

EXAMINING SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE E-COMPLAINTS AND SERVICE QUALITY IN BANGKOK HOTELS

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Abstract

Purpose – There are few studies examining the reliability of e-complaints in the hotel industry. This topic is important for hotel managers as it can help them in distinguishing emotional complaints from factual complaints. Therefore, this study aims to examine and classify customers' e-complaints regarding hotel service quality and classify them into subjective and objective categories based on factual and non-factual opinions.

Design/methodology – Content analysis and descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the data (e-complaints about Bangkok hotels) collected from a secondary source.

Findings – It was found that approximately 54% of e-complaints regarding service quality in Bangkok hotels were objective complaints (factual opinions) while 46% were subjective complaints (personal feelings). The study indicated that customer complaints resulted from hotel performance which was below than customer expectations. In addition, both types of e-complaint were found to be associated with the five dimensions of SERVQUAL, implying that hotels still had problems with service delivery in all service dimensions.

Originality of the research – Due to the insufficient literature on the reliability of customer e-complaints in the hotel industry, this study identified the characteristics of subjective and objective e-complaints and their relationship with SERVQUAL, thereby extending knowledge of e-complaints and service quality in the hotel industry. The findings are expected to assist hotel managers in better understanding the nature of online complaints, thus offering a complementary approach to service improvement.

Keywords subjective and objective e-complaints; service quality; hotels; TripAdvisor; Bangkok

1. INTRODUCTION

With a large number of choices for hotel accommodation, customers often search for information about hotels from online reviews before making a decision (Murphy et al. 2007; Sangpikul 2019). Generally, the quality of hotels can be indicated by the content of reviews. For example, positive reviews may indicate good quality and attract customers while negative reviews or electronic word-of-mouth regarding unhappy experiences (e-complaints) about a hotel is likely to affect customer decision making and confidence about booking it (Murphy et al. 2007). Today, hotel customers increasingly rely on the information provided by online sources, and often perceive it as more reliable and influential than that offered by service providers (Fotis et al. 2012; O'Connor 2010). With easy access to review websites, customers may post or share messages about their

bad experiences at a hotel. Hotels who fail to deliver services that meet customer expectations may lose customers and reputation because of the negative word-of-mouth from dissatisfied customers (Dawson and Titz 2012; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015).

A complaint can also assist hotels in obtaining useful feedback about the weaknesses of their services, thereby leading to service improvement (Barlow and Moller 2008). Customer complaints from travel review websites can be useful in informing hotel managers about the problems of their services. There has been a number of e-complaint studies in the hotel industry on service delivery (e.g. Au et al. 2014; Hu et al. 2019; Zheng et al. 2009) which focused on various topics such as complaint categories, complaint motives, factors associated with online complaints, and customer complaint behaviours (Alrawadieh and Law 2019; Au et al. 2014; Fernandes and Fernandes 2018; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sparks and Browning 2010; Zheng et al. 2009).

Although some studies have been conducted on e-complaints in the hotel industry, the reliability of the sources has not received much attention. According to the literature (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sangpikul 2021; Sparks and Browning 2010), some complaints are based on subjective opinions or customers' personal feelings and emotions (e.g. poor front desk services or impoliteness of hotel employees). Furthermore, many subjective complaints were unclear (or even unfair) as a result of the emotive and subjective nature of the content (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sangpikul 2021). In contrast, other reviewers were found to adopt a more objective approach basing their opinions on factual information as opposed to personal feelings. These objective complaints (e.g. waiting for 1 hour check-in or no availability of hair dryer in guest room) may be more useful to hotels in resolving service problems.

Therefore, examining customers' e-complaints based on factual and non-factual information is important for hotel managers. In particular, the subjective complaints seem to have more concern on the reliability issues due to lack of tangible evidence. The examination of these issues can help hotel managers to distinguish between subjective and objective complaints, and also to prioritize service corrections. In particular, objective complaints are likely to produce more reliable evidence because they were fact-based opinions and consequently help hotel managers to identify the causes of service failure.

Past studies also revealed that most e-complaints in the hotel industry are related to service quality such as poor employee courtesy, inexperienced employees, slow check-in, poor maintenance of guest room facilities, and poor food and beverage services (Au et al. 2014; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sparks and Browning 2010). However, there is still insufficient literature to understand how subjective and objective complaints are related to service quality, particularly the SERVQUAL framework. Examining their relationships will help hotel managers to better understand how customers subjectively and objectively evaluate the service performance of the hotels in each service dimension. The findings may help to guide service recovery as well as to extend the understanding of SERVQUAL from customers' subjective and objective feedback, thereby providing different results from past studies.

Given the existing research gaps, this study, therefore, has the objective to 1) examine and classify customers' e-complaints in Bangkok hotels into subjective and objective categories based on non-factual and factual opinions, respectively and 2) to classify the e-complaints into the SERVQUAL dimensions. The findings will be useful for hotel managers to obtain a thorough understanding of customers' complaints regarding their service problems, and also to support service improvements as a result of the complementary nature of the feedback (Liu et al. 2019). The findings may also help hotel managers to divide online complaints into subjective and objective feedback, leading to a better understanding of service failure and to facilitate service improvements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Service quality

One approach to obtain customer perceptions on hotel services is through assessments of service quality. According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), service quality assessment is defined as an evaluation of the difference between expectations and performance along the quality dimensions. It is a comparison of expectations of a service with perceived performance (Lewis and Booms 1983; Parasuraman et al. 1988; Lo et al. 2015). Its goal is to evaluate how well a delivered service meets customer expectations (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Lo et al. 2015).

Service quality can be measured by employing the SERVQUAL model, which is a multi-dimensional research tool designed to evaluate consumer expectations and perceptions of services. The model consists of five dimensions (Parasuraman et al. 1988): 1) reliability 2) empathy 3) assurance 4) responsiveness and 5) tangibility. The SERVQUAL model was based on the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1981) by assessing the difference between customer expectations of service performance and the actual service received (Lewis and Booms 1983; Parasuraman et al. 1988). According to Oliver (1981) and Parasuraman et al. (1988), when performance exceeds expectations, positive disconfirmation is the result. However, when performance is lower than expectations, negative disconfirmation occurs. The five dimensions of SERVQUAL model are as follows (Parasuraman et al. 1988):

1. Reliability: the ability to deliver the service correctly and/or to provide customers with the promised service
2. Assurance: the ability to inspire customer trust and confidence
3. Tangibles: the physical surroundings, facilities, and amenities
4. Empathy: the ability to understand the needs of customers
5. Responsiveness: the readiness to help customers and/or provide rapid service

One of the research objectives is to classify the e-complaints into the SERVQUAL framework, thereby helping to better understand the relationship between the subjective and objective e-complaints and service quality dimensions.

2.2. Past studies about e-complaints

As previously mentioned, there have been a number of e-complaint studies in the hotel industry under several sub-topics, for example, categorising e-complaints (Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus 2016; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015), analysing customers' online complaint behaviours (Sparks and Browning 2010; Zheng et al. 2009), analysing hotels' responses to e-complaints (Dincer and Alrawadieh 2017; Lee and Blum 2015), and factors associated with online complaints (Au et al. 2014; Fernandes and Fernandes 2018). Among them, categorising or grouping e-complaints into major themes was the most common sub-topic.

For categorising e-complaints into themes, Memarzadeh and Chang (2015), for example, identified three categories of e-complaints from luxury hotels in Kuala Lumpur: inferior quality hotel facilities, staff inattentiveness, and the inappropriate comportment of hotel staff. The study revealed that hotels suffered from service failures as a result of inexperienced and unprofessional staff, thus making guests dissatisfied with the service. Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus (2016) examined e-complaints in budget hotels in Kuala Lumpur and classified them into 16 categories. The most frequent complaints were in regard to guest rooms, hotel staff services, in-room facilities, and bathrooms. The study suggested that hotel managers should concentrate on room cleanliness, room amenities/facilities and staff training.

In addition to identifying e-complaint categories, some studies analysed customers' online complaint behaviours. For instance, Zheng et al. (2009) classified e-complaints about luxury resorts in South-western United States into eight categories: undelivered services, non-response requests, service delay, rude employees, room reservation problems, comment handling, overcharged billing, and misleading advertising. The study revealed that customers who did not receive their expected services tended to give more detail about their bad experiences. Poor service delivery was most likely to motivate unsatisfied customers to post negative comments through online channels. Similarly, Sparks and Browning (2010) identified three major e-complaint themes: room features, consumer services, and the cleanliness of the hotel's public areas. Regarding complaint motives and structure, the study revealed that most customers made complaints when the services failed to meet their expectations or were below standard. Many customers also made complaints by telling a highly descriptive, persuasive and credible story, often as a warning to prospective customers.

Other studies examined hotel responses to online complaints. Lee and Blum (2015) disclosed that most Las Vegas hotels' response rates were low, and the hotels seemed to pay most attention to positive comments. Managers at four and five-star hotels more often responded to negative online reviews while guest service managers responded to guests' online reviews. Dincer and Alrawadieh (2017) not only identified three categories of e-complaints in Jordan hotels (service quality, the efficiency of hotel facilities, and cleanliness) but also indicated that only 43% received online responses from the hotels.

Other studies have examined the factors associated with online complaints. Au et al. (2014) indicated that age, traveling partner, culture, room rates, and hotel size had impacts on the number and type of e-complaints in Chinese hotels. In particular, young customers and business travellers were the majority of e-complainers. In Portugal, Fernandes and Fernandes (2018) revealed that the type and number of complaints varied according to customer demographics and hotel classes. The study found that male and female customers tended to complain about different issues in regard to hotel services and that different classes of hotel received different types of complaint. In addition to categorising e-complaints, these studies offered a better understanding of e-complaints in relation to the influence of consumer characteristics and hotel category on online complaints.

Although several sub-topics on e-complaints have been examined in various settings, the reliability of the complaint messages in terms of subjective and objective complaints has not received much attention. According to the literature (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sangpikul 2021; Sparks and Browning 2010), a number of subjective complaints were unclear (or even unfair) towards hotels while many objective complaints led to immediate recovery actions by hotels because of their obvious mistakes.

The findings from past studies may help to better understand these issues. The subjective complaints, for example, “Hotel restaurant is awful. The buffet is inadequate with over cooked food” (Sparks and Browning 2010, 806). Similarly, “staffs at the front desk are very apathetic, lethargic, and not customer-oriented. They seem to think that if they speak, they are performing a favour to the hotel guest” (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015, 90). However, there are a number of objective complaints which revealed obvious mistakes. For instance, “There were two hair conditioners and no shampoo. No iron or ironing board (which other rooms had); The light in the doorway flickered.; My key card did not work the first time I used it; No newspaper was given the first morning” (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015, 88). Likewise, “Being woken up at 8 am every morning with the loud chatter of the cleaner working outside was not enjoyable” (Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus 2016, 86).

Examining the subjective and objective e-complaints is important for hotel managers to better understand customers’ factual and non-factual opinions regarding hotel service quality. Understanding this topic will assist hotel managers in distinguishing the two types of e-complaint and in prioritizing actions for service recovery. In particular, the categories of online complaint were mostly related to service quality, such as poor guest room quality (tangible), poor hotel staff services (reliability/assurance), and non-response to requests and service delays (responsiveness). Examining these issues in relation to the service quality framework, together with the classification of the subjective and objective e-complaints, will contribute to the SERVQUAL literature by extending the findings of previous studies. However, there have been few attempts to examine these important issues and to discuss them in literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

Negative online reviews or e-complaints posted on travel review websites regarding services at Bangkok hotels are the focus of this study. Bangkok is chosen in this study because it is the most popular city in Thailand for international tourists. In order to analyse customer e-complaints, the following guidelines were adopted from the literature (Sangpikul, 2019; Zheng et al. 2009): 1) identifying hotels for examination, 2) setting criteria for selecting e-complaints, 3) collecting data, and 4) analysing data.

Firstly, it was necessary to identify the hotels in Bangkok from Thai Hotels Association (THA), which has established hotel standards for tourism purposes in major tourism cities in Thailand including Bangkok. According to the THA (2019), there was a total of 59 listed hotels, which were mostly 4 – 5-star hotels.

Secondly, the negative online reviews were obtained from a popular travel review website, Tripadvisor, which is an important and useful travel website providing reviews of travel-related products around the world (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015). Past studies used this source to examine customer e-complaints in the hotel industry (e.g. Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sparks and Browning 2010; Zheng et al. 2009). The criteria from related studies were modified to collect the required data (Au et al. 2014; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sangpikul 2019; Zheng et al. 2009) as follows:

1. The names of hotels were obtained from Tripadvisor.
2. The complaints were chosen from English reviews by focusing on poor and terrible rating scales as they implied unpleasant experiences.
3. Hotels with 5 or more reviews were included in the data analysis.
4. Data were collected for a 1-year period.

A total of 59 Bangkok hotels met the study criteria and provided 394 negative reviews and 882 complaint issues regarding service quality.

Thirdly, data collection was conducted in March 2020. Content analysis was used to analyse the data as it is a systematic coding and categorising method used for exploring large amounts of textual information to determine the trends and patterns of word use, their frequency, and the structures of communication (Mayring 2000; Gbrich 2007; Stemler 2001). It is a suitable and flexible method to analyse qualitative data in various forms including e-complaints (Braun and Clarke 2006; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015; Sangpikul 2019).

Finally, data analysis was performed by following the literature. First, the data coding process was conducted by hand to categorise the online reviews based on words, phrases, sentences, and descriptions (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015). Data were carefully read to ensure validity and consistency in terms of analysis (Lombard et al. 2002). In accordance with the literature, a team approach was adopted to analyse and check the data, consisting of the researcher and two experienced research assistants. The two assistants helped to analyse and code the data by working independently. Each conducted a pilot test with 30 samples by analysing and coding customer complaints from Tripadvisor before the final collection to ensure the content was interpreted and categorised in a consistent way (Sangpikul 2019). During coding process, codes were established for themes of

complaints (Sparks and Browning 2010). When disagreements occurred, the final coding and interpretation were discussed and mutually agreed. In the final stage, the researcher carefully checked the coding scheme and complaint categories to ensure the reliability of the coders and validity of the categorisation process as suggested by past studies (Au et al. 2014; Sangpikul 2019). Inter-coder reliability (using a percentage agreement method) was also employed, with an average value of 83%, indicating an acceptable level of agreement between the two coders (Nurjannah and Siwi 2017). Descriptive statistics were also used to describe the data in terms of frequency and percentage.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the information of online reviewers who made complaints about service quality in Bangkok hotels. Among 394 reviewers, 37% came from Asia, 32% from Europe while 15% from North America and Oceania, and 16% did not provide any information.

Table 1: **Information of online reviewers**

Region	Frequency (n=394)	Percentage (100%)
Asia	146	37%
Europe	126	32%
North America/Oceania	59	15%
No information	63	16%

Tables 2 & 3 present the classification of e-complaints into subjective and objective categories. They are presented based on the major service areas of the hotels. In these tables, data is presented that permits a better understanding of the complaints regarding service quality problems based on hotel functions.

Table 2: **Classifying subjective complaints based on the major service areas of hotels**

Service areas	Frequency	Examples of subjective complaints
1. Guest rooms	159 (41%)	“Rooms are very old, totally outdated, and bed is not comfortable as expected” “The room is in a terrible state, out-of-date. Bathroom needs to be renovated. The furniture is old. The walls have to be repainted” “The cleaning of the room is very bad: dirty table, dirty mirror. It seems that the maid only made the beds and cleaned some parts of the bathroom” “Housekeeper was poor. She did not pay attention to the cleanliness of my room”
2. Front desk	121 (30%)	“I am not impressive about the front desk staff at this hotel because it really seemed like the staff was doing the minimum effort to be hospitable and accommodating guests”

Service areas	Frequency	Examples of subjective complaints
		<p>“It was a bad experience with receptionists. Right from check-in to check-out, the staff was unfriendly and unprofessional. The worst was the staff attitude. They were mostly rude and non-courteous”</p> <p>“The reservation staff (male) at check-in/check-out counter is lack of service mind, the procedure to treat the customer differs between male & female staff. It seems that female staff is well-educated and have a good service mind”</p>
3. F & B services	66 (16%)	<p>“Restaurant staff at this hotel are not nice and not friendly as expected. It seems that they did not care or recognize us as customers”</p> <p>“During breakfast the staff were busy with themselves, not even looking after anyone, and make the people feel like they are doing their best jobs in their positions. No, please we expect you to look after customers when they need something”</p> <p>“Not a good dining restaurant, food was awful -- poor taste and poor quality”</p> <p>“The hotel can work on the things that can be improved such as food quality of breakfast on executive floor, it looks miserable”</p>
4. Recreational services	40 (9%)	<p>“Some gym equipment look old and need maintenance”</p> <p>“The staff cannot establish efficient communication with foreign guests about the equipment, especially the receptionist is not helpful and poor communication”</p> <p>“The quality of the spa treatment here was not professional as expected and lack of understanding customer”</p> <p>“First time to go to hotel spa. Tried out but yet so disappointed on the masseuse skill compare to outside massage shops, even mentioned in the appointment that I request a firm massage but end up it is still not to the standard”</p>
5. Others	18 (4%)	<p>“Staff at the meeting rooms are not professional, they cannot understand me and cannot handle my request about keeping my luggage somewhere because we check-out already and no place to keep it”</p> <p>“Hotel has limited wheelchairs and some were not in good condition”</p>
Total	404 (100%)	

In Table 2, the complaints in the subjective category were likely to be based on customers' personal feelings or emotions rather than facts. For example, one customer felt that the decoration and/atmosphere of the hotel room looked old and the quality of the bed was not as good as expected. As a result, he or she posted the following: "rooms are very old, totally outdated, and bed is not comfortable as expected". This complaint represents a tangible feature. Another example was in the front desk area where a customer felt disappointed with employee courtesy. As a result, he/she posted that "It was a bad experience with receptionists. Right from check-in to check-out, the staff was unfriendly and unprofessional. The worst was the staff attitude. They were mostly rude and non-courteous". This complaint falls under the assurance dimension of SERVQUAL regarding staff professionalism. In regard to subjective judgements, sometimes the service delivery problem is not identified because judgements are based on customers' personal interpretation. Table 3 presents customers' fact-based judgements.

Table 3: Classifying objective complaints based on the major service areas of hotels

Service areas	Frequency	Examples of objective complaints
1. Guest rooms	232 (48%)	<p>"I left the room in the morning (9 am) with the sign of make-up room. When I came back at 5.00 pm, I expected the room to be already cleaned but it wasn't yet cleaned at all, which is unacceptable for a hotel of this category"</p> <p>"There was no fan in the bathroom then the bathroom was wet and smelly"</p> <p>"We reserved an Executive Suite room, however, the room did not look like the photos in their website. It was almost like a deluxe room with a cheaper rate"</p> <p>"I left my room with room to be made up and went out for breakfast then came back to get a shower before going back out, room not made up. The cleaners were next to my room so left again and waited in lobby for 30 mins, went back up and still not made up. Eventually, I was told to wait another 30 mins"</p>
2. Front desk	111 (23%)	<p>"I had a terrible experience with the hotel's check-in services. We arrived the hotel just before 6pm, the reception wasn't busy at that time, however it was not my expectation as it took us about 45 minutes to do the check-in"</p> <p>"It's not good experience at the front desk as time for checked in at 3:30 pm, but was told the room could only be available at 5:30 - 6:00 pm due to many group check out, poor room handling"</p> <p>"I had booked a room facing the river side through a third party website with a pay at hotel option, at first the hotel did not want to honor the booking and said they were fully booked even though we had a confirmed booking and then finally after the third party website pushed them,</p>

Service areas	Frequency	Examples of objective complaints
		they gave us the room and charged me the full price immediately” “It was unacceptable and insulting wait upon our check-in at 6 pm when our rooms were still not ready. We requested adjacent rooms for our family (2 rooms), or at least on the same floor in close proximity to each other. We were eventually assigned rooms on different floors in different locations of the hotel”
3. F & B services	85 (18%)	“Ordered American breakfast and got a 1 poached egg on bread with 2 hash browns and Tomato with basic bread basket, very disappointed” “I order something extra from room service. They bring me the wrong food because they don’t listen to you when you order, and charge me full price” “Restaurant staff is not well trained. We ordered food for 5 people and it took us 1 hour to be served” “We try dinner buffet, it seems there is almost no vegetarian option, there are many meat, pork, and seafood dishes with only 1-2 vegetarian dishes, not good for vegans to eat buffet here”
4.Recreational services	33 (7%)	“There is no changing room for males near the swimming pool and it caused so much inconvenience for us. Worse, there is no proper swimming pool for children even though I have been informed by the receptionist that there will be a pool for children” “When I enquired about the use of the hotel's tennis and squash courts, I was VERY disappointed to discover that the former incur with fee and the latter were closed! very disappointed. We chose this hotel for these facilities. Why does an in-house guest have to pay to use a facility that listed as an available one? Very shocked and sad” “Closure for renovation of gym & spa is not properly notify guests at time of check-in, lack of relaxation”
5. Others	17 (4%)	“The car which picked us up from the airport was way too small and we clarified that we had 8 guests, yet they provided us with a van merely capable of taking 5 people. We were extremely squashed with luggage on our laps, terrible” “Poor limousine service, we confirm the limousine department 2 times before our departure. The staff said it is ok to leave the hotel at 6.30 am. On my departure, we were waiting for 30 mins delay since the staff on new shift start to work at 7.00 am, this is not a 5-star hotel service”
Total	478 (100%)	

Table 3 presents the complaints in objective category that include factual information rather than personal feelings or emotions. For example, during check-in, customers observe how fast the front desk staff can handle the check-in process. If the process falls below their expectations, customers may feel dissatisfied and then make complaints. One customer posted that “I had a terrible experience with the hotel's check-in services. We arrived at the hotel just before 6 pm, and the reception was not busy at that time; however, it was not my expectation as it took us about 45 minutes to do the check-in”. This complaint is related to staff responsiveness.

For the setting of guest rooms, generally customers usually have expectations about the standard of housekeeping services, but when the service is not delivered or offered as expected, they are likely to feel dissatisfied. One customer posted the following: “I left the room in the morning (9 am) expecting the room to be cleaned. When I came back at 5.00 pm, the room had not been cleaned at all, which is unacceptable for a hotel of this category”. This complaint falls under the reliability dimension of SERVQUAL.

Complaints based on factual information represent feedback for hotels which can be used to resolve service failures. In contrast, subjective complaints lack tangible evidence as they were based mainly on customer feelings. Understanding both the subjective and objective complaints may allow hotels to identify problems and to prioritize actions to resolve such problems. The current findings are therefore different from past studies as they focus on the reliability of the complaint messages, particularly the objective complaints, which help to identify actual service failures. In order to better understand how customers subjectively and objectively evaluate the service performance of the hotels, the e-complaints are classified according to the five service dimensions of SERVQUAL as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Classifying the subjective and objective complaints into the five service dimensions of SERVQUAL

Dimensions	Subjective complaints	Objective complaints
1. Tangible n=309	142 (46%) “The room is in a terrible state, out-of-date. Bathroom needs to be renovated. The furniture is old. The walls have to be repainted” “Rooms are very old, totally outdated, and bed is not comfortable” “Room has an issue with the toilet flushing. It did not work well” “Some gym equipment look old and need maintenance”	167 (54%) “There was no fan in the bathroom then the bathroom was wet and smelly” “The pools have no sun beds available after 10 am for the rest of the day. Crammed spaces and limited staff” “Disappointed room, the bathroom is small, the shower gel container was almost empty; the floor had obvious stains; the shower head wasn't working and neither was the hair dryer”
2. Assurance n=203	115 (57%)	88 (43%)

Dimensions	Subjective complaints	Objective complaints
	<p>“Housekeeper was poor. She did not pay attention to the cleanliness of my room”</p> <p>“I am not impressive about the front desk staff at this hotel because it really seemed like the staff was doing the minimum effort to be hospitable and accommodating guests”</p> <p>“Not a good dining restaurant, food was awful -- poor taste and poor quality”</p>	<p>“We booked a room on non-smoking floor. But we actually suffered from cigarette smoke. Guests on both side of our room smoked on the balconies. It is a non-smoking floor and smoking on the balcony is also prohibited”</p> <p>“We reserved an Executive Suite room, however, the room we got did not look like the photos in their website. It was almost like a deluxe room with a lower rate”</p> <p>“The bathroom was a disgrace with the previous guests hair in the badly chipped bath, the sealant around the bath was dirty”</p>
3.Responsiveness n=150	<p>57 (38%)</p> <p>“Front desk staff are not well trained. Checked in process was long and staff lacking the efficiency of a 5-star training”</p> <p>“The check-in is delayed and slow which needs much improvement”.</p> <p>“The reservation never reply me promptly, especially when we want to change a room”</p> <p>“Poor breakfast management, every morning staff seem do not care how long we have to wait for breakfast”</p>	<p>93 (62%)</p> <p>“I left my room with room to be made up and went out for breakfast then came back to get a shower before going back out, room not made up as expected. The cleaners were next to my room so left again and waited in lobby for 30 mins, went back up and still not made up. Eventually, I was told to wait another 30 mins”</p> <p>“I had a terrible experience with the hotel's check-in services. We arrived the hotel just before 6pm, the reception wasn't busy at that time, however it took us about 45 minutes to do the check-in”</p> <p>“Reservation staff replied customers very slow. It took 3-4 days to get a room change from the hotel”</p>
4. Reliability n=123	<p>51 (41%)</p> <p>I feel the young lady at the reception is less experienced. She is not capable to help me with my room change and upgrade”</p>	<p>72 (59%)</p> <p>“I left the room in the morning (9am) with the sign of make-up room. When I came back at 5. 00pm, the room wasn't yet cleaned at</p>

Dimensions	Subjective complaints	Objective complaints
	<p>“I were unhappy with the staff at the restaurant as their English are poor and delivered me the wrong dish”</p> <p>“The reservation said they would upgrade my room because I am a return guest. When I checked in, the receptionist said sorry, my room was booked for a standard room, no upgrade for an OTA booking, very disappointed”</p>	<p>all, which is unacceptable for a hotel of this category”</p> <p>“Given a wrong room. I booked the park view but allocated the city view for me and check-in time is delayed”</p> <p>“I had booked a room facing the river side through a third party website with a pay at hotel option, at first the hotel did not want to honor the booking and said they were fully booked even though we had a confirmed booking and then finally after the third party website pushed them, they gave us the room and charged me the full price immediately”</p>
5. Empathy n=97	<p>39 (40%)</p> <p>“During breakfast the staff seem busy with themselves, not even looking after anyone, and make the people feel like they are doing their best jobs in their positions. No, please look after customers when they need something”</p> <p>“The staff at the front desk were unhelpful, bad and never listen to customer request”</p> <p>“We went to the spa in the hotel. I highlighted shoulders and legs to be massaged a bit harder, but the therapist didn’t seem to pay any attention to this. She massaged it with too light pressure”</p>	<p>58 (60%)</p> <p>“After a long flight from USA, I arrived at the hotel at 1.30 pm and requested 30 mini early check-in, and told them we were very exhausted. The staff said sorry, our hotel policy was 2 pm only, very disappointed and poor customer service”</p> <p>“It was unacceptable and insulting wait upon our check-in at 6 pm when our rooms were still not ready. We requested adjacent rooms for our family (2 rooms), or at least on the same floor in close proximity to each other. We were eventually assigned rooms on different floors in different locations of the hotel”</p> <p>“I requested if I can update my reservation to the one with breakfast and they will not allow even when I am willing to pay additional fee, not reasonable”</p>
Total = 882	n= 404 (46%)	n= 478 (54%)

Table 4 classifies the subjective and objective e-complaints into the five service dimensions of SERVQUAL. Although several studies have examined customers' e-complaints in the hotel industry as previously mentioned, none has examined the subjective and objective complaints in relation to SERVQUAL. Table 4 shows that 54% of e-complaints fell into the objective category while 46% were in the subjective category. The findings suggest that the numbers of the subjective and objective e-complaints based on each service dimension are similar. This indicates that hotel customers gave factual and no-factual feedback to the hotels regarding un-met services or service failures.

The tangible dimension received the highest number of comments, followed by assurance, responsiveness, reliability, and empathy. This suggests that the tangible dimension was the area of most concern for both for subjective and objective customer complaints. These findings may help hotel managers to better understand how customers subjectively and objectively evaluated hotel service performance. In particular, the findings regarding the objective complaints require prompt service recovery actions by hotel managers.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Tables 2 & 3 reveal that e-complaints regarding service quality in Bangkok hotels can be grouped into subjective and objective categories. The subjective complaints reflect customers' personal feelings about particular services which failed to meet customer' expectations or were below standard while the objective complaints involved factual information. These findings seem to be supported by past studies (e.g. Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus 2016; Sparks and Browning 2010) who revealed some evidence of subjective and objective complaints regarding hotel services. In the study of Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus (2016, 87), for example, a complaint like "one of the receptionists is quite rude to convey the hotel procedure & policy to me as customer" falls under the subjective category and is concerned with assurance. Another customer wrote "I asked for some bottles to be left in the freezer and to be sent back to my room at noon the next day just before check out. I had to make two phone calls to chase housekeeping and waited for 30 minutes before they appeared. This complaint falls under the objective category because the customer could identify a tangible reason for his/her dissatisfaction. This issue is related to employee responsiveness.

Another finding was that many e-complaints in Bangkok hotels were objective complaints. This may be because when customers feel unhappy about hotel services, they may prefer to post their comments online in the form of a story rather than complaining directly to the hotel when services did not meet their expectations. This finding is similar to Sparks and Browning (2010) who indicated that customers often posted their complaints by describing events.

In addition, it was found that both subjective and objective complaints were found to be associated with all five of the service dimensions of SERVQUAL (Table 4). The most frequent complaints were in regard to tangible features in Bangkok hotels, followed by assurance, responsiveness, reliability, and empathy, respectively. Most complaints under

the tangible dimension were related to guest rooms such as room decoration, beds, and amenities as guest rooms are the fundamental core product of the hotel business. The room is where customers spend most of their time when compared to other service areas (Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus 2016). Customers generally perceive the quality of guest rooms by judging room decoration, room furnishings, beds, the maintenance of room facilities, and cleanliness (Au et al. 2014; Khan 2017; Khoo-Lattimore and Yunus 2016; Memarzadeh and Chang 2015). It is, therefore, understandable that if these services do not meet their expectations or are below standard, customers may feel dissatisfied and make complaints.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

The current study had the objective to 1) examine and classify customers' e-complaints in Bangkok hotels into objective and subjective categories based on factual and non-factual opinions and 2) to classify the e-complaints into the SERVQUAL dimensions. The study found that approximately 54% of the e-complaints regarding service quality in Bangkok hotels were objective complaints while 46% were subjective complaints. The current findings help to better understand the characteristics of subjective and objective e-complaints, and also assist hotel managers in distinguishing factual and personal opinion- based online complaints regarding hotel service quality problems to facilitate service improvements. The subjective and objective e-complaints were also found to be associated with all five of the SERVQUAL dimensions. This suggests that, through customer evaluations of hotel service performance, hotels still have problems with their services which were often below customer expectations in all service dimensions. The tangible dimension received more complaints than any other dimensions due to customers' high expectations on room features. Overall, the current findings have both theoretical and practical implications for the hotel industry.

6.2. Theoretical implications

Firstly, the study has advanced our understanding in the area of e-complaint reliability in regard to hotel service quality by differentiating subjective and objective complaints. The two complaint categories were further analysed according to the five dimensions of SERVQUAL. This demonstrates that both the subjective and objective complaints are largely related to service quality. Despite there being several previous studies about e-complaints in the hotel industry as noted earlier, there is little research on the reliability of e-complaints in relation to hotel service quality. The current study has conceptualised the subjective and objective e-complaints in the hotel industry by describing their features and their relationship with SERVQUAL, thus extending knowledge about e-complaints and service quality literature.

Secondly, such conceptualisation can help scholars to further develop the service quality measurements more appropriately based on what customers complained about. The review of literature suggests that scholars are more likely to evaluate hotel service quality through subjective assessments rather than objective assessments due to the limited

literature about this concept. With the current findings, scholars may learn to modify the measurement items based on the subjectivity and objectivity of the services delivered. Past studies mostly used the subjective items to measure hotel service quality in most aspects such as hotel ambience, employee courtesy, room decoration, and quality of hotel facilities. Few scholars have the true understanding of the objective items and yet have used them to measure service quality in terms of fact-based opinions such as service responsiveness, service consistency, availability of services/information, and provision of certain services. The findings from this study will help scholars to modify the measurement items more appropriately.

Thirdly, this study can help to explain the quantitative results regarding hotel service quality. Through the questionnaire surveys, scholars cannot determine how customers make their judgments about hotel services. However, with the current study, it was shown that customers made their judgments based on what they expected and what they received, resulting in service satisfaction or dissatisfaction by describing the situations. In the described situations, customers evaluated certain hotel services through their personal feelings, and others based on the facts about the services. These findings help to better understand and supplement the quantitative results by illustrating what judgments customers used to evaluate hotel service quality. It is very likely that the service quality evaluation may be based on customers' subjective and objective judgments as evidenced from the current findings. And these two judgments may finally turn to be their overall evaluations about hotel service quality through the questionnaire surveys. The current study, therefore, is a useful approach to provide insights into how customers make negative judgments about hotel service quality, which cannot be explained by quantitative studies.

Finally, this study helps to support the theoretical concept of service quality regarding the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, and also helps to explain the causes of customer dissatisfaction better than quantitative studies. The findings show that customers expected to receive professional or standardized services from the hotels, but when the delivered services were lower than their expectations, they felt disappointed, and this consequently led to customer dissatisfaction and complaints. In other words, customers complained because hotel performance was lower than their expectations, resulting in customer dissatisfaction and complaints. The evidence from this study confirms the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, and also explains why customers were dissatisfied, which may be not clearly explained by quantitative studies.

6.3. Practical implications

Understanding subjective and objective e-complaints can be a complementary approach for hotel managers to better understand service problems, and to take more appropriate actions for service recovery. In particular, the objective complaints are likely to give a clearer picture of service problems because customers mostly complained by describing events or situations, helping the hotels to easily investigate their service failures. Conceptually, with the subjective complaints, the service improvement may be concentrated on staff performance, their behaviours & attitudes, and their courtesy to deliver the services that customers expect. For the objective complaints, this type of feedback is expected to provide hotel managers with a better understanding of what really

upset guests and the ways to improve the service problems more appropriately (Sangpikul 2021). The service improvement may be focused on services that customers can easily observe such as service procedures/processes (check-in/check-out, room handling, housekeeping services), customer responsiveness (delayed services, service availability), and the hotels' physical elements (malfunctioning or broken equipment). The following are the recommendations based on the current findings on both the subjective and objective e-complaints to improve hotel services in major service areas.

More complaints were made about guest rooms than any other service area of the hotels. Hotel managers should pay more attention to guest rooms and related services. Many customers complained about tangible dimensions such as decoration or the ambience of guest rooms. Hotel managers should focus on the development of the physical environment since past studies indicated that tangible aspects can contribute to both customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Ali 2015; Ogunjinmi and Binuyo 2018). In order to improve this aspect, issues with room design, renovation and financial issues should be addressed. However, if this is not an option, hotel managers should focus on the regular maintenance of room facilities and other intangible attributes such as housekeeping services by focusing on providing reliable services and room cleaning. This is because a number of customers also complained about the reliability of housekeeping, responsibility, consistency and room cleanliness. Housekeeping managers should pay extra attention to the cleanliness of rooms, the provision of amenities, and the regular inspection of guest rooms (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015).

Regarding the front desk, many customers complained about staff courtesy, their friendliness, and lack of understanding of customer needs. These complaints are concerned with the assurance and empathy dimensions. Since the hotels were upscale accommodation (i.e. 4-5 stars), customers should receive the expected services and favorable experiences from the front desk staff at the first point of contact. Staff should be well trained to be fully aware and understand the nature of their work. Behavioural and emotional training is also suggested (Grobelna and Marciszewska 2013). Furthermore, many complaints were about slow or delayed check-in (responsiveness) and room handling skills (reliability). Front desk staff should prepare their jobs in advance to better serve the customers. Good coordination between the front desk and housekeeping departments should be carried out by each department head to ensure there is sufficient room availability when customers check-in. In addition, front desk staff should be trained to cope with and to quickly resolve problems about room issues during check-in. Communication skill, problem-solving skill, and empowerment are important for them to ensure high customer satisfaction (Grobelna and Marciszewska 2013). In difficult cases, front desk employees and their supervisors should be able to communicate with customers regarding the facts of the problems, and offer alternatives or service recovery options when appropriate (Memarzadeh and Chang 2015).

Food & beverage services are also another area of concern. Many complaints were about employee courtesy and the quality of food (assurance). In terms of employee courtesy, hotel customers usually expect to be served by friendly and courteous staff. Restaurant managers should ensure customers about these expected services. Customer empathy and cross-cultural training should be conducted for restaurant employees to better serve customers from different backgrounds (Tian and Wang 2010). Furthermore, many

customers complained about the quality of food. This is a complicated and subjective issue because customers from different cultures may have different perceptions about food quality and its tastes (Khan 2017). Food & beverage managers should maintain high food standards, and anticipate what most customers want and expect (Au et al. 2014; Tian and Wang 2010). Customers from different cultures may have different perceptions regarding service quality in food & beverage services including the quality of food (Djekic et al. 2016; Krutulyte et al. 2009). The objective complaints were generally related to the lack of customer empathy and slow service performance (responsiveness). Food and beverage services require skillful and experienced staff to better understand and serve customers with various needs from different backgrounds (Khan 2017; Tian and Wang 2010). Customer empathy and service responsiveness should be the focus of in-house training for food and beverage employees.

Regarding recreational services, most subjective complaints were about customer responsiveness, employee reliability and spa experience while the majority of the objective complaints were about customer responsiveness (e.g. customer communication). Generally, hotel customers expect to receive these services similarly to other services of the hotels. Customer responsiveness may be improved by providing customers with prompt services, by displaying a greater willingness to assist customers, and by giving correct information about the recreational facilities. Proper in-house training about recreational services is suggested for employees in this service area. In addition, some complaints were about the reliability of spa services (e.g. therapists' skills). Past studies indicated that customers regarded the skills of spa therapists as the most important attribute when using spa services (Lo et al. 2015; Sangpikul 2019). Spa managers should focus on the improvement of spa therapists' skills through recruitment and training (Lo et al. 2015; Sangpikul 2019).

6.4. Recommendations for future research and study limitations

Researchers should consider the concept of subjective and objective e-complaints in future studies. For example, researchers could employ a qualitative approach to examine the subjective and objective characteristics of e-complaints and service quality in other tourism and hospitality sectors such as cruises, airlines, restaurants, and MICE businesses. Customer complaints, particularly about service quality, are important for all service providers as they offer a better understanding of e-complaint characteristics, and lead to service improvement. In addition, this study examined only hotels in Bangkok (mostly business hotels). Future research could examine customer complaints in different hotel categories or other destinations because e-complaints about service quality could be different depending on hotel types/categories. Furthermore, data collected from public sources (e.g. Tripadvisor) should be treated with caution because they may not be fully reliable, accurate or credible because anyone can write reviews including the possibility of competitors placing incorrect information or fake reviews (Au et al. 2014; Sparks and Browning 2010; Zheng et al. 2009). Collecting many e-complaints from several/different sources (e.g. service providers, destinations, websites) may help to enhance the reliability or credibility of the studies (Sparks and Browning 2010; Zheng et al. 2009).

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