

SERVICE QUALITY AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN 4-STAR HOTELS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. The measures of competitive advantage used are customer satisfaction and market differentiation. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. The targeted population was the twelve (12) 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria, listed on Finelib.com Nigeria Directory and Search Engine, which consists of managers from the 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted a census sampling technique since the population of the study was relatively small. Data for the study was collected through a structured questionnaire, while the four-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses from the respondents. Data was analysed using the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient Statistics technique was used to test the hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 29.0. The results of the study showed that there is a significant positive relationship between service quality and the measures of competitive advantage in 4-star hotels in Rivers State. The study concludes that service quality has a strong relationship with competitive advantage in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study therefore recommends amongst others that 4-star hotels in Rivers State should implement ongoing training programs for front-line and support staff. Emphasis should be placed on service responsiveness, empathy, communication skills, and problem-solving.

Keywords: Competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, market differentiation, service quality

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive hospitality industry, hotels must continuously adapt and innovate to maintain a strong market position. The concept of competitive advantage has become central to strategic management discussions, especially in service-oriented sectors such as the hotel

industry. Competitive advantage refers to an organization's ability to deliver greater value to customers or operate more efficiently than competitors, thereby securing a superior market position (Barney, 1991). In the hotel sector, achieving competitive advantage involves creating distinct value propositions that lead to increased customer satisfaction and stronger market differentiation (Grant, 2016).

Customer satisfaction, a key measure of competitive advantage, reflects the extent to which a hotel's services meet or exceed guest expectations. It is widely accepted that satisfied customers are more likely to return and recommend the hotel to others, thereby enhancing customer loyalty and revenue (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Market differentiation, another measure of competitive advantage, involves the development of unique service features or experiences that distinguish a hotel from its competitors (Porter, 1980). Hotels that successfully differentiate their offerings can better attract and retain customers, thus strengthening their market share and profitability.

Despite the recognized importance of competitive advantage, many hotels in Rivers State, particularly 4-star establishments, struggle to achieve and sustain it. There is a noticeable gap in understanding the specific drivers that contribute to competitive advantage in this context. While prior studies have examined competitive advantage in various industries, there remains a dearth of empirical research focusing on how service quality impacts competitive advantage within the hotel sector in Rivers State. This gap is particularly significant given the unique service expectations and competitive dynamics of the hospitality industry.

Service quality, the predictor variable in this study, has long been acknowledged as a vital factor influencing organizational performance in service sectors. It encompasses the overall assessment of a service by customers based on their perceptions of service delivery (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). High service quality leads to enhanced customer satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty—all of which are critical for achieving a sustainable competitive edge (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

In the context of hotels, service quality includes several dimensions such as responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Hotels that consistently provide high-quality services are better positioned to satisfy customers and distinguish themselves in a crowded marketplace. However, in Rivers State, anecdotal evidence and limited academic research suggest that many 4-star hotels face challenges in consistently delivering superior service quality, thereby compromising their ability to achieve competitive advantage. This study sought to fill this gap by empirically examining the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage in 4-star hotels in Rivers State by using measures of competitive advantage such as; customer satisfaction and market differentiation.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- i. To examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- ii. To determine the relationship between service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

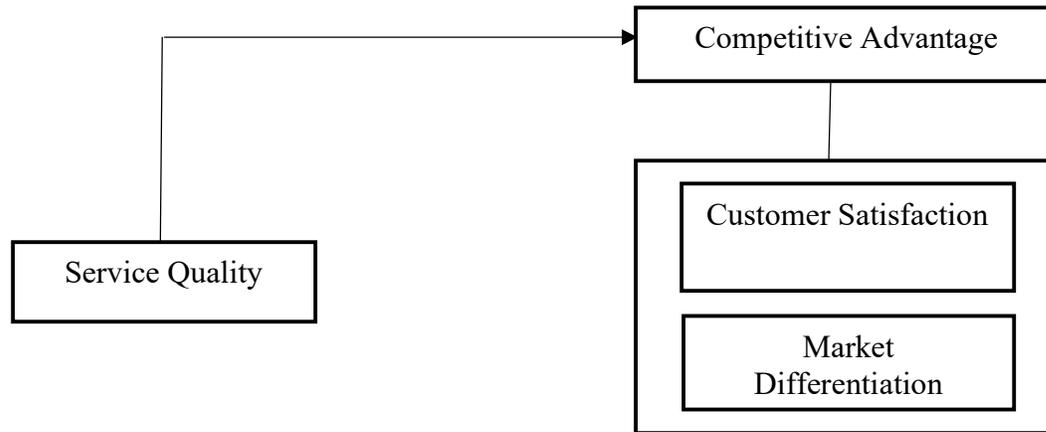


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Indicating the Relationship Between Service Quality and Competitive Advantage.

Source: Researcher’s desk (2025) measures sourced from (Sachitra, 2016)

Research Questions

The Research questions are as follows

- i. What is the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria?
- ii. What is the relationship between service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are as follows

- i. There is no significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.
- ii. There is no significant relationship between service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is a theoretical framework that underscores the critical importance of organizational resources in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. Initially introduced by Wernerfelt (1984) and expanded upon by Barney (1991), RBV suggests that the unique resources and capabilities possessed by an organization form the foundation of its success. These resources, when effectively utilized, can enable firms to achieve a competitive edge that is both sustainable and defensible against rivals.

RBV is predicated on the assumption that resources within an organization are heterogeneous and immobile. Heterogeneity refers to the unique mix of resources that differ across organizations, while immobility implies that these resources are not easily transferable or replicable by competitors. According to Barney (1991), a resource must exhibit four key characteristics to confer a sustainable competitive advantage: it must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). Resources that meet these criteria enable organizations to exploit opportunities, neutralize threats, and outperform competitors in the long run.

In the context of operations strategy, RBV provides a robust framework for understanding how organizations can harness their internal capabilities to achieve operational excellence and competitive advantage. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the need for firms to identify and develop their unique resources and capabilities—both tangible and intangible—to create value for stakeholders (Grant, 1991).

Conceptual Review

Concept of Service Quality

Service quality plays a pivotal role in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall business success, particularly in the hospitality industry. It encompasses the consistent delivery of services that meet or exceed customer expectations through effective planning, execution, and monitoring of operational processes (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). In Rivers State, Nigeria, the hospitality sector faces significant pressure to enhance service quality in response to growing customer demands and increased competition. Bagshaw (2017) asserts that the quality of service is influenced by factors such as employee training, operational efficiency, and the availability of modern facilities. These elements collectively determine how well businesses can cater to customer needs while maintaining a competitive edge.

Service quality is also closely tied to the external environment, with regulatory frameworks, cultural expectations, and economic conditions all playing a role. For instance, government policies on health and safety standards, customer protection laws, and quality assurance regulations directly impact the service delivery process (Ekpo, 2014).

Concept of Competitive Advantage

Sachitra (2016) posits that competitive advantage serves as a fundamental driver of superior performance. It refers to a firm's capability to enhance product quality, lower production costs, expand market share, or increase profitability. It also reflects the ability of firms within a particular region to effectively compete with those in other locations. Additionally, competitive advantage can be described as the extent to which a firm capitalizes on opportunities, mitigates risks, and minimizes expenses. By leveraging competitive advantage, a firm can achieve profitability levels that exceed the industry average.

Competitive advantage refers to the distinctive attributes or strategies that enable an organization to outperform its competitors and achieve superior market positioning. In Rivers State, Nigeria, competitive advantage is particularly vital for businesses operating in the hospitality industry, as it drives customer retention, profitability, and market share in an intensely competitive environment. The concept of competitive advantage is grounded in delivering superior value to customers through differentiation, cost leadership, and innovation, allowing firms to secure a sustainable edge over their rivals (Porter, 1985).

Measures of Competitive Advantage

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a critical determinant of success for businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, as it reflects the extent to which an organization's products or services meet or exceed customer expectations (Oliver, 1997). In Rivers State, where the hospitality sector is growing amidst evolving customer preferences and competitive pressures, customer satisfaction is a vital element for achieving customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term business sustainability (Morrison, 2019). Businesses that prioritize customer satisfaction gain a competitive advantage, enhancing their reputation and market share (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Customer satisfaction stems from various factors, including service quality, product offerings, value for money, and overall customer experience (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Service quality, in particular, is a dominant predictor of satisfaction, as it directly impacts how customers perceive their interactions with a business (Fornell, 1992). In the hospitality industry, where personalized services and attention to detail are paramount, factors such as responsiveness, reliability, empathy, and assurance significantly influence customer satisfaction levels (Bitner, 1990). For instance, ensuring that customer inquiries and complaints are addressed promptly and professionally can create a lasting positive impression (Ladhari, 2009).

Market Differentiation

Market differentiation is a strategic approach that enables businesses to stand out in competitive industries by offering unique value propositions that distinguish their products or services from competitors. In Rivers State's hospitality sector, market differentiation plays a pivotal role in attracting and retaining customers while driving sustainable growth (Porter, 1980). It involves leveraging various factors, such as quality, innovation, customer experience, branding, and specialization, to create a compelling identity that resonates with target audiences (Aaker, 1996).

The essence of market differentiation lies in identifying and emphasizing unique selling points (USPs) that cater to specific customer needs or preferences. In the hospitality industry, this can include superior service quality, exclusive amenities, personalized customer experiences, or the incorporation of local culture and traditions (Kotler & Keller, 2015). For instance, hotels and restaurants in Rivers State that integrate authentic Nigerian cuisine, traditional art, and cultural performances into their offerings can create a unique appeal for both local and international guests. Such differentiation enhances customer engagement, fosters loyalty, and sets businesses apart in a crowded marketplace (Hosseini, 2014).

Empirical Review

Service Quality and Competitive Advantage

Kandampully (2002) emphasized that delivering superior service quality can result in long-term benefits, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the ability to charge premium prices. In his study, he found that organizations that invest in high service quality are often able to develop a unique market position, which helps them maintain a competitive advantage. High-quality services build trust with customers, making them more likely to return and recommend the services to others. This positive word-of-mouth and strong reputation further strengthen the organization's position in the marketplace. Such outcomes, according to Brown and Dube

(2015), are crucial because retaining existing customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. Thus, service quality directly impacts customer loyalty, which is a key source of competitive advantage in the hospitality sector.

In addition, Brown and Dube (2015) also noted that service quality helps organizations differentiate their offerings from those of competitors, especially in markets where product offerings are similar or commoditized. In industries such as hospitality, where customers often have a wide range of choices, providing exceptional service quality is one of the few factors that can set a company apart. By ensuring consistent high-quality service, firms can create a unique value proposition that appeals to a loyal customer base, contributing to their competitive advantage.

Focusing specifically on the Nigerian context, Obi and Okafor (2021) explored how service quality impacts competitive advantage within the hospitality industry in Rivers State. They found that hotels and restaurants that consistently offer superior service quality are able to outperform competitors in a market where customer expectations are high.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. Therefore, the target population of this study was the twelve (12) 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria, listed on Finelib.com Nigeria Directory and Search Engine. Participants of the study were selected in line with the unit of analysis which is the organization level study. However, the study elements was (36) which consist of managers from 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. Census sampling method was adopted because the target population of the study was relatively small. The main data collection instrument for the study was structured questionnaire. A total of thirty-six (36) copies of questionnaires were distributed, and 34 were eventually used for the study. Data was analysed using mean and standard deviations with charts to display the study variables, while inferential statistics such as the Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient Statistics technique was used to test the hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science version 29.0 for the purpose of examining the nature and proposed association.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Description on Range of correlation Pearson values and the corresponding level of association

Range of Pearson with positive and negative sign values	Strength of Association
± 0.80 – 0.99	Very Strong
± 0.60 – 0.79	Strong
± 0.40 – 0.59	Moderate
± 0.20 – 0.39	Weak
± 0.00 – 0.19	Very Weak

Source: Adopted from Ahaiauzu & Asawo, 2016, *Advance Social Research Methods*

The positive (+) sign in the values of (*B*) indicates a positive relationship, while the negative (-) sign in the value of (*B*) indicates an indirect/negative or inverse relationship. Thus, the sign of

the *B* explains the direction of association between the two variables. The above table forms our yardstick for the determination of the level of relationship between the variables of the dimensions and those of the measures as understudied. These relationships range from very weak to very strong.

Relationship between Service Quality and Competitive Advantage

Table 2: Correlation between Service Quality and Competitive Advantage

Correlations

			service quality	customer satisfaction	market differentiation
Spearman's rho	service quality	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.783**	.722**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	<.001	<.001
		N	34	34	34
	customer satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	.783**	1.000	.593**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.	<.001
		N	34	34	34
	market differentiation	Correlation Coefficient	.722**	.593**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	.
		N	34	34	34

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 2 presented the Spearman’s rank order correlation matrix for the relationship between operations strategy and the measures of competitive advantage (customer satisfaction and market differentiation) in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. From the data given in the table 2, the correlation results for **Ho1** and **Ho2** were given as:

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.

From the analysis, the result showed the correlation coefficient of $r = 0.783$ which shows the direction and strength of this relationship. The coefficient represents a strong positive correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. The test of significance shows that this relationship is significant at $p = .001 < 0.05$ which makes possible to the generalization of our findings to the study population. Therefore, based on observed findings, the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria

Ho2: There is no significant relationship service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.

From the analysis, the result showed the correlation coefficient of $r = 0.722$ which shows the direction and strength of this relationship. The coefficient represents a strong positive correlation between service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. The test of significance shows that this relationship is significant at $p = .001 < 0.05$ which makes possible to the generalization of our findings to the study population. Therefore, based on observed findings, the null hypothesis earlier stated is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between service quality and market differentiation in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The first and second hypotheses sought to examine the relationship between service quality and competitive advantage. Hence it was hypothesized that there is no significant relationship between service quality and competitive advantage. These hypotheses (**Ho1** and **Ho2**) were tested using the Spearman rank order correlation technique. The study findings reveal that service quality has a strong positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction and market differentiation.

The finding agrees with previous study by Kandampully (2002) who emphasized that delivering superior service quality can result in long-term benefits, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the ability to charge premium prices. In his study, he found that organizations that invest in high service quality are often able to develop a unique market position, which helps them maintain a competitive advantage. High-quality services build trust with customers, making them more likely to return and recommend the services to others. This positive word-of-mouth and strong reputation further strengthen the organization's position in the marketplace.

The findings also agree with Brown and Dube (2015) who noted that service quality helps organizations differentiate their offerings from those of competitors, especially in markets where product offerings are similar or commoditized. In industries such as hospitality, where customers often have a wide range of choices, providing exceptional service quality is one of the few factors that can set a company apart. By ensuring consistent high-quality service, firms can create a unique value proposition that appeals to a loyal customer base, contributing to their competitive advantage.

Again, the findings agree with Obi and Okafor (2021) who explored how service quality impacts competitive advantage within the hospitality industry in Rivers State. They found that hotels and restaurants that consistently offer superior service quality are able to outperform competitors in a market where customer expectations are high.

The findings agree with Nwachukwu and Olorunfemi (2019) who further highlighted that service quality also influences the reputation of businesses in the Nigerian hospitality industry, with a direct link to customer trust and long-term business sustainability. According to Kim and Lee (2019), when firms invest in training their staff and implementing quality assurance processes, they are better equipped to meet customer needs, which leads to greater operational efficiency.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The basis of the findings of this study concludes that service quality has a positive strong relationship with customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. It is also affirmed that that knowledge resource has a positive strong relationship with customer satisfaction in 4-star hotels in Rivers State, Nigeria. This means that as 4-star hotels in River State, Nigeria enhance their service quality activities, there will be increase in customer satisfaction and market differentiation.

Based on the relationship from the findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

- i. To enhance service quality, 4-star hotels in Rivers State should implement ongoing training programs for front-line and support staff. Emphasis should be placed on service responsiveness, empathy, communication skills, and problem-solving. Improved employee competencies in these areas will lead to better guest interactions, which directly boost customer satisfaction and foster positive reviews and repeat patronage.
- ii. Hotels should develop and enforce standardized service procedures (e.g., check-in protocols, housekeeping standards, and complaint resolution systems) to ensure consistency in guest experiences. Consistent and reliable service delivery enhances the perceived quality of service, resulting in higher customer satisfaction and enabling the hotel to differentiate itself in a competitive market.

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