

Vol. 13, No. 1, February, 2023

Bi-Annual

ISSN No. 2278-8379

TOURISM INNOVATIONS

An International Journal of Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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www.tourismcongress.wordpress.com

Tourism Innovations: An International Journal of Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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ISSN : 2278-8379

VOLUME : 13

NUMBER : 1

Publication Schedule:

Twice a year : August-December

Disclaimer:

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Published by: Bharti Publications in Association with Indian Tourism and Hospitality Congress (ITHC)

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Tourism Innovations

Bharti Publications

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Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002

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Editor's Note

As of February 2023, the global tourism industry continues its journey towards recovery from the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the sector has made significant strides, it remains in a state of flux, with several key trends and developments shaping its trajectory.

The tourism industry has shown resilience and adaptability in the face of the pandemic. Many countries have eased travel restrictions, leading to a gradual increase in tourism activities, both domestically and internationally. However, recovery rates vary across regions. Domestic tourism has been a lifeline for the industry. Travelers have been exploring their own countries, contributing to the revival of local tourism economies. This trend is expected to continue as people prioritize safety and convenience. The vaccination campaigns worldwide have been a critical factor in reopening borders and restoring traveler confidence. Vaccine passports and proof of vaccination are becoming commonplace for international travel.

The digital transformation of the tourism sector has accelerated. Online booking platforms, contactless payments, and virtual experiences have become standard, enhancing both convenience and safety for travelers. Environmental and social sustainability have gained prominence. Travelers are increasingly interested in eco-friendly and responsible tourism options, pushing the industry to adopt more sustainable practices.

Traveler behavior has shifted, with a greater emphasis on health and wellness. Wellness tourism, outdoor activities, and remote destinations have seen increased interest. The integration of technology, including artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR), has enhanced the travel experience. AI-driven chatbots and AR-enhanced tours are examples of these innovations. The aviation sector has seen a gradual recovery in passenger numbers. Airlines have implemented safety measures, such as improved air filtration systems, to mitigate health risks during flights. Challenges persist, including uncertainty about the emergence of new variants, sporadic travel restrictions, and a need for industry-wide standardization of health and safety protocols.

The tourism industry's recovery journey is ongoing, marked by a mix of optimism and caution. While the path ahead may still be uncertain, the industry's ability to adapt, embrace sustainability, and prioritize traveler safety positions it well for future growth and resilience. Monitoring the evolving landscape and embracing innovation will continue to be essential in the months to come.

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An Assessment of Impact of Service Quality Dimensions on Guests Satisfaction: A Study of Houseboats of Kashmir

Reyaz A Qureshi, Mukhtar Bin Farooq Ibni Ali, Mudasir Ahmad Mir & Bilal Ahmad Dar

Abstract

In the hospitality sector, the idea of guest satisfaction refers to the perception of tourists based on their judgement of the quality of service offered by the service provider. As the sophistication and diversity of the visitor pool has grown, so has the demand for improved ways to monitor and improve customer satisfaction in the hospitality business. The literature review has added many new realities to the hospitality industry, which the industry has successfully adopted. This study was carried out to measure guests' satisfaction with the services they rendered during their stay at Houseboats of Kashmir. The study's goal was to utilise the SERVQUAL model to gauge how satisfied guests were with the various Dal Lake houseboats' levels of guest services. Based on prior research, a tool was developed, and its validity and reliability were evaluated in a pilot study. Descriptive research design was applied for the present investigation. A total of 278 questionnaires were found suitable for analysis. Collected data was analysed through SPSS 20.0 software. The proposed hypotheses were tested through multiple regression approach by using SPSS 20.0 version. The study revealed various valuable details about the service quality of the Houseboats of Kashmir.

Keywords: Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction SERVQUAL, Hotel Industry.

1. Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest industry and is being widely used as a way to stimulate economic development. Its role has become an integral part of the country's development policy. In some countries, the hospitality industry has also played a crucial role in domestic tourism (Sharples, Richard, and Telfer, David J., 2002, Bazazo et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2012). Throughout its history, the profession has been widely influenced by social interactions and regarded as the primary driver of tourism in the world (Brotherton 1999; Haddioui & Jahidi, 2016). Parayani et al. (2010), the increasing competition for high-quality service has affected hotels' profitability and customer satisfaction. According to Berry, Bennet, and Brown (1989), this issue can affect customers' brand image and loyalty. Arbelo-Perez and colleagues (2017) stated that the Quality of hotel services is essential in determining an individual's overall efficiency.

The Quality of hotel services varies depending on the region and type of service offered (Assaf and Tsionas, 2018). A quality organization is one that consistently exceeds the expectations of its customers. This is defined as a business that provides exceptional service that contributes to the satisfaction of its customers. Evans & Lindsay (2010), the scope of attention the hospitality industry has received in recent years has focused on the various types of hotel units (Vallen & Vallen, 2012; Neacu et al., 2011; Fleşeriu, 2011). The hospitality industry has been widely acclaimed as contributing to the tourism industry (Oltean and Gabor, 2017). The Quality of its services and its high customer satisfaction are two key factors that will determine the success of any business (Hung, Huang, and Chen, 2003). Hotels must understand their guests' needs to provide them with the best possible service. This can help minimize waste and maximize resources as Quality management (QM) is

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linked to competitive advantage globally (Molina-Azorin et al., 2015).

According to the International Organization for Standardization, quality management identifies and implements quality policies, procedures, and goals. This process can help improve the organization's performance. The relationship between the satisfaction of customers and the Quality of service is a critical topic in modern research. "Due to the increasing number of people using the internet, the need for more accurate and updated service quality models has also been acknowledged. This has resulted in researchers continuously developing new models that can meet the industry's requirements" (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). The Quality of services and customer satisfaction are the factors used by researchers in assessing the performance of various products and services (Taylor & Baker, 1994). In order to gain a competitive advantage and retain consumers, it is critical to consider customer happiness through service. (Iacobucci et al., 1995). "Service quality has been found to considerably influence behavioural intentions" (González et al., 2007). Customer satisfaction measurement helps determine how service processes and outcomes align with service quality and tourist satisfaction ratings. These four notions were compared to see whether there were any patterns (Yap & Kew, 2007). Service quality is an essential factor that influences the satisfaction of customers. It is often done to improve an existing study or fill a gap.

SERVQ-UAL, a five-dimensional service quality measuring construct, was released in 1988 by A. Parasuraman, Valarie Zeithaml, and Leonard L. Berry. In 1985, it was released for the first time. While designing this model, various dimensions and aspects of service quality were considered to gauge customer perceptions and expectations. It was designed by expanding the expectancy-disconfirmation model that compares service performance with customer expectations. The quality of services provided to the guests depends on the pre service expectation and post service perception. A service can only be perceived as excellent only if it meets customer expectations or exceeds it. As such SERVQUAL model has been used in diverse research contexts ranging from banks (Parasuraman et al., 1991) to tourism (Fick & Brent, 1991) to hospitals and hotels (Babakus & Boller, 1992, Bukhari et al., 2013). However it is nowhere to be found that SERVQUAL model has been used to study and investigate service quality of houseboat accommodation neither in the study region nor elsewhere.

2. Review of Literature

Service quality is critical in a tertiary sector such as the hotel business (Kim-Soon et al., 2014). For hotel managers to provide good quality service to customers, they must first understand their customer's expectations (Shi & Su, 2007) and then build programs that can handle consumer difficulties (Narangajavana and Hu, 2008) and increase

service quality (Chen, 2008). Customer satisfaction is linked to service quality (Shi & Su, 2007), and customer satisfaction is linked to customers' intention to return (Han, Back & Barrett, 2009). In the consumer happiness literature, these expectations are noticed as needs or want to be expressed by the consumer. However, they are predictions about what will happen during a forthcoming service encounter in service quality literature (Kandampully, 2002). If customers are presented with a positive image, the Hotel will gain a competitive advantage (Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008). Zeithaml (1988) defined service quality as "customers' assessment of a product or service's overall superiority." Service quality, according to Grönroos (1984), is "the result of an evaluation process in which the consumer contrasts his expectations with the service he perceives he has gotten" (p. 37). Customer satisfaction is one of the most significant outcomes of all marketing strategies in a market-oriented organization. One of the most important factors businesses consider when developing their marketing strategies is customer happiness. This is because it can help them grow their market share and increase profitability (Carev, 2008). Ladhari (2000) finds that quality perception is not solely cognitive but also affective or emotional to better comprehend the importance of consumers' emotions during service interactions.

Customer satisfaction has been used in marketing for a long time to describe how customers feel about a service delivery and execution (Rao, 2013). Customer satisfaction can aid in developing trust and loyalty in customers. Between customer satisfaction and service quality, trust can operate as a mediating variable (Kundu & Datta, 2015). Client contentment with service is essential to his engagement and loyalty to the service provider (Abror et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction is evaluated by equating service delivery operations to customer expectations (Rao, 2013). The customer is the ultimate decision-maker when choosing the ideal service for their needs and the perfect way of delivering it (Rao, 2013). The Quality of service and customer expectations significantly impact customer happiness (Tessera et al., 2016). Prior experiences about the Quality of goods or services offered determine the clients' repurchase intention (Tessera et al., 2016). The customer satisfaction level measures how satisfied a person is with a service. It can be compared to what they expected from the service (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004).

A quality management system comprises several practices that help organizations improve their operations. Some of these include people management, supplier management, and process management (Nair, 2006). A quality system refers to an organization providing satisfying and superior products or services to its customers. It ensures that the goods and services are of high Quality (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). Customer pleasure is the goal of service quality. When customers recognize Quality, they are satisfied (Kanji, 2002). Because

Quality of service is seen as a fundamental approach to achieving a competitive advantage in businesses (Lewis, 1987; Hoffman and Bateson, 1997), the management of these distinct characteristics turns out to be crucial in discussions about how to give high-quality service (Bateson, 1995; Fridgen, 1996).

Literature on service quality in tourism and recreation industry dates back to the early 1960s (Baker and Crompton, 2000). As far as the hotel industry is concerned, the Quality of service has surfaced as an essential issue. According to Sparks and Westgate (2002), customers usually transfer to a different provider when they suffer a service failure, which can damage an organization. The perception of service quality and business performance is thought to be mediated by contentment (Babikas et al., 2004). Understanding customer happiness is essential because dissatisfied customers do not usually say anything and instead choose to buy from a different service provider (Milbourn, 1998), so knowing this is important. The global market trend has shifted dramatically in favour of the services sector, with businesses aiming to give the highest possible service quality to satisfy their clients. The hotel sector is an excellent example of this (Rao and Sahu, 2013). Service quality is mirrored in the Hotel’s life (Min & Min, 1996) and is fundamental to service management (Chen, 2008). Because tourists base their decisions and actions on their perceptions, an organization or hotel business must make a concerted effort to study and satisfy tourist expectations to provide high-quality services to visitors. Various attempts to understand how visitors rate the Quality of services they receive while on vacation have been documented in the tourism literature (Atilgan et al., 2003), travel agency quality (Ryan & Cliff, 1997), hotel quality (Suh et al., 1997), and so on. In a competitive hotel market, Gilmore and Pine (2002) stated that hotels need to evade the commoditization trap by providing outstanding services to their guests. Such an objective can be achieved only when the employees first understand and identify the customer needs and the take innovative steps to meet their expectations (Gilmore and Pine 2002). Based on this discussion following hypotheses were formulated:

3. Hypotheses Development

As far as hotel and hospitality sector is concerned there is abundance of literature that proves that service quality dimensions have been extensively used to study levels of guest satisfaction. According to Fazlic and Fazlovic (2014), the critical aspects that determine consumer satisfaction in the hospitality business are reliability, empathy, assurance, and tangibility. Godolja and Spaho reported similar findings (2014). The study found that practically all SERVQUAL aspects, such as reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy, have an impact on customer satisfaction. Thus all these dimensions were found to

significantly predict and influence guest satisfaction as far as hotel industry is concerned. Several authors postulate that reliability dimension most significantly impact customer satisfaction while the others like Hossain (2012) found that the construct of empathy explains highest degree of variance while predicting customer satisfaction. To further supplement the understanding about guest satisfaction and service quality, a study was conducted by Karunaratne and Jayawardena (2010) in Sri Lanka on five-star hotels. Besides various other investigations were also undertaken in this field of research especially in reference to the service intensive hospitality sector to uncover the linkages that exist between customer satisfaction and Tangibles (Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011), customer satisfaction and Empathy (Hossain, 2012; Al Khattab & Aldehayyat, 2011), customer satisfaction and responsiveness (Karunaratne & Jayawardena, 2010), customer satisfaction and assurance (Minh et al., 2015) and customer satisfaction and reliability (Markovic & Raspor, 2010). Thus the present study is also undertaken on similar line of research to explore such relationship in the special and unique houseboat accommodation sector of hospitality industry in Kashmir valley. Thus, following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1: The tangible quality of service has a favourable impact on guest satisfaction.
- H2: The reliability of service quality has an impact on guest satisfaction.
- H3: Guest satisfaction is enhanced by responsiveness of service quality.
- H4: Service quality assurance has a favourable impact on guest satisfaction.
- H5: Service quality empathy has a beneficial impact on guest satisfaction

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research framework

The current study seeks to determine the relationship between service quality dimensions and guest satisfaction in the context of Houseboats of Kashmir Valley. An extensive literature review was undertaken on these variables, and as a result, a research framework was constructed (Figure 1).

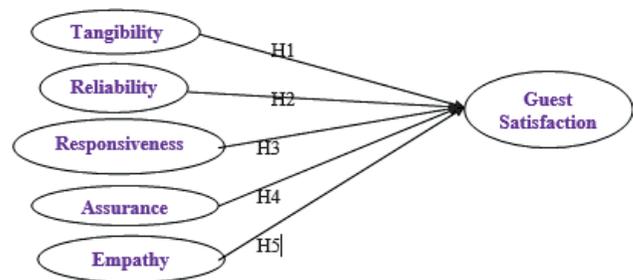


Figure 1 Research Framework

4.2 Survey instrument

A questionnaire was used to assess the impact of service quality of Srinagar-based hotels on guest satisfaction. It was divided into two parts. In the first segment, respondents' personal information was gathered; while the second section included service quality dimensions. The service quality dimensions were accessed using the five-dimensional SERVQUAL scale given by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Amin et al. (2013) gleaned the scale from measuring guest satisfaction. The items of these scales were slightly modified to meet the study context and without changing the meaning of the statements. The responses for the statements were sought using a five-point Likert scale with 1 as strongly disagree to 5 as strongly agree. On the basis of the general satisfaction scale created by Scotti et al., (2007), guests were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction at the houseboats. The responses from the guests were scored using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "extremely dissatisfied" to "very satisfied."

4.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Data were gathered from travellers who had stayed in Houseboats and had experienced the services provided by these houseboats. Using the convenience sampling method, 464 questionnaires were given to respondents. Only 278 of the submitted surveys were deemed to be legitimate for further research.

4.4 About Study Area

Houseboats in Kashmir are one of the top attractions in the region, and a vacation to Kashmir isn't complete unless a visitor has had the one-of-a-kind houseboat experience. Kashmiri houseboats are floating dwellings anchored along the banks of some of the most beautiful lakes in the world, including Dal Lake, Jhelum Lake, and Nagin Lake. Houseboats are a hybrid of a hotel and a homestay on the water. The houseboats have been meticulously made and are embellished with delicate woodwork that showcases the exquisite art and high workmanship of Kashmiri artisans.

The opulent interiors of Kashmir's houseboats are inspired by Victorian and Turkish architectural traditions, which are featured in many snug rooms. The majority of wood carvings depict Chinar trees and other important features of Kashmiri life. The historically designed ceilings, wood-paneled interiors, and hand-carved cedar paneled walls add to the interiors' homey feel. Traditional Kashmiri carpets wrap the floors, keeping your feet warm in the winter weather. Guests can also enjoy a front-facing balcony and a sun terrace on the houseboats. There is also a dedicated workforce and an on-site pantry to service the travelers. Within the Kashmiri houseboats, one can expect

3-star facilities, elegant interiors, and all the necessary amenities, such as laundry, 100% power backup, Wi-Fi, a little library, and more.

4.5 Data analysis

All the analyses were performed in R statistical software v4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020) using the packages cited within the main text. First, we served simple descriptive statistics of the demographic and other variables. We plotted the Sankey diagrams showing the relationship between the studied variables using the "flipPlots v1.3.5" package. We performed Pearson's multiple correlations to show that each studied variable is correlated. The Pearson's multiple correlations were carried out using the "metan v1.16.0" package (Olivoto and Lúcio, 2020). Also, to investigate how each of the five studied variables (i.e., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) were related to satisfaction, we performed the Pearson's correlation analyses for each of these variables separately and plotted the respective figures using the "Nagpur v0.4.0" package (Kassambara, 2020). Finally, to evaluate how each independent or predictor variable (i.e., tangibility, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy) affects the dependent or response variable (i.e., satisfaction), we performed the linear regression analysis separately for each case. The linear regression, along with the associated figures, was carried out using the "ggpmisc v0.3.9" (Aphalo, 2021) and "ggplot2 v3.3.5" (Wickham, 2016) packages. For all the analyses, the statistical significance of the results was calculated at a 0.05 level (i.e., $p < 0.05$).

5. Results

5.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

The descriptive statistics for the demographic characteristics of the respondents included in the current study are present in table 1 and figure 1. Of the total 278 respondents included, the majority were male (186, 66.9%), while the remaining 92 (33.1%) were female. Age-wise, the majority of the respondents included belonged to the 18-29 years age group (190, 68.8%), followed by 30-39 years (70, 25.4%), 40-49 years (14, 5.1%), and 50-59 years age group (2, 0.7%). Concerning marital status, most of the respondents were unmarried (186, 66.9%), while the remaining 92 (33.1%) were married. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents had a post-graduate degree (160, 57.6%), followed by graduates (74, 26.6%), those educated up to secondary school level (28, 10.1%), undergraduates (10, 3.6%), those educated at primary school level (2, 0.7%). Also, 4 (1.4%) of the respondents had degrees other than those specified above. In terms of monthly income, the majority of the respondents included earn 20000-40000 rupees (148, 78.7%), followed

by 40000-60000 (22, 11.7%), above 80000 (10, 5.3%), and 60000-80000 (8, 4.3%), lastly, according to residential place, majority of the respondents included were from Delhi (67, 24.1%), Mumbai (60, 21.6%) Gujarat (42, 15.1%) and West Bengal (33, 11.9%), while as the least number of respondents were from Jammu and Kashmir (1, 0.4%).

5.2 Correlation analysis

Figure 2 displays Pearson's multiple correlations among all the variables under consideration. A statistically significant positive correlation was found among all the studied variables ($p < 0.001$). However, the magnitude (strength) of the correlation varied with the highest correlation observed between reliability and empathy ($r = 0.91$) and the lowest seen between assurance and satisfaction and between responsiveness and satisfaction ($r = 0.35$ for each) (Fig. 2). Furthermore, when analysing the correlation between each of the tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy variables with the satisfaction variable separately, it was found that each of the studied variables showed a statistically significant positive correlation with satisfaction (Fig. 3). The highest positive correlation was demonstrated by reliability ($r = 0.58$), followed by empathy ($r = 0.57$), tangibility ($r = 0.42$) with satisfaction, while as the correlation of responsiveness and assurance with delight was lowest among all the comparisons ($r = 0.35$ for each) (Fig. 3).

5.3 Regression analysis

The linear regression results between the predictor variables (i.e., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and the response variable (i.e., satisfaction) are presented in figure 4. A significant positive effect of tangibility was observed on satisfaction (Fig 4a). More specifically, the magnitude of increase in happiness was 0.43 times with one unit increase in tangibility (Fig. 4a). Similarly, a statistically significant increase by 0.45 units in joy was found with one unit increase in reliability (Fig. 4b). Likewise, a significant positive effect of responsiveness by 0.26 magnitudes was found on satisfaction (Fig. 4c). Once again, a significant positive impact of 0.31 importance was exerted by assurance on the joy (Fig. 4d). Lastly, an increasing influence of 0.61 volumes on satisfaction was observed with one unit increase in empathy (Fig. 4e). Overall, the linear regression analysis revealed that although all the five studied variables had a significant increasing effect on satisfaction, however, the empathy exerted the most substantial effect. In contrast, responsiveness exerted a relatively lower impact than other investigated variables.

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of the Demographic Characteristics for the Respondents Included in the Study.

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	186	66.9
	Female	92	33.1
Age	18 - 29 Years	190	68.8
	30 - 39 Years	70	25.4
	40 - 49 Years	14	5.1
	50 - 59 Years	2	0.7
Marital status	Single	186	66.9
	Married	92	33.1
Educational Qualification	Primary School	2	0.7
	Secondary School	28	10.1
	Under-graduate	10	3.6
	Graduate	74	26.6
	Post-graduate	160	57.6
	Any other	4	1.4
Monthly income	20,000 to 40,000	148	78.7
	40,000 to 60,000	22	11.7
	60,000 to 80,000	8	4.3
	Above 80,000	10	5.3
Residential place	Goa	15	5.4
	Delhi	67	24.1
	Gujrat	42	15.1
	Haryana	23	8.3
	Himachal Pradesh	8	2.9
	Jharkhand	13	4.7
	Kerala	12	4.3
	Madhya Pradesh	4	1.4
	Mumbai	61	21.9
West Bengal	33	11.9	

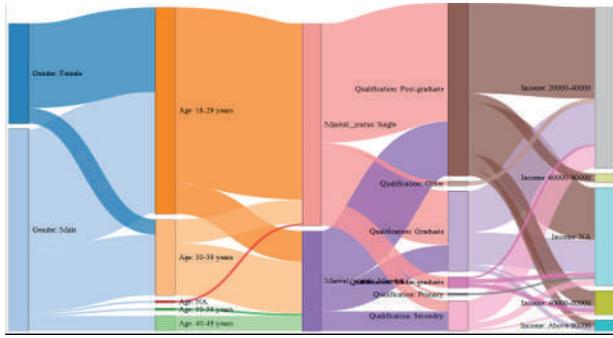


Figure 1 Sankey diagram showing the relationship between the demographic characteristics of the present study's respondents.

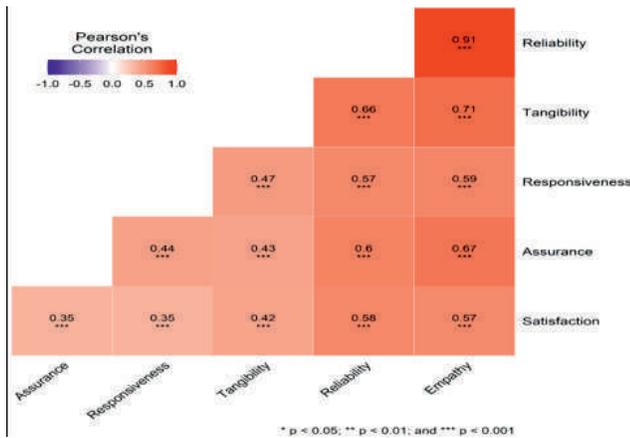


Figure 2 Pearson's multiple correlation plot showing the correlation between studied variables.

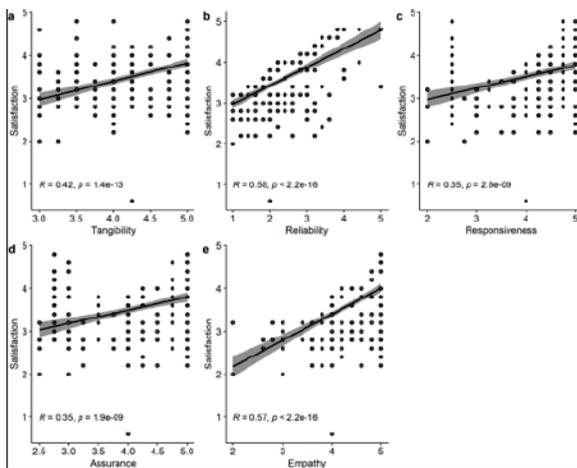


Figure 3 Pearson's pairwise correlation with satisfaction for each studied independent variable. Shown are the best fit line (black colored) along with a 95% confidence interval (grey shading) and observations (black points).

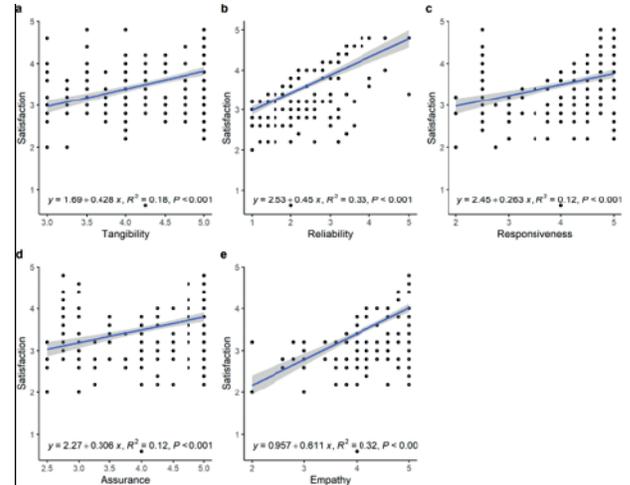


Figure 4 Regression analysis showing the effect of (a) tangibility, (b) reliability, (c) responsiveness, (d) assurance, and (e) empathy on satisfaction. Shown are the best-fit regression lines (blue colored) along with a 95% confidence interval (grey shading) and observations (black points).

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The study analyzed the various aspects of hotel service quality to determine how it affects the satisfaction of its guests. It was concluded that perceived Quality of service significantly impacts hotel guest satisfaction. This study supports prior empirical research findings that show a strong relationship between service quality and hotel guest satisfaction (Saghier, 2013; Li & Krit, 2012). Instead, it has been noted that a factor influencing customer happiness is perceived service quality (Tsiotsou, 2006). The study's outcomes show that all the service quality dimensions significantly and positively predicted guest satisfaction. To assess the level of guest satisfaction with the Quality of services provided to them by hotels in the study region, they can be said to have a satisfying opinion as interpreted from the criteria weights in figure 4. Overall, the guests seem to be happy with the Quality of services provided by their respective hotels in Srinagar city.

Since managers ought to continuously access and improve service quality to maintain guest satisfaction (Saghier, 2013), they need to be well versed in the performing areas and the areas of concern. As far as implications for the managers are concerned, this study will help identify the essential dimensions of the overall service quality of hotels in the region under investigation. It can be helpful to understand and identify the areas managers need to focus on and improve upon. Though all the SERVQUAL dimensions positively contributed to guest satisfaction, the results as provided in figure 4, depict that the dimensions of empathy and reliability are the most critical and most contributing dimensions to guest satisfaction. It is followed by the dimensions of tangibility,

assurance and responsiveness. Thus perceptions of reliability, empathy, and tangibility contribute more to guest satisfaction. Still, the perception of responsiveness and assurances surface as the area that requires attention on the part of the managers.

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