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EXPLORING ATTENDEES' PERCEPTIONS ON SERVICE QUALITY PROVIDED AT THE VAAL RIVER CARNIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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-Abstract-

There is growing evidence globally that the majority of attendees' at carnival events complain about the service quality with regard to management, planning and organisation of facilities utilised at these events. South Africa is no exception and the complaints include the environment, security, client services, parking space, food accessibility and cultural activities**.** However, there is a lack of evidence in studies examining this issue, especially in developing countries like South Africa. Hence, the purpose of the study is to explore attendees' perceptions of the quality of services provided at the Vaal River Carnival in South Africa. Considering the situational factors and the event environment, a non-probability sampling procedure was adopted. In this regard, a cross-sectional survey approach for collecting data from a conveniently selected sample of 335 attendees at the festival was undertaken**.** An exploratory factor procedure revealed seven factors namely facility access, location, food service, information, visitors interaction, valence and entertainment dimensions of carnival service quality construct. For practitioners and academics, the study presents a list of factors they may wish to consider in attempting to generate a greater degree of service quality among carnival settings.

Keywords: Service quality, Carnival, Factor analysis, Attendees, Perceptions

JEL: Classification: M31, M39, M12, M54

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In the last three decades, it has been acclaimed that special events are a significant factor in the tourism development and destination marketing literature (Esu, 2014). Likewise, the recognition of carnival events as a socio-economic driver of tourism marketing has impelled the emergence of an interest in the Vaal River Carnival held in the Vaal Triangle region. The first Vaal River Carnival was held in 2004 and attracted an audience of 10 000 visitors (Hlongwane, 2013). According to the latest press statement released by Emfuleni Local Council (2016), the event attracted more than 23 000 attendees and created more than 850 jobs during the Carnival period. This event can be seen as a tourist and visitor destination that promotes the cultural and heritage services of the people as a means of attracting and enhancing life experience.

Currently, the Vaal River Carnival presents over 15 exciting events, which include an arts and culture carnival parade, an arts and craft exhibition, a beach party and music genre festivals such as Kwaito and hip-hop (Emfuleni Local Council, 2016). There is also traditional dance, poetry, drama, fashion exhibitions, a wedding expo and river cruises throughout the month of September, making it one of the most popular and rapidly-growing carnivals in the country. In addition, the carnival profiles the easy access of the Vaal's road infrastructure with far less traffic congestion in comparison to other cities within the Gauteng province. The study intends to explore attendees' perceptions of the quality of services provided at the Vaal River Carnival in South Africa. Furthermore, the researchers are interested in identifying dimensions of service quality that attendees at carnival events value most, owing to the fact that attendees are sensitive to services provided to them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite its strategic importance, service quality is regarded as a complex construct and as such generates many debates regarding its conceptualisation and measurement. Several researchers define

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service quality as the difference between a customer's expectations for the service encounter and the perceptions of the service received (Saghier & Nathan, 2013). This research advocates Oliver's (1980) assertion that expectation disconfirmation theory (EDT) is an important theory that can assist in and measurement of perceived quality of services or products in a service environment. Although the theory had its origin in the field of psychology, it has since been adopted in marketing research, including consumer research, among others.

EDT is a cognitive theory that seeks to explain post-purchase or post-adoption satisfaction as a function of expectations, perceived performance and disconfirmation of belief (Oliver, 1980). The theory posits that expectations, disconfirmation and performance influence customer satisfaction (Lankton & McKnight, 2012). Most noteworthy is that EDT is premised on two fundamental variables, namely expectation or desire and experience or perceived performance (Elkhani & Bakri, 2014). The former relates to the initial expectation or desire about a specific performance during the pre-purchase period (Patterson and Johnson, 1997), while the latter is related to the after-purchase period that the customer experiences after perceiving a real performance (Spreng & Spreng, 2003). The difference between initial desire or expectation and perceived performance or experience is known as disconfirmation of desire or expectation (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004). This difference is important because the basis of the theory is that disconfirmation is a comparison that a person makes between expectation/desire and experience/performance. A common theme in the EDT literature is that satisfaction is a function of the size and direction of positive disconfirmation when the consumers are satisfied and vice versa (Usman & Mokhtar, 2016)

It is further suggested that consumer expectations of service quality are increasing as people are becoming more critical of the quality of service they experience (Wirtz & Lovelock, 2016). As such, there is a need for integration of EDT and quality dimensions in developing scales or instruments to measure customer expectations *vis a vis* customer perceptions (Al-Nuaimi, Mahmood, Mustapha & Jebur, 2015). Currently, there are two popular models of service quality used

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all over the world to measure the quality of service, namely SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (Tariq, Mahmood & Low (2013).

SERVQUAL was developed by the proponents of the American school of thought, Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1985) who initially conducted an exploratory investigation to delineate service quality formally, identified ten dimensions, namely reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, competence, access, courtesy, communication, security and responsiveness. Later, after further extensive research, the authors reduced the initial ten dimensions to five, namely reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness (Brown & Moore, 2012). SERVPERF was developed by Cronin and Taylor (1992) and was a modification of the SERVQUAL model based upon the performance theory. One of the main differences between SERVQUAL and SERVPERF is that the latter does not take into account customer expectations, therefore, SERVQUAL offers better diagnostic information (Jayasundara, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the SERVQUAL model will be adopted. This decision was informed by the extant literature on measuring service quality that tends to focus and prefer the use of the SERVQUAL model.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is growing evidence globally that the majority of tourists, visitors and the community attending carnival events complain about the service quality with regard to management, planning and organisation of facilities utilised at the events. South Africa is no exception and the complaints include the environment, security, client services, parking space, food accessibility and cultural activities (Hlongwane, 2013). Currently, no known study has attempted to investigate the attendee's perceptions on the quality of service provided during Vaal River Carnival. Notably, the work of Muresherwa, Machisa and Steyn (2017) on the other hand focused on residents' perceptions of the impact of a carnival in Cape Town. It is an important supposition then, that the service quality of Vaal River Carnival from avid attendees' perspectives be explored in order to eliminate the existing knowledge gap within the festival industry in

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South Africa. Furthermore, the findings emanating from this study will provide a framework on the service quality provision deployed by carnival/festival events organisers in South Africa.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design and methodology

The study was cross-sectional in nature and a quantitative methodology approach, grounded by a positivist social sciences paradigm, was employed in this study. The quantitative approach is viewed as systematic and structured, aimed at obtaining information from respondents in a direct, open manner (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2007).

4.2 Sample and data collection method

In order to achieve the stated study purpose, a non-probability convenience sampling procedure was pursued to recruit participants during the annual Vaal River Carnival in September 2016. An intercept survey was used to collect data for the study since this method has the advantage of speed, is less costly and the researcher has control over respondent type. A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. The researcher distributed 400 questionnaires with the aid of three trained field workers to obtain maximum participation of respondents for data collection. Of these distributed questionnaires, only 335 questionnaires (response rate of 84%) were useful in the final analysis of the results.

4.3 Measuring instrument

The measuring instrument consisted of Section A which elicited respondents' biographical information and Section Bwhich measured the dimensions of service quality. The scale for the service quality dimensions was adapted from Yoshida and James (2011) and modified to fit the context of South Africa. The instrument was adopted because it captures three dimensions of service quality (aesthetic, technical and functional) which underlies the interactions between customers and the service environment. These items were

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measured on seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Sample composition

An analysis of the demographic profile of respondents shows that the majority of respondents (55%; n=186) were males and the rest (45%; n=149) were females. In terms of the age groups, the largest group (25%; n=83) was composed of respondents whose ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, followed by (24%; n=80) respondents whose age group ranged from 34 to 41 years of age. Of the 335 respondents, the majority (48%; n=160) were accompanied by friends, while 32 percent (n=108) were accompanied by families and the remaining participants, (20%; n=67) were alone. More than half (51%; n=171) of the participants reside in the Vaal region, while the remaining participants (49%; n=164) were from other parts of the Gauteng region.

5.2 Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Prior to factor analysis, the Kaizer-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and the Bartlett's test of sphericity were computed to confirm whether the data were suitable factor analysis. The KMO test yielded a sampling adequacy value of 0.842(>0.50) and the Bartlett's test displayed an approximate chi-square of 1850.69 with 253 degrees of freedom (df) at a significant level of 0.000. Both measures affirmed that the data is satisfactory for a factor analysis procedure (Kaiser, 1974).

Principal component analysis with varimax rotation then was conducted on the data set to identify the different factors, which contribute to service quality dimensions as perceived by the attendee's to the Vaal River Carnival. The factor analysis procedure produced seven factors (eigenvalue>1.0), which explained 70.580 percent (>50%) of the total variance. Loading >0.50 on a factor was considered satisfactory (Malhotra, 2010). The rotated factor matrix, which shows the factors and their items as well as the factor loadings is reported in Table 1.

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Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Matrix

No	Subscale items	Factor loadings	Eigen-value	Total variance explained	Cumulative variance explained
FACILITY ACCESS			**12.461**	**37.761**	**37.761**
1	The facility was suited for the event/s	**.884**			
2	I am impressed with the design of the facility for the event/s	**.882**			
3	The facility is safe	**.829**			
4	The facility was well maintained	**.821**			
5	I can move easily in the facility	**.694**			
6	It is easy to get in and out of the facility	**.691**			
7	The facility was clean	**.673**			
LOCATION			**2.782**	**8.431**	**46.192**
8	This facility has made provision for ample parking	**.904**			
9	Local roads make it easy to get to event	**.869**			
10	This facility is easy to exit after the event	**.845**			
11	Signs are easy to read	**.729**			
12	This event/s parking is conveniently located	**.627**			
FOOD SERVICE			**2.382**	**7.217**	**53.049**
13	A wide-variety of food/s is available	**.783**			
14	The facility provided high-quality food/s	**.776**			
15	The quality of food/s stalls impressed me	**.760**			
16	The closing time of the event/s is convenient for me	**.512**			
17	Post-event/s entertainment are exciting	**.503**			
INFORMATION			**1.806**	**5.473**	**58.882**
18	Up-to-date information is available of the event/s	**.775**			
19	Information on the event/s is easy to obtain	**.744**			
20	The time for watching the event/s is convenient for me	**.737**			
21	I could easily get information about the event/s through the internet	**.654**			
VISITORS INTERACTION			**1.577**	**4.778**	**63.660**
22	I find that other visitors left me with a good impression of the	**.845**			

	service provided				
23	I find that visitors follow the rules and regulations of the event	**.830**			
24	Visitors generally interacted well with others	**.806**			
25	I am impressed with the behaviour of other visitors	**.653**			
26	I feel a sense of family among the visitors at the event/s	**.556**			
27	The demeanour (behaviour) of staff is pleasant	**.540**			
VALENCE			**1.204**	**3.649**	**67.309**
28	I evaluate the outcome of the event/s favourably	**.644**			
29	Attending the event has helped me to become a loyal visitor	**.602**			
30	I feel good about what I get from the event/s	**.592**			
ENTERTAINMENT			**1.080**	**3.272**	**70.580**
31	The event/s are exciting for me	**.698**			
32	Pre-event/s entertainment are exciting	**.688**			
33	The event/s are entertaining to me	**.601**			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy=0.842; Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at p<0.000, with chi-square=1850.69 and 253 degrees of freedom. Cumulative explained variance with a seven dimension structure =70.580 percent.					

5.3 Assessment of the measurement model

After the extraction of the factors through an exploratory factor analysis procedure, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 24.0 was performed to assess and validate the measurement model. Model fit (misfit) was assessed using indices suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (2012) as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Measurement Model Fit Results

Fit indices	**Acceptable fit indices**	**CFA** *(Measurement model)*
Chi square/degree of freedom	3.0	2.89
GFI	> 0.90	0.918
IFI	> 0.90	0.919
TLI	> 0.90	0.893
CFI	> 0.90	0.918
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.77

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The CFA results shown in Table 2 confirm that the overall fit of the measurement model was satisfactory.

5.4 Correlation analysis

Prior to the use of correlations, tests for normality in the data were concluded. The results showed that the data were not normally distributed, hence the non-parametric Spearman's correlation coefficients (*r*) was computed (Pallant, 2010). The results of the correlation analysis are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

F Dimensions	**FAC**	LOC	FOOD	**INFO**	VIS	VAL	ENT
Facility access (FAC)	1	.629**	.403**	.420**	.565**	.546**	.420**
Location (LOC)	.629**	1	.338**	.350**	.444**	.435**	.399**
Food service (FOOD)	.403**	.338**	1	.303**	.389**	.349**	.498**
Information (INFO)	.420**	.350**	.303**	1	.488**	.496**	.522**
Visitors interaction (VIS)	.565**	.444**	.389**	.488**	1	.644**	.470**
Valence (VAL)	.546**	.435**	.349**	.496**	.644**	1	.517**
Entertainment (ENT)	.420**	.399**	.498**	.522**	.470**	.517**	1
MEANS	**5.82**	**5.775**	**5.183**	**6.115**	**6.112**	**6.113**	**5.908**
SD	**1.901**	**2.055**	**2.183**	**1.428**	**1.548**	**1.601**	**1.538**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results in Table 3, indicate positive and significant inter-factor correlation relationships among the service quality factors ranging from r= .303 to r=.644 at 0.01 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) signifying convergence among the dimensions. An analysis of the mean scores reveals that all the six extracted factors had relatively high mean scores ranging from 5.183 to 6.115 with the corresponding SD values ranging between 1.845 and 2.183 (based on the seven-point Likert scales), which suggest that all the factors were important to study participants.

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5.5 Reliability and validity

The reliability and validity values of the constructs under investigation are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: Composite Reliability and Accuracy Analysis Statistics

Research constructs	Cronbach's Alpha Test		CR	AVE	Factor loading	Highest SV
	Item-total	Alpha value				
Facility access	0.830	0.931	0.930	0.653	0.648	0.396
Location	0.644	0.903	0.908	0.624	0.783	0.396
Food service	0.756	0.815	0806	0.673	0.703	0248
Information	0.654	0.817	0.810	0.514	0.692	0.272
Visitors interaction	0.715	0.885	0.841	0.634	0.810	0.415
Valence	0.703	0.871	0.834	0.621	0.722	0.415
Entertainment	0.671	0.776	0.773	0.692	0.821	0.272

Both the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability (CR) values for all measurement items surpass the acceptable benchmark of 0.70 and justify the internal consistency of the measuring instrument as suggested by Hammond and Wellington (2013).

In order to confirm construct validity, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted for each of the dimensions of service quality, which yielded item-total correlations of above threshold of 0.50; thus, affirming construct validity of the instrument. All factor loadings exceeded the 0.5 level and the average variance extracted (AVE) computed all surpassed the 0.5 threshold, which suggested convergent validity. Lastly, discriminant validity was confirmed by AVE values that were greater than the shared variance (SV) values in line with Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommendation.

6. DISCUSSION

Factor 1, **facility access** (eigenvalue=12.461), accounts for approximately 38 percent of the total explained variance and

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consisted of seven items with factor loadings ranging from 0.673 to 0.884. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=5.82. The items that loaded onto this factor relate to access or accessibility towards the event and tangibility or physical features of the environment quality, *inter alia* the conscious design of space to create certain effects in customers that will increase their purchase likelihood. This sub-dimension has been identified as one of the most influential factors in determining the physical environment quality of events (Wu & Ko, 2013). Therefore, carnival organisers should secure additional resources to improve the environment quality of their events.

Factor 2, **location** (eigenvalue=2.782), accounts for approximately 8 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of five items with factor loadings ranging from 0.627 to 0.904. The result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=5.775. The items that loaded onto this factor relate to the provision of an overall distribution blueprint for a particular region (Wu & Ko, 2013). Parking, roads and signs are important factors customers consider in terms of the location of festivals or events. Consequently, several researchers identified location as a sub-dimension of the physical environment quality.

Factor 3, **food service** (eigenvalue = 2.382), accounts for approximately 7 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of five items with factor loadings ranging from 0.503 to 0.703. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=5.183. In addition, the literature also suggests a significant linkage between this service dimension and customer satisfaction as well as loyalty retention (Wong & Fong, 2012; Ha & Jang, 2010).

Factor 4, **information** (eigenvalue = 1.806), accounts for approximately 5 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of four items with factor loadings ranging from 0.654 to 0.775. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=6.115. The items that loaded onto this factor relate to the feasibility of obtaining updated information about the programmes of the events and other related services. This factor is regarded as one of the three specific sub-dimensions of program quality, which relate to

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customers perceptions about the excellency of the programme (Ko & Pastore, 2005), therefore, it should be included in the overall service quality conceptualisation.

Factor 5, **visitors interaction** (eigenvalue = 1.577), accounts for approximately 5 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of six items with factor loadings ranging from 0.540 to 0.845. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=6112. Items that loaded onto this factor relate to attendees subjective perceptions of how the service is delivered during the service encounter. In the context of the present study, displaying attitudes and behaviours towards other visitors/attendees has the potential of enriching their event experience.

Factor 6, **valence** (eigenvalue = 1.204), accounts for approximately 4 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.661 to 0.720. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=6.113. The items that loaded onto this factor relate to customer's post-consumption assessments of whether the service outcome was acceptable or unacceptable (Ko & Pastore, 2005), *inter alia* feedback on how the service is perceived by the customer. Alternatively, this factor reflects the degree to which an episode is evaluated. Several researchers have indicated the importance of this sub-dimension of interactional quality (Kelly & Turley, 2001).

Factor 7, **entertainment** (eigenvalue = 1.080), accounts for approximately 3 percent of the total explained variance and consisted of three items with factor loadings ranging from 0.601 to 0.698. This result was also corroborated by a relatively high mean score M=5.908. The items that loaded onto this factor relate to perceptions of the quality of secondary products offered in conjunction with the events. Similarly, this has been identified as a sub-dimension of augmented services (Ko, Zhang, Cattani & Pastore, 2011).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this study need to be qualified in light of the limitations. Although it is likely that the sub-dimensions are significant in predicting attendees perceptions over service quality of

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the Vaal River Carnival, future studies would be required to ascertain whether the proposed factor structure is equally applicable to various carnival contexts. The study discussed different factors that may explain the results. It is possible that the variables used are too general and fail to capture specific dimensions related to attendees' experiences. Therefore, the conclusions should remain tentative and further empirical research is warranted to interrogate various variables impacted by the study like perceived satisfaction and future behavioural intentions. The cross-sectional nature of the study poses further limitations in the study. Longitudinal studies could be conducted across different carnival event categories in South Africa to provide fertile ground to examine similarities and differences between findings of such studies. Furthermore, instead of relying on a purely quantitative design, a mixed method approach could be considered in future studies on this topic. A qualitative design may be helpful in making follow-ups to the responses provided in the quantitative design.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

For practitioners and academics, the study presents a list of factors they may wish to consider in attempting to generate a greater degree of service quality among carnival settings. The success of an effective events development strategy lies in a unique marketing strategy. It is recommended that an understanding of how visitors perceive carnival events would be helpful for municipality planners and marketers to better structure their tourism and arts and culture resources and activities. Evaluation and assessment of customer perception relating to dimensions of service quality is critical as it allows management to modify strategies in order to increase visitors and tourists' attraction to various destinations. To this end, socio-demographic characteristics should also be considered and factored into the marketing and product strategy of carnival events especially in the implementation of image marketing (promoting the sense of place) and destination marketing (selling the service) strategies.

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9. CONCLUSION

Events with strong positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen in the tourism, arts and culture decision-making process, therefore, service quality has a critical role to play in the development of various models within the carnival industry. The critical affective dimensions of service quality, identified through the factor analysis procedure are facility access, location, food service, information, visitor interaction, valence and entertainment. These mentioned dimensions are necessary for managerial interventions and ought to be prioritised in the development of a strategy of service quality for carnival events. It is also interesting to note that the measures/scales applied fit very well to the carnival context assessed by the statistical measures of accuracy tests identified in the study. The findings of the study provide carnival event management and administrators valuable insights into improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service quality.

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