

Guests' Perceptions of Official Hotel Rating System Dimensions in Star-Rated Hotels in Malawi

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to establish guests' perceptions of official hotel rating system dimensions in star-rated hotels in Malawi. Using a descriptive research design, this study focused on 11 star-rated hotels located in Lilongwe and Blantyre, Malawi. 203 hotel guests participated in the study. Survey questionnaires based on a modified performance-only approach were used to collect data and analysed using SPSS 23.0. The findings indicate that hotel guests had high perceptions of most aspects of the two dimensions of official rating system, namely, basic registration standard and grading standard. Some of the dimensions' aspects that registered high guest perceptions include staff skills and rapport, safety and security, bedroom structure, guestroom essentials, décor and ambience, and hotel's structural features. From the managerial perspective, the study suggests that it is crucial for star rated hotels to dedicate adequate time and resources to ensure that both physical facilities and service elements entrenched in the hotel rating system dimensions are highly and constantly maintained or upgraded in order to give the customers a sustained level of confidence in the hotels' service experience and ultimately make them more satisfied.

Key Words: *Hotel rating system; Basic registration standard; Grading standard; Guest perceptions; Malawi*

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry, as a component of tourism, is generally the biggest export service sector worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008). The importance of hospitality, in the growth of economies cannot be over-emphasized (Angur, 1998; Grönroos, 2016; Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010). Many economic experts confirm that hospitality services make a steady-fast and important contribution to the development of the tourism industry in general (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2013). Looy, Gemmel and Dierdonck (2013) identified two major contributing factors to this growing trend. Firstly, increasing consumer incomes and sociological changes among consumers leading to a greater demand for hospitality services. Secondly, increasing professionalism in the hospitality industry, coupled with tremendous technological evolutions has created a new array of services. The upsurge in travel has impacted occupancy ratios and average room rates, with several international hotel chains taking this as an investment, development and internationalisation opportunity (Brookes & Roper, 2010; Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010; Rogerson, 2016; WTTC, 2017). Despite the positive developments witnessed in the last few years, the African continent still faces several bottlenecks to the industry's growth and development. One of the key constraints limiting the effectiveness of the industry to play a greater role in the national economies and hence the development and transformation of the continent, is lack of quality services especially in the hospitality sector due to various reasons (Africa Tourism Monitor, 2015).

Globally, many hospitality establishments such as hotels are striving to make their services and products unique and contemporary in line with the increasing changing customer wants, needs and tastes (Zaibaf, Taherikia, & Fakharian, 2013). Service quality is becoming a means by which customers distinguish between competing hospitality establishments (Back & Lee, 2015). The hotels' performance in a competing environment where most of them share similarities in the type of physical facilities they possess, much depends on the manner service quality is delivered to result in customer delight (Mohsin & Lockyer, 2010). Improving service quality is becoming imperative for the hotel industry based on customer expectations and perceptions of the service (Yilmaz, 2010). Hotels use service quality to establish a relationship with the customers throughout the delivery process (Johnson, Clark, & Shulver, 2012; Kandampully; 2014). Customers are, in most cases, the final judges as to how well the quality of the service delivered matches up to their requirements, and, by their continued support, determine the establishment's long-term success (Grönroos, 2016; Johnston *et al.*, 2012).

Studies involving the relationship between service quality and customer perceptions in the hotel industry have largely been conducted in star rated hotels in different geographical contexts, and literature search shows that none of such studies have been carried out in Malawi. The rapid adoption of hotel rating systems has arguably played a major impact on the customer

perceptions and experience (Hensens, Struwig, & Dayan, 2011). Perhaps, the underlying reason is that the rating system evaluates the overall quality of a hotel in terms of its physical environment and services on the basis of some attributes (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008). A rating system reflects both tangible and intangible aspects of a property, and therefore, a clear indication of the service quality level and competitive edge in the market place (Adongo, 2011; Hensens, 2016; Narangajavana & Hu, 2008).

In Malawi, a sub-Saharan country, tourism and hospitality industry is a relatively new phenomenon in the national economic development planning. The country has been a predominantly agriculture-based economy since independence in 1964 (Briggs, 2016; Lindgreen, Swaen, & Campbell, 2010). Recently, the Malawi Government formulated and launched a blueprint, dubbed the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III (MGDS III) as a central operational medium-term strategy to maximise the contribution to economic growth through the potential sectors of growth, among them tourism development (Government of Malawi [GoM], 2017). The Department of Tourism (DoT) within the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism in Malawi, has been given the responsibility to develop and promote tourism in a manner that would yield significant economic benefits to the people of the country.

Despite the rapid growth of the tourism and hospitality industry after independence in 1964, Malawi was the only travel destination country in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) without an official hotel rating system for accommodation establishments such as hotels, motels/lodges and inns until the year 2010 (World Bank, 2010). According to the Industrial Development Corporation's [IDC] (2012) report highlighting the status of the business hotel industry in selected East and West African countries, Malawi was singled out as one country in the region with very few hotels of international standards owing to low investment in the hotel sector. IDC (2012) further stated that although some of the existing facilities in the major cities of the country had a perceived international status, they fell short of refurbishment and/or rebranding as a mark of quality. Hence, the introduction of the official National Hotel Star Grading System (NHSGS) in 2010 by the government, was not just coincidental, but rather a timely development expected to uplift the overall quality of service of the Malawi's hotels and perhaps improve customers' perceptions about the status of the hotels. This is arguably beneficial because the system brings into close alignment local standards with both regional and international standards and provides a yardstick for gauging service quality in star rated hotels, an aspect supported by Narangajavana and Hu (2008).

Studies on the official hotel rating systems have largely been conducted in European, American or Asian contexts, centrally focusing on the criteria/content and structural characteristics of the systems as discrete packages of features characterizing various hotel rating systems in different countries. For instance, there are comparative analyses of country specific

hotel rating systems done in the United Kingdom, United States, China, and Taiwan (Su & Sun, 2007); and also, structural analysis of hotel classification frameworks done in Switzerland, Germany, Hungary, China and Japan (Cser & Ohuchi, 2013). Although, Callan (1989; 1994; 1999; 2000) and Adongo (2011) investigated hotel attributes that prospective guests use to select hotels, the actual utilisation of hotel rating schemes by different target groups, and the importance of different hotel attributes to guests targeting the UK hospitality industry, no similar studies have been conducted in Malawi pre- and post- NHGS introduction. There is need to expand our understanding of the customers' perceptions of hotel rating system dimensions by conducting further studies in more diverse geographical locations such as Malawi (Bello, Carr, Lovelock, & Xu, 2017)

Moreover, most of the studies on conventional or official hotel rating systems, are somewhat contradictory in their findings, and that such contradictions may arise owing to disparities in hotel rating systems among different countries reflecting local cultural differences in values, choices and preferences (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008; Leung, Lee, & Law, 2011; Su & Sun, 2007). As the official hotel rating systems vary from country to country, there is a tendency to use different symbols such as stars, plum blossoms, crowns or diamonds (Su & Sun, 2007; Narangajavana & Hu, 2008) to distinguish between various hotel categories, consequently, throwing into a state of disarray for both the consumers and the entire hospitality industry (Sepula, Kieti, Korir, Cheloti-Mapelu & Bello, 2018). Grönroos (2016) argues that such inconsistencies may affect the customer evaluation of both the functional (process related) and quality aspects of the hotels, both which underpin the customer experiences with the service delivery process and ultimate customers' perceptions. This apparent gap in knowledge necessitated the investigation of this important but neglected area of research to extend our knowledge of customers' perceptions of the official hotel rating system dimensions informing their choices of star rated hotel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hotel Rating Systems

Historically, early accommodation facilities such as hotels and inns were merely providers of just a bed and simple food to eat (Kiplagat, Makindi, & Obwoyere, 2015). But the advent of tourism around the 19th century illuminated the direction for improved standards of the early inns and similar establishments (Bhatia, 2011). Pressure was exerted on these establishments to offer some minimum standards in order to help customers to identify those establishments with some specific facilities or amenities (Kiplagat *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, a rating system was introduced out of efforts by the Automobile and cycling clubs in Europe, who kept a list of recommended hotels to their membership, based on the guaranteed facilities which these hotels/inns offered (Kiplagat *et al.*, 2015). Fascinated by the concept, World Tourism

Organization (UNWTO) and the International Hotel and Restaurant Association (IHRA), decided to dub it a hotel rating system. Both organisations jointly defined hotel rating as the categorisation of seemingly similar accommodation establishments such as, hotels, motels or inns, representing a system (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). These accommodation establishments are “conventionally broken down into classes, categories, or grades according to their common physical and service characteristics as established at government, industry or other private levels” (UNWTO & IHRA, 2004, p. 9).

To minimise confusion, Cser and Ohuchi (2008) distinguish two other most commonly applied terms (classification and grading), used interchangeably with *rating*. *Classification* differentiates accommodation establishments, such as hotels, according to particular tiers of physical attributes (amenities, facilities, service and cost); for example, the number of rooms with a private bathroom. *Grading*, on the other hand, deals with the identification of accommodation establishments based on certain intangible but provable objective features of the service offered, for example, whether room service is available or not. “Rating” appears to encompass both. World Bank (2010) further elaborates that while classification is the determination of the different categories and standards within hotels and other similar establishments, rating is the awarding of a particular classification to a particular operator using a mixture of both objective and subjective *scoring systems* tailored to different types of properties. For instance, with different set of standards for hotels or even lodges, a lift will be a more appropriate feature in a multi-storey hotel located in the heart of the city, than in a one-story lodge in the park. In this study, the term “hotel rating system” is used to embrace both the physical and service features of the hotels as used widely in the international context (Agušaj, Bazdan, & Lujak, 2017; Alčaković, Mizdraković, & Džamić, 2016; Andersson & Jia, 2018; Callan, 2000; Narangajavana & Hu, 2008).

Hotel rating systems fall into two categories: official and non-official (Andersson & Jia, 2018; Cser & Ohuchi, 2008; Leung *et al.*, 2011). The former is established and administered by government tourism authorities or agencies on a mandatory and regulatory basis. Non-official hotel rating systems, on the other hand, are developed and implemented by more independent and private agencies, and hotels participate in their volition (Hensens *et al.*, 2011). The official rating systems mainly act as a measure for monitoring hotel prices and taxes, while non-official systems do not exert any social obligations on the hotels and establishments alike, over and above monitoring service quality (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). Additionally, the official rating systems are useful to customers or third parties such as travel agents to gauge the availability of services and amenities offered in hotel properties (Leung *et al.*, 2011).

Official hotel rating systems are country-specific and often use different symbols (stars, diamonds, or plum blossom) to differentiate between hotel categories, in the process, creating

unwarranted confusion to both customers and the hospitality industry in general (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008). However, Adongo (2011) insists that despite the apparent confusion with various symbols used, rating schemes still remain vital to customer's decision making, choices they make, and service quality expectations. Hotel rating systems provide invaluable benefits to various stakeholders such as travel agencies, tour operators (safaris), governments and consumers and enable them to compare hotels' service provisions and delivery they can expect for the prices tagged (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008; Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). From the hoteliers' perspective, the hotel rating system provides a platform for advertising the hotels' positioning in the marketplace, thereby creating a win-win situation for both the consumer and the hotel business.

2.2 Dimensions of Hotel Rating Systems

Two major dimensions of hotel rating systems reported in literature are *Basic Registration Standard (BRS)* and *Grading Standard (GS)* (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008; Sepula et al., 2018). The Basic Registration Standard deals with the minimum standard requirements of quality that a hotel property must satisfy prior to the actual hotel grading (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008; Sepula et al., 2018). The BRS emphasises the objective, quantifiable and physical availability of the minimum hotel attributes and has arguably been regarded as a critical component in the hospitality industry (Cser & Ohuchi, 2008). On the other hand, the Grading Standard, which also implies "quality grading" (Callan, 1994), takes into account the qualitative, intangible service-related aspects in addition to the basic registration standard requirements that hotels ought to meet (Sepula et al., 2018). The grading standard dimension allows similar properties in the same hotel star rating category to be compared (Narangajavana & Hu, 2008; Sepula et al., 2018).

Customer perceptions concerning both BRS and GS dimensions, can best be understood through the prism of previous studies conducted on hotel designs (Zemke et al., 2017), hotel-based service attributes (Bodet, Anaba, & Bouchet, 2017; Kuo, Chen, & Lin, 2010), the hotel physical environment (Ali, Amin, & Ryu, 2016; Chen Chen, & Lee, 2013) and atmospheric elements (Countryman & Jang, 2006; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Kim, Kang, & Park, 2014). Bodet's et al. (2017) study identified a wide range of hotel attributes namely: hotel room, reception, breakfast, dinner, leisure activities, information, staff, cleanliness, bar, car park, luggage service, concierge service, and swimming pool. Findings of Bodet et al. (2017) confirmed that customers perceived these hotel attributes highly and consequently made significant contributions to their satisfaction although the influence was based on the country of residence and varied between hotels.

A host of hotel service and physical attributes have been found to influence customer perceptions. Attributes such as, hotel room, reception, dining, leisure and recreational facilities,

boutique, information, staff, cleanliness, car park, concierge service, employees, and state of maintenance and repair of facilities, have previously been investigated (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Chen *et al.*, 2013; Iacobucci, Ostrom, & Grayson, 1995; Jin, 2015) within the context of service quality. Additional host of hotel aspects have also been examined within the following contexts: hotel designs (access, space, and use); and the physical environment in which service takes place or atmospherics (décor and artefacts, spatial layout, ambient conditions, colour, lighting, style, and furnishings) (Bitner, 1992; Bodet *et al.*, 2017; Countryman & Jang, 2006; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Mari & Poggesi, 2013; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Zemke, Chena, Raaba, & Zhong, 2017). It is argued that the hotel service environment can influence a wide range of behaviours and providing a context in which these behaviours occur, which in turn affect the customers' perceptions of the hotels (Hoffman & Turley, 2002)

The importance of hotel attributes to hotel customers cannot be overemphasised. The study of Zemke *et al.* (2017) on hotel design quality investigated guest appraisals of a hotel's functionality (access, space, and use) and impact (social integration, internal environment, forms and materials, and character and innovation) qualities. The design quality results were then used to explore their influence on hotel guest satisfaction as well as the guest's likelihood to re-patronize the hotel in the future and their likelihood of sharing their thoughts about the experience with other people. Zemke *et al.* (2017) concluded that it is possible to measure customers' perceptions about a service environment's design as a means of measuring their satisfaction with a hotel's design.

A study by Amin *et al.* (2013), identified several dimensions regarding the hotel service industry. The dimensions were hotel ambience and staff courtesy, food and beverage product and service quality, staff presentation and knowledge, reservation services, and overall value for money. Amin *et al.* (2013) pointed out that both the physical and service qualities of a hotel were perceived highly and made a positive impact on customer satisfaction. Drawing from the two studies by Amin *et al.* (2013) and Zemke *et al.* (2017), it is evident that a host of hotel attributes are critical to customer experiences. Although the hotel attributes investigated above were found to yield high customer perceptions, the geographical context may have played a great role in influencing the perceptions of the customers. Whereas, Bodet *et al.* (2017) focused on the hotels in several European countries, Amin *et al.* (2013) investigated the Malaysian hotel industry. While the hotel attributes identified in these studies may fall under different service quality dimensions, there is no doubt that the same attributes may also be used as criteria items to identify BRS and GS dimension in the hotel rating system similar to Callan's (2000) study, South African grading system (TGCSA, 2013), and Malawi's hotel rating system (GoM, 2005). Establishing customers' perceptions of the hotel attributes in the Malawian context would contribute more significantly to the understanding of the importance of these attributes.

Countryman and Jang (2006) examined the atmospheric elements of colour, lighting, layout, style, and furnishings that make up the physical environment of a hotel lobby and have an impact on overall guest perceptions and impressions. However, Countryman and Jang (2006) recommend that there are other physical spaces within a hotel (other than the lobby) that may have more influence on guest perceptions and impressions, thus necessitating further investigation. Atmospherics are also linked to consumer decision processes. Hoffman and Turley (2002) developed a propositional inventory that postulated the relationship between atmospherics and the three primary stages of consumer decision processes: pre-purchase, consumption, and post-purchase evaluations. These stages are believed to have an ultimate impact on customer's perceptions and emotional satisfaction (Mari & Poggesi, 2013). Careful scrutiny of hotel rating system criteria of different countries reveals inclusion of the elements of atmospherics into BRS and GS dimensions.

There is an overwhelming number of hotel attributes eligible for consideration in the BRS and GS. However, it may not be possible to include all attributes for extraction as reliable indicators to measure the dimensions (Li, Ye, & Law, 2013). Based on Li's *et al.* (2013) methodological concerns on how many attributes are suitable for measuring BRS, this study, hence, selected and aligned hotel factors or attributes that are consistent with those provided in the hotel rating system in Malawi Tourism and Hotels (Grading) Regulations (GoM, 2005) to successfully measure customer satisfaction and establish any significant relationships. Additionally, most of the attributes are similar to those previously used in the studies of Mohsin and Lockyer (2010), Wilkins (2010) and Amin *et al.* (2013).

From the structural and content analysis of the BRS dimension of various hotel rating systems, it is clear that this dimension possesses several hotel attributes for hotel rating. The BRS may have the following attributes: *Bedroom Structure* (e.g. bedroom furniture, suitable electrical requirements, lighting, bedroom information and communication system, stationery, bed linen, sanitary installations); *Public Areas* (reception, lobbies, portage, banquet or conference hall, entertainment, recreation, sports, outdoor areas, sanitary installation for common areas, thermal conditions, corridors, etc.); *Service types* (room service provision, catering for breakfast, lunch and dinner, valet and laundry, lounges, taxis, airport transfers); *Safety and Security* (refuse disposal, adequate security of hotel and their belongings, emergency power, insect protection, emergency information and procedures); and *Staff skills* (professionally trained with courtesy, patience, self-control, uniforms with personal badges, appearance and personal grooming, suitable employee/room ratio) (Callan, 1994, 2000; Cser & Ohuchi, 2008; GoM, 2005; Tourism Grading Council of South Africa [TGCSA], 2013).

Sepula *et al.* (2018) analysed the GS dimension and found that it consists of hotel qualitative service attributes which are evaluated with some degree of subjectivity based on an aggregate

score- or point-system for placement of the hotels in their right category. The GS dimension as a measure of quality, is linked to hotel attributes grouped into measurement dimensions such as: *Structural features* (appearance of the buildings, adequacy and spaciousness of facilities such as bathroom/toilet facilities, bedrooms, suites, dining rooms, lounges, public toilets, and their state of repair); *Furnishings, fittings and décor* (adequacy, quality, comfort, convenience throughout the hotel, including soft furnishings and linen, provision of radio and television, telephones in bedrooms, cleanliness, and state of their repair); *Staff rapport* (good customer relationship, respect for customers, attention to detail, efficiency, customer confidence building, room service, dining rooms, lounges, and courtesy of staff throughout the hotel particularly those related to the reception area); *Food and beverages* (quality, preparation, presentation, variety of food, availability and variety of beverage items, quality of cutlery, crockery and glassware); and *Other hotel features/Extras* (background music in the lounges, entertainment, recreation, sporting and dancing facilities provided for convenience and comfort).

Apparently, Narangajavana and Hu (2008) and Su and Sun (2007) reveal that the main thrust of the studies is placed on getting the input of managers as key decision makers who participate in the hotel rating. Callan (2000) solicited views of the hotel rating inspectors or assessors, while neglecting the views or perceptions of the customers. Thus, it is difficult to critically establish what exactly drives customers in choosing the star rated hotels despite World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO] (2014) claiming, without further elaboration, that being officially rated and working to improve hotel guest review scores, lead to a considerable positive financial impact. However, UNWTO's (2014) assertion raises an important consideration to understand how hotel rating impacts on customer perceptions. UNWTO (2014) acknowledges that customers who make a hotel reservation often use official hotel ratings as a filter mechanism before making a final hotel selection, provided they are aware of the existence of the ratings. But it appears very little research has explored and investigated fully the underlying relationship between hotel ratings that largely characterise the choice of the hotels and customer expectations or their perceptions. In the case of Malawi, it is not clear if customers often use the ratings consistent with their perceptions when choosing the hotels.

2.3 Customers Perceptions and their measurement

Customers perceptions have widely been popularised since the seminal works on the Expectancy-Disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980; 2010) became the most prominent approach in the service quality - customer satisfaction assessment research more than the other frameworks (Pizam, Shapoval, & Ellis, 2016; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001b). Customers perceptions are regarded as customer's beliefs about the realistic performance of a service consumed or experienced (Kim, Choi & Schwartz, 2012). Hence, service quality is regarded as perceptions

of a service experience or the customer's overall impression of superiority or inferiority of an establishment and its services, with customer satisfaction, being specifically associated with disconfirmation with an element of comparison or surprise (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001a). Furthermore, Yuksel and Yuksel (2001a) argue that the dimensions explaining quality evaluations are somewhat precise and mostly, quality perceptions do not necessarily need a consumer to have an experience with the service provision. The argument emanates from the assumption that perceived service quality is viewed as a form of attitude and an ongoing evaluation of service experience (Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994).

Following the unending debate about the best service quality measurement tool (Pizam *et al.*, 2016), attention shifted to a single construct measurement, such as, performance-only model (SERVPERF) proposed by Cronin and Taylor (1994a; 1994b). A performance-only model proposes that evaluations of service quality of a hotel, are affected only by perceptions of performance of a service or experience offered by that hotel (Fallon & Schofield, 2004). Fallon and Schofield (2004) argue that perceptions are guided by how well the establishment fulfils customer's motives, needs and wants, rather than any performance comparison with prior purchase or visit predictions/expectations because they tend to be unstable owing to changes in customer experiences (Sepula *et al.*, 2018; Yilmaz, 2010).

Some researchers fervently support the use of performance-only measure because the scale has consistently explained more of the variation in hotel service quality than many of the other alternatives such as SERVQUAL which mostly provide a better understanding of areas of service deficiency in different service environments (Angur, 1998; Tefera & Govender, 2016; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001b). Actually, Fallon and Schofield (2004) suggest that performance is believed to play a distinguished role in the formation of customer perceptions because it is the main feature of the consumption experience. Moreover, when the performance-only scale is compared to SERVQUAL, the former appears to be more efficient than the latter in terms of increased response rate by respondents; and it reduces the number of items that must be measured by 50% (for instance, 44 items in a traditional SERVQUAL scale are reduced to 22 items in performance-only scale) (Angur, 1998). However, Angur (1998) concludes that both scales in their own right, may contribute different valuable information depending on the context.

Since debate on service quality vis a vis customer perceptions is further convoluted by the influence of more personal and subjective factors such as needs, disposition and previous experience which accompany the customer in the service encounter (Fallon & Schofield, 2004), hence, the present study utilised the performance-only approach in assessing customer perceptions of the hotel rating system dimensions because it is believed to perform better in explaining variances (Sepula *et al.*, 2018; Yilmaz, 2010) in customer perceptions in relation to

service quality elements entrenched in the hotel rating system dimensions. The hotel physical and service attributes within the hotel rating system dimensions are incidentally those attributes previously investigated in service quality research (Callan, 2000; GoM, 2005; Ivan, Hitchcock, Yang & Tun-Wei, 2018; TGCSA, 2013).

3. Methodology

This study is based on a descriptive research design to fully describe customers' perceptions of the hotel rating dimensions as they affect their hotel service experiences. Data on guests' perceptions were collected using a self-administered questionnaire-based survey conducted over a 5-month period (between January and May 2018). During this period, there were 29 accommodation properties (hotels, lodges, holiday resorts and guesthouses) across Malawi that were successfully graded and qualified for various star awards (DoT, 2016). The present study only targeted the star rated hotels found in Malawi's two major cities, Lilongwe and Blantyre.

Invitation letters to participate in this study were dispatched to all the 17 star rated hotels in the two-, three-, four- and five-star categories in the two cities. Only 11 hotels accepted to participate in the study. Hotel guests staying in these hotels for at least two or more nights were targeted, with the view that owing to their interaction with the service elements under study much longer than overnight guests, they would provide realistic perceptions. Survey questionnaires were handed over to the guests, either at the reception during check-in or placed in their guestrooms based on the hotel's reservations records. A simple random sampling technique was used for the selection of the guests.

A total of 224 questionnaires were distributed, and 203 guests returned sufficiently completed questionnaires, representing a 90.6% response rate. Various socio-demographic variables concerning the hotel guests were examined in terms of gender, being domestic or international, level of education, frequency of hotel visit, purpose of hotel visit, and status of hotel stay using category answers. The questions were part of a more comprehensive questionnaire to the guests after having experienced the hospitality services (Bodet *et al.*, 2017). Out of the 203 respondents, 65.4% were male and that most of the guests (56.8%) were booked on full board status. 51.5% of the guests were domestic. Guests on business trips constituted 84.3% of respondents, with 51.1% of the guests having visited the hotels for more than three times. On education level, 36.8% of the respondents were first degree holders while 41.6% were postgraduates.

The questionnaire was developed by modifying measurement scale items from the existing body of literature on service quality, hotel attributes and rating criteria. It included a total of 31 items under basic registration standard dimension measured using five indicators (i.e. bedroom structure; public areas; service types; safety and security; and staff skills); and a total of 42 items under grading standard dimension measured using six indicators (i.e. structural features;

furnishings, fittings and décor; food and beverage; staff rapport; and hotel added extras) (See Table 1). Consequently, the indicators under each dimension were explored to establish how they are perceived among guests in the sampled star rated hotels. Guest perception response scores to the questionnaire items were measured using a 5-point Likert type scale from, 1 - Very low to 5 - Very high.

Table 1: Sources of indicators for the basic registration standard and grading Standard Dimensions

Basic Registration Standard Dimension	
Indicator	Source
Bedroom structure	Ali <i>et al.</i> (2016); Callan (2000); GoM (2005)
Public areas	Bodet <i>et al.</i> (2017); Callan (2000); Chen <i>et al.</i> (2013); Countryman & Jang (2006)
Service types	Ali <i>et al.</i> (2016); Callan (2000); Chen <i>et al.</i> (2013); GoM (2005)
Safety and security	Bodet <i>et al.</i> (2017); Callan (2000); Chen <i>et al.</i> (2013); GoM (2005)
Staff skills	Ali <i>et al.</i> (2016); Callan (2000); Chen <i>et al.</i> (2013); GoM (2005)
Grading Standard Dimension	
Indicator	Source
Structural features	GoM (2005); Luo & Qu (2016); Zemke <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Furnishings	GoM (2005); Luo & Qu (2016); Mohsin & Lockyer (2010); Ramsaran-Fowdar (2007); Wilkins (2010)
Fittings and décor	GoM (2005); Kuo <i>et al.</i> (2010); Mohsin & Lockyer (2010); Ramsaran-Fowdar (2007); Wilkins (2010); Zemke <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Food and beverage	GoM (2005); Luo & Qu (2016); Mohsin & Lockyer (2010); Pizam <i>et al.</i> (2016); Wilkins (2010)
Staff rapport	GoM (2005); Luo & Qu (2016); Mohsin & Lockyer (2010); Pizam <i>et al.</i> (2016); Ramsaran-Fowdar (2007); Wilkins (2010)
Hotel added extras	Mohsin & Lockyer (2010); Ramsaran-Fowdar (2007); Wilkins (2010); Zemke <i>et al.</i> (2017)

The face validity of the questionnaire was addressed through a review by a team of three hospitality management academics. Some grammatical and structural changes were made in the statements for easy understanding, readability and credibility (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Emir, 2016). The questionnaire was piloted at one of the 2-star rated hotels in Mzuzu City, using 30 hotel guests and 1 hotel manager as recommended by Saunders *et al.* (2016). The findings of the pilot survey informed amendments, such as wording, clarity and flow of the final survey instrument (Wilkins, 2010). Furthermore, results of the Cronbach's alpha reliability test indicated that all the items developed to measure the two dimensions had reliability coefficients above 0.9, basic registration standard had an $\alpha = .939$ while grading standard an $\alpha = .955$ (Table 2). This was way above the recommended minimum of 0.7 (Butler, 2014; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) and confirmed that the items were consistent enough in measuring the two dimensions.

The major ethical issues addressed in conducting this research were: informed consent; beneficence - do not harm; respect for anonymity and confidentiality; and respect for privacy (Fouka & Mantzorou, 2011). The privacy of information relating to each respondent was also respected and maintained. Fouka and Mantzorou (2011) caution that privacy can be breached when private information such as respondents' beliefs, attitudes, opinions and records, is shared

with others without the respondents' knowledge or consent. Anonymity was sustained by keeping the identity of individuals well protected either by using codes or numbers or pseudo names. Therefore, no details of respondents were disclosed to third parties. There was no physical or psychological harm (beneficence) that occurred to the respondents in this study by ensuring that none of the information solicited embarrassed or harmed them in any way.

3.1 Testing Unidimensionality

Measuring constructs such as BRS and GS with multiple indicator variables requires a demonstration that the items are indeed measuring the same thing using a test of unidimensionality (Garson, 2012). A measure is said to be unidimensional if its items measure a single latent trait or construct (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). As a result, items belonging together in a scale are responsible for the differences within the same underlying construct (Ziegler & Hagemann, 2015). Moreover, a test of unidimensionality provides construct validity evidence of self-reporting scales (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014; Plucker, 2003; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Principal components factor analysis (PCA) was performed on all the indicators of the BRS and GS under study to confirm whether the items within the indicators were unidimensional (Hagell, 2014). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) that requires factors with Eigenvalues greater than one, as well as, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were used to test sampling adequacy and completeness, respectively. KMO was expected to have a minimum of 0.6, while Bartlett's measure was required to be significant at 5% level (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), with factor loadings expected to be above the 0.5 cut-off as an acceptable threshold (Truong & McColl, 2011) as shown in Table 2.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Guest Perceptions of Basic Registration Standard Dimension

As can be seen in Table 2, out of the five indicators for basic registration standard, the hotel guests perceived the staff skills in the star rated hotels highly (overall mean response score, $M = 4.22$, with associated standard deviation, $SD = .689$). Besides, the small magnitude of the standard deviation confirms that respondents were consistent in their perceptions. This was followed by safety and security ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .661$); bedroom structure ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .710$); public areas ($M = 3.97$, $SD = .692$), and lastly, service types ($M = 3.96$, $SD = .668$).

The results of this study showed that there is consistent and high perceptions of staff skills indicating that staff in star rated hotels in Malawi appreciates their important role in making the guest more pleased and hence, maintaining customer satisfaction. Staff exhibit courtesy, responsiveness and proper grooming when handling guests they interface with. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Amin *et al.* (2013) who encourage hotel managers to monitor and enhance both staff presentation and courtesy because they are the basis for

customer's expectations and anticipation in any successful hotel business. Besides, results indicated that staff can display balance and understanding in diverse service areas. This is perhaps a very strong element of star rated hotels in Malawi. The findings are similar in manner to those of Nguyen, Nguyen, Phan and Yoshiki (2015) who suggested that quality of service, particularly, directly attributable to staff responsiveness, reliability, empathy and assurance is a key facet in delivery of quality services. The findings also emphasize that a good command of languages can be one of the most critical elements in gaining high customer perceptions with a service. In line with Kuo *et al.* (2010), the results clearly demonstrate staff's ability to use languages for ease of communication and negotiations with customers in the star rated hotels in Malawi.

Table 2: Test of Unidimensionality and Descriptive Statistics of the Indicator Variables

Constructs/Dimensions	Indicator items	Loadings	Eigenvalues	KMO	χ^2 *	Cronbach's α	Mean	SD
Basic registration standard						.939		
	Bedroom structure		3.296	.854	378.345	.847	4.04	.710
	Bedroom furniture is modern looking	.787					4.03	.917
	Electrical requirements are adequate	.766					3.91	.950
	Bedroom lighting is suitable	.759					4.08	.900
	Bedroom linen is comfortable	.744					4.19	.767
	Information and communication system available	.700					4.06	.868
	Sanitary installations are in perfect condition	.686					4.10	.852
	Public areas		3.513	.806	452.182	.843	3.97	.692
	Reception area is visually appealing	.760					3.93	.867
	Artefacts & paintings add good image	.739					4.05	.854
	Banquet/conference rooms are well equipped	.726					3.85	.884
	Public restrooms are always neat	.694					3.90	.785
	Temperature in the public areas is appropriate	.685					3.85	.842
	Corridors are well illuminated	.677					4.06	.844
	Appropriate common outdoor areas for guests	.673					4.04	.964
	Service types		4.065	.745	310.927	.773	3.96	.668
	Convenient operating hours	.787					4.17	.856
	Room service is worth value for money	.776					3.98	.788
	Meals services are excellent	.698					4.00	.858
	Beverage selection is impressive	.560					3.80	.971
	Service orders are taken with prompt response	.555					3.83	.931
	Regular shuttle buses and taxis to the airport	.887					3.68	1.066
	Valet and laundry service is available	.825					3.96	.879
	Safety and security		2.513	.771	208.493	.771	4.13	.661
	Refuse and garbage regularly disposed off	.767					4.13	.826
	Adequate security for guests and belongings	.750					4.17	.772
	Layout/landscape provides safe access	.738					4.31	.693
	Emergency evacuation procedures displayed	.711					3.81	.984
	Electrical appliances are installed properly	.557					4.07	.895
	Staff skills		3.802	.886	552.959	.895	4.22	.689
	Staff have knowledge to answer questions	.861					4.09	.780
	Staff appear well-groomed and neat	.816					4.19	.856
	Staff appear well-trained	.793					4.09	.796
	Staff have a good command of language	.781					4.09	.802
	Staff are consistently courteous	.780					4.28	.763
	Staff capacity is well-balanced in all service areas	.739					4.13	.805

Grading standard

						.955	
Structural features		6.474	.991	1278.99	.931	4.08	.706
Paintwork is well-maintained on the hotel building	.690					3.89	.937
Building has clean overall look of the hotel	.615					4.12	.745
Good external lighting around the hotel	.612					4.07	.834
Hotel signage is very clear	.588					4.03	.917
Grounds and gardens are well-tended	.578					4.20	.783
Parking space/bay is marked and adequate	.567					4.10	.876
Driveway and entrance are well-maintained	.535					4.16	.825
Guest facilities are adequate	.516					3.99	.932
Guest facilities are in good state of repair	.507					4.09	.796
Décor and ambience		3.963	.944	1247.97	.929	4.07	.849
Proper coordination of patterns, colours & textures	.841					3.98	.954
Proper coordination of pictures, paintings & other objects	.809					4.03	.843
Wall cover provides pleasant décor	.799					3.99	.805
Furniture & furnishings offer high degree of comfort	.754					4.04	.842
Bedroom soft furnishings & linen are of good quality	.612					4.13	.818
Bedroom lighting is effective for all purposes	.606					4.11	.861
Bedrooms are spacious with good layout	.547					4.18	.829
Guestroom essentials		3.484	.921	1233.67	.903	4.12	.829
No intrusive noise from public areas	.769					3.97	.873
A wide range of bedroom accessories	.765					4.06	.898
A range of toiletries in the bathroom is adequate	.765					4.10	.831
Bathroom linen is full range with clean towels	.626					4.18	.854
Ceiling is of high quality with no watermarks	.626					4.30	.705
Food & beverage		4.208	.885	667.683	.910	4.04	.724
Dining area has no intrusive noise and smells	.708					4.08	.829
Hotel provides a variety of food on all menus	.690					3.94	.850
Menu presentation is clear with informative layout	.678					3.94	.816
Beverages are set in clear sections with options	.574					3.87	.960
Table appointments are appropriate with quality utensils	.532					4.02	.794
Meals are presented on plates with attractive visual appeal	.527					4.02	.849
Staff rapport		5.028	.925	992.622	.942	4.30	.712
Staff are warm, respectful, cheerful and friendly	.771					4.38	.778

Staff provide individual attention to you	.741				4.26	.769	
Staff behaviour instils confidence in you	.722				4.24	.750	
Staff provide information about the hotel to guests	.721				4.13	.858	
Staff always attempt to establish good rapport with you	.705				4.19	.807	
Staff always meet your demands	.694				4.36	.747	
Staff are always willing to help you and are efficient	.674				4.28	.822	
Hotel added extras		2.711	.731	339.560	.850	3.78	.885
Business centre is adequately equipped	.745				3.68	.962	
Background music in the lounges is appropriate	.719				3.82	.962	
Saloons/mini-shops are available for your convenience	.641				3.61	1.118	
Entertainment & other recreational facilities are adequate	.606				3.66	1.058	

*Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was measured using the Chi-square, χ^2 significant at $p < 0.05$

Another important finding on guest perceptions concerns safety and security. Safety and security have been documented as important factors in guests' selection of hotels (Chan & Lam, 2013). Consequently, perceptions for safety and security as an indicator of hotels' basic registration standard revealed that guests tended to rate hotels safety and security highly and in a consistent manner. Such findings elaborate the significance that guests attach when choosing hotels with an understanding that their safety and security are guaranteed (Chauhan, Shukla & Negi, 2018). The results point to the fact that star rated hotels in Malawi have taken cognizance of the impact that the safety and security of guests has on hotel's performance and have, consequently, ensured that there is safe access, adequate security, and that the environment remains immaculate.

The provision of safety and security among star rated hotels in Malawi, portends well for the hotel industry in the country. For instance, one incident recorded in history underscores the importance of safety and security to hotel guests. It is reported that guests' privacy and safety were proven paramount by a jury's decision to award \$55 million to a customer in the United States of America as a result of an up-market hotel's failure to reasonably safeguard the customer's privacy, safety and security (Migdal & Palmer, 2016). The manifestation here is that safety and security, not only assure customer satisfaction, but can also be very expensive to hotels. Moreover, such provision of security and safety in Malawi's star rated hotels is consistent with the previous study findings of Feickert, Verma, Plaschka and Dev (2006) who established that hotel guests have relatively high approval of some security measures that hotels put in place, along with willingness to pay extra for some of them, provided the measures are perceived to be favourable and less intrusive to the guests. Again, these results extend further support to Poon and Low's (2005) and Chauhan's *et al.* (2018) findings that safety and security are indeed one of the most influential factors affecting travellers' satisfaction levels.

The findings revealed that the hotel guests have high perceptions about the structure of bedrooms in the star rated hotels. The implication of these results is that star-rated hotels in Malawi are keen on providing comfort to their guests by addressing several aspects of bedroom structure. High perceptions with regards to bedroom structure augers well for star rated hotels in Malawi and this, consequently, may lead to high customer satisfaction. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Countryman and Jang (2006) and Bodet *et al.* (2017) who provided evidence that indeed hotel rooms (or bedrooms as in the present study) and their accessories are among key hotel attributes that appeal to hotel guests. The findings on hotel bedrooms, however, slightly contradicts, what Li *et al.* (2013) previously found. Li's *et al.* (2013) study established that although customers paid more attention to aspects such as bed comfort, room size, reception services and overall bedroom decoration, they were less satisfied with these aspects in star-rated hotels in Beijing, China. This is because the current study

focused on aspects of the bedroom structure (i.e. furniture, furnishings, linen, lighting, sanitary installations), that were apparently different from those examined by Li *et al.* (2013). Such disparities underscore observations corroborated by Bodet *et al.* (2017) that there exist several studies that have certainly investigated the factors that influence guest perceptions or customer satisfaction, albeit, from different perspectives within the hotel trade, yielding different results.

The aggregated results accruing from the individual indicators of basic registration standard confirm that star rated hotels in the study, comply with minimum attributes expected before formal registration. The results show that most of the star rated hotels are designed in a way that guarantees ease of access, provision of adequate public spaces, provision of rooms that assure guest comfort, and use of staff that provide quality service. These attributes resonate with similar attributes reported in extant literature (Li *et al.*, 2013; Bodet *et al.*, 2017; Zemke *et al.*, 2017) and their ultimate effect on customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the hotel managers should focus on these factors and continue to make immediate improvements whenever these hotel aspects fall short of their glamour to attract and satisfy customers. The findings of the study thus reveal one significant theoretical contribution to the existing body of knowledge that basic registration standard as a dimension of hotel rating system can potentially affect customer satisfaction.

4.2 Guest Perceptions of Grading Standard Dimension

From the grading standard dimension of hotel rating system, Table 2 shows that the hotel guests consistently perceived the staff rapport in the star rated hotels highly ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .712$). This was followed by guestroom essentials ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .829$); structural features ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .706$); décor and ambience ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .849$), food and beverage ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .724$), and lastly, hotel added extras ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .885$).

The results of this study showed that staff rapport yielded high perceptions among respondents and this clearly suggest that staff in star rated hotels are consistently establishing a close and harmonious relationship with the customers and strive to understand their feelings and communicate well. This extends the understanding of the role of staff skills under basic registration standard. Sepula *et al.* (2018) established that staff who are warm, cheerful and friendly; are always able to meet customers' demand; and are willing to help customers by providing efficient services, are important in guaranteeing positive guest impressions and critical to enhancing guest satisfaction. In addition, Kuo *et al.* (2010) opine that professional knowledge of staff is often perceived as imperative by the hotel customers and may have a direct and positive effect on their satisfaction as was notably the case in this study.

It is evident that staff rapport is crucial to the success of star rated hotels. Drawing from the findings, star rated hotels pay a great deal of attention to their employees by empowering them to handle customers in a very professional manner in order to meet their expectations and

ultimately, their satisfaction. Echoing similar sentiments, Kattara, Weheba, and El-Said (2008) state that both positive and negative staff behaviours can significantly affect perceptions of service quality as well as overall customer satisfaction in star rated hotels. Consistent with Kattara's *et al.* (2008) recommendations, the study findings on staff rapport highlight the need for hotel practitioners to be strategic and implement effective tools that would motivate employees towards behaving positively with customers, a cautious advice that can be emulated by Malawian star rated hotels.

The findings suggest deliberate efforts ought to be put in place to address issues of any service delivery inconsistencies by staff observed from different sections of the hotels in order to build proper customer confidence in any star rated hotel in Malawi. The finding corroborates the study of Qu *et al.* (2000) on hotel attributes that contribute to customer satisfaction, who found that quality of staff performance is the most influential factor. By establishing quality of staff performance as the most crucial hotel dimension in influencing customer satisfaction levels, managers in star rated hotels will be at an advantage in formulating strategies aligned with changing customer needs and expectations. The goal of managing customer satisfaction is to attain a higher customer retention rate and boost the hotel's profits and market share (Amin *et al.*, 2013).

The findings indicated consistent and high perceptions among hotel guests with regards to structural features available in star rated hotels in Malawi. The results show that most star rated hotels in Malawi have the required structural features that adequately describe the grading standard dimension as suggested by TGCSA (2013). Aspects of structural features such as building appearances, adequacy of space and facilities, and state of guest facilities, which Walter *et al.* (2010) refer to as service infrastructure, are crucial in providing hotel's external physical environment and important to customer satisfaction levels. The findings are also consistent with the assertions of Hoffman and Turley (2002) who argue that the hotel servicescape consists of components such as facility exterior design, signage, parking, landscaping, and the surrounding, all of which affect customer satisfaction in one way or another. Similarly, Li *et al.* (2013) identified parking space as another element highly perceived by customers, important, and has a significant influence on customer satisfaction. The findings also point to the fact that the structural features provide the right balance of both hedonic and utilitarian satisfaction (Zemke *et al.*, 2017) which is even more important, owing to the length of time that the customer spends within the hotel service environment - lasting between a few hours and many days or even weeks. The results showing presence of these features in star rated hotels, is therefore a crucial element of hotel grading.

Findings from the examination of respondents' perceptions on guest room essentials, décor and ambience presented in star rated hotels under study, revealed that perceptions were high

among hotel guests. The results point to the fact that most star rated hotels in Malawi possess the required furniture, fittings, furnishings, and décor elements that sufficiently describe the grading standard dimension as suggested by TGCSA (2013) and GoM (2005). High quality ceilings, full range bathroom linen, good quality bathroom linen and furnishings, and effective bedroom lighting have previously been acknowledged as some of the key elements that exert a significant effect on the importance of hotel service quality dimensions among customers (Ali *et al.*, 2016; Wilkin, 2010). Guest room essentials, décor and ambience, as part of the hotel physical environment, serve as an aide-mémoire or a recognizable characteristic in helping customer differentiate among hotel properties (Countryman & Jang, 2006). According to Countryman and Jang (2006), these hotel physical characteristics are very influential in driving the hotel purchase decision among customers and create value for the guests during their stay. Therefore, it is important that hotels pay a great deal of attention to the furniture/fittings/décor in order to drive customer satisfaction. The results depict presence of these attributes in star rated hotels in Malawi, therefore, provide a vital element for hotel rating.

One unanticipated finding was on hotel added extras whose guest perceptions were generally low compared to the other indicators, and apparently guests remained mainly neutral in all the items that measured this component. The results clearly attest to the views that elements of 'hotel added extras' such as business centre, background music, saloons or min-shops, and entertainment and recreational facilities, did not feature highly as important aspects that may impress customers and consequently drive their satisfaction. This finding seems to match that by Wilkins (2010) who established that some components of 'hotel added extras' were found to be low priority areas for hotel management owing to their low importance and performance as evaluated by hotel guests in relation to their satisfaction. Wilkins' (2010) study was conducted in first class (four star) and luxury hotels (five star) hotels targeting both business and leisure guests, a context similar to the present study. Furthermore, 'hotel added extras' in the current study, may be considered as mere attractive quality attributes which, of course, may be perceived highly and result in increased customer satisfaction when present in star rated hotels; and their absence does not cause dissatisfaction either, in line with the Kano model of satisfaction (Kano *et al.*, 1984; Gregory & Parsa, 2013). These hotel attributes may not necessarily be expected as was the case in the present study but are well received and appreciated when offered to the customer (Gregory & Parsa, 2013).

5. Conclusion

This study has investigated guests' perceptions towards the official hotel rating system dimensions in star rated hotels located in two major cities in Malawi. The extant literature reviewed identified several hotel physical and service attributes that make up the rating

dimensions. A survey strategy was used to determine the guests' perceptions of these attributes as entrenched in the dimensions of the Malawi's hotel rating criteria.

The findings of the study suggest that hotel guests perceive highly aspects such as: staff skills, staff rapport, safety and security bedroom structure, guest room essentials, and hotel structural features. The study therefore suggests several courses of action for managerial practice. It is crucial for star rated hotels in Malawi to pay a great deal of attention and devout time and resources to ensure that both physical facilities and service elements are highly maintained in order to give the customers a sustained level of confidence in the hotels' service experience and ultimately make them more satisfied.

The growing competition in the hospitality industry has increased the attention paid to customer satisfaction in recent years. Furthermore, awareness of the hotel rating system and its attendant benefits to the hotels can, thus, greatly boost the image or reputation of the hotels. The results of this study support the idea that understanding and embracing guests' perceptions of hotel rating system dimensions may help boost hotels' market share. Hotel practitioners need to seek ways of making their products/services unique from the competition by establishing means of understanding their customer needs, and then lay out mechanisms to exceed them. In the current growing competitive environment, improving quality of both hotel products and services, is becoming imperative for the hotel industry based on customer expectations, and if these expectations are met, customers will be satisfied, in the process influencing positively their future buying behaviours.

Generally, hotels need to institute a number of improvement programmes for both basic registration standard and grading standard elements. Such improvement programmes ought to follow a regular schedule without necessarily being agitated by the mere motivation when a hotel seeks to apply for a new or higher star grading status or a hotel's current star rating is nearing expiry. Regular and routine improvements of the services and facilities within the hotel environment should become well institutionalized in the minds of the hotel management and the employees. This way, it will be easier for the hotels management to advance the agenda for hotel rating as and when the need arises without hotels being concerned of the state of their services and facilities.

A reasonable approach to tackle the hotel rating issue could be providing a platform over which all hotel staff members are informed of the benefits of the hotel rating system including providing the standards for hotel premises, amenities, and surroundings; helping to improve standards of service; increasing employee commitment to service quality; increasing management commitment to service quality and providing the hotel with the expectation of customers' needs. Another important practical implication is that the hotel's Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) should be reviewed consistent with the provisions in the hotel

grading criteria and constantly communicated to staff to keep them in the loop. To this end, staff training is inevitable in order to improve service quality and staff efficiency. Implementing employee training that emphasizes adherence to service quality as part of each employee's job, would have a significant impact on guest satisfaction. This is in line with the intentions of any hotel rating system that incorporates in the grading criteria important hotel attributes, as previously established by Qu, Ryan, and Chu (2000), in order to positively influence guest perceptions and overall satisfaction. Additionally, effective supervision is a panacea to ensuring that every staff is performing to the expected level. This would in turn lead to the maintenance of the quality of service that the hotel guests expect. Any nonconformity from the established operational standards or norms must be corrected promptly. Through these efforts, guest perceptions would improve and their satisfaction eventually guaranteed, in the process increasing repeat business and opening possibilities for new customer recruitment.

There is also need for inclusion in the hotel grading criteria guidelines like those proposed by Cairncross, Wilde, and Hutchinson (2008) and Chand (2010) on specific human resource management (HRM) practices, such as recruitment, level of training and development and job design or specifications. These HRM practices are believed to have a significant effect on service quality and customer satisfaction because customers judge the quality of the service they receive largely on their assessment of the people who provide the service (Cairncross *et al.*, 2008).

Several hotels in Malawi would ordinarily put in place various mechanisms to gauge guest perceptions about their service provision and gather appropriate feedback that provides an assessment of the establishment's performance. Although hotels have adopted modern technological means such as online surveys or guest comment cards, very little was known if the official hotel rating criteria plays a role in determining various levels of perceptions. Findings of this study, therefore, render convincing reasons for hotels to seriously embark on the star rating exercise in order to gain more competitive advantage based on the customer satisfaction levels derived from the rating. Moreover, most often when hotels attempt to obtain feedback from guests regarding hotel service quality, their questions based on the tools used, are usually limited to the services or facilities already available. Therefore, hotels generally fail to seize an opportunity to explore other important aspects contributing to guest satisfaction which are carefully covered in the hotel rating system dimensions. Hence, the dimensions investigated in this study, provide an opportunity to hotels enabling them to influence the components that drive customer perceptions of quality of hotel services, or may influence perceptions of the value of the components contributing to the guests' perceptions of expected service quality offered by the hotels.

The low perceptions of some hotel attributes such as ‘hotel added extras’, may also be linked to the fact that most of the guests to the hotels in the two cities are business customers who have less time to interact with these elements owing to their busy schedules. Additionally, not all attributes have the same influence on the customer’s satisfaction levels, and these attributes may have different degrees of importance among customers. In some instances, a customer may not even prefer at all presence of some of the attributes in a given service experience. Star rated hotels should carefully ensure that such elements like ‘hotel added extras’, yield customer’s confidence by rigorously promoting them to the potential users who may need them at some point, although they are peripheral to guest’s enjoyment with the hotel experience. In future, ‘hotel added extras’, may perhaps become critical to hotel rating. The findings of this study expand our knowledge on the hotel attributes that significantly matter to hotel guests in determining their satisfaction in star rated hotels in the Malawian context.

The present study identified a number of areas where hotels performed highly or lowly based on guests’ perceptions. Hospitality practitioners may use the present study especially in strategic marketing, as the findings will properly guide marketing resource rationalization and allocation decisions based on the hotel attributes that are important to the guests. As noted by Back and Lee (2015), hotel guests’ perceptions are of great benefit in addressing decisions regarding whether a hotel should continue concentrating on certain attributes of a marketing activity or should abandon it and re-route its resources to something else different.

The findings are also of practical use to hotel managers in resource allocation and assisting them in identifying the aspects of performance that need further fine-tuning or improvement way before the hotel rating exercise is conducted, with the aim of meeting or surpassing customer expectations. The fact that the study suggests effective distribution of resources and establishment of service quality improvement strategies (Kuo *et al.*, 2016), such recommendations are signaling the existence of varied levels of importance attached to the quality attributes by the guests that star rated hotels need to adequately pay attention to when yearning for higher star ratings in future.

There should be deliberate provisions in the current hotel star rating system for regular revision of the hotel rating criteria to reflect and update the ever-changing needs and tastes of the present knowledgeable and sophisticated customer in order to suit those needs. Therefore, the government agency responsible for the hotel rating exercise should create a delicate balance by treading carefully in garnering support for a buy-in from the industry players at all levels. If a hotel star rating system is employed too “aggressively” with the existing hotel operators for purposes of addressing service quality standards that affect customers, then it risks creating a gap in service provision by forcing smaller and less professional operators out of the hospitality business with no immediate alternative provider to step in.

While quantitative approaches, such as a survey used in this study, are generally considered rigorous and statistically credible, given the complications, some researchers (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2013; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001b) argue that the qualitative methods fit better in examining customer satisfaction. A strictly quantitative method may not adequately address those emotional reactions and decisions and holistic factors which contribute to the overall quality of customer's service experience within different hospitality and tourism settings. Future studies need to focus on exploring the guests' perceptions using qualitative research approaches such as observations or in-depth interviews with the guests in order to uncover the underlying meanings favouring their decision-making processes in satisfaction evaluation with the star rated hotel service experience.

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