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## AN ANALYSIS OF CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS HOTEL SERVICE QUALITY IN REGARD TO ASSURANCE DIMENSION

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### ABSTRACT

During COVID-19, there were a number of studies examining the factors contributing to customer confidence regarding hotel's new normal services. However, there was a scarcity of research to integrate and update them into hotel's assurance dimension. This study, therefore, had the objectives to 1) to find out if there was any cluster associated with hotel assurance based on customer perceptions and 2) to examine customer expectations and perceptions of hotel assurance based on the current situation. Data were collected from 384 hotel customers through a purposive sampling. Factor analysis and *t* test were used to analyze the data. According to the finding, two factors were identified: 1) employee knowledge, courtesy and hotel security and 2) health and hygiene attributes. The first factor was regarded as a common attribute of hotel assurance while the second factor may be regarded as the new attribute of hotel assurance. Meanwhile, it was found that there were some differences of customer expectations and perceptions of hotel's assurance attributes in regard to contactless services and provision of hand sanitizers. The findings were expected to help hotel practitioners to appropriately measure and understand what can assure customers when staying in hotels in the current situation to gain competitive advantage of hotel service quality.

**Keywords:** Hotel; Service Quality; Assurance

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## INTRODUCTION

Assurance is an original element of SERVQUAL initially documented during 1980's by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988, p. 23). It has been employed as a key dimension to assess hotel service quality for more than thirty years. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988, p. 23), assurance is defined as “knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence”. Given such definition, the common assurance attributes mainly involve, for example, knowledge of employees, employee courtesy, customer safety, and secure hotel transaction (Grobela & Marciszewska, 2013, p. 315; Kurtulmusoglu & Pakdil, 2017, p. 1395; Ogunjinmi & Binuyo, 2018, p. 370).

During the COVID-19 situation, a number of studies have proposed ‘new normal’ services to build customer confidence when staying in hotels, for example, social distancing, using hand sanitizers, wearing facemasks, employee hygiene, cleanliness of hotel facilities (Japutra & Situmorang, 2021, p. 5; Jiang & Wen, 2020, p. 2565; Yu, Seo & Hyun, 2021, p. 8). As the new normal services are important in building customer confidence when staying in hotels during COVID-19, they should be considered as a part of hotel assurance, following to Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988, p. 20). However, there is a scarcity of research to examine or integrate them into hotel's assurance attributes based on the current situation. Moreover, there is a need for research to update knowledge regarding hotel assurance due to the availability of recent studies associated with COVID-19. Importantly, past literature of service models regarding hotel assurance, (e.g. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, HOLSERVE, LODGSERV, ECOSERV), seems inadequate to fully explain what inspires customer trust and confidence when staying in hotels based on the current situation. Consequently, new research is required to update the existing literature.

Table 1. presents the analysis of literature review (related studies) and identifies the research gap. This analysis compares the literature during three stages, before COVID-19, during COVID-19, and post COVID-19 (current situation). Based on the analysis, it is suggested that there is a lack of empirical study to analyze and integrate the new normal services into hotel's assurance attributes. As earlier mentioned, assurance is a key element of several service models, for example, SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, HOLSERVE, LODGSERV, ECOSERV (Anabila,



Ameyibor, Allan & Alomenu, 2022, p. 756.; Wu & Ko, 2013, p. 222), it is thus worthy of further examination of hotel assurance, given the availability of recent studies associated with COVID-19, in order to strengthen knowledge development in the field. The findings of the current study are expected to provide hotel managers a better understanding of overall hotel assurance for appropriate implementations to build customer confidence based on the current situation.

Table 1. The analysis of related studies and research gap in regard to hotel assurance

Sources	Studies discussing common assurance attributes (before COVID-19)	Studies discussing new normal services (during COVID-19)	Studies discussing new assurance attributes (post COVID-19) current situation
Grobelna & Marciszewska, (2013)	✓	-	-
Saghier, (2015)	✓	-	-
Kurtulmusoglu & Pakdil (2017)	✓	-	-
Ogunjinmi & Binuyo (2018)	✓	-	-
Jiang & Wen (2020)	-	✓	-
Shin & Kang (2020)	-	✓	-
Japutra & Situmorang (2021)	-	✓	-
Yu, Seo & Hyun (2021)	-	✓	-
Current study*	✓	✓	✓



## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To determine if there was any possibility of cluster associated with hotel assurance based on customer perceptions
2. To examine customer expectations and perceptions of hotel assurance based on the current situation

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Population and Samples

The samples in this study were customers (aged 20 years and above) who had stayed in hotels (3-5 stars hotels) in Thailand during the past 6 months. A convenience sampling was used for this study due to a non-probability sampling method.

### Research Instrument

Questionnaires were employed in this study. To ensure content validity and appropriate measurement, the measurement items were developed from the existing literature regarding assurance attributes and the new normal services proposed during COVID-19 (e.g. Grobelna & Marciszewska, 2013, p. 316; Kurtulmusoglu & Pakdil, 2017, p. 1398; Japutra & Situmorang, 2021, p. 8; Jiang & Wen, 2020, p. 2568; Yu, Seo & Hyun, 2021, p. 5). Later, they were reviewed by three experts (one scholar and two hotel executives) to assure that they were suitable for the current situation. After the reviews, the number of items was reduced from 13 to 11 items. A pilot test was conducted with 30 hotel customers. Minor revisions were made to enhance clarity.

### Data Collection

During data collection, the participants were asked to answer a questionnaire in regard to hotel assurance attributes (what build their trust and confidence when staying in hotels), based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). 400 questionnaires were distributed to qualified participants (both Thais and internationals). The participants (aged 20 years old and older) were approached during their visits in tourism related fairs in Bangkok during a 2-month period (June to July 2023). However, only 384 usable questionnaires were included in the final analysis.



### Data Analysis

For questionnaire reliability, Cronbach Alpha was calculated with a value of .877 for expectations and .891 for perceptions, higher than the recommended value of .70 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 2006, p. 50). Factor analysis and *t* test were also employed to analyze the data.

## RESEARCH RESULT

Regarding the general information of research respondents, among 384 respondents, most of them (58.00%) were females while 42.00% were males. Most respondents were in the age range of 36-50 years old (52.00%) and 31.00% were in the age range of 20-35 years old. The majority (65.00%) had education at the college level. The respondents come from different occupations, for example, 38.00% are company employees, 16.00% are government officers, 11.00% are business owners and 10.00% are students. Most respondents (55.00%) usually travel and stay at hotels for 2-3 times a year, and stay for 2-3 nights per trip.

Table 2. Factor analysis of hotel's assurance attributes

Components	Factor1	Factor2
1. Employees are friendly/courteous.	.886	
2. Employees are always willing to assist customers.	.861	
3. Employees are knowledgeable to answer customers' questions.	.845	
4. Hotel provides its guests a safe/ secure place.	.811	
5. Customers feel confident with hotel transactions.	.792	
6. Hotel facilities and public areas are clean and hygienic.		.864
7. Guest rooms are clean and hygienic.		.855
8. Restaurant provides clean and sanitary environment.		.841
9. Hotel provides contactless services in service areas.		.796
10. When appropriate, restaurant employees wear masks when servicing customers.		.754



Table 2. (continued)

Components	Factor1	Factor2
11. Hand sanitizers are available to customers in service areas.		.729
Eigenvalues	5.711	1.295
% of variance explained	57.521	12.814
Reliability ( $\alpha$ )	.852	.812
Total variance explained=70.335, KMO value=.865, Bartlett's test=0.000 ( $p<.001$ )		

Factor analysis (Table 2) was employed to determine if there was any possibility of cluster associated with hotel assurance. Among the eleven items, the two factors, based on customers' actual perceptions, were derived and labeled as: 1) employee knowledge, courtesy and hotel security and 2) health and hygiene attributes. Total variance, eigenvalues, and alpha coefficients met statistical requirements as suggested by Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black (2006, p. 55) suggesting an appropriate factor structure.

As shown in table 2, factor 1 mostly involves common assurance attributes, for example, employee knowledge, courtesy, customer safety and secure transactions while factor 2 mainly involves new normal service attributes, for instance, hand sanitizers, contactless services, facemasks, and hygiene of hotel facilities. Based on the current finding, this suggests that hotel's overall assurance consists of two sub-dimensions which are common assurance attributes (factor 1) and new assurance attributes (factor 2), which have been recently developed from COVID-19.

Table 3. Paired *t* test for hotel's assurance attributes

Factors and items	Exceptions (Mean)	Perceptions (Mean)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Employee knowledge, courtesy and hotel security				
1. Employees are friendly/courteous.	4.35	4.39	0.881	.370



Table 3. (continued)

Factors and items	Exceptions (Mean)	Perceptions (Mean)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
2. Employees are always willing to assist customers.	4.24	4.21	-1.032	.681
3. Employees are knowledgeable to answer customers' questions.	4.17	4.12	-0.941	.330
4. Hotel provides its guests a safe and secure place.	4.02	4.10	0.844	.110
5. Customers feel confident with hotel transactions.	4.09	4.12	1.872	.512
Health & hygiene attributes				
6. Hotel facilities and public areas are clean and hygienic.	4.37	4.25	-1.524	.107
7. Guest rooms are clean and hygienic.	4.35	4.22	-1.227	.345
8. Restaurant provides clean and sanitary environment.	4.24	4.19	-1.408	.151
9. Hotel provides contactless services in service areas.	4.39	3.85	-2.814*	.015
10. When appropriate, restaurant employees wear masks when servicing customers.	4.49	4.32	-0.984	.374
11. Hand sanitizers are available to customers in service areas.	4.22	3.73	-2.449*	.010

\* $p < .05$

Table 3 presents average scores for customer expectations and perceptions of assurance attributes. Most items received an average score greater than 4.00. When considering each item, most items were found to have no significant differences between customer



expectations and perceptions ( $p>.05$ ), including items 1-8, and 10. However, items 9 and 11 were found to have significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions ( $p<.05$ ). These items were related to contactless services and provision of hand sanitizers.

## DISCUSSION

To discuss, the findings from table 2 suggest that the scope of hotel assurance based on the current situation of post COVID-19 is likely to involve common assurance attributes (e.g. knowledge & courtesy of employees, customer safety, secure transactions) and the new attributes related to hygienic attributes (e.g. availability of hand sanitizers, employee hygiene, and cleanliness of hotel's public facilities). The current findings associated with two clusters of hotel assurance are reasonable as they can be supported from the past literature (Grobelna & Marciszewska, 2013, p. 320; Kurtulmusoglu & Pakdil, 2017, p. 1398) documenting about common hotel assurance as well as the recent literature discussing about new normal services in the hotel industry (Japutra & Situmorang, 2021, p. 8; Yu, Seo & Hyun, 2021, p. 7). The findings help to expand the service literature.

For findings in table 3, it was found that most hotel assurance attributes (items) received an average score greater than 4.00 with no significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions. These findings may suggest that most hotels in Thailand still provide most services (assurance attributes) corresponding to customer expectations and perceptions. Meanwhile, there were some assurance attributes (items 9 and 11) found to have significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions. These findings suggest that there are some hotels providing these services below customer expectations such as contactless services and provision of hand sanitizers, requiring further service improvement. The findings are consistent with past studies indicating that some hotels may provide certain services below customer expectations, including hotel assurance (Boon-itt, 2012, p. 54; Sangpikul, 2022, p. 148).





## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for Implementation

In terms of practical implementation, according to the findings, the two factors associated with hotel assurance were identified: 1) employee knowledge, courtesy and hotel security and 2) health and hygiene attributes, hotel managers need to understand and act on the expectations of customers regarding these two factors to enhance customer confidence when staying in hotels in the current situation. Hotel manager and the management team may employ the two factors to be implemented in hotel services. For example, employee knowledge and courtesy, hotel employees should be trained to be professional by having good knowledge about hotel services and facilities, particularly front desk and restaurant employees. Likewise, the service employees should be trained to provide customers with the confidence of hotel hygiene such as hotel facilities, guestrooms and restaurants. Customers may evaluate these services as the new service standards of the hotel, enhancing customer satisfaction (Jeong, Kim, Ma & DiPietrp, 2022, p. 845).

In addition, attention should be paid to the attributes which were below customer expectations, for example, contactless services, and provision of hand sanitizers. Hotel managers should develop or improve their services to use technology or innovation to provide customers with contactless services in hotel public areas to increase customer perceptions of hotel assurance (Wang, Yao & Martin, 2021, p. 8) Past studies indicate that the use of technology, innovation or contactless services many help increase customer satisfaction and customer confidence of hotel services (Sangpikul, 2022, p. 150; Wang, Yao & Martin, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, several studies have recommended the hotels to provide hand sanitizers in major service areas (e.g. front office, hotel restaurant, fitness center) as a part of their new normal services to reduce the risk of any infections (Bonfanti, Vigolo & Yfantidou, 2021, p. 7). Overall, the findings of the current study are expected to help hotel practitioners to appropriately measure and understand what can assure customers when staying in hotels in the current situation to gain competitive advantage of hotel service quality.



### Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies may examine and update assurance attributes in other service sectors because assurance is one of the important elements of service quality in the hospitality and tourism industry. Assurance may impact other key variables such as overall service quality, service satisfaction and repeat consumption, worthy of future investigation.

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