

Knowledge of user expectations by tourism accommodation providers: towards competitiveness in the state of Merida, Venezuela

pp. 41-56

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ABSTRACT Tourism cannot be considered an important economic activity yet In Venezuela, despite having a myriad of natural attractions and the fact that this activity is an alternative for the economic development of many countries. In relation to the competitiveness of the tourism sector, it is pertinent to address two of the main components of the tourism product: accommodation services and their quality. Therefore, as a first breach of the integral gap model in service quality, this research analyzed the knowledge of the providers of accommodation services in the state of Merida about the user's expectations. For this purpose, previously validated data collection instruments were applied to a sample of accommodation providers and users of these services obtained through stratified probabilistic sampling in high and low season. The knowledge of such expectations was analyzed especially in accommodations other than those of high category as a first step for the design of service standards which are adjusted to the customers' requirements and the fulfillment of service promises. Subsequently, several strategies were designed to reduce the provider gap found.

KEYWORDS service quality, expectations, deficiencies model, tourism

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Conocimiento de las expectativas del usuario por los proveedores de servicios de alojamiento turístico: hacia la competitividad en el estado Mérida, Venezuela

RESUMEN En Venezuela, el turismo aún no puede considerarse una actividad económica importante, pese a poseer innumerables atractivos naturales, y a que esa actividad es una alternativa para el desarrollo económico de muchos países. En relación con la competitividad del sector turístico es pertinente abordar dos de los principales componentes del producto turístico: los servicios de alojamiento y su calidad. Por ello, como una primera brecha del modelo integral de brechas sobre la calidad del servicio, se analizó el conocimiento de las expectativas del usuario por parte de los proveedores del servicio de alojamiento del estado *Mérida*. Para ese fin, se utilizaron instrumentos de recogida de datos previamente validados, a una muestra de alojamientos y usuarios de estos servicios, obtenida mediante muestreo probabilístico estratificado, en temporada alta y baja. Se analizó el conocimiento de tales expectativas, en especial en los alojamientos distintos a los de categoría elevada, como un primer paso para el diseño de estándares de servicio ajustados a los requerimientos de los clientes y el cumplimiento con las promesas de servicio, por lo que posteriormente se diseñaron estrategias para disminuir la brecha del proveedor encontrada.

PALABRAS CLAVE calidad de servicio, expectativas, modelo de deficiencias, turismo.

Conhecimento das expectativas do usuário pelos fornecedores de serviços de hospedagem turística: para a competitividade do estado de Mérida

RESUMO Na Venezuela, o turismo ainda não pode ser considerada uma atividade econômica importante, a pesar de possuir inúmeráveis atrativos naturais, e de essa atividade de ser uma alternativa para o desenvolvimento econômico de muitos países. Respeito à competitividade do setor turístico é pertinente abordar dois dos principais componentes do produto turístico: os serviços de hospedagem e sua qualidade. Por isto, como uma primeira lacuna do modelo abrangente de lacunas sobre a qualidade do serviço, analisou-se o conhecimento das expectativas do usuário por parte dos fornecedores do serviço de hospedagem no estado de Mérida. Para esse fim, foram utilizados instrumentos de coleta de dados, avaliados previamente, a uma amostra de hospedagens e usuários desses serviços, obtida por meio de amostragem probabilística estratificada em alta e baixa temporada. Analisou-se o conhecimento de tais expectativas, em especial nas hospedagens que não são da categoria alta, como um primeiro passo para a configuração de padrões de serviço ajustados às exigências dos clientes e cumprimento das promessas de serviço, pelo qual foram estruturadas estratégias para diminuir a lacuna achada do fornecedor.

PALAVRAS CHAVE qualidade do serviço, expectativas, modelo de deficiencias, turismo.

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Introduction

At present, tourism has considerable relevance at the economic and social level. It is comparable to any other economic activity, it is widely spread and it is driven largely by the speed of technological advancement through sophisticated means of communication and transportation around the world. This has placed tourism as one of the most important commercial activities on the planet. Certainly, for the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2015), at the dawn of the new millennium tourism has established itself as the main economic activity of many countries and the fastest growing sector in terms of foreign exchange income and job creation. According to the figures presented by that entity, the growing tourist activity is one of the most remarkable economic and social phenomena of the last century. International tourism is the world's largest export driver and an important factor in the balance of payments of most countries. According to Molina (2004), tourism income in foreign currency for the economy of nations ranks third after the oil industry and the manufacture and sale of weapons.

This ability of tourism to generate high levels of employment and production means that maintaining its production competitiveness is relevant for all those who aspire to an expansion of the sector. In this sense, quality in the provision of tourism services is a fundamental element. Service quality is expressed as the difference between expected service levels and service perception levels. Also, the success of tourism destinations, according to Díaz-Pérez (2010), is related to such levels, where customer needs and expectations are dynamic and shaped by their current experiences. Therefore, it is important for quality to remain constant, as also stated by Pride and Ferrel (1997).

One way to obtain information to improve and maintain the service quality of tourist accommodation establishments is by measuring information as a quality control system of the service provided. For Hoffman & Bateson (2012), the methods to measure quality and customer satisfaction conform a service quality information system, which Zeithaml (2009) also calls investigations of services, based on continuous investigation processes about relevant and timely data used to make decisions. Specifically for the study of service quality, according to Deming (1986) there are some aspects of services that are easy to measure

(customer service time, number of claims and employees, facilities), as well as the characteristics of the basic manufacturing products --called intangible aspects by Cantú (2006)--, so the measurement is made based on the reaction of the clients around the unique characteristics of the services (intangibility, heterogeneity, simultaneous consumption and production, their perishable condition). For this reason, according to Lovelock & Wirtz (2008), the pioneering researchers in the evaluation of service quality, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1985), took performance measures from the clients' multidimensional viewpoint with the inclusion of their judgments (perceptions) according to their expectations on the service provision process, where service quality is given by the difference between client expectations and perceptions. This conception of service quality has been conceived and approached by authors such as Hoffman & Bateson (2012), Kotler & Keller (2012), Cantú (2006), Grönroos (2001), Albrecht & Zemke (2003), Lovelock & Wirtz (2008), Lovelock (2011), Díaz Pérez et al. (2006), Gutiérrez (2001), among others. Customer expectations are what the client wants to obtain and they are shaped by the promises of the service provider and its competitors, previous purchase experiences and third-party opinions. Perceptions are the performance or result that the client believes to have obtained when acquiring the product or service and they depend on the clients' point of view, their state of mind, reasoning, and even other people's opinions and not on the company itself (Thompson, 2005).

According to Santomà & Costa (2007), even when customer expectations are perfectly known and the service offer adjusts to them, service quality often fails because there are differences between the clients' expectations and their perceptions. These deficiencies or imbalances were diagnosed in the 1980s by Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1988). They grouped them into four gaps that cause poor service quality (knowledge of customer expectations and needs, design of service standards in accordance with previous expectations and needs, fulfillment with these standards and service promises), which is known as the integral gap model (Lovelock, 2011).

Knowing customer expectations is the first step to offer quality services, given that an incorrect appreciation of the client's expectations results in a standard design of inadequate service that would lead to below expectations

performance. Another reason to study the clients' expectations is that they can have varied sources. Although some of them are uncontrollable (personal or innate client needs), others can be controlled by the service provider, as in the case of the communications and promises made, which is, according to Kotler & Keller (2012), a great advantage for service providers to be able to shape or influence the client's aspirations or expectations on many occasions.

When reflecting on the fact that the accommodation service is one of the fundamental components of the tourist activity, its study is essential to determine and address the problems it faces. Therefore, this research is limited to accommodation services provided in the state of Merida. As part of a diagnosis on the fulfillment of user expectations by the providers of tourist accommodation services in the state of Merida and with the aim of deepening on the quality of the services provided from the point of view of their provider, this work dealt with the first deficiency or mismatch in the integral gap model on service quality. Specifically, the objective was to determine the knowledge of user needs and expectations by tourist accommodation providers in the state of Merida, Venezuela, as part of the service providers' gap. All this contributes to the quality analysis of the accommodation service prior to its provision from the providers' perspective. This highlights their responsibility and participation in adjusting the existing gap between user expectations and perceptions.

In this work, the literature review on service quality and the models that have approached it academically are initially presented. This allowed the researcher to formulate the hypotheses later exposed and explain the analysis of the results through a transversal methodological design and field work. Finally, the results and their discussion are presented, followed by some conclusions, recommendations and future lines of research.

Literature review

Conceptually speaking, quality has been studied in terms of gaps between expectations and perceptions from the clients', the employees' and the service management's point of view. This is how service quality was conceived by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in their document "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and

Its Implications for Future Research" in 1985. This model has been studied by various tourism and service marketing specialists, such as Solá (1994), Díez (1999), Esteban (2003), Bethencourt-Cejas, Díaz-Pérez, Morales-González, & Sánchez-Pérez (2005), González & Mendieta (2009), Morillo (2010), Ruiz-Vega, Vásquez-Casielles & Díaz-Martín (1995), among others.

Service quality can be measured as the difference or gap between the clients' expected value and the value perceived by them, as stated by Santomà & Costa (2007) in a compilation of studies on service quality.

According to Díaz Pérez et al. (2006), service quality can be measured quantitatively through the coefficient between perceived quality / expected quality, which leads to the following results: when the coefficient is equal to 1, customer perceptions are adjusted to their expectations and therefore quality is optimal, which indicates that the customer is satisfied because he has obtained what he expected from the service. If the coefficient is lower than 1, the customer's perceptions do not match his high expectations, so there is a quality deficit. That is, from the customer's perspective, there is poor service quality and dissatisfaction because he did not obtain what he expected. On the contrary, if the coefficient is greater than 1, there is an excessive service quality that was not expected or demanded by the user. This also means that the customer is satisfied and pleasantly surprised because he obtained more than expected, but this represents an extra cost for the service provider that may not be valued by the user.

Studies that have measured service quality by trying to discover the service attributes that affect customers' perceptions and expectations are based on a model known as Servqual. In the documents "Servqual: A multiple Item Scale for Measuring Customer Perceptions of Service Quality" and "Refinement and Reassessment of Servqual Scale" the Servqual creators, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1985, 1988 and 1993) define it as a scale or model for measuring service quality through a survey that is commonly adapted from the generic model. In short, it is a generic diagnostic tool that can be applied in any organization to discover strengths and weaknesses in the provision of the service, based on the five quality dimensions.

From these dimensions, the authors of Servqual proposed 22 items that collect the

expectations of an excellent service and later the perceptions of the same dimensions in a specific company, for a total of 44 points. Once the data is collected, the differences between expectations and perceptions are called the service gap, where the lower the perceptions are as compared to the expectations, the lower the result of the quality evaluation (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1993a).

The Servqual model has been of interest to a large number of researchers. The measurement scale and the five generic attributes have been generally used to study service quality in different areas of the service sector. The Servqual model is a starting point for a large amount of research on service quality in the hotel industry. The main conclusions of these studies are first, that the model is valid to be applied in the hotel industry, and second, that its applications take into account a specific type of hotel (Santomà & Costa, 2007). For Díaz Pérez et al. (2006) and Hoffman & Bateson (2012), despite the controversy and criticism to this scale, it is the most suitable in terms of reliability and validity, which are fundamental to determine the competitive position of each destination and serve as a basis for decision making by service providers in specific areas. Also, in the opinion of Hoffman & Bateson (2012), Servqual continues to be the most commonly used instrument to measure service quality. In fact, Santomà & Costa (2007) state that there are many researchers who have used the model in the tourism field (hotels, restaurants, airlines and others).

Derived from Servqual, another model based on the difference between the clients' expectations and their perceptions, also known as the *customer gap* (Zeithaml, 2009), is the integral gaps model of service quality, which focuses on the strategies and processes that must be used to provide quality services, while making it possible to know how employees or the company's processes contribute to or hinder the closing of the gap between customer expectations and perceptions. This model is the result of an investigation carried out by Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1988) in different types of services. It was found that a mismatch between customer expectations prior to service consumption and the perception of the service provided (customer gap) can be a consequence of four imbalances or causes called service provider gaps.

The first gap (the difference between what the company perceives about the client's expectations

and what the client really expects) is given when the company does not know exactly what the client expects. Therefore, consumer expectations should be known and understood by the company's management. According to Lovelock & Wirtz (2008), the term *expectation* comes from the Latin word *expectatum*, which means visualizing the service from the context of beliefs, hopes or illusions, which constitutes a comparison pattern on the part of the client to evaluate or judge the service. The clients' perceptions are subjective evaluations of real service experiences. Their expectations are performance standards, which are benchmarks that they compare service experiences to.

Figure 1 presents the key factors or reasons that constitute gap 1 on the part of the supplier: poor market research or an inadequate approach. That is, when the supplier does not have exact information on customer expectations, gap 1 is large. Therefore, formal and informal methods must be developed to obtain information regarding customer expectations through market research, with the use of techniques with different approaches to remain close to the client.

On the other hand, the accommodation service is one of the fundamental components of the tourism activity, as expressed by specialists such as Álvarez, Díaz & Álvarez (2001) and Oreja (2000), who state that the service offered to tourists in accommodation establishments determine their perception and also that of the city or country visited. This, in turn, determines their length of stay, the number of visitors willing to spend the night at the destination and even the return of the visitor, his family and friends, with the corresponding income, jobs and benefit distribution from other tourist activities (recreation, transportation, restaurants and commerce) in the receiving and providing community.

Hypothesis formulation

Based on the review of existing literature on service quality, in particular on the integral gaps model of service quality, the following hypothesis was constructed at the primary level, in an attempt to respond to the formulated approaches.

H₁: *Most tourist accommodation providers know the customers' needs and expectations.*

In order to study the knowledge of such expectations and needs in the various types of tourist

accommodation providers in the state of Mérida with a view to formulate strategies, the following second-level hypothesis was formulated.

H_{1.1}: *The proportion of suppliers that know their customers' requirements is larger in high-category establishments than in the rest.*

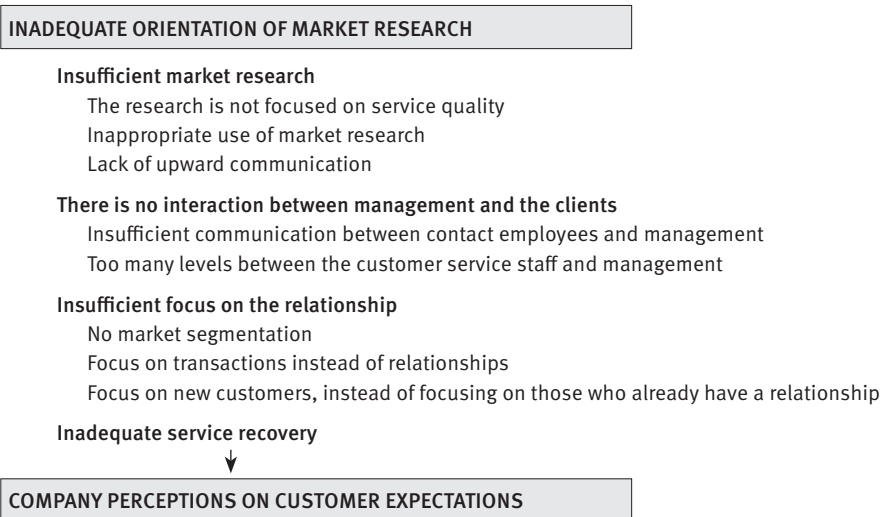
Methodology

For data collection, the tourist lodgings located in the state of Merida were defined as the population under study. Subsequently, the sample was selected according to the maximum variance criterion and a stratified probabilistic sampling procedure. The minimum number of analysis units for the first population, which guarantees a standard error of less than or equal to 5% for a population of 346 establishments, is 186. Given that this population consists of different groups of establishments with specific characteristics (non-categorized tourism hotels from 1 to 4 stars, inns, motels, special establishments and camps), demographic strata were formed. In turn, in each of these strata, subgroups called sub-strata were identified given the geographical location of the establishments in the different municipalities of the state of Merida. Thus, it was guaranteed that the selected sample elements were representative of all that Venezuelan state.

For data collection, a questionnaire was designed for the management or administration of the selected tourist accommodation establishments, which was applied through a personal interview (Annex 1). Its content was previously validated through a systematic and subjective evaluation. To this end, a qualitative study was carried out through extensive and careful consultations of the relevant literature (theories and previous studies) in documents published from the mid-1980s, specifically Zeithaml et al. (1985, 1988, 1993, 1993a), Lovelock & Wirtz (2008), Zeithaml (2009), Esteban (2003) and Cejas et al. (2005), which were published in scientific journals and specialized texts on the subject. The classic works of Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, pioneering researchers in the service quality sector whose works have been published for two decades, were included.

Likewise, unstructured, free or non-directed personal interviews were conducted with managers of lodging companies in the state of Merida and with some people who are involved with the state and the country's tourism activity (president of the Chamber of Tourism, president of the Merideña Tourism Corporation, Cormetur, and members of the Venezuelan Hotels Federation, Fenahoven), as well as tourism researchers of Universidad de Los Andes (Venezuela), Hotel Escuela de Los Andes (Venezuela) and Universidad de La Laguna (Spain). They were

FIGURE 1. Key reasons that generate gap 1 of the integral gaps model of service quality



Source: taken from Zeithaml, 2009.

selected with the purpose of considering the dimensions that should be included in the scale.

Once each of the instruments was built, they were evaluated as part of the technique known as expert validity, in which specialists from various areas related to the subject under study participate. Subsequently, adjustments were made to the instruments and the observations pointed out by the experts were taken into account. A pilot or pre-test of each questionnaire was applied to people with similar characteristics to those identified in the population under study. Its size was no greater than 10% of each sample.

Results

Based on the data collected in the survey applied to suppliers of tourist accommodation services in the state of Merida, the following information is presented (Table 1) in order to test

hypothesis 1 (H_1). For this contrast, a proportion test is used for a sample (unilateral contrast), using a statistic for large samples (Z standard normal distribution). This is intended to know the proportion of service providers that are aware of their users' needs and expectations.

Considering that sample size (n) is 186 establishments, the significance level is 5% (α), the proportion of the assigned population is 80% (π) and the sample proportion (p) observed in the data collected is 82.8% (percentage of establishments that stated knowing their users' expectations and needs) (table 1), the Z statistical value obtained is 0.954, which is out of the rejection zone for the null hypothesis ($Z > -1.65$). Therefore, it can be inferred with 95% confidence that a percentage equal to or greater than 80% of tourist accommodation establishments in the state of Merida know their users' needs and expectations (figure 2).

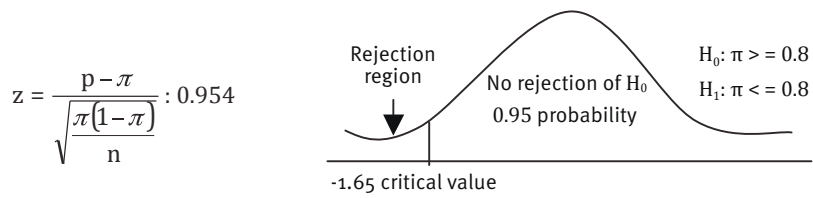
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TABLE 1. Means used by service providers to know users' expectations according to type and category of the establishment

MEANS USED BY THE SERVICE PROVIDERS TO KNOW USERS' EXPECTATIONS	TYPE AND CATEGORY GROUPED					TOTAL
	Not categorized	Inns	1 and 2-star tourist hotels	3 and 4-star tourist hotels	Motels, special establishments and camps	
User expectations are not known	5	13	0	0	8	26
	2,7%	7,0%	,0%	,0%	4,3%	14,0%
Oral descriptions of users	8	15	2	0	8	33
	4,3%	8,1%	1,1%	,0%	4,3%	17,7%
User gestures	1	7	0	0	3	11
	,5%	3,8%	,0%	,0%	1,6%	5,9%
Information collected by employees	7	16	1	6	10	40
	3,8%	8,6%	,5%	3,2%	5,4%	21,5%
Data collected by competent entities (Cormetur, Chamber of Tourism and others)	12	11	0	0	8	31
	6,5%	5,9%	,0%	,0%	4,3%	16,7%
Did not answer	2	4	0	0	0	6
	1,1%	2,2%	,0%	,0%	,0%	3,2%
Oral expressions and gestures of users	5	24	1	0	5	35
	2,7%	12,9%	,5%	,0%	2,7%	18,8%
Oral expressions and gestures of users collected by employees and other information gathered by them	1	0	1	2	0	4
	,5%	,0%	,5%	1,1%	,0%	2,2%
	41	90	5	8	42	186
	22,0%	48,4%	2,7%	4,3%	22,6%	100%

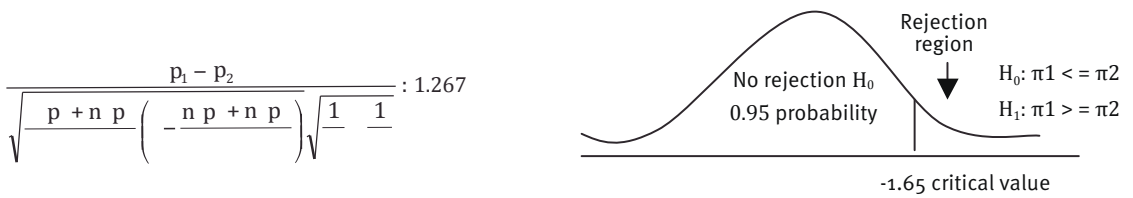
Source: made with data collected and processed with the SPSS statistical program, version 15

FIGURE 2. Calculation of the test statistic and decision rule for hypothesis 1



Source: own elaboration based on data taken from Lind, Marchal & Wathen.

FIGURE 3. Calculation of the test statistic and decision rule for hypothesis 2.1.1



Source: own elaboration, based on data taken from Lind et al., 2005.

To contrast hypothesis 1.1, a test was carried out to differentiate the sampling proportions of two independent populations (high category establishments: 3 and 4-star hotels and the rest of the establishments: 1 and 2-star hotels, not categorized, motels, camps and special establishments), as a unilateral contrast with the purpose of inferring whether the percentages of samples that come from these two populations are the same.

In this test, the sample size of high-category establishments (n_1) is 8, the sample size of the rest of the establishments (n_2) is 178, the significance level is 5% (α), the proportion of n_1 (p_1) is 100% (8/8) and the proportion of n_2 (p_2) is 83.15% (148/178) observed in the data collected from establishments that stated knowing their clients' expectations (table 2). The Z statistic value obtained is 1.267, which is within the acceptance zone for the null hypothesis ($Z < 1.65$). It can be inferred with 95% confidence that a lower or equal proportion of high-category establishments know their users' expectations in comparison with the rest of establishments (figure 3).

From the theoretical review carried out, which guided the collection and analysis of the knowledge that service providers have about the users' needs and expectations, table 2 summarizes the variables associated with the knowledge of service providers about their users' expectations.

Although it can be inferred that in most of tourist accommodation establishments user needs and expectations are known and that such proportion is equal or lower for high category establishments, according to the descriptive analysis carried out it can be observed that there are obstacles that threaten such knowledge.

In the first place, this is caused by poor upward communication. Even though the majority of managers surveyed stated knowing their clients' expectations through information collected by their employees on service details, employees perceive that they are not authorized to register such information, even though they are listened to and authorized to do so. A second obstacle to know customer expectations is that most of the establishments do not store user data except for their name. Market research is not carried out in this type of establishments, since most users do not know about the existence of mechanisms to evaluate service quality, despite the fact that a large number of users and employees indicated that service requirements are informed (table 2).

Considering that relationships with the client would facilitate knowing their expectations, in the third place it was observed that for the owners or managers of the establishments it is difficult to fully know their customers' expectations and needs because their relationship is weak, there is a low

TABLE 2. Summary of the behavior of incidental variables in the knowledge of user expectations

VARIABLES	BEHAVIOR (POSSIBLE ANSWER)	TOTAL (%)
Upward communication		
		21,5%
	• Information collected by employees	17,7%
	• Oral comments from users	5,9%
	• Gestures from users	18,8%
Means used to know customer expectations	• Oral comments or gestures from users	16,7%
	• Data collected by public entities	2,2%
	• Oral comments or gestures from users gathered by employees and other information collected by them	14%
	• Expectations are not known	
Authority of employees to obtain and record information on customers' expectations, tastes and preferences	• Yes	65,6%
	• No	23,7%
Degree in which managers are informed by their employees about service details	• Totally agree	71,5%
	• Moderately agree	28%
	• Indifferent	0,5%
Managers listen to employee suggestions	• Yes	86,6%
	• No answer	13,4%
Degree in which employees are authorized to acquire and record information about customers' expectations, tastes and preferences	• Strongly disagree	11,9%
	• Moderately disagree	70,2%
	• Indifferent	7,1%
	• Moderately agree	6,4%
	• Totally agree	4,5%
Authority given to employees to establish friendship relationships and communication with users	• Totally disagree	13,5%
	• Moderately disagree	81,4%
	• Indifferent	2,6%
	• Moderately agree	2,6%
Market research		
Aspects analyzed on client expectations	• Rooms features and comfort and other services	31,2%
	• Entertainment	21,5%
Customer informed stored by the establishment	• Names	91,9%
Purpose of market research	• No market research is carried out	86%
System or mechanism used by the provider to evaluate service quality	• Suggestion box	35,5%
	• Claims or complaints	29,6%
System or mechanism to evaluate service quality as perceived by the client	• None	48,4%
	• Suggestion box	33,9%
Information provided by the clients about their requirements and needs, according to the employee	• Totally agree	66,3%
	• Moderately agree	29,2%
Customer relationships		
Variables to distinguish different types of clients	• No distinctions	50,5%
	• Holidays and weddings	22,6%
Ways to face client heterogeneity at the establishment	• Packages offered according to client type	23,4%
	• Extreme care	35,9%
	• Clients are informed about the presence of other groups	23,4%
Purpose of the analysis of client features	• No analysis is made	49,2%
	• Rate adjustments	19,5%
	• Service adaptation	17,8%

VARIABLES	BEHAVIOR (POSSIBLE ANSWER)	TOTAL (%)
Attitude of suppliers towards customer retention		
Attracting new clients increases confidence levels towards the services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Totally agree • Moderately agree 	65,2% 25,5%
It is easier to satisfy new customers than regular guests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Totally agree • Moderately agree 	66,7% 25,3%
It is more profitable for the company to attract new guests than to retain old ones or make them return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Totally agree • Moderately agree 	54,3% 28,5%
Prices, discounts or special services are frequently offered to make guests return or extend their stay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly disagree • Moderately disagree 	59,7% 19,4%
Service recovery		
Use given by the service provider to the registration of faults and errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Errors are not registered • To train employees • Design of new procedures 	61% 14,3% 14,3%
Evidence of failures or errors in the hosting service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	10,4% 83,6%
Types of failures or errors in the service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of electricity • Lack of hot water • Lack of parking space 	3,9% 1,5% 1,1%
Client knowledge about the cause of the failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	5,3% 6,1%
Customer communication about failures or complaints to employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	5,9% 5,5%
Customer satisfaction with the attention given to the claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably would not be heard 	3,4%
Concrete claim results as perceived by the client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologies • Speed and effort to repair it 	2% 1,6%
Company reaction in the face of errors and service failures, according to management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologies • Speed and effort to repair it 	16,4% 24%
Frequent actions taken by the company in case of service errors or failures according to the employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologies • Replacements and repairs 	52,3% 27,7%
Employees' authority to solve guest complaints or problems, according to owners or managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No 	32,3% 54,3%

Source: based on data taken from Zeithaml, 2009, and Zeithaml et al., 1993.

tendency to retain clients and also the degree of authority given to employees to create friendly relationships with clients is scarce. In addition, in most establishments market segmentation is not carried out to specialize the service, but customer characteristics are analyzed only to set special rates, which promotes a trend toward transactions and not towards establishing relationships with them.

Finally, although concrete actions are taken in the establishments to recover the service, other

factors that could hinder the knowledge of customer expectations and needs are the absence of failure and error records and insufficient clearance given to employees to solve problems, which makes them have an indifferent attitude towards failures. These aspects are summarized in table 2. These aspects make it difficult for service providers to know and monitor their users' expectations and needs, which could be associated to likely differences between the level of user expectations and perceptions.

Conclusions, recommendations and future lines of research

Figure 4 summarizes the results of the contrasted hypotheses, which attempt to fulfill the objective outlined. The main conclusion is that even if service providers know the users' expectations and needs, this does not guarantee their fulfillment and therefore the quality of the hosting service. First, there are some aspects that hinder such knowledge, such as poor upward communication, the absence of market research practices, transaction-oriented actions and service recovery deficiencies. Secondly, the fulfillment of the user's expectations or the quality of the service cannot be guaranteed. Given the limitations of the study, there is still a need to corroborate or ensure the design of standards in accordance with these expectations, as well as compliance with the service standards and promises made. Likewise, according to the descriptive analysis, some limitations were found in terms of the knowledge of the users' expectations and needs. Therefore, some suggestions that contribute to increase, maintain and control service quality are provided below.

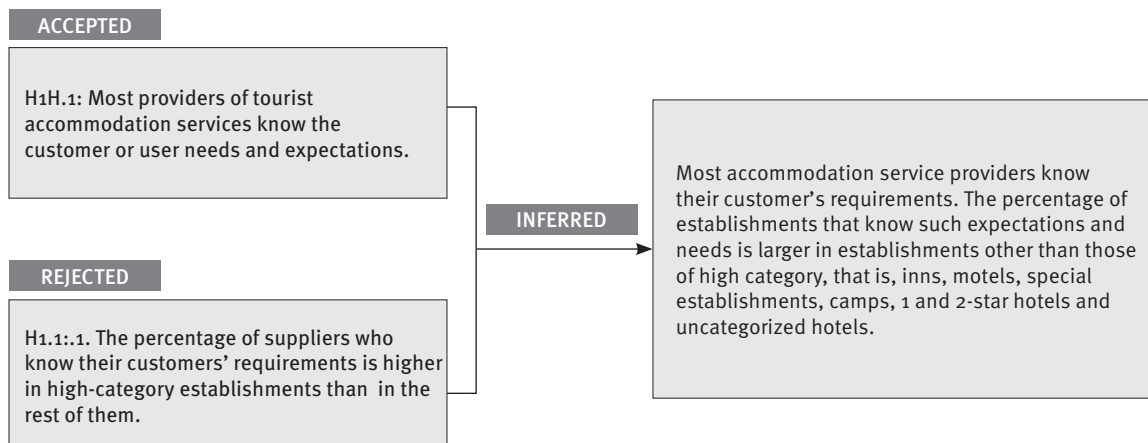
In order to understand user expectations and requirements, the following suggestions are made:

- Develop market research through brief surveys to users through comment cards, post-transaction surveys (phone calls or emails) in order to know the most important service features for the users, their satisfaction with the service and return plans, what

they think should be done to solve failures and their perception on employee performance.

- Other ways to conduct market research is through critical incident methods like under-cover user, user observation and the registration of user data (place of origin, reason for travel, requested services, length of the stay, activities performed and other habits observed).
- Recover the service by promoting user complaints through satisfaction surveys, the critical incident technique and the use of the suggestion boxes (techniques of the market research strategy). Service recovery should be characterized by politeness, speed, concern, clarity, honesty, flexibility or adaptation to user requirements and willingness to explain, inform and compensate failures in a fair and combined way (apologies, reimbursements and financial compensation) according to the severity of the failure.
- Another way to recover the service is to discover failures before they occur by storing and analyzing claims or complaints, classifying faults and identifying the problematic delivery service process to reformulate processes, policies, plan alternatives and compensations and train the personnel. These strategies should be applied even in establishments where faults are uncommon.
- Improve upward communication, thanks to the combination of formal and informal meetings with employees, the reduction of

FIGURE 4. Summary of hypotheses test



Source: own elaboration.

hierarchical levels and the increase in interaction between managers and users.

- Retain service users or customers through the use of bonuses (social, personal and financial) following the tracking of users grouped in segments through relational surveys or post-transaction communication.

With these strategies, the tourist accommodation establishments of the state of Mérida are expected to meet their users' expectations by equaling their perception and expectation levels, which will favor the constant influx of visitors to the state, return, referrals and increased lengths of stay. Also, considering the relevance of accommodation services in the tourism sector, which determines the number of visitors, the length of stay and customer return, it is believed that the quality of tourist accommodation services will also boost and favor other components of the tourism system (restaurants, recreational centers and others). Due to the fact that service quality is a fundamental component of competitiveness at the business level and in relation to tourist destinations, an increased quality of accommodation services will be reflected as a competitive force in the tourism sector of the state of Merida with the corresponding increases in revenue, employment, income distribution and sustainability, which will in turn contribute to turning the tourist activity into an important sector for state and national economy.

The methodology used and the suggestions made on the quality of the provision of tourism services in Mérida are expected to be applied by other components of the tourism supply system and even by other states or municipalities of the country. For this reason and under the assumption that quality is a multidimensional construct, the research conducted leads to suggesting the following lines of research:

- Research on the perceptions of entrepreneurs or managers of tourist accommodation establishments on service quality to have access to their experiences and management processes.
- Research related to the analysis of human resources management in tourism sectors with a special emphasis on internal marketing and service culture, associating user satisfaction and employee satisfaction.

- Research aimed at determining the design and fulfillment of service quality standards by accommodation service providers, based on user expectations and perceptions.

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Annex 1. Data collection instrument

Questionnaire to the managers of tourist accommodation establishments in the state of Merida

In order to know our tourism potential, Universidad de Los Andes is conducting an investigation where your collaboration is very valuable. Please provide information about your experiences and performance in accommodation services in the state of Merida.

1. Questionnaire No. ____

GENERAL FEATURES

2. What means do you use to find out customers' expectations?

- Client expectations are not known ____
- Comments from customers ____
- Customer gestures ____
- Information collected by employees ____
- Data reported by state agencies (Cormetur and Chamber of Tourism) ____
- No answer ____

3. What aspects inquire about their expectations?

- Entertainment options ____
- Characteristics or amenities of the rooms and other services ____
- Length of stay ____
- Reason for the visit ____
- Aspects involved with security ____
- Prices or rates to be paid ____
- No answer ____

4. If market research is conducted, what is its purpose? (You can choose several alternatives)

- No answer ____
- Does not conduct market research ____
- Identify dissatisfied customers and try to recover the service ____
- Discover the client's requirements or expectations about the service and its changes ____
- Supervise and monitor service performance ____
- Compare the performance of the establishment with that of the competition ____
- Offer new services or improve current ones ____
- Do not conduct market research ____

5. What system or mechanism do you use to evaluate the quality of the services offered to the guest?

- No answer ____
- Suggestion box ____
- Exit surveys ____
- Personal interview ____
- Complaints or claims ____
- None of the above (the service is not evaluated) ____

6. Express your opinion on the following statements. Write an X in your chosen option (5 is the preferred choice and 1 the least preferred).

	5	4	3	2	1
	TOTALLY AGREE	MODERATELY AGREE	DO NOT AGREE OR DISAGREE	MODERATELY DISAGREE	TOTALLY DISAGREE
• Attracting new clients increases confidence levels towards the establishment's services					
• It is easier to satisfy new customers than regular guests					
• It is more profitable for the company to attract new guests than to keep current ones or make them return					
• The activities, tasks and procedures formally established are not fully accepted by the employees					
• Employees always keep management or their superiors informed about the circumstances and details of the provision of the service					
• Generally the procedures and activities carried out in the establishment do not meet guest expectations					
• Generally employees have the training and authority required to adjust the service to the guest's requirements					

ABOUT MARKET SEGMENTS

7. Which of the following variables do you use to distinguish your clients in order to provide your services? (You can select several alternatives)

- Different types of clients are not distinguished ___ (go to question 33)
- Group size ___
- Age ___
- Sex ___
- Nationality or place of origin (culture) ___
- Reason for the trip (business, holidays, wedding, etc.) ___
- Type of companions (friends, colleagues, relatives, children, spouses) ___
- According to tour operator or travel agency ___

8. How do you deal with the heterogeneity of visitors at the same time?

- Services are offered in packages by type or group of clients ___
- There are separate areas for smokers or young people and adults ___
- When there is a large group, only that group is served given that the capacity of the establishment does not allow anything else ___
- Extreme attention from employees ___
- Clients are informed about the presence of other groups ___

9. What is the purpose of analyzing the characteristics of the guests that visit the establishment during different times? (carnival, Easter, Christmas, summer and peak seasons)

- Guest characteristics are not analyzed ___
- The service is adapted to their needs ___

- Attract certain groups at specific moments, improving advertising (local tourism) ____
- Make adjustments to the prices or rates ____

ON PERSONNEL ATTENTION TO THE GUEST
(receptionists, waitresses, bellboys, waiters, bartenders)

	1 YES	2 NO	3 NO ANSWER
10. Do your employees have the authority to obtain and record information on customer expectations, tastes and preferences?			
11. Do you listen to the suggestions (points of view, experience and information) given by the employees about the service provided?			
12. Do employees have the authority to face or solve any guest claim or problem?			

Position of the respondent: _____

Establishment location : _____

THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION