

## Guest Experiences of Service Quality in Bed and Breakfast Establishments in East London, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This study appraises guests' experiences in Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs) establishments in the developing context, specifically in South Africa. The purpose was to establish the levels of service quality experienced by guests in B&Bs and the influence of demographic variables on such experiences. A descriptive quantitative research paradigm was adopted and face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents using a structured questionnaire. Four hundred guests were targeted using a stratified purposive sampling technique. In order to meet the surveys' goals, descriptive and bivariate statistical analyses were conducted. The empirical results show that on a 5 point Likert scale, the overall mean experience score was 3.76, indicating rather low experiences of guests regarding service quality in B&Bs. Furthermore, significant statistical similarities and differences were found between guest experiences and demographic variables. The study advocates for the need to develop a service excellence approach that would help improve customer satisfaction and secure performance improvement in B&Bs in the developing context.

### INTRODUCTION

The essence of a guests' experience in a B&B requires involvement or participation by the guest involved (Knutson et al. 2009). Guests' descriptions and visualizations, no matter how sincere and vivid, cannot match actually being in a B&B or being part of an activity in a B&B (Berry and Haeckel 2002). According to Bell (2002), experiences are internal in nature and, therefore, individualized. Karen and Berg (2007) opine that, each guest brings a different background, values, attitudes and beliefs to the B&B; each experiences it through his or her individual lens. Consequently, Pantelidis (2010) underscores the fact that, complexity and intricacies of guests' experiences, makes it difficult to predict how each guest will react to a particular B&B experience.

Elsewhere in academic literature, Lu et al. (2006) contend that, two guests could check into the same B&B but nevertheless judge the experience in totally different terms. In the context of the aforementioned, Karen and Berg (2007) accentuate that the marketing, measurement and management of a guests' experience in a B&B is so difficult. As such, it has become increasingly difficult to satisfy guests in B&Bs (Nuntsu et al. 2004). In addition, B&Bs also experience the pressure from steady increases in labour costs, small profit margins, the burden of complying with

stringent legal requirements (Enz 2004; Hu 2009) and fierce competition (Enz 2004; Reynolds and Biel 2007; Hu 2009).

Today's B&B guests progressively demand higher quality service than before (Forster 2014). Guests not only require accommodation provided, but also expect a memorable experience (Thorn 2003). Following a memorable experience, come positive perceptions, word-of-mouth communication and guest satisfaction which are considered critical to the success of B&Bs (Ladhari et al. 2008). Guest satisfaction leads to positive behavioural intentions, such as return patronage or repeat purchase (Kivela et al. 1999; Quan and Wang 2004). While there is no guarantee of a satisfied guest's repeat business, it is almost certain that a dissatisfied guest will not return (Soriano 2002). For this reason, a memorable experience can directly affect guest loyalty, organisational profits, return patronage, complaint behaviour and word-of-mouth communications which tend to shape guests' experiences (Ladhari et al. 2008). Hence, B&Bs that provide guests with quality services can gain a stronger competitive position in today's dynamic marketplace (Karen and Berg 2007).

According to Federated Hospitality Association of South Africa (FEDHASA) (2014), the B&B service industry has drawn much attention and enthusiasm in South Africa over the

past 15 years, although it is believed to be originated in Europe one hundred years ago. More than just a place to accommodate and feed tourists, the B&B also provides them a warm, family-like feeling during the stay. However, unlike hotels, little research has been conducted on B&Bs yet they play a significant role in the tourism industry in South Africa (FEDHASA 2014). Previous researches (Lu et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2012) has suggested that physical environment and service are the major components of overall service quality in a B&B. Additionally, as Chen and Lin (2006) posit, in B&Bs, guest experiences are an important determinant of customer satisfaction.

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to assess guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in East London. In order to achieve this goal, the article arrangement is thus: the introduction is followed by a theoretical background, a problem statement and research objectives, after which an explanation of the research method and a discussion on the results and conclusions thereof are furnished and finally, recommendations and limitations are presented.

### Theoretical Background

Tourism is one of the largest industries globally. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC 2014) reports that the tourism industry contributed 9.5 percent to the global economy in 2013 and expects tourists to spend more per trip and stay longer on their holidays in 2014. Despite tough global economic conditions, the South African tourism industry reached a record of 9.6 million international tourist arrivals in 2013 (Statistics South Africa 2013). Consequently, the sector's contribution to gross domestic product in South Africa has risen gradually from 8.1 percent in 2007 to 10.3 percent in 2013 and is expected to reach 12 percent in 2014 (WTTC 2014).

According to Culture Arts Tourism Hospitality Sport Sector Education Training Authority (CATHSSETA) (2014), B&Bs are classified as one of the category of fields within the hospitality industry that make up the South African Tourism Industry. B&B's have increased dramatically in number throughout the world in the last three years, though there are no exact statistics that shows the extent of their growth. However, according to FEDHASA (2014), the distribution of accommodation types used by foreign visi-

tors during their stay in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa in 2013, were in descending order: hotels (47%); B&B's (19%); self-catering (14%); guest houses (11%); game lodges (9%).

According to statistics by FEDHASA (2014), a total of 22 percent of all foreign tourists made use of B&B accommodation in South Africa. However, it is extremely difficult to accurately estimate how B&Bs have contributed to the tourism industry given that most B&Bs do not formally register themselves with the Companies Office, unlike other business types (Hall and Rusher 2004). However, they provide a modern day engine of economic growth (Matshediso 2014).

Zane (1997) maintains that B&B's can have a substantial positive economic impact on the communities where they stay because most of the people who run them were once unemployed (for example, housewives, single parents, etc.). This is particularly true in small communities, where motel and hotel accommodations are limited and B&B's may handle a large percentage of visitors. Their economic contribution is in the form of increased earnings, foreign exchange, job opportunities, production, entrepreneurship and infrastructure. For example, Zane (1997) found that a couple using a B&B for a getaway typically spends US\$225.72 per day for lodging, food, souvenirs and incidentals. When multiplied by the median stay of 2.35 nights, this adds up to more than US\$530 per trip spent in the host community.

International researchers have investigated guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs from various perspectives. For example, Pevetz (1982) investigated guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in Austria, 66 percent of B&B tourists were between the ages of 31 and 49, with most having children under the age of 16). Koth and Norman (1989) investigated guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in Minnesota, USA. Fleischer and Pizam (1997) investigated guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in Israel. Vofeler (1977) investigated guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in Canada. As the above discussion has shown, most empirical studies that has focussed on guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs mainly focused in the developed context. Case studies that inform the developing context specifically from an African perspective are not known.

Furthermore, studies that investigate guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in South Africa is scant. This is rather surprising considering that, Nuntsu et al. (2004) recognised fact that, B&Bs are amongst the fastest and maturing Small Medium Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) sector with the potential of contributing to economic growth and employment generation. This research endeavour seeks to fill in this identified gap in tourism and hospitality studies. What makes this study particularly significant is that, as Blakey (2012) observe, existing academic literature to-date is western in orientation and the principles and methods that emerged may need revision in light of findings beyond the developed world. Conspicuously, hardly can one find studies on the same in the African context. Perhaps, it might not be judicious to assume a-priori that the findings from the developed parts of the World can apply in the African context. Therefore, the current study seeks to confirm or disconfirm the previous findings from developed countries in the African context – in particular, using South Africa as a case in point.

### Problem Statement

South Africa's accommodation sector, in terms of capacity and room revenue, expanded rapidly in 2010, boosted by tourists' arrivals to the 2010 FIFA World Cup which is usually the case for a country hosting a mega-event (Forster 2014). However, post-event has witnessed that, there was an oversupply in accommodation in several parts of the country (Ndweni 2014). As a result of such oversupply, average room occupancies have fallen and room rates dropped as role players in the accommodation sector fight for a limited market of guests (Forster 2014). Consequently, occupancies in B&Bs have plummeted from 79 percent in 2007 to 64 percent in 2013 (FEDHASA 2014) and average revenue declined by 0.6 percent in 2013 (Matshediso 2014).

Researchers such as Hsieh and Lin (2010); Matshediso (2014) and Ndweni (2014) identify B&Bs' inability to satisfy their guests' experiences as one of the main reasons for low occupancies and revenue. According to tourism consulting firm Grant Thornton (2009), despite lowering their room rates, B&Bs in South Africa seem to be finding great difficulty in determining guest experiences. As such, a study to determine guests' experiences in B&Bs has been visual-

ised. The results of the study could increase the level of guest satisfaction and conceptualise guests' probability of intention to return to South Africa generally and East London B&Bs in particular.

### Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to determine guests' experiences of service quality in B&Bs in East London. In order to achieve the primary objective, the following secondary objectives were formulated:

- ♦ To establish the influence of demographic variables on guests' experiences in East London B&Bs,
- ♦ To establish the levels of experienced service quality in East London B&Bs, and
- ♦ To make recommendations to improve guests' experiences in B&Bs.

### METHODOLOGY

A list of names and addresses of B&B's in the Buffalo City region was constructed using existing data sources such as South African travel guides, daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, the Yellow Pages telephone directory, accommodation booklets, publicity associations, pamphlets, directories and road sign boards. These B&Bs complied with the criteria set by Statistics South Africa (2013) for classification as a B&B, namely: accommodation establishments that serve only breakfast (that is, no lunches or suppers except on request) and have 5 or less bedrooms.

Furthermore, to be classified initially as a B&B the name of the B&B had to include the words B&B (for example, Cozy Nest B&B) and the B&B should have advertised itself under the B&B accommodation category. The other accommodation establishments could not be classified as B&Bs, but as guest houses and were therefore excluded. Thus, if an establishment had more than 5 bedrooms and if it served lunch and/or supper on a regular basis, then it was considered to be a guest house and not a B&B.

A questionnaire was developed bearing in mind the research objectives of the study. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were used mainly be-

cause data obtained from the administration of closed questions are easier to analyse since they guarantee uniform responses whilst open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to give their views and opinions about the dining experience (Creswell et al. 2004).

The questionnaire adopted was based on the LODGSERV model (developed by Patton et al. 1994). The LODGSERV model was deemed suitable by the researchers, since it is accommodation specific as emphasised by Ekinici et al. (2003). Moreover, the model measures the essential components of a B&B experience namely; assurance, empathy, tangibility, responsibility and reliability (Getty and Getty 2003) which were all used in this study. These descriptors were selected, since various scholars (Patton et al. 1994; Baker and Crompton 2000; Nuntsu et al. 2004) identify these factors as the most essential components of a guests' experience in a B&B.

To be able to measure experiences, a 5-point Likert-type scale drawn from DeVellis (1991) was employed in the questionnaire to illustrate the degree of experiences. The scale ranged from "very low experiences – (1)", "low experiences – (2)", "indifferent – (3)", "high experiences – (4)", to "very high experiences – (5)".

The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data that were collected from 400 guests. A sample of 400 was adequate (Leedy and Ormrod 2010), since the total population of guests in B&Bs in East London exceeds 5 000. A descriptive quantitative study design (McMillan and Schumacher 2006) was followed. Stratified purposive sampling was used to select respondents. Kumar (2012) asserts that stratified sampling occurs when the study area is divided up into subareas that all share a similar characteristic, with the study sample then being obtained by means of taking samples from each subarea concerned. Therefore, the study area was split up into three sub-groups: Quigney; Selbourne-Vincent; and Berea. The questionnaires were then shared up equally among the three subareas. According to Veal (2010), the purposive sampling technique involves sampling with a purpose in mind. B&Bs in Quigney, Selbourne-Vincent, and Berea were purposively selected, with a questionnaire being given to their guests to complete.

The owner or manager of the B&B was approached for permission to conduct the study. Data were collected in January and February 2014

during weekdays, weekends and across these two months as recommended by various researchers (Akinyele 2010; Sulek and Hensley 2004). This enabled the researchers to maximise chances of eliciting information from guests of different lifestyles, occupation, income, age and gender (Kivela et al. 1999). The following procedures were used to collect data. The researchers approached every guest who checked into the B&B after they had checked in at the reception. The researchers explained the aim of the study to the guests and requested them to participate. It was emphasised that the researchers would treat the information provided as confidential and anonymous.

Guests who were willing to participate in the study received a questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked and discussed with the respondents in case of any queries. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21, which is a statistical analysis software programme that allows for descriptive and inferential statistics to be generated.

### Reliability and Validity

Reliability in quantitative studies can be defined as the extent to which test scores are accurate, consistent or stable (Struwig and Stead 2001). Taking into account that McMillan and Schumacher (2006) regard the Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient as the most appropriate method to investigate the reliability of survey research where there is a range of possible answers and not only a choice between two items, internal reliability was tested using this measure. A Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of higher than seven is acceptable (Pietersen and Maree 2007). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the total index was high (0.7928), while moderate to high reliability coefficients were calculated for assurance (0.7104), empathy (0.7457), tangibility (0.8714) responsibility (0.8220), reliability (0.8049) and overall experience (0.8111). The high alpha values indicate good internal consistency among the items.

Pietersen and Maree (2007) describe validity as the extent to which an empirical instrument "measures what it is supposed to measure". In order to ensure content and face validity (Babbie and Mouton 2008), a literature study was undertaken and the survey instrument was scru-

tinised by hospitality academics and B&B managers before the instrument was finalised.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic characteristics of guests can influence the type of accommodation they choose (Bowie and Buttle 2006). As such, B&Bs have to be familiar with the demographic characteristics of their clients in order to make effective marketing, promotional and operational decisions to raise guest experiences (Kotler and Keller 2006). In view of this, Table 1 reflects the demographic composition of the respondents. The Table also reflects the means and standard deviations for respondents with different demographic variables.

In this study, of the 400 respondents, 61.70 percent (n=247) were male whilst 38.30 percent were in the age group 35 to 44 years (see Table 1). Of the respondents, 43.3 percent had a tertiary

diploma whilst 38.0 percent earned a monthly income in the R5 001 to R10 000 range. A total of 79.6 percent of the respondents used IsiXhosa as home language.

Table 1 further depicts the variable mean scores and standard deviations for the demographic sample. An initial glance at the data reveals that respondents' overall mean experience scores varied between 3.61 (guests with a monthly income above R20 000) and 4.62 (guests with a monthly income in the R1001 to R5000 range), with five being the highest possible score. Respondents with a monthly income in the R1 001 to R5 000 range recorded the highest overall mean experience score (4.62) whilst those with a monthly income above R20 000 recorded the lowest overall mean experience score (3.61).

An average standard deviation of 0.66 was obtained. As such, respondents' experience scores for gender, age, monthly income, education and home language were clustered closely to the average overall experiences means for these demographic variables.

**Table 1: Experiences of respondents with different demographic variables**

Demographic variables	n	%	Overall experiences	
			Mean	SD
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	247	61.70	4.09	0.63
Female	153	38.30	4.27	0.72
<i>Age</i>				
≤ 24	33	8.30	4.21	0.57
25-34	147	36.70	4.39	1.12
35-44	153	38.30	4.12	0.81
45-54	60	15.00	4.11	0.75
≥55	7	1.70	4.18	0.70
<i>Monthly Income</i>				
≤1000	7	1.7	4.49	0.61
R1001-R5000	34	8.6	4.62	0.59
R5001-R10000	152	38.0	4.34	0.80
R10001-R15000	90	22.4	4.28	0.61
R15001-R20000	55	13.8	3.81	0.75
≥R20001	62	15.5	3.61	0.86
<i>Education</i>				
No schooling	0	0	0	0
Primary school	0	0	0	0
High school	34	8.4	4.17	0.62
Tertiary Diploma	173	43.3	4.28	0.51
Tertiary Degree	80	20.00	4.11	0.79
Other,	113	28.3	4.33	0.58
<i>Home Language</i>				
Afrikaans	6	1.4	3.92	1.05
English	41	10.2	4.03	0.63
IsiXhosa	318	79.6	4.51	0.82
IsiZulu	15	3.7	4.34	0.56
Other	20	5.1	4.26	0.67
All	400	100	3.85	0.66

## Guests' Experiences

Descriptive and bivariate analysis was used to determine guests' experiences to establish customers' satisfaction. In this view, Table 2 shows the results for the guests' experiences of service quality. The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for service quality and ambience as well as the t-values.

Guests' experiences were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale. An initial glance at the data reveals that the overall mean scores for experiences items was 3.76, indicating rather low experiences of guests regarding service quality (Markovic and Raspor 2010). The overall experience score indicates that the overall service quality fell below guests' expectations and that there is room for service quality improvement in B&Bs in East London.

A further investigation of Table 2 shows that guests' mean experience scores ranged between 3.42 and 4.30. The item with the highest experience scores was; "understanding of specific guests' needs". The results in this study reveal similarities to studies conducted by other researchers. For example, Chen and Lin (2006) and Lu et al. (2012) noted empathy as a factor with the highest experience score.

**Table 2: Means and standard deviations for guests' experiences of service quality**

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Experiences</i>		<i>t-value</i>
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Assurance</i>	Friendliness of the employees	3.81	0.58	1.02
	Professionalism of the employees	3.87	1.07	8.58*
<i>Empathy</i>	Personal and material safety of guests	3.42	0.69	1.60
	Individual care of guests	3.98	1.15	9.06*
	Honest and empathic treatment of guests	4.19	0.68	6.81*
<i>Tangibility</i>	Understanding of specific guests' needs	4.30	0.53	8.07*
	B&B location	4.14	0.86	4.17*
	B&B exterior	3.84	0.51	5.19*
	B&B interior	4.21	0.68	8.46*
	Leaflets and brochures	3.62	0.71	1.45
<i>Responsibility</i>	Appearance of the employees	3.74	0.83	5.05*
	Readiness of the employees to help guests	4.11	0.77	6.36*
	Readiness of the employees to provide guests with answers	4.17	0.60	11.5*
	Timeliness of the B&B staff	4.05	0.66	9.02*
<i>Reliability</i>	Offering of services in a promised manner of time	4.13	0.60	7.36*
	Offering of previously arranged services from the first meeting and onwards	3.91	0.52	3.78*
	Offering services without mistakes	4.04	0.74	10.3*
	Overall mean for 18 attributes	3.76	0.68	-

\*t-test (2 tailed Significance)  $p < 0.05$ ; SD: Standard deviation  $p < 0.05$

The item with the lowest experience scores was “personal and material safety of guests”. The results vindicate the findings by Liu and Jang (2009), who noted assurance as a factor with the lowest experience score. On the other hand, in the study conducted by Wang et al. (2012), reliability was the factor noted with the highest experience score. The reported differences could occur due to different sample characteristics (for example, tourists in Wang et al.’s (2012) study, and non-tourists in the present study), and because of the different modifications of LODGSERV instrument used in each of the studies mentioned.

It should be noted that B&Bs should improve the service quality on the attributes with low experience scores, namely; “friendliness of the employees”; “professionalism of the employees”; “personal and material safety of guests”; “individual care of guests”; “B&B exterior”; “leaflets and brochures”; “appearance of the employees” and “offering of previously arranged services from the first meeting and onwards. These items are just less important when compared to other attributes. If the service quality meets the experienced minimum, guests will focus on other dimensions in the service quality evaluation process. Hence, managers should maintain at least this minimum of service.

The following attributes were statistically significant: “Friendliness of the employees”;

“Personal and material safety of guests” and “Leaflets and brochures” meaning they require significant attention. These attributes were statistically significant especially security, and they represent serious shortfalls and require significant attention of B&B managers in terms of making improvement efforts.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the modified LODGSERV instrument tested in this study is suitable for use by B&B managers in gaining easily interpretable data. By administering the modified LODGSERV questionnaire to guests, managers can get information on how guests view the B&B’s service quality and identify where the problems are. The measurement instrument also provides a quantified measure of what guests expect in a B&B.

The study implies two main contributions. Generally, the findings contribute to the development of a service excellence approach that helps identify guests’ requirements and secure performance improvement in B&Bs. In this context, results may broaden the knowledge of service quality in B&Bs and are suitable for international comparison. In particular, the study itself is considered useful for South African academics and practitioners, as it is the first that presents the application of the LODGSERV in-

strument in the South African B&B industry, and captures the measurement of experience attributes. Improving service quality in the South African B&B industry will, in turn, not only increase guest satisfaction and strengthen guest loyalty, but also improve the B&B's reputation and generate greater revenue. The research supports the strategic responsible growth objectives of the National Tourism Sector Strategy (2011) of South Africa, namely to develop people, to provide decent work for employees in the tourism industry, and to deliver a world class experience to guests.

### MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the conclusions presented above, since guests in the 35 to 44 age group had higher experiences than guests in other age groups, the researchers recommend that B&Bs consider attracting more guests in the 35 to 44 age group since they are easier to satisfy compared to other age groups. From the preceding points, B&Bs can treat this age group as one market segment and develop a unified market strategy to attract more guests of this age group. In the same vein of thought, since guests with an income in the R5001 to R10000 range had higher experiences than guests with other monthly income, the researchers recommend that B&Bs consider attracting more guests in the R5001 to R10000 income range since they are easier to satisfy compared to other income groups. Furthermore, it is also recommended that participating B&Bs train their staff on the "friendliness of the employees" since this attribute was statistically significant. B&Bs should also beef up security, since most guests noted that they felt unsafe in most B&Bs.

### FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

Within the framework of this study, three areas for future research can be identified. Firstly, the research could be expanded to B&Bs situated in other cities within South Africa, although it is not expected that the findings would be significantly different. Secondly, triangulation requirements could be considered in another study by applying multiple methods (for example, surveys, individual interviews and focus group discussions) and multiple data and data sources (for example, data obtained from actual

customers, mystery guests, waiters and B&B management) in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the research. Lastly, future research could also assess guests' expectations of service performance and compare them with guests' experiences in order to identify the differences.

### LIMITATIONS

Despite its managerial implications, the study is not free of limitations. The results are based on a sample size chosen from a limited geographic area and gathered during a short time period. Also, the measurement of B&B service quality was limited to 18 attributes. Even though these attributes were included in other studies and their validity is tested, there could be other relevant B&B attributes that are likely to influence guests' experiences about overall B&B experience.

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