

Beyond The Surface: Unveiling The Impact Of Marketing-Based Tangibility On Post-Covid Customer Satisfaction In Pakistan's Hospitality Sector

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Abstract

This research examines the role of Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) in the Hospitality sector and its impact on customer satisfaction in Pakistan. Purpose of this exploration was to understand the behavior and expectations of customers in post-Covid scenario. Through audio and video interviews with 51 regular customers, significant insights were obtained using thematic analysis via NVivo qualitative research software. Thematic analysis of the interviews identified key tangible factors affecting customer satisfaction. The absence or poor performance of these factors in hospitality industry can lead to customer dissatisfaction. The study reveals that customers have become more conscious after Covid pandemic leading to higher level of expectations. Tangibles such as furniture, food, cleanliness, and amenities inside the hotel, and factors like gym facilities, prayer areas, and sports areas outside, perform more crucial roles in shaping customer perceptions after pandemic. The research highlights the importance of understanding evolving customer preferences, particularly post-Covid-19, and emphasizes the need for hotels/restaurants to adapt their strategies accordingly. It highlights how seemingly minor, often overlooked tangible elements significantly influence a substantial number of customers. Addressing these neglected aspects proactively holds the potential to elevate the level of customer satisfaction significantly, ultimately leading to enhanced profitability of hospitality industry.

Keywords: Hospitality Industry, Marketing based tangibility, Service sector, Covid-19, Customer Satisfaction.

JEL Classifications: L83, M31, L80, M31

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the hospitality business, particularly the hospitality industry, has been considered a significant driver of development and strength in the service sector in both developing and developed economies (Dzhandzhugazova et al., 2016; Lee & Cheng, 2018). An organization's business idea generation and execution, operational excellence, managerial

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proficiency, and market share of the overall industry are constantly established on customer loyalty, which is a consequence of highly delighted consumers, indicating that their service expectancy has been met and outperformed (Yeong et al., 2022).

Customer satisfaction is defined as the consumer's assessment of the total experience or value of an offering (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In the services industry, particularly if we talk about hospitality industry, customer satisfaction depends on numerous factors like reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness (Gummesson, 2008). However, this article focuses exclusively on how tangibles improve customer satisfaction. According to Heller et al. (2021) Tangibles are features of a service that may be 'felt' without really purchasing it. These are all part of the total experience for which the buyer has paid. Likewise, it was also unveiled by previous studies that tangibles are the 'visible' features of a service that firms use to foster satisfaction among customers (Kim et al., 2023).

Burhan et al. (2021) narrated that after Covid-19 pandemic, the hospitality industry in Pakistan is stumbling day by day, and the profit margin of large players has dramatically decreased. Customers seek relaxation, refreshment, and mental satisfaction in hotels. Likewise, five and seven star restaurants, including multinationals, are spending hundreds of thousands on advertising, but there is some lacking (Sun et al., 2022). Past researchers (Haming et al., 2019; Heller et al., 2021) found that the tangibility element is continuously ignored by hotels today, which focus more on commercialization instead of improving the customer experience.

In the services sector, such as hotels, restaurants, hospitals, transportation, telecommunication, and tourism, the only thing that matters are the customer experience. This experience will lead to satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Cahyani & Sujana, 2018). Likewise, Ali (2019) informed that due to massive growth in technology and social media in the last decade, customer experience is no longer private. Reviews, ratings, and comments on social media have become a solid wall against promotional campaigns. As per the investigation of Ruanguttamanun and Peemane (2022), Marketers need to understand what the key segments of their restaurants are that need to be refined, refurbished, or replaced to satisfy their potential and existing customers with respect to tangibility. Thus, it has become inevitable now to discover how Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) factors are playing their role in improving the customer experience subsequently satisfaction.

This study aims to investigate the Marketing-Based Tangibles found in the hospitality sector and assess their influence on customer satisfaction. For instance, hotels employ various tangible elements such as furniture, food offerings, play areas, and maintain a hygienic environment, alongside providing gym, sports and other facilities including visible objects to establish an ambiance that reflects a strong corporate identity. However, these tangibles may fall short of meeting customer expectations, potentially dissuading them from revisiting the hotel.

Moreover, customers have become more discerning and astute in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted their choices and expectations. Therefore, this research seeks to identify the most significant tangible factors and evaluate their impact on the overall level of customer satisfaction.

Theoretical Background of the study

Marketing Based Tangibility

The concept of Marketing in services sector is now accepted as an underlying philosophy and way of life, not only in the context of business and income, but also as a widely prevalent facet of entire modern society (Shanker 2002). Understanding and getting to know customers has recently been a widely acknowledged key of a company's function and longevity (Urban, 2005). Whereas, Tangibility is one of the dimensions of service quality identified in the SERVQUAL model, which assesses customer perceptions of service excellence (Parasuraman

et al., 1988). Tangible cues such as the physical appearance of facilities and amenities significantly influence customers' overall evaluations of service quality in the hospitality sector (Koernig, 2003).

Linking the both, Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) refers to the tangible elements of a service that are strategically managed and promoted to enhance customer satisfaction and overall service experience (Kotler et al., 2021). Likewise, customer satisfaction is a key performance indicator in the hospitality industry, reflecting guests' perceptions of the service received compared to their expectations (Haming et al., 2019).

However, Dzhandzhugazova et al. (2016) discussed that recent commercial challenges in all industries, particularly hospitality industry, are created by ignorance of customer expectations. It is the level of service quality which originates the customer experience. Tangibility factor is one of integral part of service quality which needs to be focused in order to unearth the key to customer satisfaction (Milovanovic & Ivanisevic, 2014; Setiono & Hidayat, 2022).

Consequently, it is critical for all stakeholder of hospitality industry, particularly those directly involved in the service offering process, to recognize the impact of MBT on overall performance of their organization.

Research Question 1: How does Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) contribute to customer satisfaction and overall performance in the hospitality sector?

Key Factors of MBT

Tamwatin et al. (2015) assert that in today's intensely competitive climate, the survival and success of hotels & restaurants relies significantly on the quality of service, with the ultimate aim being to attain the highest levels of customer satisfaction.

Erol et al. (2016) delve into the specifics of MBT within the hospitality industry, identifying key tangible components such as physical facilities, amenities, cleanliness, and ambiance. These elements, as outlined by Alaan (2016), contribute significantly to the perceived value of the service offered to customers, thereby influencing their overall satisfaction and experience. Furthermore, Tarn (2005) introduces marketing-related tangibility techniques, emphasizing the strategic deployment of tangible and symbolic elements to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction, complementing the operational focus found in much of the literature.

Kim et al. (2013) further support this idea, suggesting the integration of human touchpoints and resources to amplify tangibility in hotel and restaurant services. They also advocate for cultivating word-of-mouth effects and establishing robust communication channels to enrich the overall customer experience.

Similarly, Dzhandzhugazova et al. (2016) and Priyo et al. (2019) highlight the importance of enhancing service tangibility to enable customers to thoroughly assess their value. By prioritizing and optimizing Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) factors such as culinary offerings, recreational facilities, furnishings, reading materials, and more, hotels can enhance customer perceptions and satisfaction levels, thus strengthening their competitive position in the industry.

These insights converge to inform Research Question 2, which aims to identify and prioritize specific MBT factors crucial for the hospitality industry to address in order to enhance customer satisfaction and overall performance. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of these factors, hotel and restaurant managers can effectively tailor their strategies to meet the evolving needs and expectations of their guests, thereby driving sustainable success in the competitive hospitality landscape.

Research Question 2: What specific Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) factors are indispensable for the hospitality industry to address?

In the wake of transformative events like the COVID-19 pandemic, Mueller & Sensini (2021) emphasize the importance of adapting to evolving customer preferences. They suggest that service providers should leverage tangible and symbolic elements to align with changing expectations and enhance service quality. Tarn (2005) and Nguyen et al. (2018) provide further insights, recommending MBT-related techniques to address shifting consumer demands.

Moreover, Yeong et al., (2022) suggested that, the idea of making things seem real isn't just for hotels; it's important for everyone. They added by saying that after the pandemic, when people use a service, they think about how real it seems, not just how good it is. So, hotels and restaurants, along with other businesses and organizations, need to rethink about how to make things seem catchier and appealing.

Despite the fact that most studies in the literature focus on the tangibility issue from an operational standpoint, some articles have been working on the MBT issue. As per Sun et al. (2022), customers have become savvy after Covid pandemic, therefore in order to improve quality, service providers should use more tangible and symbolic things, in order to meet customer expectations and improve satisfaction.

Numerous studies (Jones et al., 2020; Ntounis et al., 2020; Sanabria-Díaz et al., 2021) have highlighted that customers have become increasingly vulnerable in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their expectations and demands have heightened significantly. Therefore, it is imperative to identify areas requiring improvement to meet these evolving needs. Particularly in the hospitality industry, it is crucial to discern the specific tangible factors necessary to meet and exceed customer expectations.

As such, Research Question 3 arises, seeking to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry and how hotel management can respond to these changes with respect to MBT. This question reflects the urgency for hoteliers to adapt their MBT strategies in light of evolving consumer needs and expectations in the post-pandemic era.

Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced customer satisfaction within the hospitality industry, given the heightened vulnerability and increased expectations of customers and how can their management respond to these changes with respect to MBT?

Research Methodology

Purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth investigation, it is based on the interpretivism research paradigm (Clarke, 2009). Furthermore, since the research study is qualitative as well as exploratory in nature, this kind of research produces collective perspectives of the participants' rich and typically unstructured, nonnumeric and unpredictable data (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is to learn about the emotions, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes (Grossoehme, 2014) of hotel customers in order to get insights of them regarding significance and impact of Marketing Based Tangible elements on their overall satisfaction level.

For this study, customers who visited minimum five hotels/restaurants in last one year were used as a unit of analysis to gain a thorough grasp of their real-world experiences. In order to gather data, semi structured open ended audio and video interviews comprising of 30-40 minutes were conducted. Data were collected between November 2023 to January 2024. Yin (2015) advises that small and common samples be used in qualitative research for data collection. Hence, 70 regular visitors of hotels in Pakistan were requested but only 51 were available for interview. Out of 51 acknowledged interviews, 29 were video and remaining 22 were audio. Respondents from five major cities of Pakistan were requested to generalize the results. Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta were targeted as population.

Hotel/restaurant guests were approached on the basis on snow ball sampling in which respondents refer each other for data collection. Rationale for utilizing this method was method was to reach potential respondents (Parker et al., 2019). Further details are exhibited in following table.

Table 1 Sample Characteristics

Demographics	Values	Frequency
Gender	Male	29
	Female	22
Hotel/Restaurant category	4 star	19
	5 star	14
	7 Star	18
Average stay per visit	<3 days	18
	3-5 days	17
	6-8 days	10
	<8 days	6
Hotel Origin*	National	37
	Multinational	14
Total number of visits in last one year	>5	12
	5-7	16
	8-10	11
	<10	12

*Most hotels were visited by more than one respondent

Source: Data compiled by authors

Results and Interpretation

Data collected through interviews were analyzed in NVivo software version 13.1 recommended by various studies i.e. Ali & Muhammad (2018), Khalid et al. (2019), Muhammad et al. (2020) and many more. Themes, were generated from the interviews of respondents by conducting comprehensive thematic analysis. Further, three queries were run in order to get insight from the gathered data (Grossoehme, 2014; Yin, 2015). The results are following;

Hierarchy Chart



Figure 1. Hierarchy Chart

The function of the Hierarchy Chart is to illustrate each theme of the study in distinct regions, arranged as nested rectangles of varying sizes (small and large). The size of each factor represents its importance, with larger blocks indicating greater significance. Some of these factors were also identified in the investigation conducted by Haming et al. (2019).

Figure-1 depicts two major segments of the hierarchy chart, distinguished between inside and outside factors for enhanced comprehension. Inside tangibles, as reported by customers, encompass furniture, food, newspapers & magazines, complimentary kits, and hygiene facilities. On the other hand, inside factors include gym facilities, sports amenities, prayer areas, kids' and play areas, identified as the most prominent factors in this category.

Word Tree

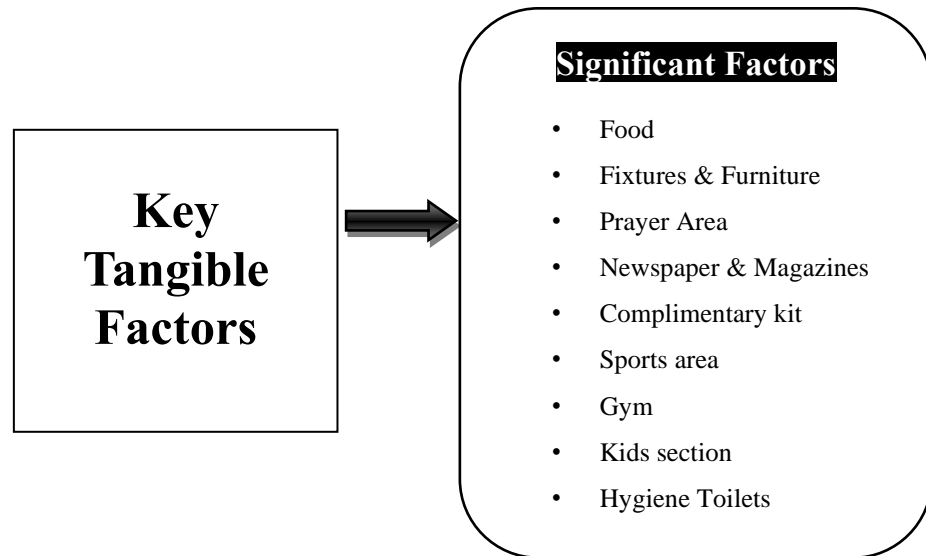


Figure 4. Findings of the study

Discussion and Conclusion

The examination, carried out through audio and video interviews with 51 regular customers, has yielded significant insights, shedding light on various aspects of Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT). Analysis techniques such as the Hierarchy Chart, Word Tree, and Tree Map were employed using NVivo software to generate findings (Ali and Muhammad, 2018), presenting responses in pictorial form. Following the thematic analysis of the interviews, significant themes were identified and utilized to derive results (Ali & Lodhi, 2017; Shahzad et al., 2021). The aim of this study was to explore the essential tangible factors crucial for customer satisfaction in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study focused on Pakistan, the world's fifth largest country (Majeed and Munir, 2020), with a population exceeding 240 million (Ahmad et al., 2022). Respondents were selected from five major cities, including the federal capital, as well as the four provincial capitals.

The figure demonstrated above, Figure 4, reflects the findings of the examination. The mentioned indicators are basically the key tangible factors responsible for customer response and satisfaction in post Covid scenario. The authors discovered that the absence or inadequate performance of these factors can result in customer dissatisfaction and frustration. Contrary to the pre-pandemic period, as noted by Ntounis et al. (2022) and Priyo et al. (2019), people were less cautious and vulnerable. However, their attitudes have since shifted. Through comprehensive analysis of interviews and informal discussions with respondents, it became apparent that the greater the presence of these tangible factors in hotels, the higher the frequency of customer visits.

The rationale behind this assertion is that these factors are among the most prominent and observed by customers, playing a crucial role in forming their initial impressions. It is well-established that services heavily rely on aesthetics and optics (Davahli et al., 2020; Heller et al., 2021; Mueller & Sensini, 2021). Thus, in addressing our first question, it becomes evident that MBT factors significantly influence not only customer satisfaction but also the overall performance of the hotel.

Now moving chronologically, our examination, primarily aided by visual aids such as the Hierarchy Chart (Figure 2), reveals two general classifications of tangibles. Inside tangibles, as mentioned by customers, include furniture, food, newspapers & magazines, and complimentary kits. Additionally, the Hierarchy Chart illustrates that alongside inside factors, certain outside factors also hold significance. Gym facilities, sports amenities, prayer areas,

and kids' areas emerged as the most identified factors in this category. While there may be other tangibles, our focus here lies on those factors significantly mentioned by customers.

Consequently, in addressing our second question, we now have insights into the specific tangibles crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering potential loyalty within the hospitality industry. These findings are consistent with various studies, including those conducted by Cahyani and Sujana (2018), Haming et al. (2019), and several others.

Additionally, Marketers must comprehend the changing dynamics of the hospitality industry, particularly considering that customers are now more discerning and cautious post-Covid-19. They exhibit heightened sensitivity towards tangibles, recognizing them as pivotal elements in their decision-making processes (Yeong et al., 2022).

As a response to our third question, it is established that the epidemic has indeed had adverse impacts on the hospitality industry. In order to tackle these challenges, marketers must now be more vigilant and conscious, as the consumers they are dealing with are highly savvy and well aware. Today, consumers are particular, sensitive, and more difficult to attract and retain compared to pre-pandemic times (Kim et al., 2023; Ruanguttamanun & Peemanee 2022). Marketers need to understand that they cannot simply neglect the role of tangibles by diverting all attention to aspects such as respect, sincerity, and the 7 C's of customer service.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in how consumers behave and what they expect from the hospitality industry (Sun et al., 2022). As some industries like online food delivery and ride-sharing companies have flourished during the recent shifts (Jones & Comfort, 2020) the hospitality industry has encountered considerable hindrances. Features such as aesthetics and tangible offerings, which were previously believed less vital, have now gained prominence in drawing and keeping clients. Consequently, the pandemic highlighted the significant importance of Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) in maintaining the hotels' resilience and flexibility during these challenging times. Marketers must recognize the changing environment and alter their approaches to bring into line with the growing expectations and demands of consumers in this post-pandemic era.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The findings of this investigation stem from a relatively modest sample size comprising 51 customers. While qualitative research often prioritizes depth over breadth, the limited number of participants may raise concerns regarding the broader applicability of the results to a larger population. Moreover, restricting the focus exclusively to the hospitality industry in Pakistan may constrain the transferability of the findings to other cultural or geographical settings.

Integrating qualitative insights gleaned from interviews with quantitative data collection methods can yield a more comprehensive analysis of Marketing-Based Tangibility (MBT) within the hospitality sector. By juxtaposing findings from various sources, researchers can corroborate and contextualize qualitative interpretations, thereby bolstering the credibility of the investigation.

Cultural variances can significantly shape customer expectations and perspectives, potentially influencing the utility of the study's recommendations across different locales. Subsequent research endeavors could benefit from engaging a more extensive and diverse pool of participants to enhance the representativeness of the results. By incorporating individuals from diverse backgrounds, regions, and hospitality establishments, the study can better grasp customer sentiments regarding MBT.

Furthermore, future research should augment customer feedback by soliciting input from management, staff, and other stakeholders along the service chain. Encompassing diverse viewpoints can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing MBT implementation and its ramifications on business performance and customer satisfaction. Additionally, researchers may employ quantitative methodologies such as surveys and random sampling to enhance the precision and inclusiveness of their investigations.

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Ethical Disclosures

Conflict of Interest: Ali, A., & Rasheed, M. H. declare that they do not have any competing interests.

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