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Pratik Ghosh & Deepika Jhamb

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How is the influence of hotel internship service quality a measurable factor in student interns' behavioral intentions? Mediating Role of Interns' Satisfaction

Pratik Ghosh  and Deepika Jhamb 

Chitkara Business School, Chitkara University, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The study aims to delineate the factors affecting the behavioral intentions of hotel interns of the reputed Institute of Hotel Management (IHMs). Also, the study intends to identify the association between future career intentions and word of mouth taking students' satisfaction during the internship as a mediating factor into consideration. To achieve this, a descriptive cross-sectional design was adopted and data were collected from 140 Indian students recently finished their hotel internship. The proposed claims were tested through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Findings claim no direct influence of service quality of the internship on the career intentions of the hotel interns. However, hotel internship service quality has an adverse impact on the word of mouth of interns. Further, the satisfaction of interns mediates positively between these two variables, thereby negating the direct adverse effect and depicting competitive mediation. The results may facilitate both hotels and IHMs to design and schedule an effective internship program to bridge the gap between the expected and available skilled manpower for the hotels.

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Service quality; satisfaction; career intentions; word of mouth; behavioral intentions; institute of hotel management; hotel internship

1. Introduction

The relentless challenge for harmonizing guest delight with upbeat room inventory has welded competition among the talent managers of top hotel brands to engage quality hospitality professionals (Nagar & Jaiswal, 2019). With the key performance indicators (KPIs) such as occupancy percentage, average room rate, and revenue per available room bolstered over the last five financial years (Khanna & Rahan, 2018), the National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology (NCHMCT) with its 72 affiliated Institutes of Hotel Management (IHMs) across the nation are incessantly engaged in training the students with the desired learning outcomes to meet the industry demands (NCHMCT, n.d.). Hotel management graduates with superior knowledge and skills to match the requirements of the industry are a result of a well-designed academic program (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2007). The IHMs focus to deliver quality hospitality education to undergraduate students by balancing theory and practical aspects of learning in the

curriculum (Dahiya, 2013). One of the most significant ways to emphasize this learning is going through an internship, which entails practical exposure away from classrooms. This is the occasion when the students, by working in a hotel for the first time, form an opinion, impressions, and future career intentions for the industry.

However, there is a lack of readiness and motivation amongst hospitality undergraduate students toward career intentions (Boo & Kim, 2020). The research highlighted that 59% of students undergo disillusionment and remain skeptical regarding their future career intentions in the hotels owing to unrealistic expectations, unfavorable working conditions, and lack of supervisory and management skills imparted during the internship (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2019).

A survey on declining students' participation in internship programs among hospitality students in the UK indicated that many students cited their disinterest to work in the hotels in the future (Aggett & Busby, 2011). Another study revealed 46% of respondents' post-internship had negative intentions to pick hotels as their career choice and almost all these students stated their decision owing to adverse experiences of internship (Robinson et al., 2016). This is a serious concern as the negative behavioral intentions of the interns would lead to their reluctance for joining the hotel industry in the future, thereby defeating the requirements of the talent managers (Siu et al., 2012). A recent focus group discussion in April 2019 conducted by the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) among hotel management academicians, hoteliers, and IHM alumni in India also highlighted the issue, which stated that about 25% of graduates from IHMs opt for other service industries and not hotels.

On the positive side, interpersonal skills, communication, patience, and tolerance can be learned as a part of internship experiences by intermingling theory and practice (Chatzigeorgiou & Simeli, 2017; Chen et al., 2018). This establishes that internship exposure is an important juncture for the interns in forming positive or negative perceptions about the hotel industry. The talent managers of top hotel brands would not like to lose on the quality human resources and therefore constantly focus on designing good quality internship programs. Still, their efforts may be futile until the service quality of internship delivered by the hotels from the interns' perspective is evaluated to assess whether the students perceive the internship to be positive and whether they decide to pursue their career in hotels in the future. To be specific, there is a requirement for measuring the service quality of internship in hotels that would decide whether these programs would facilitate the students to prepare as future hotel professionals. Although researchers in the past have provided more attention to the aspect of learning outcomes of the interns, the subsequent influence of service quality of hotel internship on the career intentions and word of mouth of interns have received much less attention (Robinson et al., 2016). Moreover, scarce literature was found to address whether the internship service quality delivered by hotels has been able to influence career intentions and word of mouth of interns; whether interns are satisfied with the internship service quality; and whether their satisfaction would further influence them to choose hotels as their future career and spread the positive word of mouth about their internship experiences to their juniors. Hence, it becomes essential to explore further in the area of hotel internship service quality by connecting the gap in hotel internship literature. Consequently, the present study measures the service quality perceptions of IHM students who have just returned from their internship and carry afresh their internship experiences. Moreover, this will be

the first research of its kind and a unique study where the behavioral intentions will not be measured as a construct; rather, the impact of service quality on the observed variables of behavioral intentions – that is, career intentions and word of mouth – will be evaluated separately. The theoretical foundations of this research are based on two theories: Appraisal theory (Smith & Lazarus, 1990) and Expectation-confirmation theory (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). The theoretical and practical contribution will enlighten both the industry and the institutes to scrutinize the internship program offered. Accordingly, they can strengthen and monitor the systems and processes to create a favorable and engaging learning experience for the interns to serve the hotel industry in the future. The following section of the paper includes a literature review. [Section 3](#) comprises of theoretical framework, conceptualization and development of hypotheses. The methodology followed in the study is depicted in [Section 4](#). The data analysis process is mentioned in [Section 5](#) whereas [Section 6](#) discusses the entire results of hypotheses testing. The conclusion of the study is drawn in [Section 7](#) and [Section 8](#) describes theoretical and practical implications. Finally, [Section 9](#) is devoted to limitations and the future scope of research in the area.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Literature review methodology

The method of selecting the research papers needs to be finalized before conducting the literature review (Kampani & Jhamb 2020; Rana & Sharma, 2015). The scholarly journals from renowned publishing houses were accessed in the field of hospitality education, service quality, and internship, namely, Elsevier, Emerald, Taylor and Francis, Inderscience, Springer, De Gruyter, and other reputed journal interfaces. Out of many papers that emerged in the search, the authors considered only English manuscripts with literature from the period of 1981 to 2020 for the present study.

2.2. Service quality of hotel internship

Service quality of internship programs and industry participation are the two major factors influencing students to take up the hotel industry as their future careers (Robinson et al., 2016). It is through this exposure that the students enhance their critical thinking skills, commitment towards organizations, and experiential learning to secure future campus placements in the hotels (Assante et al., 2010). However, the higher level of student expectations before internships may lead to dissatisfaction among the interns (Farmaki, 2018). A research of 113 hotel interns in Turkey revealed that nearly 83% of the respondents felt hotel personnel to be very friendly, 79% of respondents measured the supervisory roles as adequate; however, 32% of the students described poor task orientation of the hotels during the internship (Collins, 2002). Further study on the perception of hotel interns showed that about 40 to 50% of the students decided to exit the hotel industry post their graduation (Lu & Adler, 2009; Robinson et al., 2016). This suggests that a substantial proportion of students tend not to join hotels after completing their graduation.

2.3. The satisfaction of hotel interns

The trade-off between the expectations and perceptions of students during their hotel internship indicates satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Farmaki, 2018). Further research on the satisfaction of students reveals the challenges with hotel internships in the formulation of a well-designed internship program in the future (Farmaki, 2018). Supervisors' feedback and scope for learning new skills were the primary measures of students' satisfaction with hotel internships (Murphy, 2018). The quality of training in hospitality management significantly influences satisfaction among interns, which in turn enhances their positive career intentions. The training satisfaction also indirectly influenced the career intentions of the students mediated by their satisfaction towards internship (Ko, 2008). This indicates the critical role played by the satisfaction towards the behavioral intentions of interns.

2.4. Behavioral intentions of hotel interns

From the hotels' perspective, the role of interns continues even after the internship has ended. This may be in the form of their career intentions to join the same hotel chain and spread the word of mouth to their juniors about their internship experience (Breitsohl & Ruhle, 2016). As such, behavioral intentions could be expressed as repurchase intentions and word of mouth resulting in a multidimensional construct (Widianti et al., 2015). However, the present research does not measure the behavioral intentions as a single construct; instead, career intentions and word of mouth of the interns are measured separately. Gaining exposure from hotels builds up confidence in an intern which in turn motivates them to pursue a rewarding career in the future (Ko, 2008). These undergraduates mentioned experiences during an internship as one of the significant predictors in deciding their career intentions (Lee et al., 2019).

At the same time, a study found that many students pursuing hospitality management in India hold an adverse perception of the hotels as a career for them (Nair et al., 2017). Also, most of them do not have a long-term plan to stay in the hotel industry (Amisshah et al., 2020). Further, there are instances where researchers mentioned the negatives experiences of the internship by the students leads to their decision of not joining the hotel industry henceforth and disseminating the negative word of mouth regarding their internship experience (Liu et al., 2010). As such, there is a need for the hotel industry to be well prepared with quality internship programs to satisfy the interns and create positive behavioral intentions.

2.5. Hotel internship

Practical training involving students, institutions, and colleges of higher learning to indulge in an activity-oriented process of learning is referred to as an internship or industrial training (Pusiran et al., 2020). An internship enables the shift of the students to employment from education, which facilitates career development through experiential learning (Silva et al., 2018). The undergraduates in IHMs are required to undergo a 17-week internship with a four or five-star hotel in all the four core departments of food production, food and beverage service, front office, and housekeeping. A study establishes a strong connection between internship service quality offered by the hotels on the

future of hospitality professionals (Dhar, 2015). The internships help the budding hotel professionals to select those hotels that offer a cultural environment that conforms to their values (Goia et al., 2017).

Many negative perceptions and thoughts of the students regarding their future careers and word of mouth are modified during internships when they are exposed to desirable social experiences (Kim & Park, 2013). The academicians and regulators of hotel management courses strive to replicate the technique that the industry follows by robustly integrating experiential learning techniques such as industry internships (Kim & Jeong, 2018). Integration of experiential learning is the key for the academic institutions to enable “industry ready” graduates (Goh & King, 2019). Amid apprehensions that the desire of undergraduates to join hotels diminishes post-internship, there need to be significant steps taken by academic institutions and industry to promote encouraging workplace settings (Mensah et al., 2020). Like employees, this necessitates the hotels to deliver superior internal service quality to the student interns for creating an overall positive internship experience (Ko, 2008).

Although higher education institutions have acknowledged the significance of measuring service quality perceptions of internal customers such as faculty and administrative staff using modified SERVQUAL (Galloway, 1998; Pariseau & McDaniel, 1997; Sahney, 2016; Sahney et al., 2008), the hotels have lately recognized the importance of the same (Al-Ababneh et al., 2018). To the best of the author’s knowledge, the application of the SERVQUAL to measure internship experiences is scarce. As such, the study identifies this gap and grasp the opportunity to apply the modified SERVQUAL to measure service quality perceptions of student interns regarding their internship experiences.

2.6. Theoretical framework

Conceptualizing the structural model offered by Cronin and Taylor (1992), the current study is based on the theories of emotion and adaptation as well as utility-oriented framework popularly known as “Appraisal Theory” and “Expectation-confirmation Theory”. The first theory proposed that any evaluation process involves emotion which in turn leads to behavioral intentions. According to the theory, emotion holds the central position between the appraisal process and coping activities. The appraisal process initiates with personality factors of the person that includes attitude perceptions such as service quality, arising positive or negative emotions such as satisfaction or fear, leading to coping responses in the form of behavioral intentions (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). Later, the theory was justified through an appraisal → emotional response → coping framework (Bagozzi, 1992). This research will accordingly study the emotions of the student interns which is in the midst of the relationship between the internship service quality delivered by hotels and behavioral intentions of interns. This is a critical aspect as according to the theory, the coping responses of interns towards their career intentions or word of mouth will be accordingly conditioned based on their satisfaction or fear.

The second theory that the study finds further support is the “*Expectation-confirmation theory*” which includes a complete cycle emanating from the expectation of consumers before purchase to the behavioral intentions of a satisfied customer in terms of word of mouth and post-purchase intentions (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Tuncer et al., 2020). The

theory delineates that the higher perceived quality of a customer is more important than disconfirmations leading to greater satisfaction towards the service influencing favorable behavioral intentions. It states that entities that provide high satisfaction are less sensitive to changes in the perceptions of quality and satisfaction of the customers. Their reputation insulates them even in case of a drop in customer service quality perceptions. The theory will nevertheless help to understand the role of service quality perceptions among the interns leading to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction influencing career intentions and word of mouth. Also, it may help to explore whether internship service quality may have taken a backseat for the reputed hotels providing high satisfaction to the interns.

3. Developing the conceptual framework and hypotheses

The perspective on service quality, also termed the American perspective, was developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) described by characteristics such as reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles depicted in the performance expectation model (SERVQUAL) with 22 items. Later, Cronin and Taylor (1992) delineated the relationship among SERVQUAL items with satisfaction and behavioral intentions by developing a structural model. In the present study, the conceptual model as shown in Figure 1 is adapted from the structural model to evaluate the service quality of hotel internship from the student interns' perspective. Further, the model derives support from the Appraisal theory where satisfaction is in the center between service quality and behavioral intention variables.

It is imperative that the constructs in the model need to be conceptualized by acknowledging the previous literature creating the foundation for hypotheses development (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

3.1. Association between service quality and behavioural intentions

Previous studies have depicted a positive direct impact of service quality on behavioral intentions. In the context of higher education, a similar relationship is depicted (Prentice

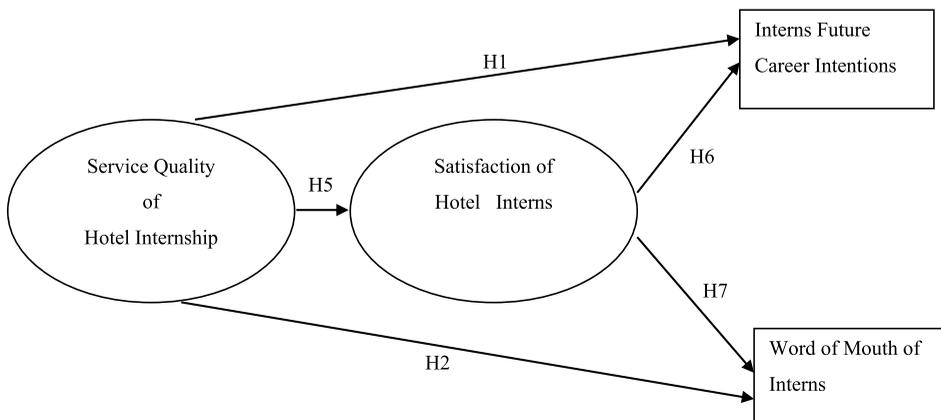


Figure 1. Proposed model. Source: Author's Proposed Model

et al., 2018). Moreover, past studies have revealed a positive association between service quality and specific subsets of behavioral intentions in the form of word-of-mouth and repurchase intentions (Prentice et al., 2018; Teo & Soutar, 2012). However, several studies also conclude that a negative perception of service quality of hotels during internship would reduce the career intentions of the students and lead to negative word of mouth experiences among their juniors upon their return to their institutes (Farmaki, 2018; Robinson et al., 2016). At the same time, there are studies in the past to suggest that the internship experiences prepare the hotel management interns for their future career in hotels by controlling and managing their expectations encouragingly with positive word of mouth sharing (Kim & Park, 2013; Lee & Chao, 2013). Thus, the first two hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1. Service quality of hotel internship has a positive and direct influence on interns' future career intentions.

H2. Service quality of hotel internship has a positive and direct influence on word of mouth of interns.

Quite a few studies have shown an indirect positive relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prentice et al., 2018; Žabkar et al., 2010). Specifically, the associations of two components of behavioral intentions – repurchases intentions and word of mouth – have also been studied separately with service quality, and their indirect effects are significant (Prentice et al., 2018; Widiанти et al., 2015). As such, it is expected that service quality will have positive indirect relationships with behavioral intentions. The study will analyze the indirect effect of service quality of hotel internship on the career intentions and word of mouth behavior of interns. Hence, the next two hypotheses are delineated as follows:

H3. Service quality of hotel internship has a positive and indirect influence on interns' future career intentions.

H4. Service quality of hotel internship has a positive and indirect influence on word of mouth of interns.

3.2. Association between service quality and satisfaction

It was considered because both of these variables were influenced by the attitude in which service quality is long-term evaluation and satisfaction is considered as an outcome of evaluation (Sultan et al., 2012). Many others considered satisfaction as the precursor of service quality (Bolton & Drew, 1991). It was later established that the researchers operationalized these variables according to their focus. Service quality was considered as a holistic or global perspective whereas satisfaction was considered as a transactional perspective which is mostly service encounters (Teas, 1993). Thus, at the transaction stage, service quality would lead to satisfaction and the satisfaction of these encounters will further lead to overall service quality. There are many pieces of research where service quality is seen to indirectly affect behavioral intentions via satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010; Widiанти et al., 2015). At the same time, research in the field also supports the positive direct relationship between service

quality and satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prentice et al., 2018; Widianti et al., 2015; Žabkar et al., 2010). So, the fifth hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

H5. Service quality of hotel internship has a positive influence on the satisfaction of hotel interns.

3.3. Association between satisfaction and behavioral intentions

Many studies depict a strong direct impact of satisfaction on behavioral intentions (Cronin et al., 2000; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Prentice et al., 2018; Tam, 2004). It is inferred that customer satisfaction is a significant antecedent of behavioral intentions which in turn influences organizations' profits and market share (Tam, 2004). The literature also shows a positive relationship between satisfaction and behavioral intentions, in terms of word of mouth and repurchases intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010; Žabkar et al., 2010). In the context of higher education, a similar relationship is depicted (Prentice et al., 2018). As such, the hypothesis for the same can be stated as follows:

H6. The satisfaction of hotel interns has a positive influence on the interns' future career intentions.

H7. The satisfaction of hotel interns has a positive influence on the word of mouth of interns.

3.4. Mediation of satisfaction between service quality and behavioral intentions

Analysis of mediation is denoted by a causal effect that results in an independent variable for an outcome (Kenny et al., 1998). A study underlying the effect of service quality on behavioral intentions of coach passengers in Taiwan suggests satisfaction played the role of a mediator in the relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions (Jen et al., 2011). Research to evaluate the impact of service quality and satisfaction of mobile value-added services on post-purchase intentions depict that no significant direct effects between service quality and post-purchase intentions; however, the indirect association between the constructs were significant through satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2009). As such, the role of satisfaction as the mediator between service quality and behavioral intentions such as word of mouth and repurchase intentions is established in several studies (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prentice et al., 2018). Therefore, the hypotheses are expressed as follows:

H8. The relationship between service quality of hotel internship and interns' future career intentions is mediated by the satisfaction of interns.

H9. The relationship between the service quality of hotel internship and the word of mouth of interns is mediated by the satisfaction of interns.

4. Methodology

4.1. Variables and measures

The variables considered in the research comprise service quality, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in the form of word of mouth and career intentions. To measure the internship service quality from the student intern's perspective, a modified SERVQUAL or "Internal service quality battery (ISQB)" scale proposed by Kang et al. (2002) is used. The scale consists of five dimensions – tangibles, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy having 22 items. In the literature, ISQB is examined to be a reliable and valid instrument (Kang, 2006). The scale is used to measure service quality perceptions of internal customers in various industries such as universities, technical institutes, police departments and hotels by rewording the original SERVQUAL items (Al-Ababneh et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2002; Sahney, 2016; Singh, 2016). The items used in the scale are thus, not only reworded but also further refined to the context of the study with the support from the hotel internship literature. Finally, the items used for the ISQB under different dimensions of SERVQUAL indicated the need for autonomy provided to interns, support from the supervisors, assistance and trust of hotel employees and learning opportunities (Cho, 2006; Conway & Briner, 2002; Ko, 2008). The three items for satisfaction construct and two observed variables for behavioral intentions were adapted from Cronin et al. (2000).

4.2. Instrument development

To test the hypotheses, a cross-sectional survey research design was used. The instrument drew questions from existing scales. The survey began with a demographic section, gathering data such as name, gender, IHM and contact information. All other questions applied a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree. Seven items in the instrument are negatively worded to avoid respondent bias, which was later re-coded for analysis. For all other items, the higher the value given by the respondents, the higher are the perceptions of the variables. To ensure the content validity of the instrument, an experiential survey has been conducted considering five experts from the industry and alumni of IHMs. The final questionnaire was then modified as suggested by the experts.

4.3. Participant selection

Participants were invited from four premier Institute of Hotel Management (IHMs) located in Tier-I cities in India. There are numerous reasons behind choosing the tier I cities as a sample. At first, these cities have high concentrations of branded hotel chain properties, about 72% of the total branded-chain properties in the country (Thadani & Mobar, 2019) and the IHMs in these cities are preferred by students due to proximity to the industry. Next, the sample IHMs are categorized as "Group A" institutes based on infrastructure, location, student preferences, placements and other parameters prescribed by the National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology (NCHMCT) under the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

Further, these selected IHMs have proven their mettle in the overall hospitality educational institutes ranking conducted by reputed rating agencies by securing top positions in the country (Global Human Resource Development Centre [GHRDC], 2019; India Today [IT], 2018). The respondents selected in the study were the fourth-semester students who carry their fresh perceptions about their internship experiences. As the population of the study is defined, the entire population were included in the survey. The questionnaires were distributed to the population of 252 students out of which 140 questionnaires had usable responses and were completed in all aspects, thereby accounting for 56% of the response rate including male (68.24%) and female (31.76%) respondents.

4.4. Preliminary model testing

Although the survey was performed at four different IHMs over a period of 4 months, data for all latent variables were collected at the same time from each respondent using a single method. As such, it was necessary to determine if common method bias influenced the measurement model results (Gligor et al., 2016; Lii & Kuo, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman's one-factor test was applied (Centobelli et al. 2019; Zu et al., 2010). If the overall variance depicted by a single unrotated factor exceeds the overall variance of the entire scale by more than 50%, that indicates common method bias.

5. Data analysis

In the exploratory factor analysis to test for common method bias, the first extracted factor explained 25.56% of the variance, which was below the 50% threshold. The results thus indicated the absence of common method bias in the study. Next, the conceptual model was tested through SEM, which is conducted in two stages (Hair et al., 2010). In the first stage, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the measurement model to investigate how well the indicators measure the individual constructs (Lee et al., 2010). In the measurement model, convergent and discriminant validity is used to measure the construct validity. Convergent validity ensures a high correlation among the items of the same constructs with factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010) and the composite reliability (CR) of each construct above 0.7 (Hair et al., 1998). Also, if the AVE of the construct is more than 0.5 and maximum shared variance (MSV), it meets the criteria of convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's alpha is used to check the reliability of each construct (Hair et al., 2010) that should be equal to or more than 0.7 (Tarí et al., 2007). Following the criteria set by Hair et al. (2010), multiple benchmarks, such as the ratio of χ^2/df , the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI) was used to confirm that the data collected has a good fit with the proposed model.

To evaluate the relative magnitude of a direct path with that of an indirect or mediated path, Sobel's z-test or bootstrapping is advised (Iacobucci et al., 2007). It is recommended to use the bootstrap method only to check the indirect effects in the model instead of the Sobel test and Baron–Kenny three tests method to establish mediation. The mediation will be indirect only if the mediated paths are significant and the direct path is not. In case the direct path, as well as indirect paths, is both significant, the mediation will be either complementary or competitive (Zhao et al., 2010). The mediation effect can thus be

detected through bootstrapping as it rectifies the non-normality issues (Wood et al., 2008). If zero is not included in the bias-corrected interval, the study can conclude the presence of a mediation effect (Hayes, 2009; Ro, 2012). In the present study, to confirm the mediation effect, 2000 bootstrap samples at 95 percentile bias-corrected confidence level was measured. The entire data analysis was facilitated with the help of AMOS 24.

6. Results and discussions

6.1. Measurement model

6.1.1. Content validity

As the questionnaire was adapted from standard instruments, the same needs to be customized, rephrased, and amended to ensure content validity through an expert review for value addition (Ikart, 2019). The experts included five experts from hotels and alumni of these IHMs. The questionnaire was validated after removing two indicators of empathy dimension as recommended by the experts.

6.1.2. Pilot study

To determine the sample size for a pilot study, it is inferred that a sample size of 59 respondents will be sufficient to detect an existing problem with a 5% probability to occur in a study with 95% confidence (Viechtbauer et al., 2015). The pilot test was done on the first 65 samples to ascertain the reliability of the constructs which were above 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010).

6.1.3. Construct validity

Convergent and discriminant validity was done to assess construct (Kampani and Jhamb, 2020) validity. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out initially to check the convergent validity. At first, the factor loading value was assessed for each construct and it was identified whether it was more than 0.5 to be statistically significant (Tavana et al. 2019; Hair et al., 2010). Then, the composite reliability (CR) of each construct was measured to check if it meets the criteria of 0.7 (Hair et al., 1998). Table 1 depicts the factor loading of the individual constructs, which has a minimum loading of 0.5. Three items of reliability and empathy in each construct were dropped as the factor loadings for these indicators were below the criteria which suggested their weak influence on the construct. As such, the empathy dimension of service quality became redundant and is not considered in the study. The CR in the study ranged from 0.70 to 0.82 whereas factor loadings had a spread of 0.555 to 0.815. The average variance extracted (AVE) was calculated to assess the convergent and discriminant validity, which needs to be more than 0.5 and MSV (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The same has a range between 0.41 and 0.541. All the indicators in the construct met the criteria of convergent and discriminant validity other than the responsiveness dimension of service quality and satisfaction. The AVE of these constructs was under the criteria of 0.50 but still at an acceptable level of above 0.40 (Handley & Benton, 2009). Also, the dimensions are not dropped as CR was 0.7, which satisfies one of the criteria and is also well acknowledged in the literature (Agung, 2011).

Table 1. Reliability and validity of the constructs.

Latent variable	Item	Standardized		Error variance	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
		Factor loading	t-value				
Service quality <i>Tangibles</i>	P1 The hotel has up to date equipment.	0.745**	6.456	0.06	0.81	0.82	0.541
	P2 Hotel's working environment is comfortable and attractive	0.815**	6.900	0.06			
	P3 Hotel employees have a neat professional appearance	0.769**	6.995	0.05			
	P4 The facilities in the hotel are visually appearing	0.595**	6,900	0.07			
Reliability	P8 Hotel supervisors provides me feedback and correct information	0.607**	6.920	0.10	0.79	0.70	0.509
	P9 Hotel supervisors are reliable	0.807**	6.920	0.10			
Responsiveness	P10 My communication with supervisors is not appropriate, accurate and clear.	0.718**	5.420	0.13	0.75	0.70	0.47
	P11 Supervisors do not respond quickly and efficiently to my request.	0.610**	5.846	0.11			
	P12 Supervisors are not always willing to help me in learning.	0.560**	6.909	0.14			
	P13 Supervisors of the hotel are too busy to consider special requests and needs.	0.555**	5.846	0.12			
	P14 I can trust employees of the hotel.	0.802**	5.934	0.10			
Assurance	P15 I can feel safe in dealing with employees.	0.728**	5.727	0.09	0.75	0.79	0.501
	P16 Hotel employees are polite and kind.	0.605**	5.852	0.11			
	P17 Employees are knowledgeable to support my learning.	0.683**	5.852	0.10			
	P18 Hotel employees are knowledgeable to support my learning.	0.683**	5.852	0.10			
Satisfaction	SA1 The choice to select this hotel for internship was a wise one.	0.720**	6.309	0.19	0.71	0.70	0.41
	SA2 Pursuing the internship from the hotel was the right thing.	0.596**	6.250	0.11			
	SA3 The facility in the hotel is exactly what is required by the interns.	0.598**	6.362	0.18			

** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). AVE indicates average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability.

6.1.4. Testing reliability

All the constructs in the model showed good reliability as the Cronbach's α varied between 0.71 and 0.81 compared to the minimum criteria of more than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010; Ho, 2013). Construct reliability is thus verified.

6.2. Structural model (model fitting and testing hypotheses)

More than one criterion is used to find out whether the proposed model has a good fit in the form of a ratio of chi-square to the degree of freedom (χ^2/df), CFI or TLI and GFI or RMSEA that can provide adequate information for model assessment (Hair et al., 2010). The calculated values are being displayed in Table 2. It is also mentioned that incremental fit indices (CFI) are not affected by sample size. Overall, sufficient proof of model fit is provided by these indices.

In Figure 2, the results of the model being tested are delineated. All direct paths except "service quality of hotel internship" to "interns future career intentions", "satisfaction of hotel interns" to "interns' future career intentions" are statistically significant. Moreover,

Table 2. Summary of the goodness-of-fit.

Measures	Criteria	Indicators
χ^2/df	< 5	2.101
GFI	>0.9	0.901
TLI	>0.9	0.917
CFI	>0.9	0.926
RMSEA	<0.08	0.071

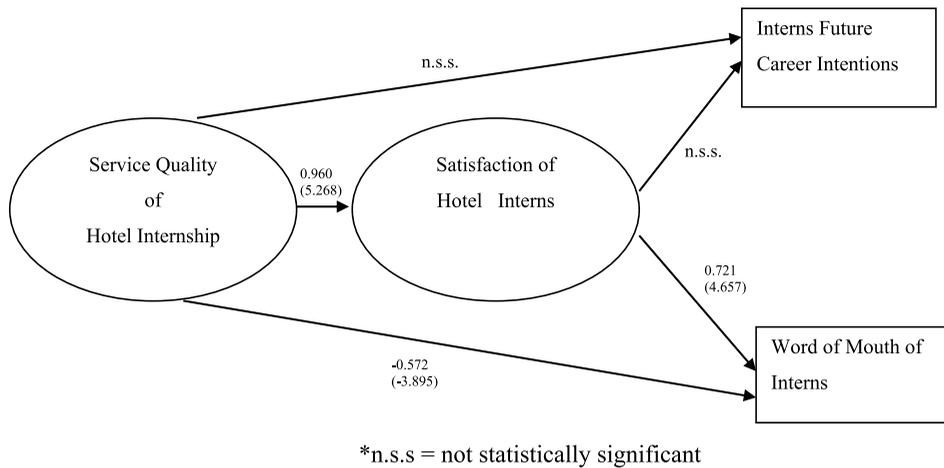


Figure 2. The SEM results of the conceptual model. *n.s.s = not statistically significant

Table 3. Hypotheses Tests – I.

Path	Standard parameter estimate	Standard Error	T - value	p-value	Significant	Test result
Direct effects						
H1: Service quality → Future Career intentions	-0.377	0.960	-0.454	0.446	No	Reject
H2: Service quality → Word of mouth	-0.572	0.181	-3.895	0.001	Yes	Reject
H5: Service quality → Satisfaction	0.960	0.159	5.268	0.001	Yes	Support
H6: Satisfaction → Future Career intention	0.114	1.094	0.135	0.892	No	Reject
H7: Satisfaction → Word of mouth	0.721	0.368	4.657	0.001	Yes	Support
Indirect effects						
H3: Service quality → Future Career intentions	0.109	1.499		0.761	No	Reject
H4: Service quality → Word of mouth	0.692	0.135		0.001	Yes	Support

the direct path “service quality of hotel internship” to “word of mouth of interns” is negative and significant, which is opposed to our assertion. As such, H1, H2, and H6 are rejected whereas H5 and H7 are accepted. At the same time, the indirect path between “service quality of hotel internship” to “interns future career intentions” is insignificant thereby rejecting H3; however, H4 is accepted owing to a significant indirect path between “service quality of hotel internship” to “word of mouth of interns”.

The entire results of the hypotheses testing are summarized in Table 3. The first hypothesis that service quality has a positive and direct influence on future career intentions of interns is rejected, indicating that a greater level of internship service quality does not lead to a higher level of career intentions. This is supported in previous literature also (Widiанти et al., 2015). The results may also indicate that the interns are not finding anything unique in the service quality delivered by the hotels. Consequently, the hotels should consider various innovative ways to make the entire program enriched and engaging for the interns to establish a significant relationship between these two variables.

The second hypothesis is also rejected due to the findings that the service quality has an adverse and direct influence on the word of mouth of interns. The findings indicate that negative perceptions of service quality of hotels, as perceived by interns, trigger unpleasant sharing of their experiences with the juniors about the same. The result, however, is in line with the earlier literature that advocates negative career intentions and word of mouth prevalent among interns due to adverse exposure during the hotel internships (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2019; Siu et al., 2012).

The study rejects the third hypothesis that service quality has a positive and indirect influence on the career intentions of hotel interns. However, the effect is positive but not significant. This finding is not supported by previous studies, which have typically established a significant positive indirect relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions in the form of repurchase intentions. The finding of this study may be unique, as the indirect effect is positive, but not enough to make the relationship both positive and significant.

On the other hand, the fourth hypothesis is supported for having a significant positive indirect relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions as word of mouth. This is supported by the previous literature also (Cronin et al., 2000; Prentice et al., 2018; Widiанти et al., 2015). Moreover, the indirect positive relationship is large enough to create a positive effect between these two variables, thereby minimizing the negative word of mouth experiences among the juniors about the hotel internship. This is a situation of competitive mediation as the direct effect is significant and negative whereas the indirect effect is significant and positive (Zhao et al., 2010).

There is a positive direct effect of service quality of hotels on the satisfaction of interns, which is well established in the literature (Chen & Chen, 2010; Cronin et al., 2000; Prentice et al., 2018; Widiанти et al., 2015). As such, the fifth hypothesis is accepted. This suggests that the higher the service quality delivered by the hotels, the satisfaction among the interns is also amplified accordingly.

The sixth hypothesis to assess the effect of satisfaction of hotel interns on future career intentions was not found to be significant, showing that the satisfaction of hotel interns is not guaranteed to influence their career intentions about joining the hotel chain in the

Table 4. Hypotheses Tests – II.

Mediated Path	Lower Bounds interval	Upper Bounds interval	p-value	Significant	Test result
H8: Service quality → Future Career intentions	- 1.537	6.002	0.761	No	Reject
H9: Service quality → Word of mouth	0.436	0.964	0.01	Yes	Support

future. This is supported in a few studies in the service industry where similar results have been found (Cronin et al., 2000). This may indicate that even if interns are satisfied that they are completing their internship programs, there is no significant desire among interns to join hotels in the future.

The word of mouth of hotel interns is positively impacted by their satisfaction, which is significant. This relationship between satisfaction and word of mouth is well depicted in the literature (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prentice et al., 2018). As such, the seventh hypothesis is supported. The findings indicate that satisfied interns will spread the word of mouth among their juniors about their overall internship experiences.

The mediation effect of satisfaction on the relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions in the form of career intentions and word of mouth was checked and the results are indicated in Table 4.

The eighth hypothesis, which tests for the mediation effect of satisfaction between service quality and career intentions, is rejected as there is no significant relationship between these variables; also, the indirect relationship between the service quality of hotels and future career intentions of the interns is insignificant indication no mediation between the variables (Kline, 2005; Zhao et al., 2010).

On the other hand, there is evidence of mediation between service quality and word of mouth as the bootstrapping results indicate that zero does not lie between lower and upper intervals of the bias-corrected percentile method (Hayes, 2009). As such, the ninth hypothesis is accepted, which conforms to the previous studies (Cronin et al., 2000; Ko, 2008; Prentice et al., 2018). The result indicates that satisfaction is a mediator in the relationship between service quality delivered by the hotels and word of mouth of the interns. An interesting observation that emerges out in this relationship is that the direct and indirect relationships between the variables are of different signs; one negative and the other positive. This is a typical situation of competitive mediation which also suggests the probable presence of other mediators that are not considered in this study (Zhao et al., 2010).

7. Conclusion

The study focuses on the factors affecting the behavioral intentions of hotel interns through SEM. The budding hospitality professionals of four reputed IHMs of tier I cities of the country participated in the study. In particular, this research explored the relationship among service quality of hotel internship, the satisfaction of hotel interns, interns' future career intentions, and their word-of-mouth appraisals of their experiences. The survey investigates the influence on word of mouth and career intentions as separately observed variables instead of considering behavioral intentions as a single latent construct. The findings depicted that the service quality of the hotel internship does not impact the behavioral intentions of interns positively and directly. Service quality, on the other hand, has a strong positive effect on the satisfaction of hotel interns. Also, it was seen in the study that satisfaction played a competitive mediating role in the relationship between service quality of the hotel internship and word of mouth spread by interns.

8. Implications

8.1. Theoretical implication

The study addressed the gap in the hotel internship literature where according to the author, sparse research was found on the relationship between service quality of hotel internship, the satisfaction of interns leading to their behavioral intentions. Also, the use of the ISQB instrument to measure the service quality of hotel internship adds to the existing literature where a similar instrument was used to evaluate service quality perceptions of various internal customers in different business settings. The present study is designed to measure the two indicators of behavioral intentions, career intentions and word of mouth, separately and not as a single construct to indicate their relative influence in the context of hotel interns. The absence of a positive direct effect of service quality on both career intentions and word of mouth of the interns is associated with the sample in context. The choices of the interns are limited for undergoing internship as it is based on a first-come-first-served basis between the IHMs and hotels. Interns seldom have any choice in selecting and upgrading their preferred hotels as they are restricted to a fixed location by the institutes. As such, there is a high probability that the service quality of internship offered by these hotels may not lead to a positive perception in the minds of these interns in terms of sharing their internship experience or future career intentions with the hotel chain. This justifies the literature on adverse internship experiences by the students.

At the same time, the internship service quality did evoke a strong positive feeling of satisfaction among the interns as they were completing their internship in the hotels as a part of their curriculum, and the satisfied interns did result in positive sharing of experiences through word of mouth. This relationship adds to the Appraisal theory where service quality perceptions evoke satisfaction leading to favorable word of mouth decision among interns. Also, as suggested in the Expectancy confirmation theory, the present study is consistent with the findings where the perceived service quality of the interns influences satisfaction and word of mouth. Moreover, the theory mentions that highly satisfied firms are less sensitive to changes in the perceptions of quality and satisfaction. Their reputation insulates them in case of drop-in service quality perceptions. This may have been the cause for negative perceptions of internship service quality delivered by hotels on the behavioral intentions of the interns when measured directly. However, the same adverse effect is negated with the satisfaction of having undergone the internship in reputed hotels. The competitive mediation of satisfaction is evident in this situation on the relationship between service quality and word of mouth which validates the pivotal role played by emotions in the form of satisfaction over the entire appraisal process. As the direct and indirect effects counter each other, the possibility of other mediators is evident which may be considered in future studies. The indirect positive effect of service quality through satisfaction is also felt by the interns on the future career intentions with the same hotel chain; however, the effect was not significant enough to positively affect the perception of students. This may suggest that although student internship experiences on satisfaction are positive, it fails to influence student career intentions in hotels. This finding is consistent with the past literature of students' unwillingness to pick up hotels as their future career choice.

8.2. Managerial implication

The study reveals a negative direct estimate between service quality and behavioral intentions, which supports many studies where inferior service quality perceptions have influenced negative career intentions and adverse word of mouth about the hotel chain. As such, there is a requirement for the management of both the IHMs and hotels to keep the interest of students in mind while offering and designing internship programs and schedules. There should be enough opportunities given to the students to select the hotels of their choices so that the perceptions of service quality during the internship can directly evoke positive behavioral intentions in the interns in terms of taking up their future careers in the hotels and sharing their experiences with the juniors. Also, the hotel chains with superior service quality should be able to motivate the interns to take up their future careers with the hotel chain and spread positive word of mouth among their juniors regarding their internship exposure. The study also revealed that strong positive satisfaction experiences negate the direct effect of service quality on behavioral intentions to a large extent. However, over-dependence on satisfaction without indulging superior service quality of internship may not be a wise idea for the hotels in the long run. The reason for an intern's satisfaction could be due to a reasonable stipend paid with not enough effort and time required to be devoted to the workplace. This could be detrimental for the entire experiential learning and the purpose of the internship could be defeated.

9. Limitations and future scope

There are a few limitations to the study. Although the sample size is not large, the analysis of SEM models with small samples is adequate with 100 to 150 observations (Anderson & Gerbing, 1984; Hair et al., 2010; Kyriazos, 2018). Despite the adequacy, future studies may involve private IHMs in addition to central and state IHMs from Tier -2 and Tier-3 cities. Similarly, future research can compare internship service quality provided by leading hotel chains of the country. Also, the research did not consider the money earned, value, time spent, and efforts given by the interns that may influence their satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The forthcoming research could strive to reveal other mediating variables which could provide the reason for competitive mediation experienced in this study. As such, it is also advised that the upcoming studies may consider variables such as service value, sacrifice, image, and trust to have a better understanding of the mutual relationships among these constructs. Future studies should encompass not only service quality of hotel internship but internships in other disciplines of higher education as well.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Pratik Ghosh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8217-6071>

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