

Brides' expectations of their hotel stay: An exploratory study

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study is an examination of service-quality determinants in hotels from the perspective of brides staying at hotels before and after the wedding ceremony. Twenty semi-structured interviews revealed that the brides' perception of the hotel experiences is composed of technical and functional factors, with emphasis on the quality of service. Findings indicated that hotels paid only minor attention to brides' wishes and desires regarding hotel-room features and critical service components. The brides expressed a clear expectation that the hotel servicescape would enable them to be at their best (physically and emotionally) in their center-of-the-show position. The findings have clear and immediate practical implications for the hotel industry to better tap the potential of this significant market segment, one all but ignored by scholars and practitioners.

Keywords: Brides, Qualitative study, Service quality, Weddings.

Loving companions will surely gladden, as you gladdened your creations in the Garden of Eden in the past. Blessed are You, LORD, Gladdener of groom and bride."

(From the blessings recited at the Jewish wedding ceremony)

1. Introduction

Despite the rise in divorce rates and the disintegration of the nuclear family in the West, a wedding is still considered one of the most significant events of people's lives (Cohen-Israeli & Remennick, 2015). Fantasies about a romantic "dream" wedding have intensified over the years due to the growth of the culture of consumption, with the ostentatious wedding becoming a clear social status symbol (Carter & Duncan, 2017). For many people, marriage constitutes a significant personal status change, and the wedding with its accompanying experiences (e.g., the wedding party and honeymoon) is a means to symbolize the transition to a new stage in life (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). The great personal, social, and cultural importance accorded to the institution of marriage and the ceremony itself (Strong & Cohen, 2013) exert considerable stress, anxiety and pressure on the couple (Cramer & Lafreniere, 2003). The stress is felt particularly by the bride, who usually has the dominant voice in planning the wedding and the one who has the most significant impact on demand trends in the wedding industry (Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008).

The impressive scope of the wedding industry and its financial potential (Blakely, 2008) have attracted the attention of hospitality researchers. Couples' perspectives of the selection attributes of wedding reception venues have been examined (Daniels, Lee, & Cohen, 2012; Lau & Hui, 2010; Mahmoud, 2015), as has the rapidly growing popularity of destination weddings (Bertella, 2017; Chao, 2012). Another aspect of the wedding industry – the impact of wedding receptions on the revenues of hotels and other hospitality settings – has been studied (Adler & Chienm, 2004), all adding up to highlight the important role of hotels in this wedding industry. However, most studies focus on the hotel as a wedding venue or as an “environment,” with little attention paid to examining the accommodation experience of couples staying at the hotel before and after the wedding. The lack of attention to the perceptions of the bride and groom regarding the determinants of service quality during their stay constitutes a significant gap in the literature. This gap is highly surprising given the fierce competition between hotels and their attempt to identify new customer segments.

1.1 Research Objective

The 'wedding business' is a lucrative and distinct market segment with unique characteristics, needs and wants. Therefore, research should examine the factors that generate couples' satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the hotel experience – before the wedding and immediately after, yielding information that could give hotel a distinctive competitive edge, even if the hotel is only used for the couple's lodging. The present article presents an exploratory study that addresses this aim by using a qualitative research strategy. The study was conducted among newly married Jewish heterosexual Israeli women, and as will be illustrated in the next section, the Israeli context provides a suitable setting for this study.

2. The Wedding Industry in Israel

Despite the substantial social changes that Israeli society has known, the institution of marriage is still popular and central to the Israeli experience. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2015), in 2013 about 95% of couples in Israel were married couples. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014) figures, Israel ranks high on the marriage rate, alongside countries such as Greece, Japan, and Turkey, compared to countries such as Iceland and Sweden, where about a third of couples live together without marriage. However, the marriage ceremony has undergone significant changes in recent decades. While in the first decades of statehood (the 1950s and 1960s), it was customary to hold modest weddings with a limited number of participants (mainly family and close friends), by the 1980s, as the overall economic situation improved, large, glamorous, and expensive weddings became a growing trend (Kaplan, 2001).

Rudin and Almog (2008) noted the growing importance of the wedding ceremony in Israel. The outcome of this high position of the ceremony have led to people spending increasingly larger amounts of money, itself a result of the higher standard of living, individualization of culture, and the pursuit of high social status, all of which generated an extensive wedding industry in Israel. According to research firm Dun & Bradstreet (2013), there are about 50,000 weddings a year in Israel, each with an average of 300 guests, for a total cost of NIS100,000-140,000 (about \$30,000-\$40,000), although high-end wedding can cost about half a million dollars. These figures are similar to the average cost of weddings in the USA – \$35,329 (Seaver, 2017) and the UK – £ 27,161 (~\$38,000) (Moss, 2017).

3. Service Quality Determinants in Hotels

Because the quality of service is of the utmost importance and impacts guest loyalty, hospitality scholars have devoted considerable attention to examining the perception of service quality. In addition to affecting guest

loyalty, service impacts upon recruiting new customers, creating a positive reputation leading to favorable word-of-mouth communication, achieving employee satisfaction, and strengthening financial performance (Pizam, 2004; Pizam, Shapoval & Ellis, 2016; Wilkins, Merrilees & Herington, 2007). Most hospitality studies on this subject have been quantitative, and include the use of multi-dimensional research instruments, mainly SERVQUAL and its derivatives (e.g., Hsieh, Lin, & Lin, 2008; Saleh & Ryan, 1991; Tsaur & Lin, 2004), as well as adapted versions of SERVQUAL that have been tailored specifically for the hotel industry such as LODGSERV (Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert, Patton, & Yokoyama, 1990) and HOLSERV (Mei, Dean, & While, 1999).

The quantitative approach yielded findings regarding critical hotel service features. Akbaba (2006) conducted a study at a business hotel in Turkey and found that the dimension "tangibles" was the most dominant factor in shaping the perception of service among guests. This dimension included features such as "modern looking equipment," "adequate capacity," and "food and beverages." Similarly, Rauch, Collins, Nale, & Barr (2015), who examined mid-scale hotels guests, found that the "service environment" as well as the service quality was the most significant predictor of customer satisfaction. This dimension relates to the condition and appearance of hotel furniture and facilities, as well as to the ambiance that is part of the service encounters. Studies in North Cyprus (Nadiri & Hussain, 2005) and Antalya, Turkey (Dortyol, Varinli, & Kitapci, 2014) also revealed that hotel facilities and physical appearance are of the highest importance.

Other studies have raised additional emphases to improve the quality of service in hotels. In a study of 3-5-stars hotels in Australia, the "people" dimension was found to be most important for the guests' perception of service quality (Mei et al., 1999). The human aspect of service was also found critical in a study that measured the service in a hotel chain in the UK, with the "responsiveness" dimension (i.e., willingness to help customers and provide prompt service) being the most dominant (Antony, Jiju Antony, & Ghosh, 2004). Similarly, the characteristics of hotel personnel were found to be the most important attributes influencing the perception of service quality in a study conducted in Istanbul, Turkey (Akan, 1995).

Despite their useful findings for the hotel industry, these studies have significant limitations. Quantitative research on customer satisfaction with the service provided is effective in understanding the concept and structure of service quality, as well as in establishing reliability and validity, but may be weak in providing clear insights and detailed tailored practical recommendations on how to improve service quality in hotels, especially for nonstandard guests. This is where qualitative research has the potential to point out in detail aspects of service quality that are not always represented in quantitative indexes (e.g., Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2007). Additionally, in contrast to earlier assumptions, it is now well established that service quality is not transferable across industries and market segments (Wilkins et al., 2007), and Akbaba (2006) noted that "purpose of stay may be an important determining element when evaluating the quality of hotels" (p. 185).

Poria and Beal (2017) referred to the need to conduct an exploratory qualitative study prior to studying unique segments of the population whose special attributes may impact their hotel experience. Such groups include, among others, gay men and lesbian women, people with mobility disabilities, or obese people. Also, to achieve theoretical as well as practical contributions, qualitative research is recommended.

4. Study Methods

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative research epistemology was adopted. In-depth semi-structured personal interviews were applied for data collection. Such interviews allow both for an examination of the participants' perceptions and feelings about the topic, and for comparing participants' responses

(Cresswell, 2003). The interviews were conducted with 20 Israeli women who at the time of the interview had been married between 3-12 months, a time frame that would enable, on the one hand, to avoid reporting affected by short-term euphoria right after the wedding and, on the other hand, to minimize the risk of recall bias. The study sample comprised only women, who are those with greater influence on wedding plans than their future husbands (Sniezek, 2005). From the very beginning of data collection it became clear that it is the women who are particular about the hotel experience and spend long hours in the hotel room. The men rarely stay in the room before the ceremony. The interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling, in which three of the researchers used their own social networks to recruit the initial participants, who were then asked to suggest other potential interviewees from among their friends and family. To avoid homogeneity, an attempt was made to interview women of various ages, all marrying for the first time. The age range was 24-38 years (the average was 29). Women varied in their place and type of residence (urban/rural, central/peripheral), and financial background. The ceremonies, too, were not uniform, and varied in size (100-600 guests) and degree of religiosity.

Each interview lasted about 40 minutes and included a few unstructured questions to encourage the participants to share their experiences about the hotels in which they were hosted before and after the wedding, with emphasis on factors of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the service experience provided. The data collection began with six preliminary interviews. Minor changes were conducted in the interview transcript following the preliminary stage. The interviews continued until the collection of new data ceased to provide new insights and a sense of saturation was achieved (Mason, 2010).

The interview transcripts were scanned according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in an attempt to identify the determinants of hotel service and hotel experience quality from the participants' perspective. The purpose of the analysis was to explore a range of aspects that affect the perceived service quality from the bride's point of view highlighting issues linked with the human as well as physical environment.

5. Findings

As with the theoretical framework proposed by Grönroos (1990) for assessing service quality, the study participants' perceptions of the service quality provided in the pre- and post-wedding periods included both technical and functional determinants. As noted by Grönroos (1984), technical quality "answers the question of what the customer gets," while functional quality "answers the question of how he gets it" (p. 39). In other words, the former refers to the result or outcome of the service provided (e.g., room size, room furnishings, and air conditioning), whereas the latter refers to the process or the way the service has been delivered (e.g., service providers' attitude). In line with previous studies (e.g., Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000), the findings are divided to the technical aspects and functional ones with the aim of highlighting concrete managerial implications.

5.1 Technical Determinants of Service Quality

5.1.1 Size of the Hotel Room

The interviewees noted that the standard guestroom assigned was too small for the wedding entourage aiding the bride to prepare for the wedding. It was emphasized that the guestroom should be sufficiently spacious to comfortably accommodate all those escorting the bride (e.g. the bridesmaids, the hairdresser, the makeup artist,

and the photographers). In this context, some of the interviewees noted that one of the main reasons for choosing to stay at the hotel before the wedding ceremony was their will to save the time and energy involved in hosting in the bride's home. Nevertheless, this aspiration often did not materialize, as one bride claimed, "there were lots of visitors in the guestroom, and although the room was large, it was still crowded."

5.1.2 Mirrors

Some brides complained that the mirrors in the guestrooms were not suitable for their needs, being too small for a full-length view of the bride in her wedding attire. One interviewee said that her parents had been forced to bring a full-length mirror so she could see herself properly, which, of course, made the preparations cumbersome. The need for a professional magnifying and lighted make-up mirror was also mentioned as a necessary device for preparation that was lacking in several hotel rooms.

5.1.3 "A room with a view"

Several of the brides interviewed reported a lack of consideration on the part of the hotel about the view from the room, and expressed their desire to have a relaxing and romantic view. They were disappointed to receive rooms with a "standard" view, a feature that might be considered to be of moderate importance during regular vacations, but one that bothered the brides greatly at the time of the wedding which was described as the day that should be the most romantic day of her life as well as a symbol for the future romance of her marriage. As noted by one of the respondents, "it may sound foolish, but the view really upset me; I expected to start the day with a sea view and not a view of the parking lot!".

5.1.4 Lighting

Some of the participants complained that the standard lighting in the hotel room did not meet their needs during the preparations for the wedding. Although most of the brides dressed and put on makeup during daylight hours, some were unhappy with the relatively weak lighting. The standard lighting of hotel rooms is not suitable for bridal preparations, which require attention to very small details. "The room had intimate lighting, which is problematic in terms of wedding and makeup arrangements," stated one interviewee, "more intensive lighting would have made it easier for me."

5.1.5 Air Conditioning

The brides who married in the summer months claimed that the air conditioners in the hotel rooms were too weak to cope with the relatively large number of the service providers as well as the bride's guests: "We got married in the hot July [weather] and the air-conditioning was not able to cool the room properly. We had to leave the door open to air the room." In this context, there was a clear preference for rooms with a balcony, to which one could retire to breathe fresh air. There were times when the importance of the balcony was also emphasized as a place where the bride and service providers could smoke, and as a refuge where the groom who is not an active participant in preparations could relax and escape from the chaos in the room.

5.2 Functional Determinants of Service Quality

5.2.1 Room Service

Many interviewees complained that when they returned from the wedding reception to their hotel room, the room was messy and had not been serviced from the pre-wedding preparations. These brides stated that they would have liked to return to a clean and tidy room after the wedding reception. This viewpoint was reflected by one of the brides: "the service we received was bad! My husband had specifically requested that the room be clean and tidy when we return from the wedding [reception], but . . . everything remained a mess." In general, the interviewees noted that it is desirable that room service be available, fast, and easily accessible, as during the preparations for the wedding there are many frequent needs that the hotel can help in providing (food and beverages, garbage disposal, pharmaceutical products, etc.).

5.2.2 Food and Beverage Service

The interviews indicated that wedding couples are often busy and under great pressure on their wedding day as well as during the wedding ceremony. The interviewees reported that because they had not eaten all day (owing to stress and excitement), they would have liked the hotel to provide them with a pampering meal on their return to the hotel. Here the preference was for fast and filling food (e.g. burgers and pizzas) rather than gourmet food. One participant said: "I was really hungry; I would have been very happy to eat a good hamburger in the room."

5.2.3 Late Check-Out

Several brides expressed dissatisfaction that the hotels were not sufficiently flexible about the check-out time. They noted that after the demanding, exhausting, and emotional wedding day, they had fallen asleep late, but the hotel did not show sensitivity to the special circumstances. Participants thought that a few extra hours would have helped them physically, also preserving their unique "just married" status a bit longer: "The morning after the wedding we were woken by [a call from] the reception desk asking us to vacate the room. It happened to another friend of us who also got married. All this, despite the fact that we emphasized that we were a bride and groom."

5.2.4 Relaxation and Pampering Treatments

Many brides would have liked to receive some pampering and soothing after the event to rid themselves of the tension, pressure and adrenaline rush they had experienced. After a night of dancing and standing on high heels, a special foot or whole-body massage would have greatly enhanced the hotel stay-experience. However, as hotel spas are not open into the late hours, compliance with such a requirement would have required special preparation and a desire to provide an extraordinary service for the new brides, but in most cases, there was no such willingness on the part of the hotel.

5.2.5 Festive Atmosphere

The brides noted that the hotel room lacked elements symbolizing the act of marriage. It was noted that attention to the celebratory circumstances would have added much to the brides' perception of the hotel's service quality. The interviewees noted that as the hotel staff are the first people outside the circle of friends / family who encounter the couple after the marriage, they expected to be welcomed as a married couple (e.g. by a greeting card in the room or a greeting in the lobby/reception desk as a married couple by the host). As illustrated by one of the interviewees, "I wanted to have a sign on the door of the hotel room to mark the occasion. The hotel could also have decorated the room in a way that distinguished it as a bride and groom's room. The hotel was aware that this was a room for guests experiencing a unique day in their lives and that should not have been ignored."

6. Conclusions

The main conclusion of the study is that despite the growth of the wedding industry and the central role played by the hotel industry in this trend, there is no recognition of the bride and groom as a distinct market segment with unique needs and desires. This preliminary investigation indicates that hotels which are prepared to direct resources to improving the technical and functional service quality determinants, will be able to gain competitive advantage. For hotels to successfully integrate into the wedding industry, it is not sufficient to simply hold events, hire wedding planners, and market rooms to the prospective couple and the wedding guests (Blank, 2002; McMullen-Coyne, 2005; Tunner, 2017); rather, hotels should emphasize key service attributes regarding the hotel room itself as well as the service provided.

The hospitality literature recognizes that hotels are critical venues for the wedding industry (Daniels et al., 2012), mostly focusing on the wedding ceremony itself (e.g., Guan, Luo, & Tang, 2015; Mahmoud, 2015), and ignoring the hotel servicescape. However, as the current study indicates, the hotel itself and particularly its servicescape are of great symbolic, emotional, and practical importance. In addition to the managerial implications detailed below, these findings have theoretical implications for research on the wedding industry. Critical satisfaction factors are often "behind the scenes," not only in the physical venue where the ceremony takes place. Therefore, any attempt to conceptualize the wedding experience for the bride and groom has to take a broader perspective, one that includes the time frame before and after the wedding.

The findings indicate that there is an identifiable, easy-to-access segment of the population yet ignored by hospitality scholars. The literature review revealed that scholars ignore certain segments' hotel and travel experiences the industry already identified. Poria and Timothy (2014) argued that scholars avoid exploratory research with children as studying them involves complicated research implementations. Poria (2006) in his study of the hotel experience of gay men and lesbians argued that scholars' personal characteristics influence their decision as to the segment on which they will focus, noting that the paucity of lesbians in hospitality and tourism academic departments leads to the dearth of studies on lesbians' hotel experience. Poria and Beal (2017) also suggested that small segments may be ignored as the industry may not be interested in financing studies about them.

However, these reasons are not applicable to the brides' and grooms' hotel experience, and others should be sought. Following Berdychevsky, Poria and Uriely (2013), it may be that scholars do not regard brides' hotel experience as interesting or sophisticated enough, viewing it as an experience to which no intellectual depth can be assigned. Additionally, Poria and Timothy (2014), and Poria, Schwartz, and Uysal (2015) suggested that due to the glorification of the Impact Factor, exploratory studies have limited chances to be considered for publication in top hospitality and tourism journals, as they will not be quoted two or even five years following their publication. Poria et al. (2015) argued that promotion mechanisms in universities may also prevent scholars from getting involved in exploratory studies which will not be quoted in the short term. These reasons may prevent scholars from researching easy-to-access segments, among them brides and grooms. It is argued here, that scholars should put effort and highlight all segments of population hotel experience even though the findings will not necessarily be highly complicated and sophisticated.

To conclude, brides regard the wedding ceremony as a show in which they play the lead role. The hotel, as a servicescape, should provide each bride with an environment that will assist her to be at her best. Following the ceremony, the hotel should assist her to recover, recognizing her needs as an exhausted main actress. The brides expect the hotel experience to be perfect with no room for mistakes. The hotel management should capture the distinctiveness of the wedding event, recognizing their important role in this show.

6.1 Managerial Implications

Followings are some practical implications that can be applied in hotels. The foothold of hotels in the wedding industry requires a strategic plan and a conceptual change regarding the market segment of wedding couples. The change in attitude toward this market segment must manifest itself at every level of the hotel. Technical characteristics of the service require attention to aspects such as the allocation of large rooms with balcony and spectacular romantic views, strong lighting and strong air conditioning, and guest rooms with a full-body mirror and a makeup mirror. The changes in the functional features of the service is more difficult to implement, because they require raising the awareness of the hotel staff to the needs, desires and expectations of this unique market segment as well as to the complexities and sensitivities that accompany brides during the wedding period. The staff should ensure that they receive fast and elaborate service that sometimes exceeds the usual limits of service provided by a hotel.

Adapting the functional service to the bride's wishes (and the couple in general) also requires special adjustment of the hotel. Elements such as the provision of late-night dinners and the opening of the spa or providing massage treatment in the room beyond normal working hours require a strategic commitment on the part of the hotel. A late checkout and ongoing housekeeping service as well as arranging the guest room several times throughout the wedding day (especially before the return of the couple from their wedding). It should be noted that during the interviews, there was a willingness to pay a high price for the aforementioned services, which would make the hotel experience "perfect" for the bride's "once in a lifetime" event. It should be noted that in many cases, it emerged from participants' talk that it is not the couple who finances the hotel stay, but the couple's families, which greatly reduce the bride's price sensitivity.

The great importance that brides assign to the hotel where they are stay raises the possibility that the room has important symbolic memorable meaning for them. In this case, relying on heritage tourism literature, the hotel has market opportunity to offer additional products and services to the bride and groom. For example, because the room has the potential to be part of the participants' personal heritage (Timothy, 1997) of the bride and groom, in the coming years the hotel can turn to offer them to stay at the hotel on their wedding anniversaries, making the room a kind of private nostalgic pilgrimage site. Future studies can examine the viability of the implications suggested or conduct the study in other locations attributed by various wedding ceremonies.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study has its limitations. First, the study was conducted among Jewish Israeli women only, and therefore cultural and social biases are likely. To generalize the findings, follow-up studies should be conducted with different and diverse populations. Second, the objective of this qualitative study was to expose themes and generate insights, rather than quantify the results and examine the statistical association between variables. The findings of this exploratory research can serve as a basis for future quantitative studies providing a more accurate understanding of the brides' hotel experience. Future studies should also examine the viability of the various implications suggested, or conduct the study in other countries. Finally, despite the centrality of the bride in the decision-making process regarding the wedding, it is not possible to obtain a complete picture without examining the groom's perceptions and attitudes.

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