Original Article

Examining the Relationship between Service Quality and Behavioural Intentions in Game Lodges

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ABSTRACT

Providing high-quality services in game lodges promotes customer satisfaction and, subsequently, favourable behavioural intentions, leading to enhanced business performance, including market share and profitability. Practical and empirical evidence has demonstrated that visitors have varying degrees of preferences that influence their expectations and satisfaction, which consequently affects their behavioural intentions. Though numerous studies have examined the influence of service quality on behavioural intentions in the context of the tourism industry, there exist limited studies in game lodges. To fill this gap, this study aims to examine the influence of service quality on visitors' behavioural intention in the context of star-rated game lodges. The study adopted an epistemological research philosophy guided by a positivism paradigm with a quantitative and cross-sectional survey research design. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to obtain the sample size of 337 visitors from the different categories of star-rated game lodges at Maasai Mara National Reserve and its conservancies in Kenya. Data was collected using structured questionnaires and was analyzed using descriptive statistics and a structural equation model that tested the hypothesis and the relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions. The findings suggest that in the context of game lodges, service quality is important for developing favourable behavioural intentions. The study supports a positive and significant relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions. The study contributes immensely to the theoretical background of service marketing by providing a thorough examination of service quality and its influence on behavioural intentions. This is a significant input to service marketing, especially in the little-researched area of service quality perceptions and behavioural intentions among the traditional, domestic and emerging tourism markets in game lodges in Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is a key driver of the global economy and an integral part of the travel and tourism industry (Anabila et al., 2022). The tourism industry accounts for 10.3% of the Gross Domestic Product. (GDP) and contributes to socioeconomic development, employment, and poverty reduction (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). Global tourism involves domestic and international travel for business, leisure, culture, sports, health, and religion, among other reasons (Kara & Mkwizu, 2020). Increased travel in both developed and developing countries (Sota et al., 2020) has seen hospitality services grow into one of the major demands of tourists worldwide (Enilov & Wang, 2022). The increasing demand in this sector has led to the rise of investments in the lodging sector, resulting in stiff competition in the hospitality industry (Chikazhe et al., 2021).

In Kenya, both domestic and international tourists are attracted by numerous tourist attractions such as wildlife safaris among others. These tourists need hospitality services such as accommodation, thus the importance of lodging facilities such as game lodges. Game lodges are classified within the context of resort hotels since they satisfy the classification criteria for resort hotels, as suggested by Fredrick (2019), for their unique location in terms of attractions, scenery, and climate. Game lodges are becoming one of the fastest-growing segments of tourist attractions globally (Ali et al., 2016). In this study, star-rated game lodges refer to classified accommodation establishments located in Kenya's national parks and national reserves, such as Maasai Mara National Reserve. Tourists' patronage of Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) national parks and reserves is an indicator of tourism performance as wildlife tourism is a core product in Kenya's tourism industry. Maasai Mara National Reserve is one of the world's wildlife safari destinations owing to its annual wild beast migration (Chakrabarti & Ekblom, 2024).

Tourists' behavioural intentions, such as repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth (WoM) recommendations, are very crucial in the lodging industry (Singh & Nika, 2019) and are achieved by providing service quality to meet their needs and expectations (Putri et al., 2024). Service quality has, therefore, become the key factor for attracting and retaining customers (Ramamoorthy et al., 2018). Several studies also support service quality as an important factor in offering a business competitive position which is essential for satisfaction (Pizam et al., 2016) and customer behavioural intentions (Padlee et al., 2019). The competitive environment in the lodging industry has also seen much attention given to building favourable behavioural intentions (Cheng et al., 2018). FBI is operationalized as a multi-dimensional construct and is comprised of customer loyalty, recommendations, and positive word of mouth.

Although numerous studies have examined the influence of service quality on behavioural intentions in the context of tourism, there are still gaps in examining the influence of service quality and behavioural intention within game lodges context. It is against this background this study seeks to investigate the influence of service quality on behavioural intentions in star-rated game lodges.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Service quality

Service quality is a multi-dimensional construct and there are different approaches used in measuring service quality. The first approach is the discrepancy between customers' service quality expectations and service quality perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Other approaches include the overall service quality perception. Within the service quality modelling framework, earlier studies (Brady and Cronin,2001; Dabhokar et al., 1996) have conceptualised service quality as a multi-dimensional construct with a hierarchical framework. Based on this framework, the customers evaluate service quality at three ordered and hierarchical levels; a sub-dimension level, a primary dimension level and an overall level. The sub-dimensions' level comprises a number of sub-dimensions that explains the primary dimensions. The primary dimensions' levels are made up of at least three primary dimensions namely; interaction quality (IQ), Environment quality (EQ) and outcome quality (OQ). Numerous studies (Assaker, 2020; Clemes et al., 2018, 2020; Seetanah et al., 2014; Wu et, al., 2016) have supported a hierarchical model in conceptualising service quality and have confirmed the three primary dimensions of service quality, with varying multi-sub-dimensions in hospitality and tourism industry.

This study adopted the aforementioned three primary dimensions; Interaction quality (IQ), physical environment quality and outcome quality (OQ).

Behavioural Intentions

The ever-changing competitive environment in the hotel industry has witnessed more research on examining customer behavioural intentions (Ali & Amin, 2014; Hussein & Hapsari, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021; Su et al., 2016). Behavioural intention is often operationalized as a multi-dimensional construct and comprises customer revisit intentions, recommendations, and positive word of mouth. The extant literature supports service quality as an antecedent of behavioural intention in the hotel sector, specifically in star-rated lodges where customers expect a higher service experience (Jasinskas et al., 2016).

Earlier studies have extensively examined the relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions in different tourism contexts (Chi et al., 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2020; Pandey and Sahu, 2020; Seetanah et al., 2020; Tran, 2020). A study conducted in Ukraine by Tran (2020) assessed how service quality influenced the behavioural intentions of middle-income group tourists. The findings of the study demonstrated that service quality had a positive influence on tourists' purchase intention. However, the study was limited to middle-income tourists and the author could not access high-income level tourists. Additionally, the study did not assess the indirect influence of service quality on behavioural intention and only considered purchase intention as the only indicator for behavioural intention.

In India, Pandey and Sahu (2020) empirically assessed perceived service quality and behavioural intentions in a heritage site and concluded that service quality had a positive effect on destination attachment and e-WoM. However, this study was conducted in a heritage site and thus, the findings cannot be generalized for other tourism set-ups, such as adventure tourism, ecotourism, and game tourism, among others. Seetanah et al. (2020) conducted a study on the effect of service quality in a sampled Mauritius Airport and concluded that service quality significantly affected the likelihood of revisiting by tourists. However, this study investigated one dimension of behavioural intentions and the use of service quality at the point of entry (the airport) rather than at the destination Through such limitations, this study intends to widen the scope of Seetanah et al. (2020) by broadening the scale for revisiting intentions and

considering service quality dimensions at the exact tourist destination, namely the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

In Greece, Daskalaki et al. (2020) assessed the influence of service quality on tourists' future behaviour among visitors visiting sampled museums. From the findings, a moderately significant positive correlation was found between the service quality dimensions and the future behavioural intentions of tourists.

Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypothesis is proposed

H1: There is a relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions among visitors patronising game lodges

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from tourists visiting Masai Mara National Reserve and its conservancies. This study focused on game lodges in the Masai Mara Ecosystem in Kenya which has been recognised as a unique ecosystem (Nampushi & Nankaya, 2020; Pedroso & Biu Kung'u, 2019). In addition, the choice of Masai Mara ecosystem was based on tourist popularity (GOK, 2022) attributed to the fact that Masai Mara National Reserve (MMNR) is one of Kenya's leading wildlife reserves owing to its spectacular wild beast migration (Chakrabarti & Ekblom, 2024), abundance of variety of large wildlife that include the big five, and availability of high standard lodging facilities.

Tourists who resided in the star-rated game lodges in Masai Mara National Reserve and its conservancies between November 2021 and August 2022. were considered as the total population of this study. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to obtain the sample size of 337 visitors from the different categories of star-rated game lodges. The sample frame consisted of tourists who stayed in 28 star-rated lodges. Respondents from each lodge were selected through systematic random sampling

and every third customer who checked in was selected for data collection.

The measurement items were derived and modified from the existing literature. A structured questionnaire was used with a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from strongly disagree "1" to strongly agree "5" to measure the constructs. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed out of which 312 were returned, indicating an 80.3% response rate.

Descriptive analysis was employed to profile the respondents and a structural equation model was used to show the relationship between service quality and emotional behavioural intentions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Diagnostic tests were among the preliminary data analyses done on collected data to determine the validity of the findings (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this study, three diagnostic tests were conducted to test for the assumptions of the absence of multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity and test of normality. In this study, the variance inflation factor, (VIF) and the Tolerance were used to test multicollinearity among the independent variables. Tolerance measures the impact of collinearity among the variables in a regression model and is calculated from $1 - R2$ with a tolerance value close to 1 showing little multicollinearity, while a value close to 0 indicates the presence of multicollinearity. VIF values ranged between 1,013 to 1.927 while tolerance values ranged from 0.519 to 0.987. The VIF values were within the range of below 5 and tolerance values were close to 1. The finding therefore shows that there was no evidence of multicollinearity in the data.

To test normality, the value of skewness ranged from -0.125 to -1.933 while kurtosis ranged from -0.902 to 3.682 and these values were within the +/- 3 range for all factors. This implied that most of the data was normally distributed. Heteroscedasticity was not a problem in the data as the constant

variance (Chi-square= 2.001) was insignificant (P = 0.245). Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected and concluded that the error variance is equal.

Profile of Study Respondents

The study findings revealed that respondents were drawn from international and domestic tourism markets (Table 1). Domestic tourism comprised the Kenyan residents and constituted 18.9% of the total respondents visiting Masai Mara game lodges. The international tourism market on the other hand comprised of tourists coming from different world regions namely Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia. More than 50% of tourists came from American and European regions and constituted 29.8% and 28.5 of the total number of tourists respectively. This was followed by tourists from the Asia region comprising 17% (50) and a small proportion of tourists from Africa and Australia regions consisting of less than 10% of total tourists. The results show that whereas Kenya has relied on the international market and more specifically USA market, UK, German, Italian and French markets, there is a positive indication of patronage of Masai Mara game lodges by Kenyan residents as well emerging markets such as Indians, Chinese, Polish and Spanish nationals. This is a clear indication that Kenya has made efforts in tourism market diversification as envisaged in Vision 2030.

Table 1: Respondents per Tourism Market

Nationality/ Region	Counts	% of Total
Domestic Tourism		
Kenya residents	59	18.9%
International Tourism		
America	93	29.8%
Europe	88	28.5%
Asia	50	17.0%
Africa	18	5.8%
Australia	4	1.3 %
Total	**312**	**100%**

As Table 2 depicts, the gender of the respondents revealed that the majority were males (65.4%) and 34.6% were female. Analysis of respondents' age group suggests that the age bracket of 45-54 years constituted a slightly higher proportion of tourists than other age groups constituting 27.6 % of the total respondents.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The gender of the respondents	Male	204	65.4%
	Female	108	34.6%
Age of the respondent	<24 years	13	4.2%
	25-34 years	75	24.0%
	35-44 years	74	23.7%
	45-54 years	86	27.6%
	55-64 years	55	17.6%
	>64 years	9	2.9%
Marital Status	Single	100	32.1%
	Married	171	54.8%
	Other	41	13.1%
Highest level of education	Pre-High School	2	0.6%
	High School	11	3.5%
	Diploma	12	3.8%
	Undergraduate	59	18.9%
	Postgraduate	210	67.3%
	Other	18	5.8%
Profession/Occupation	Employed	193	61.9%
	Self-Employed	95	30.4%
	Student	14	4.5%
	Other	10	3.2%
Frequency of visit	First Time	189	60.6%
	Two-Three times	99	31.7%
	Four Times and above	24	7.7%
The average length of stay	1-2 nights	157	50.3%
	3-5 nights	137	43.9%
	6 nights and above	18	5.8%
preferred mode of travel	All-inclusive package	237	76.0%
	Independent travel arrangement	69	22.1%
	Other	6	1.9%
category of the game lodge	1-2 star	6	1.9%
	Medium Level (3 star)	17	5.4%
	Upscale (4 star)	135	43.3%
	Luxury (5 star)	154	49.4%

The majority of the respondents (67.3%) had a postgraduate level of education and 61.9% were employed. On the lodges star rating category, it was evident that the majority of respondents preferred 5-star or luxury lodges (49.4%) and 4-star or upscale lodges (43. 3%). These results further suggest that, while the majority of respondents (60.6%) were visiting Masai Mara game lodges (MMGL) for the first time, repeat visits constituting almost 40% were an equally integral component of tourists visiting MMGL.

Results of this study indicate that the majority of guests in Masai Mara game lodges stayed for 1-2 days constituting 50% of all the tourists. Equally, a large number of about 44% preferred 3-5 nights and only a small number of less than 10% stayed for more than 6 days. The majority of the respondents (76%) travelled on an All-inclusive travel package.

Analysis of measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using IBM AMOS software to assess the reliability

and validity of the measures before using them in the research model (Anderson and Gerbing,1988). Several model-fit measures were tested to assess the overall goodness of fit. In addition to chi-square and degree of freedom (DF), normed chi-square (CMIN/df), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residue (SRMR), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and P of close fit (PClose). CFA for the model service quality and behavioural intentions fit the data adequately since the fit indices were within an acceptable range:(CMIN=2121.574, DF=1204, CMIN/df=1.7, CFI=0.913, SRMR=0.072, RMSEA=0.050 and PClose=0.589).

Construct reliability was assessed by computing the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha of the constructs. The Cronbach alphas were all above the 0.6 threshold (outcome quality= 0.725, Interaction quality=0.719, Physical Environment quality= 0.709 and emotional satisfaction= 0.941) as specified for PLS analysis (Hair et al., 2010). Composite reliability of reflective items was all above the acceptable 0.7 thresholds (outcome quality= 0.808, Interaction quality=0-747, Physical environment quality= 0.809 and emotional satisfaction= 0.936 which means all the variables in the study exhibited construct reliability as indicated in Table 3

Construct Reliability

Table 3: Construct Reliability

Study Variables	Cronbach's Alpha > 0.6	Composite Reliability > 0.7
Outcome Quality	0.725	0.808
Interaction Quality	0.719	0.747
Physical Environmental Quality	0.709	0.809
Behavioural Intentions	0.920	0.853

Discriminant Validity

Fornell and Larcker (1981) discriminant criterion was adopted in this study to measure the correlation matrix or cross-correlation between the constructs. According to the Fornell and Larcker criterion, discriminant validity is established when the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for a construct is greater than its correlation with other constructs. If the top number (square root of AVE) in any factor column is higher than the numbers (correlation) below it there is discriminant validity.

In the correlation matrix, as shown in Table 4, the diagonal elements are the square root of AVE of all the latent constructs (i.e. outcome quality, Interaction quality, physical environment quality and behavioural intentions). The discriminant validity was assumed if the diagonal elements were higher than other off-diagonal elements in their rows and columns (Compeau et al., 1999). In this study, the square root of the AVE of all constructs was higher than the correlations below it. Hence discriminant validity was confirmed for the measurement.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity.

Construct	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Outcome Quality	0.601	**0.899**			
2. Interaction Quality	0.702	0.508**	**0.864**		
3. Physical Environmental Quality	0.636	0.431**	0.565**	**0.899**	
4. Behavioural Intentions	0.559	0.367**	0.348**	0.311**	**0.924**

*Notes*: * $p < 0.050$, ** $p < 0.010$, *** $p < 0.001$

Having tested and established construct reliability and discriminant validity, the next step was to test

the relationship between the exogenous and endogenous latent variables through a structural model.

The SEM fit statistics of the overall measurement model for service quality dimensions and behavioural intentions study variables were extracted, as shown in Figure 1.

SEM and Hypothesis Testing

Figure 1: SEM model for the relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions.
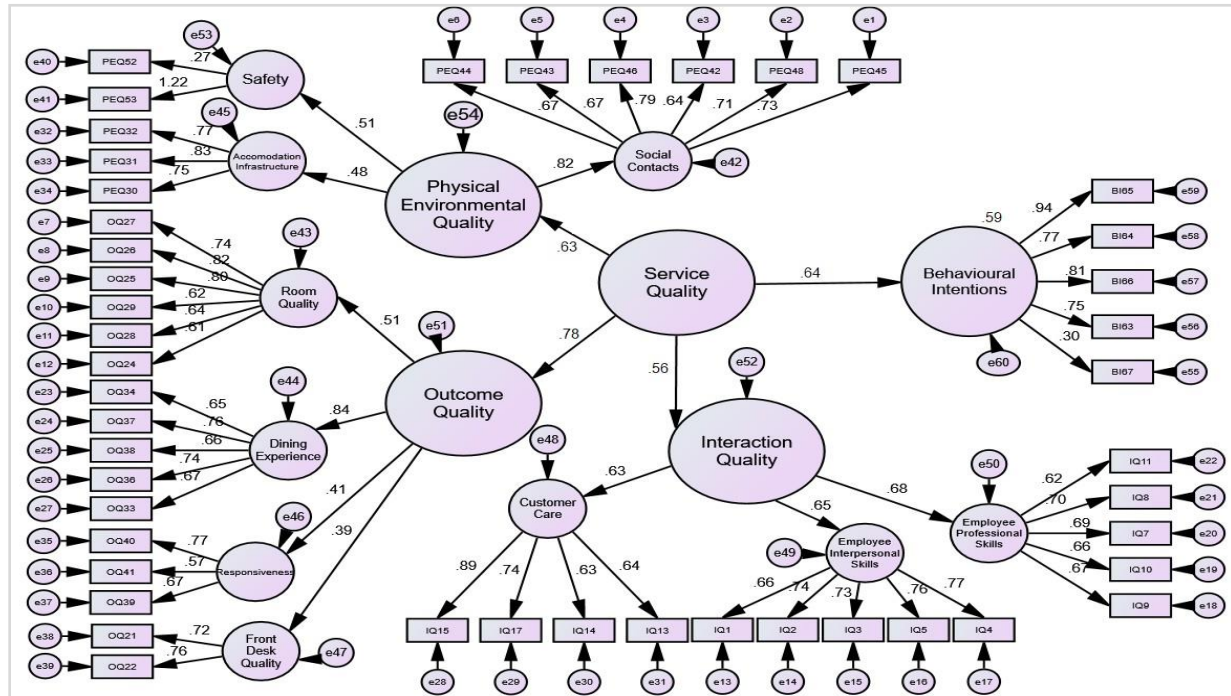
As shown in Figure 1, outcome service quality had the highest influence on the overall service quality (β=0.781, followed by physical environment (β=0.634) quality and interaction quality (β=0.563). The dining experience was the most significant indicator of outcome quality β=0.841 followed by room quality (β=0.482) and responsiveness (β=0.424). This finding implies that visitors in game lodges place importance on the dining experience while evaluating service quality. Thus, the game lodge managers should comprehend the varied needs of visitors and improve food and beverage quality. Game lodges reflect hedonic aspects of visitors' experience through the physical environment such as social (β=0.821), safety (β=0.463) and accommodation infrastructure (β=0.450). These results imply that game lodge managers should provide a physical environment that promotes customer-customer interactions, a safe environment and an attractive physical infrastructure. Employees' professional skills (β=0.761), staff interaction (β=0.720) and customer care β=0.341were considered as important factors that should be improved to enhance interaction quality. This can be achieved through regular training and incentives to improve service delivery.

This study further found that there was a positive path coefficient (β= 0.643) between service quality and behavioural intentions, as shown in Table 5

Table 5: Analysis of the Nexus Between Service Quality and Behavioural Intentions

Path	Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	P
Service Quality → Behavioural Intentions	0.864	.643	0.074	11.705	***

Note: *** p<0.05

In this regard, the relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions was significant since the T value was 11.705 (p<0.05), as shown in Table.5 Thus, the study rejects the null hypothesis, accepts the alternative hypothesis, and concludes that there is a significant relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions among tourists patronizing Maasai Mara game lodges. Service quality explained 59.1% (R^2=0.591) of the variance in behavioural intentions among tourists patronizing the Maasai Mara game.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings support a significant and positive relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions. This result is consistent with the findings of previous study (Daskalaki et al. 2020; Pandey; Sahu, 2020; Seetanah et al., 2020; Tran, 2020). Thus, the perceived service quality is identified as the greatest predictor of visitors' behavioural intentions such as positive WoM and revisit intentions in the hospitality and tourism context. Based on this study's results, the service provider should pay attention to outcome service quality in terms of dining experience, room experience and responsiveness. Additionally, game lodge managers should create an attractive physical environment by improving customer- customer interactions, safety and accommodation infrastructure. Equally, interaction service quality aspects such as employee professionalism, employee- customer interactions and customer care for visitors to make revisit intentions as well as pass positive word of mouth to the significant others.

Theoretical implications

The results of this study present empirical evidence that service experience in game lodges plays an important role in influencing visitors' behavioural intentions. This represents a significant contribution to existing knowledge of service marketing in the hospitality industry.

Managerial and Practice Implications

The game lodge managers should comprehend the service quality dimensions that influence the overall service quality and subsequently favourable behavioural intentions (revisit intentions and word of mouth). Additionally, game lodges may need to segment the visitors based on their preferences and needs to improve quality service delivery. More attention should be given to outcome service quality and specifically the dining experience amongst visitors with different cultural backgrounds. The game lodge managers should recognize the significant role the employees play in service delivery to visitors patronizing game lodges. Therefore, managers should enhance customer-staff interactions through staff training and incentives to improve employees' professional skills, interactions and customer care. Game lodges should reflect hedonic aspects of visitors' experiences and improvement should be ensured in the physical environment such as Attractive physical facilities that reflect culture and theme and this can be used as a marketing tool.

Implications for future research

The finding of the present study has several implications for future research. First, this study is location-specific to Maasai Mara National Reserve and its conservancies that have different cultures and geographical locations and hence may not be generalized to other tourist regions. Future research could be conducted in other tourist destinations that have different service settings. Second, the role of emotions is crucial in service experience. Visitors' behavioural intentions and service quality

perception may vary according to the type of lodges. The current study was conducted in classified lodges. Future research may explore the relationship between service quality and behavioural intentions in unclassified lodges at Maasai Mara National Reserve. Additionally, inclusion of other behavioural intention indicators such as switching cost and willingness to pay premium prices may be included in future studies.

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