

Therapist Quality as an Influence of Spa Choice Decisions Amongst Customers in Eldoret Town, Kenya

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Abstract: People visit spas for varied reasons; curiosity, health requirement or leisure, while others visit spas to transform their lifestyles and recover lost health. The choice decisions clients make in visiting spas is not a recent occurrence because individuals began to tour to spa centers for restoration, health and other purposes all through the long olden times in the 1800s. There is limited evidence of published research on the choice decisions spa customers make in visiting spas in Kenya. Hence, this study helped to examine and understand spa-goers' preferences and considerations in choosing spa services. The study sought to examine the influence of therapist quality on customers' spa choice decisions. The hypothesis 'therapist quality influences customers' spa choice decisions' guided the study. Three hundred and fifty-one spa customers from four different spas establishments were randomly selected to participate in the study. Questionnaires were employed to gather information and analyzed using SPSS. From the 351 questionnaires issued to the spa respondents, 311 questionnaires were filled. The findings were presented descriptively. The study established that therapist quality influenced decisions made by customers regarding their preference of one spa facility to the other. A unit change in therapist quality caused 1.389 change in customers' spa choice decisions. The regression analysis findings also showed that therapist quality had a fairly strong significant and positive relationship with customers' spa choice decisions ($r = .751$, p -value $< .05$). The study concludes that therapist quality influences customers' spa choice decisions. The study recommended that spa institutions and operators should introduce pieces of training on the qualities of a qualified therapist for individuals who want to venture into the spa business. The results from the research are to benefit the leisure business industry, the well-being industry, policymakers, the public, the private segment, the government, and other stakeholders.

Key words: Therapist quality, Spa services, Customers' Spa Choice Decisions

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Bodeker and Cohen (2010), the spa industry has turned out to be the world's leading leisure industry. For instance, the more an individual schedule becomes hectic and the cycle of life ever-accelerating, visiting a spa becomes necessity for remaining healthy and with vigor (Frost, 2004). Throughout the centuries, the description and concept of the spa has advanced and changed (Puczko & Bachvarov, 2006). The definitions of the term 'spa' vary from one area to another, even within a similar topographical region there is no precise meaning of what a spa is.

Some scholars believe that a spa can be related to a city where organic crystal fountains are found and to a company or category of companies presenting wellbeing therapies grounded on that foundation (Lee & King 2009; Smith & Jenner, 2000). The 21st century spas, concurring to the International Spa Association (ISPA), are settings that deliver qualified amenities to improve individual's welfare by means of revitalizing the mental power, physical body and soul (Hyde-Smith, 2012). This meaning captures a lot of what spa therapists try to accomplish on behalf of their customers each day.

Spa awareness has grown in terms of the benefits it offers amongst spa-goers. According to Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC), customers are far knowledgeable on spa facilities and are further persistent in quality of services and uniformity of facilities while others focus on acquiring a better rate for their money (CTC, 2006b). Customers' choice decisions regarding spa attributes are influenced by numeral factors (O'Fallon and Rutherford, 2011).

In spa service delivery, quality is considered as a very important element of customers' spa choice decisions (Kucukusta & Guillet, 2014). A well-known established setting for instance, such as a recognized resort, association or destination spa, frequently sways the choice, so does the quality of therapy and hospitability of employees. Spa travelers also contemplate spa therapies' quality and services, the service charges and therapist cleanliness as very significant (CTC 2006a).

According to the Thai Spa Association, a spa therapist is an expert and licensed employee in the spa industry who carries out spa therapies or spa services for clientele (Suttikun, Chang & Bicksler, 2018). Beblavy, Akgüc, Fabo and Lenaerts (2016), postulated that spa therapists merge the roles and tasks of different professions to give a classy package of wellbeing and splendor therapies and services to their clients. Spa therapists skillfully employ their fingers, knuckles, elbows, knees and feet to maneuver clients' bodies to ease agony and discomforts, making them feel at peace (Suttikun, Chang & Bicksler, 2018).

People perceive spa therapies as a vital mechanism in conserving their well being and look and are integrating spa practices into their vacations. Bordoloi, Begado, Jacka, and Khiewsanun, (2014), suggested that the most sought spa treatments and therapies by customers that make them feel relaxed and relieved are aromatherapy, deep tissue, foot pressure, herbal compress, Reflexology massages and Thai massage as well as body scrub and wrapping. Thus, a spa therapist to be termed as a qualified and professional therapist must know to offer such treatments and therapies. Terry (2007) also stressed that trained and proficient therapists were seen as the supreme vital spa features in providing spa experiences to their customers.

Likewise, Kucukusta and Guillet (2014) discovered that therapist quality and proficiencies were constantly stated as the most significant attributes steering customers' spa choices. For instance, in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) it is highly-acknowledged that therapists in Thai spas are talented in their work than those in other nations (Thai Spa Association, 2014). As a result, once Asia-Pacific, European and American spa customers' stopover in Thai spas, they await to consume diverse varieties of bodywork therapies from skillful and proficient therapists. This is evidence that spa therapists create the magic of spa experience. Kucukusta, Pang and Chui (2013) also suggested that the greatest central factor amongst spa customers' regarding spa choice was therapist quality.

Personal hygiene or cleanliness, external appearance and the boldness of spa therapists to spa-goers are also amid the principal quality traits expected by spa-goers. These being the case, spas with an emphasis on spa-goers allegiance ought to concentrate on physical attribute qualities and service techniques (Koçoğlu, 2009). Therefore, the more skilled, empathetic and professional a spa therapist is, the superior their competence in providing spa services and foreseeing guest's wishes, the further contented and thrilled the guest will be.

Some parts of the country have embraced spa services, for instance, the induction of spa therapies and a variety of fitness centers and wellness-tourism. Generally, tourists mostly tour the coastal zones to have their bodies coated with special mud which is therapeutic for the skin natural coloring (Okech, 2014). Eldoret town is characterized by major hospitality service sectors and one of the major growing service sectors being the spa industry that offers a variety of spa services to the public and travelers emerging from all corners of the world.

2. METHODOLOGY

Three hundred and fifty-one spa customers from four different spas establishments were randomly selected to participate in this study. The category of the four spa establishments selected was because they offered similar spa services and were well fitted with spa facilities. Moreover, the spas were strategically located in the central business area of Eldoret town thus well visible to the public. Data collected in this study was through the means of questionnaires. The questionnaires were carefully constructed thus eliminated the aspect of fright among respondents. This aided in ensuring that the respondents gave their honest responses freely and with transparency. Data was collected for 3 months by the researcher at different times from the respondents who visited the 4 spas establishment. From a total of 351 respondents, 311 (88.6%) spa customers participated in the questionnaires. Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used to analyze the information collected. The results were displayed using pie charts and tables.

3. RESULTS

The researcher examined six socio-demographic features displayed by respondents namely nationality, gender, age, marital status, education level, monthly income and spa visit in the last 12 months. The purpose was to represent any peculiar characteristics displayed by spa respondents in Eldoret town. The results were presented in table (table1) and graphs.

Table1. Demographic Information

Attributes	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Nationality		
Kenyan	265	85.2
USA	9	2.9
German	1	.3
Indian	36	11.6
Total	311	100
Gender		
Male	102	33.0
Female	209	67.0
Total	311	100
Age		
25 yrs& below	41	13.0
Between 26- 30yrs	85	27.0
Between 31-35yrs	86	28.0
Between 36-40yrs	40	13.0
above 40yrs	59	19.0
Total	311	100
Marital status		
Married	182	58.5
Single	121	38.9
Widowed	4	1.3
Divorced	3	1.0
Separated	1	.3
Total	311	100

Source: Research Data

Out of the 311 respondents, the majority 265(85.2%) were Kenya citizens, followed by the Indian nationals 36(11.6%). The least of the respondents were from the USA nationals 9(2.9%) and German nationals 1(0.3%). The findings revealed that the female gender occupied the top level of spa visits as compared to the male gender. This was ascertained by 209 (67.0%) female respondents and the remaining 102(33.0%) being the male respondents.

The results also showed that an average of the aged group above 40 years 59(19.0%) embraced spa services. But then again the age bracket of between 26-30 years and 31-35 years showed that they were the main spa-goers. This was established by 85(27.0%) and 86(28.0%) respondents respectively. The least of the respondents were those below 25 years 41(13.0%) and between 36- 40 years (13.0%). The married respondents182 (58.5%) were revealed to be the chief spa visitors from the four spa establishment followed by the single respondents 121(38.9%). This can only mean that these respondents were aged between 26- 35 years and a few above 40 years. The least of the respondents were widowed 4(1.3%), divorced 3(1.0%) and separated 1 (0.3%).

Most of the respondents had attained a technical college degree (18.3%) majority being those who had a bachelor’s degree (44.7%) followed by a master’s degree (24.7%) level of education. The 0’level and primary level of education comprised of the least respondents with 2.9% and 1.0% respectively. These findings indicate that most of the respondents who had a higher level of education were those from the age bracket between 26-40 years and above.

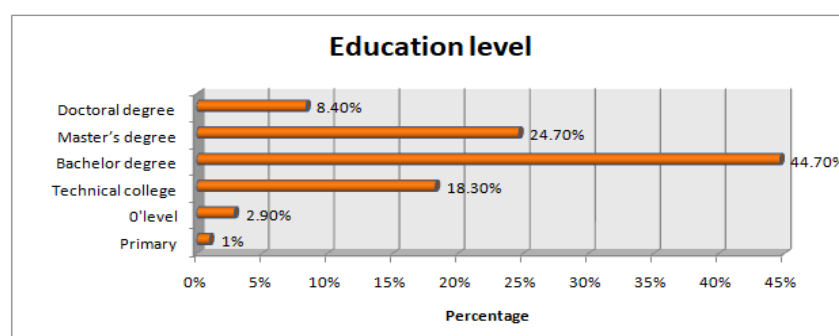


Figure1. Respondents education level

A higher response rate was from full-time employees 54.7% followed by 25.4% who were self-employed. An average of 15.1% of respondents was from part-time employees. Those who were retired and unemployed occupied the least of the response rate of 1.6% and 0.3% respectively. This, therefore, meant the spas were majorly characterized by the working-class group.

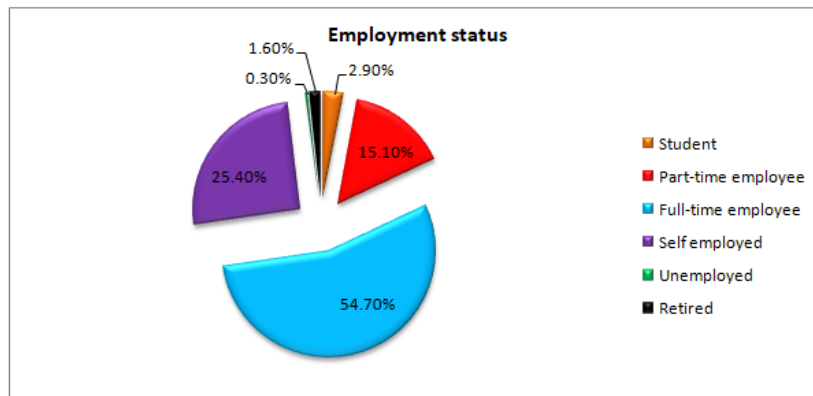


Figure2. Respondents employment status,

The researcher further sought information on respondents’ monthly income and the findings revealed that a higher respondent rate earned more than Kshs 40,000 and above. Majority were those who earned more than Ksh51, 000 and above (38.6%) with the least 4.5% earning between Kshs 10,000-20,000 and below Kshs 10,000 respectively. Hence, these findings implied that most of the earning spa respondents were of the working class group.

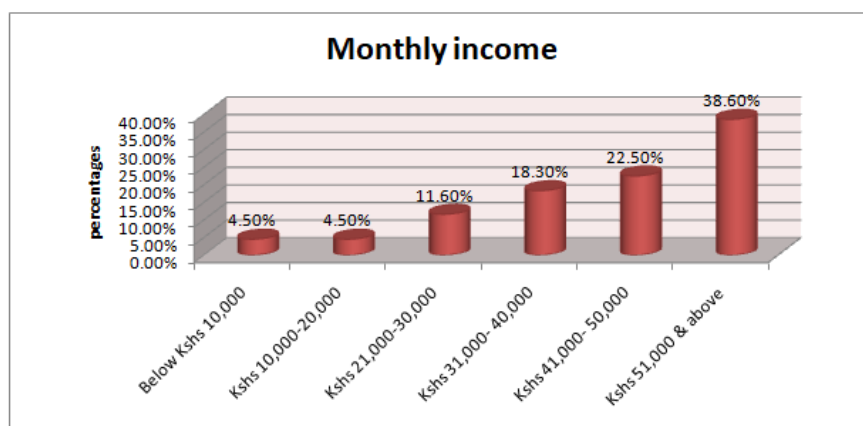


Figure3. Respondents monthly income

The question on how often the respondents had visited the spa of their choice in the last 12 months revealed that majority had visited a spa twice in every month (48.9%). A good number had visited a spa once every month (28.6%) while the least 2.3% of respondents had visited a spa once in six months. This shows that every month the spa therapists were busy attending to their customers’ spa requests.

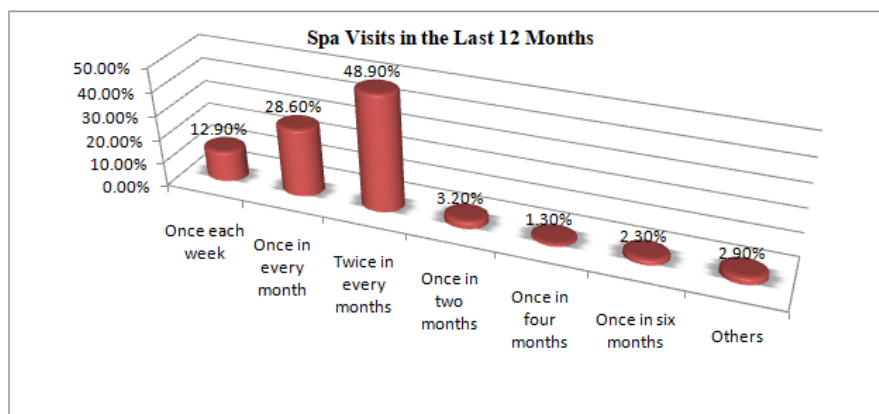


Figure4. Respondents spa visit in the last 12 months

These findings on respondents’ demographic information are consistent with findings from a study by the Thai Spa Association (2014) who disclosed that majority of the spa-goers were the female gender who visited spas mainly for beautification and skin improvement whereas men visited spas essentially for therapeutic massage and recreation. Also, Sacharinov and Rizova, (2011) in their study on spas noted that youthful individuals of the early 20s desired to keep their health fine and mostly observing a healthful way of life by visiting spas of their choice. Besides, a study by Canadian Tourism Commission, (CTC 2006a) noted that most spa consumers visited a spa of their choice with family or spouses to socialize while receiving spa services implying that majority were married. On the same note, O’Fallon and Rutherford, (2011) discovered that working spa customers visited spas on a normal weekly basis after working hours or even when taking business trips. Further, Elrod, Stanley, Cudney and Fisher, (2015) in their study on spas noted that the topmost spa consumers were those who earned more income thus able to consume quality of spa services at their expense.

3.1. Determinants likely to Influence Customer’s Spa Choice Decisions based on Therapist Quality

The researcher further sought to establish the determinants likely to influence customers’ spa choice decisions based on therapist quality. To accomplish this, respondents’ were enquired to state their views on their level of satisfaction, revisit intentions and referral to customers’ spa choice decisions based on therapist quality. Each statement was on a scale of 1-5 where Not Important (N.I) =1; Least Important (L.I) =2; Neutral (N) =3; Important (I) =4; Very Important (V.I) =5

The findings revealed that a higher rate of respondents 234(75.2%) had the opinion that customer satisfaction with the level of therapist quality on their choice of spas they visited was very important. This was followed by 71(22.8%) who had the opinion that it was important. Two hundred and forty-nine (80.1%) believed it was very important to revisit their choice of spa based on therapist quality. Two (0.6%) of the respondents believed that it was the least important. Most of the respondents had the opinion that it was very important to refer their choice of the spa to friends and relatives. This was ascertained by 220 (70.7%) spa respondents. This was followed by an average of 80(25.7%) respondents who believed it was important. None of the respondents believed that it was not important.

These findings were in line with findings from Mandelbaum and Lerner (2008) who discovered that spa visitors are individuals of well-informed users and their choice decisions rely on the extent to how therapist quality encounters or surpasses their anticipations and then form a view in spa choice. These results are also coherent to findings from Chi and Qu (2008) and Santouridis and Trivellas (2010) who perceived that total satisfaction of service was a significant predecessor of revisiting intention. Further, Peña, Jamilena and Molina (2013), deduced that corporate status and customer contentment in service had a direct consequence on both intents to buying and referrals.

Table2. Responses on the determinants likely to influence customers’ spa choice decisions based on therapist quality.

Statements on the determinants likely to influence customer’s spa choice decisions		N.I	L.I	N	I	V. I	Mean	Std. Deviation
Level of customer satisfaction with therapist quality	F	0	1	5	71	234		
	%	0	0.3	1.6	22.8	75.2	4.73	0.499
Revisit intentions based on therapist quality	F	0	2	3	57	249		
	%	0	0.6	1.0	18.3	80.1	4.78	0.481
Referrals due to therapist quality to friends or relatives	F	0	3	8	80	220		
	%	0	1.0	2.6	25.7	70.7	4.66	0.578
Composite value							4.72	0.519
n=311								

This study also sought to find out how attributes related to therapist quality influenced customers’ spa choice decision. The respondents were to express their opinion on each attribute related to therapist quality that influenced their choice decisions on the spa. The interpretation of the findings was done in

terms of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. The mean differences were used to explain the therapist attributes considered the most or not important on the respondents' spa choice decisions. The statements were on a scale of 1-5 where Not Important (N.I) =1; Least Important (L.I) =2; Neutral (N) =3; Important (I) =4; Very Important (V.I) =5. The implication of the findings was summarized with other studies done on therapist quality. The responses were presented in table 3 below.

Table3. Respondents' Perception towards Attributes Related to Therapist Quality

		N.I	L.I	N	I	V.I	Mean	Std. Deviation
Therapist professional qualification	F	10	7	25	64	205		
	%	3.2	2.3	8.0	20.6	65.9	4.44	0.965
Therapist experience on spa services	F	5	2	17	78	209		
	%	1.6	0.6	5.5	25.1	67.2	4.56	0.768
Therapist skills on spa services	F	6	9	14	60	222		
	%	1.9	2.9	4.5	19.3	71.4	4.55	0.863
Therapist knowledge on spa services	F	9	5	10	67	220		
	%	2.9	1.6	3.2	21.5	70.7	4.56	0.870
Therapist personal hygiene	F	5	3	4	48	251		
	%	1.6	1.0	1.3	15.4	80.7	4.73	0.690
Therapist public relation	F	3	4	8	101	195		
	%	1.0	1.3	2.6	32.5	62.7	4.55	0.703
Composite values							4.57	0.810

A higher rate of respondents believed that therapist professional qualification, 205(65.9%), therapist experience on spa services 209(67.2%), therapist skills on spa services, 222(71.4%), therapist knowledge on spa services 220(70.7%), therapist personal hygiene 251 (80.7%) and therapist public relation 195(62.7%) were very important attributes in their spa choice decision. The least of the respondents were those who viewed that therapist professional qualification 7(2.3%), therapist experience on spa services 2(0.6%), therapist skills on spa services 9(2.9%), therapist knowledge on spa services 5(1.6%), therapist personal hygiene 3(1.0%) and therapist public relation 4(1.3%) were the least important attributes in their spa choice decisions.

These findings indicate that therapist personal hygiene was a very important valued therapist quality with a mean of 4.73 compared to the other therapist attributes. This implied that therapists' physical appearance influenced the majority of the respondents when choosing a spa of their choice. Henceforth, a spa therapist should look presentable to their spa customers while providing spa services in terms of cleanliness and grooming to attract more customers and retain them as well. In summary, therapists' quality had an average mean of 4.57 and a standard deviation of 0.810. This means that therapists professional qualifications, experiences, knowledge, skills, personal hygiene and public relation all influenced customers' choice decisions. The implication of this is that therapist quality was an important attribute to majority of the respondents when choosing a spa of their choice. This could simply imply that unqualified therapist led respondents to reject one spa facility over the other.

These findings concur with Koçoğlu who contemplated that, personal hygiene or cleanliness, external appearance and the boldness of spa therapists to spa-goers are amid the principal quality traits expected by spa-goers. These being the case, spas with an emphasis on spa-goers allegiance ought to concentrate on physical attribute qualities and service techniques (Koçoğlu, 2009). Also, the findings are consistent to Kucukusta and Guillet (2014) who stipulated that therapist quality and proficiencies were constantly stated as the most significant attributes steering customers' spa choices. In a similar vein, Kucukusta et al. (2013) also suggested that, the greatest central factor amongst spa customers' with spa choice was therapist quality. On the same issue, a study in Chinese spas by Kucukusta and Guillet (2014) noticed that Chinese spa consumers chose the rapist quality as the most significant attribute of their spa choice decision in visiting hotel spas in Hong Kong.

The regression results revealed that therapist quality had a fairly strong significant and positive relationship with customers' choice decisions ($r = .751$, $p\text{-value} < .05$). This hence implied that the respondents both male and female had equal opinions on spa choice decisions based on therapist

attributes. Their perception was not different on therapist quality hence the positive significant relationship. Further analysis of the correlation between therapist quality and customers' spa choice decisions was done and the findings indicated that a unit change in therapist quality would result in 1.389 change in customers' spa choice decisions. The t-value results similarly showed that therapist quality had a positive significant correlation with customers' spa choice decisions ($t=13.444$, $p=0.000$) at $p<0.05$. The outcomes of these results indicate that spa customers value therapist quality and that their spa choice decisions were majorly influenced by the attributes related to therapist quality. Thus, spa therapists should try to advance their expertise and skills in spa services since regardless of whether a customer is in a different spa setup their perception towards therapist quality will likely be similar.

The study further sought to find out respondents' future expectations based on therapist quality on customers' spa choice decisions. Most of the respondents 267(86%) had the opinion that therapists should be more consistent in providing spa services and also focus much more on aromatherapy and massages since it aids in improving body health issues. This was consistent to Bordoloi *et al.*,(2014), who suggested that the most sought spa treatments and therapies by customers that make them feel relaxed and relieved are aromatherapy, deep tissue, foot pressure that aid in improving body health issues.

Also, an average of 219 (70%) of the respondents emphasized on friendly client relationships and that therapists should not be selective to customers of their choice. On the same issue, 247 (79%) of the respondents' suggested that Muslims and Hindu therapists specialized in spa services to be included in the spa industry to cater to the Muslim and Indian customers. This could simply be for more comfort and assurance for quality service. Further, 253 (81%) respondents desired for customer follow-up after a visit to spa services.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the study results, it is clear that therapist quality influences customers' spa choice decisions. Most respondents popped at the spa of their choice because their anticipations based on therapist quality were met. This simply meant that unqualified spa therapists led to spa customers turn down a spa facility. Further, whether a spa customer was in a different spa establishment their opinion towards attributes related to therapist quality was similar.

RECOMMENDATION

In light of the results and conclusion of this study, this study recommends that spa institutions should introduce courses on the qualities of qualified therapists for individuals who want to venture into the spa business. This will enlighten future spa therapists and enable them in realizing customers' demands and expectations. Spa operators should also strive in introducing such training in their establishment and monitoring their therapist services. In accomplishing this, the spa business will be guaranteed business growth and more customer turnout.

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