. As such, failure by management to interpret customer desires accurately can result in loss of business and possible bankruptcy for some.

There has been some confusion regarding the differences between service quality and satisfaction (Storbacka et al., 1994). Satisfaction would, according to Liljander and Strandvik (1993), refer to an insider perspective, the customer's own experiences of a service where the outcome has been evaluated in terms of what value was received, in other words what the customer had to give to get something. According to Hunt (1977), satisfaction is an evaluation that an experience was at least as good as it was perceived to be. One way to achieve strong relationships thus, long relationships is to ensure that customers are satisfied. Performance analysis is a recognized approach for the management of customer satisfaction (Matzler et al., 2002).

A strong relationship between service organizations and customers is important because when dissatisfied customers defect, it leads to loss of business (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Customers seem to have a zone of tolerance which according to Zeithaml et al. (1985) is referred to as the difference between an adequate and a desired level of service. In the hotel industry little research has been undertaken to directly evaluate the differences between customer importance and hotel performance. According to Kennedy and Thirkell (1988), customers are prepared to absorb some unfavourable evaluations before expressing them in terms of net dissatisfaction and therefore service based organizations like hotels must be aware of service levels below which customers take their business elsewhere. This study aims at filling the gaps identified within the literature review.

### 3. Methodology

The aim of the study was to assess the key underlying factors that are deemed to be critical in enhancing service experience of guests. The three hotels used in this study were all four star under ITC chain of hotels. These included Riviera hotel in Jammu, Fortune Park in Delhi, and Bella in Chandigarh. Three towns in the northern part of India of Jammu, Chandigarh and Delhi were selected because of being in the same geographic area. In order to identify the underlying factors within the scales used, a principle component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. In addition, the importance-performance analysis was used in order to establish aspects of service that were considered to be important and performing as expected by guests in the hotels surveyed.

The initial measurement items for constructing the survey questionnaire were obtained through literature review (Lockyer, 2000; Mohsin, 2003; Lockyer and Mohsin, 2010; Mohsin and Ryan, 2005). A list of the initially generated items for the survey questionnaire was distributed to the hotel managers of the selected hotels for their input in order to achieve face validity. This procedure led to removal of some unclear items and rewording others to ensure consistency. Lastly hotel managers were responsible for the distribution survey questionnaires and their collection after being filled for their respective hotels. The hotel managers' involvement in the



process of data collection also ensured the overall external validity and reliability for this study.

The questionnaire comprised three sections. Section one was designed to obtain data relating to the importance of different service attributes, regarding front office, room service, in-house cafe-restaurant, and recreation centres. Section two sought to establish how the identified aspects of service were rated by guests in terms of performance. The performance scale was anchored on a 5 point Likert scale that required the level of agreement of respondents for each measurement item, where 1 represented “Strongly disagree” and 5 “Strongly agree”. The importance scale was anchored on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 represented “Not at all important” and 5 represented “Extremely important”. Lastly, section three was designed to obtain demographic and trip characteristics of the respondents in terms of gender, age, type of trip (business or holiday), as well as country of residence for respondent profiling purposes only.

The procedure for data collection involved surveying consenting hotel guests. The questionnaires were placed at different strategic positions within the hotel lobby or other convenient locations within the hotel. All guests were encouraged to participate and their responses remained anonymous. A useable sample of 450 participants was obtained over a period of five months from January to May, 2011 which is considered peak period for India. The sample size was considered adequate for this study based on [Krejcie and Morgan \(1970\)](#) recommendation. The authors argue that for a population greater than 5000, a sample of 384 respondents would be enough at 95% confidence level and a sample of 450 respondents for this study is well above the recommended value. The respondents profile was made up of 46% females and 54% males. The majority were married and travelling with family members accounting for 64.2%. Respondents in the 20–35 age group accounted for 43.5%, followed by 36–50 with 24.2% and 20.3% were below 19 years.

## 4. Results and discussions

### 4.1. Factor analysis

A principle component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the initial 40 items for importance scale with orthogonal rotation (Varimax). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (KMO = .751) which determines the sampling adequacy was adequate for further analysis. According to [Field \(2009\)](#) values between .70 and .80 are good. However, on close scrutiny of individual item contribution, one item “First contact with hotel staff”, was found to have a KMO value of .475 which was less than the recommended value of .5 and was therefore deleted ([Field, 2009](#)). Therefore, the final analysis was carried out on 39 items. The retained 39 items had a slightly improved KMO value of .763. Finally, the Bartlett’s test of sphericity  $\chi^2(741) = 26,131, p < .001$  was obtained indicating that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA to be conducted.

An initial analysis was carried out to obtain eigenvalues for each component in the data. Eight components were extracted all having eigenvalues over 1 and in combination explained 82.5% of variance. However, the screen plot was very clear and showed inflexions that would justify retaining 6 components only. Additionally the seventh component had a high cross loading with component 2 on item “Brand name matters” and was therefore deleted. Lastly, component 8 had only one item “Receiving confirmation on reservation” and was also deleted to finally retain 6 components for final analysis with a total of 37 items.

Table 1 shows the factor loadings after rotation for the importance scale. Accordingly, the respective components were named based on the items that clustered on the same component. Therefore component 1 was named *Service quality*; component

2 – *Service delivery*; component 3 – *Hotel ambience*; component 4 – *Quality of staff and amenities*; component 5 – *Experience quality* and lastly, component 6 – *Quality of aesthetics*.

The reliability test was carried out using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ). For each component and all results showed that they were all above .80. The values above .70 show that reliability had been achieved ([Nunnally, 1970, 1978](#)). The overall scale for the retained 37 items had  $\alpha$ -value of .953 which means that internal consistency was achieved.

*Factor 1 – Service quality*: An assessment of how well a delivered service conforms to the guest’s expectations. Service business operators often assess the service quality provided to their customers in order to improve their service, to quickly identify problems, and to better assess client satisfaction. Service quality includes various indicators such as quality of the restaurant food with factor loading (.804); product knowledge of the staff (.786). The variability of product and service offerings makes it vital for front of the house employees to be knowledgeable, confident and accurate when discussing products and services with customers.

The other indicators of quality of service are the comparison made by customers relative to other hotels of the same category (.783). In hospitality industry it is common to find hotels competing for a larger share in the market. This means that customer-driven quality management is becoming the preferred method for improving their performance ([Luoh and Tsaur, 2011](#)). To ensure success, a hotel needs to measure the quality of service it provides to its guests in order to identify areas that may require improvement. Areas that need improvement include: the ambience of the food and beverage area (.767), which is about creating a special experience by coordinating food and beverage with decor, ambience, presentation, service style and entertainment; professionalism among staff (.765), which basically entails the knowledge that an individual has about a certain field.

In hospitality industry, professionalism further refers to a person doing his/her job with sincerity and maintaining professional etiquette and ethics. Professionalism leads to making logical and unbiased decision-making. This is important in the creation of good work environment and improvement of the image of the hotel as having value for money (.764).

Public area cleanliness like lobby, toilets (.757) was found to be an important indicator of service quality. Cleanliness is both the abstract state of being clean and free from dirt, and the process of achieving and maintaining that state ([Johnston, 1995](#)).

Other indicators of service quality identified in this study are: variety of items on the menu (.755), which allows guests to have a wide choice for food and drinks, room cleanliness (.753), the most important indicator that will definitely hinder guests’ decision to return, reception area (.748), where a guest could gather important information when he or she inquires about the hotel. These are considered important by the customers and yet were rated least on performance of the hotels. Lastly, helpful and friendly staff (.738) is actually the backbone of any hotel and it is up to them whether they can impress the guests or not. Ease of making a reservation (.636) requires that guests are given an opportunity get everything carried instantly. This can be facilitated by having efficient online services using on efficient information technologies available in the tourism and hospitality industry ([Barrutia and Gilsanz, 2012; Saleh and Ryan, 1991](#)).

*Factor 2 – Service delivery*: Service delivery requires a common understanding of service or a product or activity that meets the needs of a user or can be applied by a user. Interior design provides exceptional client service and has been found to influence customer loyalty ([Pullman and Gross, 2004](#)). Quality of design and creativity used in hotel rooms contributes to ambience and the

**Table 1**  
Summary of exploratory factor analysis results for importance scale (N = 450).

Item	Rotated factor loadings					
	SQ	SD	HA	QSA	EQ	QOA
Quality of the restaurant food	.804					
Product knowledge of the staff	.786					
Quality of service compared to other hotels of the same category	.783					
The ambience of the food and beverage area	.767					
Professionalism among staff	.765					
The value for money of the hotel	.764					
Public area cleanliness like lobby, toilets, etc.	.757					
Variety of items on the menu	.755					
Room cleanliness	.753					
Reception area	.748					
Helpful and friendly staff	.738					
Ease of making a reservation	.636					
Dealing with complaints		.906				
Interior design		.898				
The willingness and ability of the personnel to provide service		.893				
The overall quality of food		.872				
First impression of the hotel		.694				
The brand name matters for you		.671				
The décor of this hotel is stylish and attractive			.848			
Timely service			.830			
The overall selection of beverages			.803			
The furnishings in the room			.793			
Your first impressions of the hotel			.670			
Prompt response from order taker				.861		
Hotel's atmosphere				.859		
The appearance of the staff				.857		
The adequacy of room amenities (e.g. TV, lamp, phone, mini-bar, etc.)				.776		
The check in and out of the hotel				.490		
Value for money for room service					.859	
Hotel location					.853	
The quality of service					.836	
Ambience of the restaurant					.811	
Your hotel experience matters in choosing the particular hotel					.760	
The physical appearance of the hotel						.874
A secure safe is available in the room of this hotel						.824
The comfort of the room						.815
Prompt room service						.788
Value for money of the restaurant service						.751
Eigenvalues	14.93	4.24	3.75	2.91	2.19	1.598
% of variance	21.9	11.8	11.4	10.5	9.8	9.76
Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	.918	.833	.912	.925	.900	.900

Note: SQ, service quality; SD, service delivery; HA, hotel ambience; QSA, quality of staff and amenities; EQ, experience quality and QOA, quality of aesthetics.

physical evidence an important factor in service marketing mix (Lentell, 2000). Therefore, service delivery in this study was found to be associated with various factors such as dealing with complaints (.906). One should avoid making any flaws and if any, try to resolve it with an ease and in a very short span (Saleh and Ryan, 1991). Interior design (.898) attracts many guests and may help in keeping them to stay longer. Willingness and ability of the personnel to provide service (.893) and the overall quality of food (.872) which describes the characteristics of food that is acceptable to consumers were also identified as important indicators of service in this study. Other indicators include: External factors as appearance (size, shape, colour, gloss, and consistency), texture, and flavour; first impression of the hotel (.694). Lastly, the brand name of the hotel (.671) was found to be important in the perception of service delivery because some people are particular about a brand (Oh, 1999).

**Factor 3 – Hotel ambience:** This factor covers feelings a room provides to a guest engineered by hotel designers using lighting, sound, colours and even smells. This was measured by asking the guests to rate the décor of the hotel in terms of style and attractiveness (.848), timely service (.830) so that guests obtain what they want just in time, the overall selection of beverages (.803), the furnishings in the room (.793), and the first impressions of the hotel (.670). All these help in providing a means for guests to be attracted

to the infrastructure, amenities and its brand thus facilitating guest loyalty (Berkman and Gilson, 1986).

**Factor 4 – Quality of staff and amenities:** The quality of being pleasant or attractive is basically a feature that increases attractiveness or value especially of a piece of real estate or a geographic location (Kandampully et al., 2001). It includes prompt response from order taker (.861). Prompt service is important because it allows guests get what they need at a particular time and reduces complaints. Hotel's atmosphere (.859) means that guests like the place and feel at home while the appearance of the staff (.857) is essential parts which increase the satisfaction of guests who are more concerned with the looks and appearances along with the services. The room amenities such as television, lamp, phone, mini-bar, etc. (.776), and the check in and out of the hotel (.490) are the first steps that facilitate customer to enjoy particular services of a hotel (Milliman, 1986).

**Factor 5 – Experience quality:** This explains a measure of the overall level of customer satisfaction with service (Berry et al., 2006). It comprises of value for money for room service (.859), satisfaction in this case refers guests obtaining everything within their means, hotel location (.853), which should be in a convenient location for easy accessibility by all guests, the quality of service (.836), ambience of the restaurant (.811), so as to attract the guests at the very first glance, and overall hotel experience (.760) which provide a

**Table 2**  
Mean values used in importance performance analyses.

	Item	Mean importance <sup>a</sup> ( $\alpha = .953$ )	Mean performance <sup>b</sup> ( $\alpha = .927$ )
1	Ease of making a reservation.	3.65	3.22
2	Helpful and friendly staff.	3.75	3.06
3	First impression of the hotel.	4.03	3.20
4	The check in and out of the hotel	3.59	3.21
5	The physical appearance of the hotel	3.70	3.38
6	Reception area	3.51	3.38
7	The value for money of the hotel	3.94	3.40
8	Value for money for room service	3.60	3.55
9	The overall quality of food	3.92	3.42
10	The overall selection of beverages	3.81	3.42
11	Prompt response from order taker	3.54	3.31
12	Prompt room service	3.95	3.31
13	Variety of items on the menu	3.25	3.30
14	Quality of the restaurant food	3.82	3.21
15	The quality of service	4.01	3.44
16	Dealing with complaints	3.72	3.05
17	Timely service	3.70	3.40
18	The appearance of the staff	3.40	3.51
19	Value for money of the restaurant service	3.92	3.58
20	Product knowledge of the staff	3.60	3.51
21	Professionalism among staff	3.78	3.51
22	Ambience of the restaurant	3.73	3.56
23	The willingness and ability of the personnel to provide service	3.82	3.51
24	The furnishings in the room	3.73	3.38
25	The room amenities (e.g. TV, lamp, phone, mini-bar, etc.)	3.70	3.38
26	The room comfort	3.99	3.38
27	Room cleanliness	3.51	3.41
28	The ambience of the food and beverage area	3.78	3.38
29	Hotel location	3.51	3.38
30	Interior design	3.58	3.41
31	The décor of the hotel is stylish and attractive	3.58	3.31
32	Hotel's atmosphere	3.44	3.55
33	A secure safe is available in the room of the hotel	3.73	3.35
34	Quality of service compared to other hotels of the same category	3.58	3.51
35	Public area cleanliness like lobby, toilets, etc.	3.78	3.51
36	Your hotel experience matters in choosing the particular hotel	3.73	3.15
37	The brand name matters for you	3.58	3.29

<sup>a</sup> Ratings obtained from a 5 point scale of 1 = not important at all to 5 = extremely important.

<sup>b</sup> Service quality performance rating obtained from a 5 point scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

reason for guests to return and spend their holidays in a particular hotel (Pullman and Gross, 2004).

*Factor 6 – Quality of aesthetics:* This deals with the nature of art, beauty, and taste, with the creation and appreciation of natural design (Zomerdijsk and Voss, 2010). It includes the physical appearance of the hotel (.874), which could attract the guests easily, a secure safe is available in the room of this hotel (.824), so that guests can feel secure about their valuable attributes and roam around without any problem, the room comfort (.815), prompt room service if used (.788), so that guests get what they want at a sudden, value for money of the restaurant Service (.751), so that guest could come again and again to stay in that particular hotel (Baltas et al., 2012).

#### 4.2. Importance-performance analysis

According to Martilla and James (1977), importance-performance analysis is a valuable tool that aids managers to easily view which attributes of their firms are important to customers and how the firms are performing from the customers' perspective. Importance-performance analysis is also useful in the evaluation of different elements of a marketing programme. A graphical representation of importance-performance analysis makes it easy to interpret.

The mean ratings of the importance and performance scales were used to identify the items that are considered important as well as how the surveyed hotels performed in providing service experience to guests. Each of the mean importance and

performance values in Table 2 are plotted in any one of the four quadrants that fall within fair performance to excellent performance and slightly important to extremely important to axis. This visual plotting of the results provides the managers the ability to make decisions on which aspects of service to concentrate on such as those attributes in (Quadrant I). This is followed by quadrant II which is under excellent performance and extreme importance of the attributes. Quadrant III represents fair performance and slightly important attributes and shows the managers that the service attributes therein should be given a low priority. Lastly quadrant IV which signifies possible overkill is under slightly important and excellent performance.

As shown in Fig. 1, the 37 attribute ratings were plotted under the four quadrants that explain what action should be taken by management for each of the attribute in order to improve guest service experience. Fig. 1 provides the summary of the importance-performance analysis. The numbers represent the attributes in Table 2.

The interpretation of the importance-performance analysis is as follows:

*Quadrant I – Concentrate here:* In quadrant I, five service attributes were identified. These are first impression of the hotel (3), helpful and friendly staff (2), Quality of the restaurant food (14), Hotel experience matters in choosing the particular hotel (36), Dealing with complaints (16). These attributes are considered as being extremely important by the guests, but guests were not satisfied with their performance. According to the importance-performance model, this calls for the hotel managers to concentrate

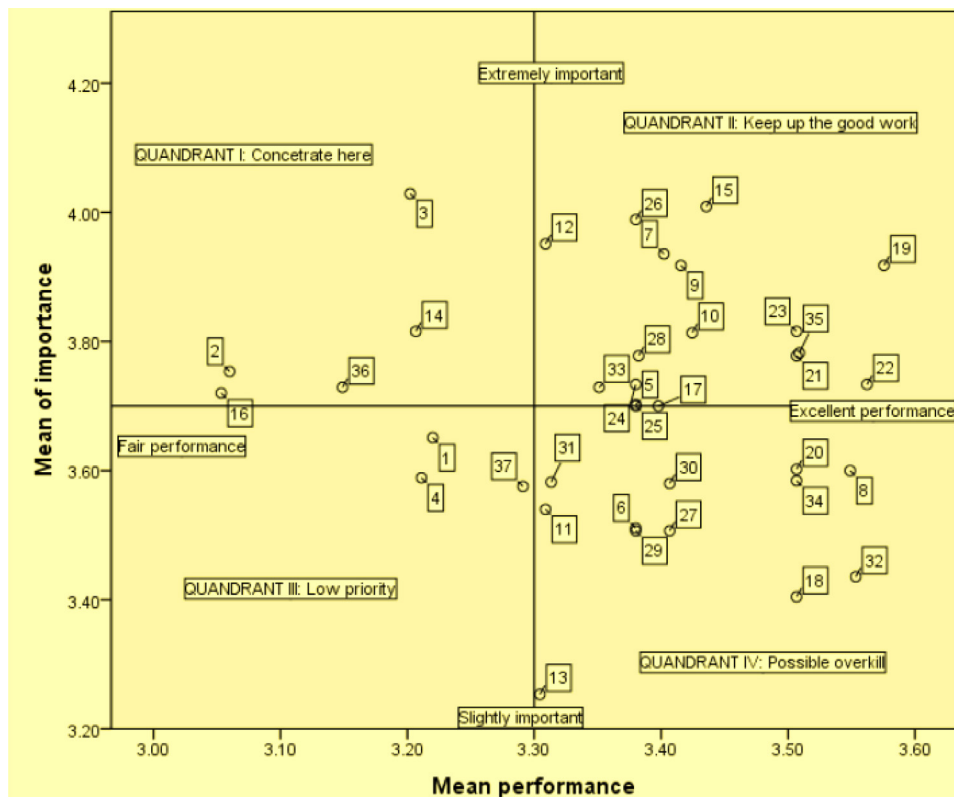


Fig. 1. Importance-performance analysis.

on these attributes in order to improve the guest service experience.

**Quadrant II – Keep up the good work:** In this quadrant the service attributes that were considered to be extremely important and the hotels were excellently performing were 15. Only three attributes were on the borderline of excellent performance and therefore need minimum effort to upgrade them from possible overkill to keeping up good work. The attributes on which the hotels performance was excellent were: Prompt room service (12), The room comfort (26), The quality of service (15), The value for money of the hotel (7), Value for money for room service (8), The overall quality of food (9), The overall selection of beverages (10), The ambiance of the food and beverage area (28), A secure safe is available in the room of the hotel (5), The physical appearance of the hotel (33), The willingness and ability of the personnel to provide service (23), Public area cleanliness like lobby, toilets, etc. (35), Professionalism among staff (21), Ambiance of the restaurant (22) and Value for money of the restaurant service (19). These attributes contribute greatly to the guest experience and should be maintained.

Interesting finding was related to three attributes of the furnishings in the room (24), the room amenities (25) and timely service (17) which were all related to the room service. These were lying exactly on the line of performance. The hotel managers may remain indifferent with their performance, but they can take any of the decision either to concentrate on these attributes or assume that they are performing well and therefore keeping up the good work.

**Quadrant III – Low priority:** In quadrant III, the three attributes were clearly identified. Ease of making a reservation (1), the check in and out of the hotel (4), and the brand name matters for you (37). These attributes were rated as being slightly important and hotels' performance was deemed fair. Based on finding, now managers are able to give low priority concern on these attributes but continue improving them for long term hotel operation.

**Quadrant IV – Possible overkill:** Under this quadrant, the hotels were considered by guests as having performed well on the eight attributes that include: The décor of the hotel as being stylish and attractive (31), prompt response from order taker (11), reception area (6), interior design (30), Room cleanliness (27), hotel location (29), variety of items on the menu (13), product knowledge of the staff (20), quality of service compared to other hotels of the same category (34), the appearance of the staff (18), value for money for room service (8) and hotel's atmosphere (32). However, on these attributes, the guests attached only a slight importance to them. This calls for managers to continue providing these services which could serve the purpose of uniquely differentiating one hotel from others, thus creating unique service experience. If these are given a low priority, it could lead to guest dissatisfaction which could lead to loss of business to competitors.

What can be deduced from the importance-performance analysis is that hotel managers could use this information in developing marketing strategies which are aimed at creating awareness of attributes that were rated as not important and yet serve to improve the brand image of the hotel. Service quality of the hotel industry affects brand image, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and profit as well (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998). One of the main reasons is that today's hotel guests are better travelled than previous generations and have clear notions of good service. Providing excellent service quality and high customer satisfaction is the most important issue and challenge facing the contemporary service industry (Grönroos, 1984). Effective service quality management is the best way to achieve superior customer satisfaction. This is in relation to all attributes in the possible overkill quadrant and to some extent those in the low priority quadrant.

Given the high importance attached to attributes such as the first impressions that hotel create on guests (3), and others, identified in quadrant I requires hotel managers concentration an attempt should be made to make guests feel that it worth paying



a premium price even during low peak seasons. This will serve to improve guest service experience in both peak and low peak seasons.

From the factor analysis, six components were identified as described before. The majority of attributes associated with service quality were found in quadrants I and II, an indication that the surveyed hotels were performing well. A close look at the attributes considered in this study reveal that they were rated as being extremely important by respondents and with excellent performance. This requires that the hotel maintain the good work of providing excellent services that enhance guest experience. This is in line with [Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons \(1994\)](#) finding that quality of service, enhances customer experience, which is one of the facets for creating competitive advantage of service based organizations, and in creating unique brand image.

Furthermore, service delivery, hotel ambience, quality of staff and amenities, experience quality, guest comfort derived from attributes that support guest experience are important in generating the overall service experience. The fact that the six components explained 75% of variance show that all the attributes measured are critical, if hotel owners want to keep guest service experience high. This means that improved guest experience has a greater impact on brand image.

## 5. Summary and conclusion

Some scholars have suggested that service experience is one of the most important and critical factors that influence consumers' evaluation of service performance ([Otto et al., 2000](#)). All the hospitality organizations worldwide consider and give priority and importance to quality of service being provided because it helps them to create high standards ([Phillips et al., 1983](#)). The brand image emphasized in this study facilitates improved perception of the customers regarding hotel attributes that serve to uniquely differentiate one hotel from another despite being in the same category based on the star rating. Therefore, the quality of service experience can be strategic and tactical tool with the ability to positively impact on related areas of service such as employee morale, reduction in working costs and waste and time management ([Tukamushaba et al., 2012](#)).

In India similar strategies are being employed by hotel industry and they are putting efforts to manage the quality and deliver their offering to the guests in order to make their service experience memorable ([Gilmore and Pine, 2002](#)). This study provides preliminary indications of the possible impact of customer service experience on brand image of a hotel based on high factor loadings for all items used ([Cai and Hobson, 2004](#)). Hotel brand positioning in the mind of consumers helps them to choose among so many alternatives and this creates leverage where competition exists as in the case of Jammu, Chandigarh and Delhi.

The experiential aspect of services should play an important role in how service brand image is conceptualized. Specifically, [O'Case and Grace \(2004\)](#) and [Padgett and Allen \(1997\)](#) suggest that experience is a useful conceptualization for understanding service brand image because it represents the customer's perspective of a service and the symbolic meanings created during service consumption. The importance and performance evaluation of the guests in every area from front office operations, through food and beverage service, value for the quality services and products knowledge to professionalism of staff indicate that the performance levels were relatively low. Results in [Table 2](#) clearly shows that there was not a single item which had the mean value of 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 which calls for managers in the surveyed hotels vigilance in ensuring higher performance in order to obtain better ratings on all the aspects explored in this study.

This study showed that there is a serious problem in management and control of the service and experiential quality in the hospitality industry in India. Factor analysis was employed to identify the underlying factors that were important in order to achieve guest satisfaction. Obtaining repeat business and building hotel brand image in the competitive market is a goal of every hotel ([Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998](#)).

Overall the results indicate that the mean values for both importance and performance evaluation responses of the hotel guests were less than the neutral point of 4.0 with exception of only two attributes of first impression of the hotel ( $M=4.03$ ) on importance evaluation and  $M=3.2$  on performance evaluation and the quality of service with ( $M=4.01$ ) on importance evaluation and ( $M=3.44$ ) on performance evaluation. Clearly this shows that Indian hotel owners and managers need to double their effort in ensuring delivery of quality guest experience as well as ensuring excellent standards of performance in the attributes considered in this study.

It is important that the managers recognize these differences and take appropriate actions to improve. Such an approach will help them to build customer loyalty and get repeat business. Providing the services according to the commitment/standards of the hotel industry vis-à-vis service quality is often a challenge faced by many service organizations. Studying customers' attitude, seeking feedback and accumulating that information to analyze helps to identify areas of disparity through importance performance evaluation. This further helps to develop appropriate actions and strategy which can address differences if any and build their brand image today's competitive world. Attributes are distinguished according to how directly they relate to product performance. The service attributes including the appearance of staff, hotels atmosphere, hotel location, interior design, and value for money for room service, room cleanliness and reception area are considered important by the customers and rated low on performance. This provides practical implications for the hotel managers to understand the needs of the customers and make them comfortable and happy during their stay in the hotels. Continuous professional development through customer service and pleasantries management should be conducted regularly in order to increase employees' product knowledge and efficiency. The reason for this is that these attributes are critical in quality service delivery to customers. Moreover, the customers should be charged according to the value services being provided by the hotel.

To provide excellent quality service, the values incorporated in the vision and mission of particular hotel establishments should be observed by every employee in the hotel. This creates service culture aimed at creating and managing first impressions that are important in creating better moments of truth. A service culture creates a better place to work. This engages and motivates employees to improve performance and helps organizations attract and retain customers. For example food and beverage service should reflect the organizational culture in all service areas where a variety of quality food from different cuisines among others, Indian, continental, Chinese are provided.

This paper provides an understanding of the impact of customers' common expectations and factors of importance to service quality experience during their stay at various stars rated hotels. The research has some significant value as it provides valuable information to researchers who are interested in conducting comparative studies in their different countries. Service quality perceptions studies among various hotel guests are still essential in establishing consumer behaviour. The attitude of managers towards employees and service quality during busy hours and how it affected service quality should be further investigated. This is because service quality may diminish or deteriorate during peak hours of the service if employees are put under pressure to provide quick service by both managers and guests.

Most luxury hotels worldwide easily compete by exploiting physical evidence and comfort their facilities provide. However, it is the level of service in the hotel that creates the difference among competing hotels. Establishing how hotels are working in order to achieve customer satisfaction or meet the expectation of the hotel guests and thereby improving their brand image is essential. This is possible through continuous research and contribution to literature and this is something this study has attempted to undertake. Further study with a larger sample size accumulated from different cities and location of other parts of India is suggested.

This study helps in expanding the understanding of the relationship between service experience, customer satisfaction, and brand image. This is of interest to both practitioners and academics in the field of hospitality industry, because improving service experience and ability to identify the factors that influence brand image and customer satisfaction is important in ensuring customer loyalty in the hotel industry. Using data collected from the concerned hotels, the findings indicate that hotel's brand image and customer satisfaction with the performance of staff are associated with guest experience which has an impact on marketing decision making process for managers.

This study had some limitations. The small number of the hotel surveyed in the northern part of India in Jammu, Chandigarh and Delhi, is not sufficient to make generalization of the results. However the sample size of 450 is big enough to allow some level of confidence with the conclusion arrived at. It is therefore recommended that further studies be carried out to confirm the factor structure that was obtained in this study. This could be done using confirmatory factor analysis with a view of finally establishing the structural relationships between the six components and how they influence hotel brand image.

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