

SERVICE ASSURANCE AND COMPETITIVENESS OF 4-STAR HOTELS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between service assurance and competitiveness of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State. The study took a mono-dimensional view of service assurance, and proxied competitiveness with occupancy rate, brand reputation, and service efficiency. An explanatory research design with a correlational method of investigation was adopted. The population consisted eighteen (18) 4-Star hotels in Rivers State. Using a census approach, three copies of structured questionnaire were administered to general managers, marketing/booking managers, and front desk officers in each hotel, totaling fifty-four (54) respondents. Data collected were analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation, with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. Results indicate positive and statistically significant relationships between service assurance and proxies of competitiveness. Thus, the study concluded that there is a significant relationship between service assurance and competitiveness of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State, and recommends that managers of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State that seek improved competitiveness should strengthen service assurance to improve occupancy rate, brand reputation; and boost their service efficiency.

Keywords: Brand reputation, competitiveness, occupancy rate, service assurance, service efficiency

Introduction

The hospitality industry contributes substantially to employment and revenue generation, and cultural exchange, hence is critical to the economy of nations (Kazaara & Christopher, 2023). Within the industry, 4-Star hotels - hotels that offer a blend of luxury that appeal to a broad spectrum of clientele - represent a key component (Arimbawa et al., 2022). 4-Star hotels are distinguished by their aesthetic exteriors and interiors, choice location, free seamless internet access and other enticements like local and continental cuisines, on-site cocktail bars, well-resourced fitness hubs and commodious rooms, suites and apartments (Brandão, 2022; Igwe & Ateke, 2021).

Wosu and Ogan (2022) and Obinwanne and Okpoko (2015) observe that the competitiveness of 4-Star hotels hold the key to their wellness and the sustenance of the hospitality industry. Yet, the influx of new entrants into the market, coupled with evolving consumer preferences and lifestyles pose significant challenge for 4-Star hotels in Rivers State. Huang and Huang (2018) states that luxury hotels all over the world struggle to meet the heightened expectations of today's tourists, business travelers and other users of hotel services; and are experiencing decline in occupancy rates, brand reputation, and service efficiency. This however, raises the question of the extent to which these hotels leverage "service assurance" in their operations.

Service assurance - the degree of confidence and trust service providers instill in their customers - is essential to their competitiveness (Chege, 2022). Filho et al. (2023) states that

service assurance as demonstrated through staff competence, courtesy, credibility and security, contribute to guests' overall experience. This importance of service assurance notwithstanding, there is scarcity of empirical examination of its direct relationship with competitiveness of 4-Star hotels. Extant inquiries like those of Ghaazi et al. (2024) and Ghimire et al. (2024) focused on service quality and customer satisfaction in the banking sector. Igwe and Ateke (2021) examined employee emotional contagion and sales performance. These studies offer little help to operators of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State, as they did not specifically address the relationship between service assurance and competitiveness.

Thus, operators of 4-Star hotels that seek to implement evidence-based strategies to enhance competitiveness still face significant challenge. Therefore, this study aims to complement literature by investigating the relationship between service assurance and competitiveness of four-star hotels in Rivers State. By providing insights into this relationship, the study seeks to inform managerial practices and contribute to academic discourse on hostel management in emerging economies.

Literature Review

Theoretical foundations of the study

Resource-Based View (RBV) provide an adequate theoretical foundation for this study. RBV Wernerfelt (1984) explains how firms gain competitive advantage through internal resources. Barney (1991) argue that Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (VRIN) resources are pivotal to success in business. The main thrust of RBV is that a firms' VRIN resources enable them conceive and implement strategies that improve their effectiveness and efficiency (Barney, 2002, 1991).

RBV has been significantly enriched by various scholars since its inception. Building upon Wernerfelt (1984), Barney (1991) introduced the VRIN framework that emphasize resources that provide sustained competitive advantage. Dierickx and Cool (1989) further contributed by highlighting the importance of asset accumulation and time compression diseconomies associated with developing strategic resources. Additionally, Teece et al. (1997) expanded RBV by integrating the concept of dynamic capabilities, which focuses on firms' ability to adapt and renew their resources in rapidly changing environments.

RBV is thus an adequate baseline theory for this study because it provides a framework that explains the relationship between service assurance and competitiveness. Service assurance, which includes staff competence, courtesy, and credibility, a strategic resource that can significantly enhance competitiveness (Nguyen & Ngoc, 2024; Shonubi et al., 2021). Hotels that invest in staff training, reliable security systems, and consistent service quality develop resources that are not easily replicated by competitors, leading to higher occupancy rates, stronger brand reputation, and improved service efficiency (Nguyen, & Ngoc, 2024).

Concept of service assurance

Service assurance is a dimension of service quality (Shonubi et al., 2021) that focuses on the competencies of staff and their ability to use those competencies to inspire confidence and trust among customers (Bogale, 2017). Anetoh (2016) states that service assurance addresses the competence of the organization, the courtesy it extend to customers, and the security of its operations. Tazreen (2012) defines it as the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. It involves serving customers optimally, being polite and professional, and gaining the trust of service recipients by fulfilling their expectations (Rochmansjah & Karno, 2020).

Similarly, Anisetti et al. (2012) defined service assurance as the systematic process of preserving and enhancing the quality of services offered to customers. It comprises actions meant to boost user confidence that a service will satisfy its functional and non-functional requirements, such as security and dependability (Bogale, 2017). For the best possible customer experience, it guarantees that services provided across networks meet a predetermined service quality standard. Service assurance construct is made up of competence (having the necessary abilities and knowledge to provide the service), courtesy (considering the property of the customer and keeping the public contact personnel clean), employee credibility and security (Filho et al., 2023).

In essence, service assurance is a comprehensive approach that ensures consistency in quality service delivery. It contributes to the trustworthiness and overall competitiveness of an organization. By focusing on competencies of employees and their ability to inspire confidence and trust, service assurance ensures that the firm delivers its services optimally, and in line with customer expectations in terms competence, courtesy, credibility, and ability to inspire trust.

Concept of competitiveness

The survival and success of firms in today's turbulent business environment is premised on their level of competitiveness (Kwelle et al., 2023; Ambastha & Momaya, 2004). Competitiveness is the ability to compete, and it has become the buzzword of the day to describe the economic strength of a nation, industry, or firm in relation to its rivals in the global market economy (Zhu & Cheung, 2017; Gupta et al., 2013). Didia and Ames (2018) opine that competitiveness refers to a company's capacity to create, manufacture, or sell goods that are better than those of rivals, taking into account both price and non-price factors.

Li et al. (2019) and Kenny (2015) competitiveness is seen as organization's capacity to establish a position that can be defended against its rivals; as well as capacity to strike a balance between cost and quality of its goods and services in order to give clients the best possible experience. It also describes a business's capacity to outperform its rivals in terms of sales or client loyalty as a result of quality, pricing, or a mix of the two.

Based on the opinions of other scholars reviewed on the concept of competitiveness, we define competitiveness as the ability of a firm to provide goods and services that satisfy consumer needs better than competitors. Competitiveness is a key to success in today's changing business world. It includes a company's skill to create, make, and sell better products while managing costs and quality to gain and keep customers. Competitiveness may also be viewed in terms of market position, economic power and special skills that confer an advantage. This study adopts occupancy rate, brand reputation and service efficiency as measures of competitiveness.

Occupancy rate

Occupancy rate is a common concept in hospitality, real estate and healthcare, where it is used to measure the utilization of properties, rooms or facilities (Laini et al., 2023; Cheng & Tung, 2019). Occupancy rate in a hotel indicates how many of the available rooms at a hotel are reserved by visitors (Takahashi, 2024). According to Anshori et al. (2023), occupancy rate is the ratio of rented or used space to the total amount of available space. Tang et al. (2017) defined occupancy rate as the percentage of available rooms occupied over a specific period, reflecting a hotel's ability to attract guests and generate revenue.

Occupancy rate is an important metric for assessing the competitiveness of hotels. High occupancy rate indicates strong demand, effective marketing and operational efficiency, while low occupancy rate may signal underutilization or strategic challenges (Jaya, 2023). For hotel

managers, monitoring occupancy rates is crucial for making informed decisions on staffing, inventory management, and pricing strategies. Maintaining an optimal occupancy rate is crucial for maximizing revenue, ensuring sustainability, and enhancing operational effectiveness in hotel operations.

Brand reputation

Brand reputation refers to the perceptions and the associations held by consumers about a brand over time (Keller, 1993). It is consumers' perceptual representation of a brand's past actions, results, and future expectations, and which affect consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Sengupta et al., 2015). Aaker and Keller (1990) described brand reputation as the perception of quality connected to a brand name; while Brand and Reith (2022) opine that brand reputation relates to people's perceptions of a brand's quality and trustworthiness. In order to boost competitiveness, firms build and maintain favorable brand reputation.

For this study, brand reputation is defined as consumer perception and assessment of a brand, impacted by elements like product quality, dependability, and overall customer experience. Findings from prior studies show that brand reputation has a positive impact on customers (Lau & Lee, 1999) and companies (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993; Erisher et al., 2014; Chaudhuri, 2022; Cheng et al., 2023). For customers, Lau and Lee (1999) found that brand reputation help customers make purchase decisions and boosts their trust. For companies, a strong brand reputation contributes to financial performance, equity and profit (Chaudhuri, 2022; Erisher et al., 2014; Herbig & Milewicz, 1993).

Service efficiency

Service efficiency is another critical measure of competitiveness (Zhong & Xie, 2014). It is a multidimensional concept that has generated increasing attention in various industries and sectors (Song et al., 2019). It is not only applicable to manufacturing or production but also to services, where the efficient delivery can significantly enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. From the perspective of value in use, service efficiency transcends the traditional metrics of speed and cost-effectiveness; and includes quality of interaction, service personalization and overall customer experience (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020).

Mathieu (2022) define service efficiency as the optimal use of resources to achieve desired outcomes with minimal waste. Service efficiency increases overall productivity and customer satisfaction, and decreases operational cost (Medberg & Grönroos, 2020). Efficient service delivery increases trust and loyalty of customers. This can be achieved by making processes more efficient and minimizing waste, therefore reducing spending while continuing to provide quality service (Dimitrieska & Efremova, 2020). Firms that appreciate the strategic importance of service efficiency are more likely to sustain operations and grow (Song et al., 2019).

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have provided insight into the relationship between service assurance and competitiveness. For instance, Ghaazi et al. (2024) examined the influence of assurance, reliance, and compliance on customer satisfaction in the Pakistani Islamic banking sector. The study utilized a quantitative research design to distribute structured questionnaire to customers and employees of Islamic banks, aiming to capture diverse perspectives on service quality. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via Smart PLS. The findings demonstrate significant positive impacts of assurance, reliance, and compliance on customer satisfaction.

Ghimire et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction of joint venture and government banks in Nepal. The study used descriptive and causal comparative research techniques. A total of 383 samples were taken from six joint venture banks and three public (or government-owned) banks in Nepal. Using primary data obtained from a survey, correlation and regression analysis are used to examine the impact of several service quality parameters on customer satisfaction. The results show that in the Nepalese banking industry, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and empathy have positive and significant association with customer satisfaction.

Onyeonoro et al. (2024) examined the relationship between service quality and customer patronage. The population for the study was customers of hotels in Umahia, Abia state. The study adopted a sample size of 196. Primary data was collected using structured questionnaire. The hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis. The findings revealed that service employee responsiveness, service tangibility, service assurance, and service empathy have a significant influence on customer patronage.

Chege (2022) examined the influence of service assurance on customer satisfaction in Kenya's insurance industry. A descriptive research design was adopted and a multi-stage sampling technique was used to sample 400 policyholders from 19 composite insurance companies in Kenya. Primary data was collected using structured questionnaire. The study applied linear mixed-effect models of structural equation modeling (SEM). The study revealed that service assurance positively and significantly influences customer satisfaction in the insurance industry in Kenya. The foregoing demonstrates that service assurance enhances competitiveness. Based on this, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between service assurance and occupancy rate of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between service assurance and brand reputation of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between service assurance and service efficiency of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

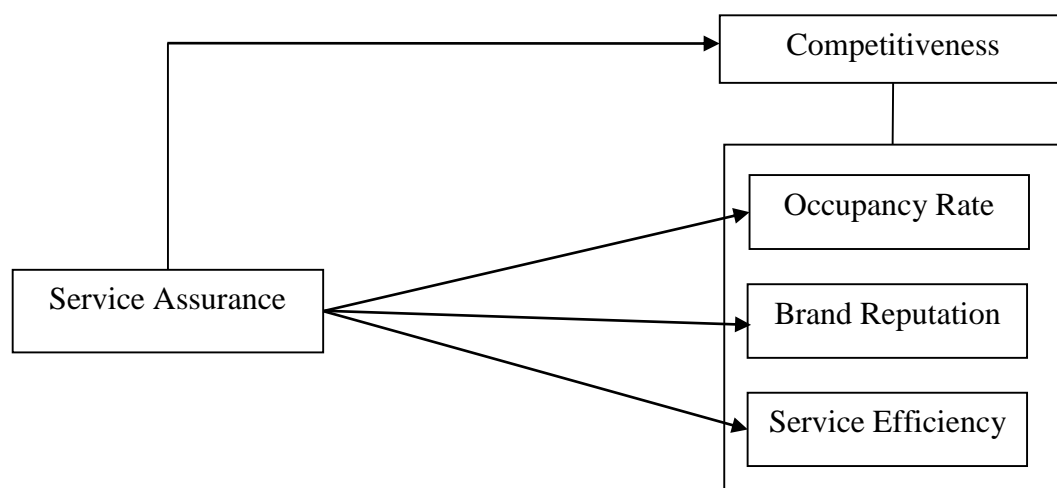


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of relationship between service assurance and competitiveness of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

Methodology

This study adopted an explanatory research design. The population of the study comprised eighteen (18) 4-Star hotels in Rivers State, as listed on Finelib.com (2024). Using a census

approach, three copies of a structured questionnaire were administered to general managers, marketing/booking managers, and front desk officers in each hotel, totaling fifty-four (54) respondents. The questionnaire was designed in a 5-point Likert scale. Validity of the research instrument was established using the opinion of academic experts and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), while Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted to ascertain the reliability of the instrument. Table 1 below provides a summary of results of test of reliability and validity. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while Pearson's Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the formulated hypotheses. All analyses were performed using SPSS version 25.0.

Table 1: Summary of Results of Test of Validity and Reliability

S/N	Variables	Number of Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients
1	Service Assurance	4	0.770	0.949
2	Occupancy Rate	4	0.783	0.944
3	Brand Reputation	4	0.802	0.896
4	Service Efficiency	4	0.861	0.893

Source: SPSS Output form field data, 2025

Data Analysis and Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Service Assurance

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Your organisation invests in staff training to ensure professionalism in service delivery.	53	215	4.06	1.064	1.131
Your staff are equipped to make guests feel safe and confident during their stay.	53	232	4.38	.860	.739
Your organisation maintains staff that inspire trust and competence among guests.	53	220	4.15	.988	.977
Your organisation emphasizes staff courtesy and confidence as a strategic service priority.	53	225	4.25	1.036	1.073
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Results of the analysis from the SPSS output in Table 2 revealed mean scores above 4.0, reflecting positive respondent perceptions. Specifically, in the result, item 2, which sought to ascertain the extent to which 4-Star hotels in Rivers State equip their staff to make guests feel safe and confident during their stay, has the highest sum of 232 and highest mean score of 4.38. This indicates that item 2 has the strongest influence on the variable. However, item 1 which examined investment in staff training, recorded the highest standard deviation of 1.064 and a variance of 1.131, indicating that responses spread most in item 1 compared to other items.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Occupancy Rate

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
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Your hotel consistently records a high frequency of room bookings throughout operational periods.	53	222	4.19	.962	.925
Your hotel maintains a favorable average length of guest stay that supports higher occupancy.	53	208	3.92	.917	.840
Your hotel's service quality drives consistent guest patronage.	53	211	3.98	1.047	1.096
Room occupancy is a major driver of your hotel's overall revenue generation.	53	209	3.94	1.064	1.131
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Results of the analysis from the SPSS output in Table 3 revealed that all the mean scores are above 3.90, reflecting positive respondent perceptions. Specifically, item 1 which sought to determine whether 4-Star hotels in River State consistently record high room bookings throughout operational periods, recorded the highest sum of 222 and the highest mean score of 4.19. This implies that this item has the strongest influence on the occupancy rate variable. However, item 4 which examined whether room occupancy significantly drives overall revenue generation recorded the highest standard deviation of 1.064 and variance of 1.131, indicating the widest spread of responses among all items in this section.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Brand Reputation

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Your hotel is recognized for consistent service quality and guest satisfaction.	53	226	4.26	.984	.967
Your hotel enjoys positive online and offline brand perception.	53	197	3.72	.968	.938
Your hotel reputation influences corporate or group bookings.	53	233	4.40	.840	.705
Your hotel engages in brand-building efforts to sustain competitive advantage.	53	213	4.02	.820	.673
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Results of the analysis in Table 4 revealed that all the mean scores are above 3.50, indicating a generally favorable perception of brand reputation among respondents. Specifically, item 3 which examined the extent to which hotel reputation influences corporate or group bookings recorded the highest sum of 233 and the highest mean score of 4.40. This suggests that item 3 has the strongest influence on the variable. Meanwhile, item 1 which addressed recognition for consistent service quality and guest satisfaction had the highest standard deviation of 0.984 and variance of 0.967, indicating that responses to this item were more widely spread than others in the group.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Service Efficiency

	N	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
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Your hotel operations are structured to ensure minimal delays in guest service delivery.	53	216	4.08	.917	.840
Your hotel optimizes resources (human and material) for maximum service output.	53	209	3.94	1.117	1.247
Your internal processes contribute to timely check-in and check-out procedures.	53	199	3.75	.998	.996
Your hotel tracks and manages service efficiency as a performance indicator.	53	207	3.91	.946	.895
Valid N (listwise)	53				

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

The results in Table 6 revealed that all the mean scores are above 3.70, indicating positive perceptions of service efficiency practices in the surveyed hotels. Specifically, item 1, which examined whether the operations of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State are structured to ensure minimal delays in guest service delivery, recorded the highest sum of 216 and the highest mean score of 4.08. This suggests that this item has the strongest influence on the variable. However, item 2, which assessed resource optimization, had the highest standard deviation of 1.117 and variance of 1.247, indicating that responses to item 2 were the most dispersed compared to others.

Table 7: Relationship between Service Assurance and Measures of Competitiveness

		Service Assurance	Occupancy Rate	Brand Reputation	Service Efficiency
Service Assurance	Pearson Correlation	1	.540**	.488**	.602**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	53	53	53	53
Occupancy Rate	Pearson Correlation	.540**	1	.565**	.609**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	53	53	53	53
Brand Reputation	Pearson Correlation	.488**	.565**	1	.569**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	53	53	53	53
Service Efficiency	Pearson Correlation	.602**	.609**	.569**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	53	53	53	53

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

The Table 7 reveals a correlation coefficient of 0.540** between service assurance and occupancy rate, indicating a moderate positive relationship between service assurance and occupancy rate. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), which shows that there is a moderate and statistically significant relationship between service assurance and occupancy rate. Based on this, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between service assurance and occupancy rate of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

Table 7 also reveals a correlation coefficient of 0.488** between service assurance and brand reputation, indicating a moderate positive relationship between service assurance and brand reputation. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), which shows that there is a moderately significant relationship between service assurance and brand

reputation. Based on this, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between service assurance and brand reputation of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

Furthermore, Table 7 reveals a correlation coefficient of 0.602** between service assurance and service efficiency, indicating a strong positive relationship between service assurance and efficiency. More so, the probability value (0.000) is less than the critical value (0.05), this shows that there is a strong significant relationship between service assurance and service efficiency. Based on this, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between service assurance and service efficiency of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed a correlation coefficient of 0.540** between service assurance and occupancy rate, a correlation coefficient of 0.488** between service assurance and brand reputation, and a correlation coefficient of 0.602** between service assurance and service efficiency. The probability value of all the tests (0.000) are less than the critical value (0.05), which shows the presence of statistically significant relationship between service assurance and competitiveness (occupancy rate, brand reputation, and service efficiency).

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of similar studies. For instance, Ghimire et al. (2024) found that in the Nepalese banking industry, service assurance has a positive significant association with customer satisfaction. Onyeonoro et al. (2024) found that service assurance has a significant influence on customer patronage. Similarly, Chege (2022) found that clients who perceive service assurance from their insurer are bound to have higher satisfaction than a customer who does not perceive it. Additionally, the findings of this study align with the findings of Shonubi et al. (2021), who found that there is a significant effect of service assurance on customer loyalty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the nexus between service assurance and competitiveness of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State and found a positive and significant relationship between the variables. Based on these findings and the extent of their consistency with findings of previous studies, the study concludes that there is a significant relationship between service assurance and competitiveness of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State. This implies that service assurance is instrumental to enhancing competitiveness of 4-Star hotel in terms of occupancy rate, brand reputation and service efficiency. Consequently, we recommend that of 4-Star hotels in Rivers State that seek to enhance their competitiveness in terms of occupancy rate, brand reputation and service efficiency should focus on service assurance in their service delivery and interaction with customers.

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