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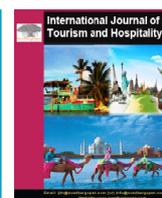
Research Paper **Open Access**

Role of Culture in Guest Retention in Hotels: A Case Study on Hotels of Hyderabad, India

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Abstract

Culture as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is understood as "the ideas, customs, and social behavior of particular people` or society". These ideas or backgrounds have not only a significant impact on the day-to-day behavior in their social life but also in their professional life as professionals of hospitality. Hospitality is all about the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers and ensuring they have a good time while they are with you. In a broader perspective, it is creating the experience relating to or denoting the business of leisure, pleasure, or MICE visitors. This study is an attempt to understand the influence of culture on the guest retention and satisfaction along with boosting the business of the host. The present study is a combination of secondary sources in most part as well as collection of data from primary sources by administering a structured questionnaire. The purpose of this study is to assess the influence of culture on developing the relationship of hospitality professionals towards the guest and retention of repeat business for hotels. This study will give an insight of enhancing the experience of the guests at the hotel in order to ensure guest retention and thereby loyalty. This study also tries to understand the role of culture in the experience of a guest and his host and generate a long lasting relationship in a sustainable way. This would not only benefit the guest with delightful experiences but would also enhance the business prospects of the hotel and enrich the local culture in a memorable way.

Keywords: *Culture, Subculture, Cultural factors, Hospitality, Guest retention, Guest satisfaction*

1. Introduction

Hospitality is a part of service industry which is very important for every nation in the world. Service is defined in Webster's New World Dictionary as "the act or means of serving". To serve is to "provide goods and services for" and "be of assistance to". In other words, service is an action or set of actions taken by one person for the benefit of another person that meets a need, solves a problem, or produces a positive experience.

Today the hospitality sector is one of the important pillars of the global economy. It is a major stakeholder in the economy of India. Presently, this sector offers many opportunities for those who are associated with it or they want to start a business related to it or are employees in the hospitality and tourism industry. This sector is also considered to be one among the experience-intensive services. Accommodation, a part of hospitality, could be in hotels, motels, apartments, camps, guest houses, lodges, house boats, resorts, etc. In addition, tourists also require catering facilities, which include hotels, local restaurants, roadside joints, retail outlets, and cafeterias.

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Nowadays, most of the hotels or accommodation establishments or catering establishments are very similar to each other in their ambience and facilities. The differentiating factor is usually service—generally in the form of personal service. Service organizations worldwide are also shifting their focus to service quality as a priority in the current competitive environment (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). The service industries make significant contributions to economic and social development worldwide (Daniel and Harrington, 2007). Understanding the importance of service culture is therefore vitally important. Good service leads to the customer's satisfaction and loyalty which should be the first priority for the operators of any accommodation facility. High service quality allows service providers to differentiate themselves from their competitors and thus gain sustainable competitive advantage in the global market place (Gounaris *et al.*, 2003). Those who understand the consequence of customer satisfaction can be successful and profitable. This study deals mainly with culture as one of the important elements for success in the hospitality industry and customer satisfaction as a prerequisite to profitable operations. There is brief information about what service is and the characteristics of service like: intangibility, perishability, inseparability and variability. Also information about culture, customer and how we can develop the service culture. Most advanced economies are dominated by services, which account for more than 70% of their gross domestic product (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010).

2. Objectives

1. To examine the relationship of culture with guest retention in hotels.
2. To identify the cultural factors influencing the guest to visit or stay in hotels.
3. To study the various practices and methods adopted by hoteliers in Hyderabad for guest retention.

Hyderabad, the capital city of Telangana state, sprawls along the Musi River. Situated on undulating terrain complete with scenic lakes, the city is a major metropolitan establishment which is unique, for it draws heavily from its rich history, and at the same time, stays ahead of curve in development and growth.

The city of Hyderabad has always found a place in the pages of history. An important political centre for different dynasties, the city was groomed to evolve as a major cultural centre which has attracted works of virtuosos of painting, architecture and literature. Each era has its vivid reflections imprinted on the city's architecture, monuments and cuisine. Same are visible in the grandeur of Charminar which has become the landmark of the city, just like the Golconda Fort. While Birla Mandir and NTR gardens are newer additions to the city's landscape, Safdarjung Museum houses artifacts and relics reawakening the past. One's visit to Hyderabad is not complete unless they have savored the world-famous Hyderabadi Biryani and Haleem, a Mughal style of preparation. The city's traditional bazaar like Laad Bazaar and Sultan Bazaar still retain the flavour and chirpiness of the era gone by.

In the past, Hyderabad was often overlooked as a tourism destination. But in recent years, sleek hotels, restaurants and night spots have been attracting jet-setters from around the world who come to discover the past and experience the rapidly evolving present.

While Hyderabad may not be a major contributor to India's standing as one of the largest hospitality hubs in the world, it is a fast emerging market for the hospitality, travel, and tourism sectors. Statistics shared by the Telangana Tourism Department in a Deccan Chronicle report show that the city witnessed an impressive growth of Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) of 13.4 % in the month of March 2018, compared to the same period last year. FTAs in March 2018 were 10.26 lakh as against 9.05 lakh in March 2017.

3. Perception About Culture

A fine definition of culture is, "Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." (Hofstede, 1997)

Culture plays a major role in any kind of business that exists in the market. Especially when it comes to the international hospitality business; culture is a serious fact to consider in order to survive in the market. Culture exists and differs from place to place and time to time. And some cultures spread way beyond their boundaries and reach new destinations in time and leave marks of their influence there too.

Culture manifests differently in different places. For example managing a culture in a work environment is different when looking at the customer's point of view. It is a test of tact for managers to handle it in any kind of organizations. In today's world it is really hard to find a place where there is no existence of more than one culture. Today's world is mixed with different cultures which makes more difficult for the managers to handle the business.

4. Hotel Work-Culture and Customer Satisfaction

Constantly evolving, most of the industries reinvented themselves; and so did the hospitality industry. Hospitality is a major and diverse industry around the world. And business in today's world is not a constant one which stands there

in the market for eternity. Different factors affect it like time, trend of the market, customer expectations and culture of the place. The influence of each of these factors contributes to the direction of evolution of the hospitality industry.

Working in the field of hospitality could be quite challenging. The hospitality industry is unique in its nature as it tends to be service-oriented and has a strong emphasis on human interactions in the service delivery process. A few of the key concepts of the hospitality industry include Intangibility, Inseparability, Perishability, Relationship building and Diversity in culture.

Hospitality services are quiet different in compare to any other industries by many aspects (Stanuleviciute and Daihnoraviciute, 2014) as:

Intangibility: Hospitality services have unique feature that they cannot be seen, touched, smelled or tasted prior to purchase (Hassanien *et al*., 2010). Intangible things are not physical objects and only exist in connection to other things. Examples include a brands image, or goodwill. Unlike physical products, services cannot be seen, felt, tasted, heard, or smelled before they are purchased. Although hospitality services are intangible in principle, they have a characteristic that makes them unique. They are a basic blend of product and service. Hence the customer of this industry pays not only for the food and drinks but also the comfortable dining atmosphere and friendly attitude of the staff. As a result, the hospitality industry services could include tangible (for example, food) as well as intangible elements (for example, advice about the food and beverage selection). Inspite of this, the hospitality service industry's value is on the basis of its intangible value created.

Inseparability: Inseparability is the characteristic that a service has which renders it impossible to divorce the supply or production of the service from its consumption (Michael J Thomas, 1995). It means that goods and services are provided and used at the same time as they are provided, for example, in the restaurants, hotels, clubs, etc. no one hotel or restaurant, or even travel agency can store the vacant room or table till the moment when the service will be demanded. The perishability is extremely high and so the demand and supply are both inseparable for providing the guest satisfaction for his needs and requirements.

Perishability: Using technical criteria to define services, Smith (1776) states a service will "perish in the very instant of its performance, and seldom leave any trace or value behind them for which an equal quantity of services could afterwards be procured". This means that service-providing time is limited and if the service is not purchased now, it won't be done later. This characteristic is closely related to the inseparability. Each service provider in the hospitality industry should think how to attract customers to use the service in the period when the demand is slack so that the service is used over and over again. This means an inventory cannot be made and services stored. Hence the capacity of the hotel must reach optimum levels.

Lack of Ownership: The hospitality industry customers can not own the hospitality goods and services. It is very important to ensure the highest quality services that the customer may be able to experience. The evaluation of the services should be positive, enjoyable, and memorable for this reason. This will make the customers return back to us time after time and will ensure repeat customers giving us repeat business.

Relationship Building: The hospitality industry highly depends on repeat customers for survival. Building long term relationship with customers can benefit the organizations for generating stable revenues regardless of the instability of seasons and at the same time, developing brand reputations through positive word-of-mouth of the repeat customers. In order to develop brand loyalty, different methods are currently applied by the lodging and food service sectors, such as membership programs which give privileges and incentives to frequent customers. However, top management of organizations do believe that the informal ways of building "friendship" between front-line staff and customers through high degree of personal attention and customization can win the loyalty of customers in long run.

Customer satisfaction is the leading criterion for determining the quality that is actually delivered to customers through the product or service and by the accompanying servicing (Vavra, 1997). Guests have expectations from the different products and services in a hotel. Sometimes those expectations may be met, sometimes they may not. The most important step in the guest satisfaction is setting correct expectations for the guests. For this, you need to know (a) who your customer is; and (b) what he or she expects. Customer satisfaction is recognized as of great importance to all commercial firms because of its influence on repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations (Berkman and Gilson, 1986).

According to the scientific literature analysis, the most important factors, influencing the success of business model in the hospitality industry are as follows:

Innovation: The hospitality industry enterprises may able to improve the quality of the products as well as services, costs reductions, meet and satisfy the changing customer needs better, increase the profit and gain the competitive advantage by adopting the innovation in their work environment (Chang *et al*., 2011). Various types of innovation development and implementation (for example, service innovation, product innovation, administrative innovation) – could lead the hospitality enterprises to the application of novel ideas in services and products.

Empowered Employees: The hospitality industry is a unique one because employees are involved into service process in this industry (Barrows, 2012). Thus, the customer's opinion about the enterprise depends on the employees' ability to provide the service. Therefore, competent managers should empower the employees to provide the highest quality services in order to maintain and attract new customers.

Customer Relationship Management: In the hospitality industry, in contrary to other industries, special attention must be given to the customers. Customer relationship is very important for retention of gussets in hotel business because success of the hospitality business enterprises mostly depends on the customers and their needs (Bagdan, 2013).

Technology: When we enhance interaction and communication with customers, it helps us to reduce operating costs, create strategic opportunities, and maximize profits and this could help the hospitality industry. The use of relevant latest technology in the hospitality services aimed at the comfort of the guest will allow enjoyable experience for the customers.

Internal Marketing: This factor could help the hospitality enterprises to find and understand customers' attitude to the delivery of services, in order to discover the possibilities for hospitality services development in the future.

Value Proposition: This factor should focus on the customer needs and include elements of the factors listed. Moreover, the unique and value-added proposition offered by the hospitality enterprises for customer's needs, distinguishes the company from other similar competitors. As many authors agree that value proposition is crucial in the services enterprises business, this element should attain the largest attention from the business strategists. Clarifying the needs and requirements from the hospitality customer's perspective, agreeing on value to be provided and capturing the value for the service shareholders, the best balance between the wishes of the customer and possibilities of the services providers should be found. Only quality no longer is enough to provide a competitive advantage. Subsequently, an increasing number of organizations are reorienting strategy toward superior value delivery (Band, 1991; Day, 1990; Gale, 1994; Naumann, 1995).

"Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context" study model given by Geert Hofstede had explained, how values in a workplace are influenced by culture. His study has covered the both national and organizational culture value impacts. After analyzing, about employee values from over 70 countries, he indicated that the values that differentiated countries can be divided in four different dimensions: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; Woodside and Martin, 2007) and long term orientation vs short term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). In addition to the four cultural value dimensions there is also a fifth dimension observed and added in 1985 by Michael Bond (Hofstede, 2001). It comprises long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. Another dimension explained by Geert Hofstede is Uncertainty avoidance which relates to the degree to which individuals of a specific society are comfortable with uncertainty and the unknown. It explains how accepting people are towards others who have dissimilar opinions to what they are used to. Uncertainty tolerant cultures attempt to have as few rules as possible. Controversially, uncertainty avoiding cultures desire to minimize the possibility of surprising and uncomfortable situations through strict laws and safety factors. These variables in culture are what make it interesting and novel to the guests who are from all over the world staying at the hotel.

Yvette Reisinger, another scholar has conducted research in this field of culture. In his studies, he has divided culture into several levels. He has found that culture in hospitality can have macro aspects to micro aspects which can be represented as individual culture to universal culture. He has divided culture into 6 divisions and each one covers different categories that it affects. As one of the macro aspects of hospitality, universal culture deals with morals, values, etc. that are common to everyone throughout the world. Further, the Civilization culture deals with ethnicity, religion, economic system and development. National culture deals with the origin of a culture and its resilience. Industrial culture talks about the culture of an industry, the professionalism followed by it, etc. Organizational or family culture is one aspect of an individual where customs and traditions unique to the family or the practices followed by the company are represented. Lastly, we have the individual culture which is influenced in parts by several of the above listed cultures and subsequently each one of the cultures has an effect on the way the individual thinks acts and behaves.

5. Hyderabad's Hotel Guest Services Practices and Cultural Impact

Each of these cultures in some way or the other influences the experience of the guest. However, there are some aspects of culture that help in creating a unique and enjoyable experience for the guest. The research gap that has been found during the review of literature is the role of culture—the traditional practices, the religious customs etc. that have an influence on the retention of the guest. The prime minister of India has laid out the 5 Ts as the watchwords for India's future. They are – Tradition, Talent, Tourism, Trade and Technology. Our focus through this paper is on the two Ts- Tradition and Tourism and their interrelation. As Indian Hospitality grows in size and scale, staying true to our age old tradition of "*Atithi Devo Bhava*" could prove to be one of the differentiators that separate the successful and the not-so-successful.

In order to understand the cultural impacts of current practices followed by hotels and the feedback of the guests about those practices, we have developed a structured questionnaire and distributed it to various hoteliers. We have sent this questionnaire to 45 hoteliers who are occupying managerial positions like training Manager, Human Resource Manager, Executive Housekeeper, Housekeeping Manager, etc. Out of them, 38 have responded. Based on the response of the hoteliers, the following are the interpretations that are mentioned below.

It is vital to remember that what delights customers from one culture might not delight others, thus it is important to target various guest groups appropriately, delivering services and amenities according to their preferences (Torres *et al.*, 2014).

When it comes to uniforms, there is a wide array to choose from. However, most of the hotels except those who are specifically themed have the same or at least similar kind of uniforms. Their staff at the reception looks the same as the reception staff in several other properties around the world. Their staff in the restaurant looks the same as staff in any other restaurant. So it would do well for the hotels to incorporate the local fabrics and weaves into their uniforms. This would add an element of interest for the guest at the hotel and make him more aware of the rich textile heritage of that place.

A traveler at the hotel may not have the time or the inclination to put in the effort for celebration of festivals, events, etc. as he is traveling for a specific purpose and he wishes to concentrate on the work for which he is travelling. They may remember those special occasions or festivals and may even miss celebrating them. So when any hotel celebrates those special events. It give them some happiness and excitement. In this way, guests can be a part of customs, traditions and celebrations and help them to know more about our culture. India is a diverse country. Sometimes the same festival is celebrated in various ways across the different cultures. Even the guests who belong to India might be able to have novel experiences. These festive practices may comprise of those festivals celebrated through the country or could even be a significant festival celebrated locally. Overall, these celebrations may become the way to showcase or reflect some specific and unique traditions by their hotels and become memory or experience of culture for the guests. A case in the matter would be the celebration of *Batukamma* – a floral festival that has started being celebrated on a larger scale since the formation of Telengana state. The hotels subsequently are displaying the *Batukamma* and also celebrating the festival making the guest aware of this state festival of Telangana and making it a very enjoyable experience of the guest.

One more practice of bringing in culture into the guest experience is by introducing it into the various amenities provided for the guest. The introduction of *Multani Mitti* as a guest room amenity, the use of distinctly Indian odors in incense sticks, and using them in the evening for turndown service, etc are some of the practices introduced in the hotels of Hyderabad. One very interesting way of using local handlooms would be the amenities kit bag that would give them a feel of the local culture and would also promote local culture since this also acts as a takeaway.

Personalized service is the key mantra today wherever we go, especially where customer service is concerned. Handwritten notes add the personal touch to the guest experience since the communication is not something produced in mass but created especially for the guest. This becomes even more authentic and interesting when these personal notes are created on mango leaves as mango leaves are believed to be auspicious. Overall, some of the common distinguished and unique practices adopted by the hoteliers of Hyderabad have been listed below. They are-

1.   Uniforms of the staff, especially in themed areas

2.   Linen used in guest rooms as well as restaurants

3.   Ambience of the different areas in a hotel

4.   Celebrations of special events and festivals.

5.   Refillable brass water jug

6.   Window farms

7.   Handwritten messages on mango leaves

8.   Goodies bag from kalamkari print cloths

9.   Hotel logo with petals

10.   *Multani Mitti* in amenities kit.

Taj group properties of Hyderabad are promoting local arts, cultures and heritage has been a part of their corporate ethos. To promote and showcase the local culture and traditions, they are procuring gifts of local art value, exhibitions of local arts and crafts, and performances by local arts and culture troops for the guests of hotels. These initiatives are also linked to procure more goods and services from local people and organizations that help the local economy benefit from tourism-linked businesses and on the other hand cultural experiences to the guests.

ITC Kohinoor in Hyderabad, have designed his interior of the hotel and taken inspiration from local culture and landscape—whether it is the marble, found in and around the city, which has been used in varied ways: as etched columns, accents, and more; or the famed gemstones, whose presence is palpable in the various hues that adorn the rooms, in combination with dark wood and opulent fabrics; or even the iconic bidri metal work and zardozi—both local crafts which have been used inventively in their hotel interior, which certainly draws the attentions of the guests. The setting of rocks and sculptures in the outdoor spaces also draw inspiration from the ancient volcanic rocks that have stood tall in Hyderabad for millennia.

Based on the above discussions, deliberations and analysis, it has been found that the customer wants different experiences and a novelty in the way he is treated in order to get a good experience of a hotel. So in order to give him this change and add value to his experience, we have tried to look at what are the ways we can do it to make him a more satisfied and even delighted customer. As our topic of study is how culture impacts the guest retention of a hotel, we have tried to look at the traditional cultural practices that give the guests a unique and enjoyable experience and make them want to come back for more.

6. Conclusion

Hyderabad is known as the popular destination of the world and IT hub. Hospitality in Hyderabad is essentially required to meet the expectations of guests and culture is one of the important part that can play a memorable and comfortable stay for guests on hand and on the other hand the hotel can create its brand image and retain the guests for hotel business. In the global environment of today, Hospitality is considered as one of the drivers of growth. People travel more often now as compared to any time in the past. It is essential to understand the guests, their needs and their expectations. The guest, especially a frequent traveler, finds that his travel and hotel stays are very similar. Most of the experiences he has are similar to one another. Each hotel keeps making efforts to make a guest more comfortable and his stay more satisfying. There are many unique practices already existing or previously adopted by the hotels of Hyderabad but much more needs to be done to make culture attract and retain the customers as the changing environment. In order to make his stay more interesting and enjoyable, the culture displayed in the place makes a difference. When a hotel chooses to focus on the attributes that each culture values the most, it enables the hotel to provide customizable service to the guest. Culture adds value to the stay of the guest which encourages him to come back over and over again helping the hotels to retain him as a guest for long periods of time.

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