The Post-purchase Evaluation of   The China's Star Rated Hotel Service Quality: A Content Analysis of Guest Comments on Third Party Hotel Booking Websites

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ABSTRACT

The research presents the findings from a content analysis of domestic tourists' comments on the Chinese third party hotel online booking website---elong.com. Stratified sampling and systematic sampling methods are used in the selection of hotels and cities. Guest comments on 200 hotels located in 10 cities ranging from 3 stars to 5 star properties are analyzed. The research findings are that the Chinese domestic tourists are no less sophisticated customers than international tourists in purchasing hotels, especially star rated hotels. The facilities, front office procedures, housekeeping service, and room size are important factors contributing to the guests perceptions of the hotel standards as opposed to the star rating of the hotel. The research findings are useful for China hotel industry to improve its quality service and offer a useful and economic tool in evaluating the quality service by conducing content analysis.

Key words: China Hotel, Content Analysis, Quality Service, Domestic Tourists

INTRODUCTION

China hotel service quality has long been a concern and hot topic for scholars and practitioners (Tsang, N. and Qu, H., 2000; Liping, C., & Robert, W.H., 1993). Previous researches indicate that the service quality of Chinese hotels is still lag behind the international standards (Tsang & Qu, 2000). It has been argued that one reason that China's hotel didn't deliver quality service was due to the substantiate gap of the living standards of Chinese employees and international tourists (i.e., the Western living standard), which contributed to the fact that the Chinese employee had difficulty to understand and thus deliver high quality standard services expected from international tourists. Clearly now in China, domestic tourists are the major demand for hotels, including star rated hotels (perceived luxurious by Chinese living standard).

Domestic tourism in China has been increasing rapidly since 1991 and not surprisingly getting attention from a number of researchers. However there are few researches focusing on the hotel service quality perceived by domestic tourists (Wang & Qu, 2004). How do Chinese tourists perceive the quality service delivered by those hotels? In another words, do star rated hotels meet Chinese tourists' expectation? The inquiry for answers to these questions are the focal point of this research. One would assume that due to the big gap between the West and Chinese life styles and living standards, Chinese tourists may have lower expectations of service quality than Western tourists in terms of hotel service and facilities.

The implications of this research are many folds. Firstly it offers an unobtrusive and economic way of examining hotel service quality; in addition, it will help us understanding the quality service of the star rated hotels perceived by the domestic tourists. Further more, the research findings will be useful to pinpoint the areas of hotel quality service for China hotels improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tsang and Qu (2000) contends that one of the root problems that cause China hotels quality service failure is that most service workers in China are "lack of an understanding or appreciation of international service standards." Wen (2000) highlights several main problems that prevail in Chinese hotels. Ignoring the maintenance of physical plant and lacking of talented personnel and management are the two main problems troubling the Chinese hotels service and standards. To solve the quality service problems some hotels' management are trying to upgrade "hotels from lower star to high star." However the service level and management are obviously lag behind the physical facilities." Xie (2000). Chinese government recognized the existing, chronic hotel service problems would derail the growing international tourism in China and adopted star rating system in 1988 and began implement it in 1990 (Liu & Liu, 1993; Wang & Qu, 2004) in order to improve hotel quality service and standards to better meet international tourists expectation.

China Star Rating System is similar to AAA star rating system which evaluates hotels from the following aspects to determine the number of stars of the hotel should have (Liu, & Liu, 1993), that is: required facilities and range of services; quality of facilities and equipment; maintenance; cleanliness; quality of service; guest satisfaction.

Previous researchers in evaluating hotel quality service use quite extensive list of indicators. For example, Tsang and Qu (2000) use a 35 attributes of hotel evaluating China hotel quality. Shea and Roberts (1998) and Manickas and Shea (1997) contend that analyzing contents from guest comments are useful resources to improve hotel quality and competitiveness. On the basis of the hotel attributes from Tsang and Qu's research (1997) and China Star Rating System, the hotels selected in this research are evaluated from aspects of front office, housekeeping, facilities, food and beverage (F &B) and the perceptions of hotel standards.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis method was adopted in this research due to its unobtrusive nature of probing answers from the population and the ease of getting data from online travel booking websites. Content analysis is generally regarded as a "system" used to analyze texts by simple counting a particular theme or examining the meanings exhibited by images (Esterberg, K.G. 2002; Kassarjian, 1977). Previous researches in evaluating hotel quality were referenced (Tsang and Qu, 2000 and) in designing the analytical framework for guest comments content analysis.

A pilot test was first conducted in developing the analytical framework. As there is a lack of comments on each specific hotel attributes, the hotel attributes for analysis is boiled down to 13 indicators centering around three main aspects: hotel services, facilities, and the perception of guests on whether the hotel has achieved star rated standards (Table 1 shows the detail list of criteria for evaluating). Demographic characteristics of the hotels were also recorded, including hotel size measured in rooms, the year hotel started and the year the hotel did the recent renovation, the stars of the hotel carrying. One limitation of the content analysis on the guest comments posted online is that there is lack of comments on star rated hotels under 3 stars. Therefore, in this research, 3 to 5 star rated hotels were selected as the unit analysis.

Elong.com was selected for collecting online guest comments due to its wide coverage of various kinds of hotels located in all major tourist cities in China. It is one of the largest online travel booking company in China (Top 10 Travel Websites, Anonymous, 2001). The other reason to choose elong is its easiness in retrieving guest comments on a particular hotel. 10 cities were randomly selected and then 20 hotels were selected ranging from 3 to 5 star hotels by the systematic random sampling from each city. The sample size is 200 hotels (Table 2 shows the profile of the sample).

The assumption here is that as it is a Chinese website (there is no other languages version), thus presumably most (if not all) guests comments made on the website are domestic tourists.

Table 1. Hotel Quality Service Content Analysis Framework and Coding Sheet

Areas		Indicators	Coding Scheme
Hotel Services	Front office service	Check-in and check-out procedures	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	food and beverage service	Room service, complementary breakfast etc.	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	Housekeeping Service	Making beds, cleanliness of the room, courtesy of the housekeeping staff	1=very poor 5 =excellent

	Other Services	For example, uniform services, like valet parking, bellperson;	1=very poor 5 =excellent
Facilities	Room size	The space of the room	
	Washroom	Size and quality,	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	HVAC	quality and maintenance,	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	TV	TV's quality	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	Noise	Quietness of the room	5 = very quite 1 = very noisy
	Lobby size	Lobby space and amenities	1 = crowded 5 = spacious
	Internet	if there is internet service in the room, the speed of the internet, and the price of the internet service impressions on the facilities.	1=very poor 5 =excellent
	General Impressions on Facilities	Comments on facilities in general	1=very poor 5 =excellent
Standards		If the hotel maintaining its star rated standards	1 = no 2 = yes
Demographic Characteristics	Hotel Size	Number of Rooms	
	The year hotel in operation		
	The year of the most recent renovation		
	City of the hotel located		
Star Rating		Number of stars that a hotel have been rated.	

Table 2. Number of Star Rated Hotels selected in 10 Cities

City	Star Rating			Total
	3 star	4 star	5 star	
Beijing	9	7	4	20
Haerbin	8	8	4	20
Chendu	10	7	3	20
Tianjin	8	9	3	20
Sanya	1	11	8	20
Guangzhou	8	8	4	20
Wuhan	11	6	3	20
Shuzhou	10	7	3	20
Kunmin	5	11	4	20
Hangzhou	13	5	2	20
Total	83	79	38	200

The coding sheet contain Likert 5 points scale is used in rating hotel services and facilities from 1 "very poor" to 5 "excellent." Nominal scale is used in measuring the perception of the guests to hotel standard, which is whether the hotel maintains its star rated standards.

The authors independently rate guest comments on the selected hotels as apposed to the hotel quality service attributes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Sample Profile

There are 200 hotels were selected in the sample across 10 major tourist cities in China, among which 18% are 5 star hotels, 40% are 4 star hotels, and 42% are 3 star hotels. The average hotel size is 299 rooms. Almost half of the sample hotels are quite new under 5 years and only one hotel in analysis are more than 100 years history (see Table 3).

Frequent Guest Comments on Hotel Quality Attributes

Table 4   shows the frequency of guest comments on hotel quality attributes. The most commented area is hotel standard and then guests general impressions on hotel facilities and the third most commented area is service in general.   The frequency of guest comments on front office, housekeeping service and noisiness ranked in the middle, only receiving 6% respectively.

<div align="center">Table 3   Sample Profile</div>

	categories	count	percentage
Number of hotels		200.00	
Average hotel size (no. of rooms)		299.00	
Average years of hotels in operation		8.00	
Star rated hotels	3 star	83.00	42
	4 star	79.00	40
	5 star	38.00	18
Year of hotel in operation	0-5	80.00	47.06
	6- 10	59.00	34.71
	11-15	12.00	7.06
	16-20	18.00	10.59
	21-120	1.00	0.59

Table 4. Frequency Table of Guest Comments Areas

Guest Comments Areas	Count	Percentage
Standards	158	17%
general impression on facilities	119	13%
Service in general	114	12%
Room Size	83	9%
housekeeping	61	6%
Bed Quality	56	6%
front office	55	6%
Noisy Proof	52	6%
Food and Beverage	51	5%
washroom	50	5%
Internet speed and price	46	5%
HVAC	42	4%
Lobby	30	3%
TV Quality	25	3%
Total Evaluation	942	100%

Star Rated Hotels and Perceived Hotel Quality and Standards Delivered

Do higher star rated hotels receive more positive comments from Guests in terms of Star rated standards? Using crosstabulation and Chi-Square test on star rating and guest's perception of hotel standard, it shows that there is no association between these two variables.

Chi-square test also rejects the hypothesis that hotel size is associated with guest's perceptions of hotel standards.

The Factors Affecting Guests Perceptions of Hotel Standards

Treating the guest perceptions on whether hotel maintaining its standards as the dependent variable and the other hotel service quality attributes as dependent variables, Bivariate Correlations procedure was conducted by SPSS version 12 to examine if a guest comments on each hotel quality service attributes associated to the perception of guests' perceptions. The results (see Table 5) show front office procedures, housekeeping service, other services, bed quality, TV quality, room size, washroom cleanliness and maintenance, internet service, and general impression on facilities are positively associated with the perception at 0.05 significance level. The association with the food and beverage, HVAC, Lobby, are not statistically significant.

The bivariate analysis also reveals that washroom cleanliness and facilities maintenance has strong positive relationships with housekeeping service and general impressions on hotel property facilities. Their relationships are statistically significant at 0.01 levels.

Food and Beverage area seems to be not highly related to the perceptions on the particular hotel rating standards. One explanation is that most guests are not using food and beverage often, which is the case that most hotels do not offer complementary breakfast or include it in room rate.

Internet service affects the guest perception on whether or not the property maintaining the star rated standards.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chinese domestic tourists are no less sophisticated than international tourists as consumers of hotel services. 44 % of hotels were perceived not achieving their star rated standards. As more stars that a hotel get represent more luxurious the hotel is, and should have better quality service expected by guests. However there is no evidence showing that there is a positive association between the star status and the perception of the hotel standards.

Domestic tourists seem more relate hotel facilities conditions, front office, housekeeping services, internet services in rooms to the perception of hotel standards. Room size is also an important factor influencing guest perceptions on hotel standards.

Most common complaints about facilities are that the HVAC is not working properly, the facilities in general are old, washroom is dirty and lack of maintenance. Typical complaints about front office procedures are the slow check-in and check out procedures and lack of hospitality spirit and professionalism exhibited by the front staff. Some even complain that they were treated differently from international tourists. The service quality delivered by front office apparently affects the guests' perception of the hotel standards. Many guests complain noise in rooms are not related to the sound proof nature of the window or walls but to unwanted telephone calls during night.

There are many implications from this research. One implication is that the China's hotel quality service is not only perceived as poor by international tourists but also by domestic tourists. Secondly, if hotels want to improve guest perceptions of the quality service, the following areas should be improved, that is: facilities management, housekeeping service, front office management.   Last but not least, personnel training is a key factor affecting the quality service. Employees should not only be familiar with the procedures but also hospitality spirit and positive attitude.

Table 5. Bivariate Correlation Analysis of Hotel Service Attributes and Guest Perception on Hotel Standards

	Front office	Housekeeping	F & B	Service	Bed	TV	Noisy	Room	washroom	HVAC	Lobby	Internet	Facilities	Perception on standards
Front office	1													
housekeeping	0.69**	1.00												
F & B	0.74**	0.65**	1.00											
Service	0.67**	0.67**	0.65**	1.00										
Bed	0.67**	0.73**	0.44*	0.59**	1.00									
TV	0.49	0.75**	0.70*	0.10	0.51	1.00								
Noisy	0.77**	0.60**	0.37	0.58**	0.68**	0.31	1.00							
Room	0.74**	0.70**	0.56**	0.58**	0.78**	0.57*	0.53**	1.00						
washroom	0.66**	0.80**	0.62**	0.62**	0.70**	0.76**	0.53**	0.73**	1.00					
HVAC	0.47*	0.75**	0.44*	0.56**	0.58**	0.18	0.39*	0.57**	0.82**	1.00				
Lobby	0.75**	0.45*	0.35	0.48*	0.55*	0.50	0.64**	0.70**	0.42	0.14	1.00			
Internet	0.58**	0.57**	0.41	0.43**	0.52**	0.71**	0.09	0.47**	0.51**	0.56**	-0.11	1.00		
Facilities	0.54**	0.69**	0.59**	0.54**	0.75**	0.80**	0.45**	0.70**	0.81**	0.65**	0.47*	0.66**	1.00	
Perception on standards	0.43**	0.45**	0.26	0.44**	0.51**	0.53**	0.16	0.56**	0.35*	0.20	0.36	0.47**	0.58**	1.00

** Significant at 0.01 level
* significant at 0.05 level

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