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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EFFECT OF PERCEIVED QUALITY ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN SMALL HOTEL INDUSTRY: EVIDENCE FROM KUDUMBASREE HOTELS IN KERALA

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction is an important aspect of the hospitality industry and contributes significantly to restaurant success. Therefore, hotels or restaurants must prioritize offering high-quality services, maintaining their facilities, and ensuring their workforce and business organization are in good working order. This empirical study based on a survey of 163 customers evaluates customer satisfaction towards Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala across six dimensions: food quality, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, reliability, and tangibles. While the comparison of satisfaction levels revealed no statistically significant differences between male and female customers, the examination of age groups also showed no significant variations in satisfaction. According to the results excluding the factor responsiveness, all other factors considered namely, food quality, empathy, assurance, reliability, and tangibles are found to be significant positive predictors of satisfaction. As there has been little research into customer satisfaction in respect of small hospitality businesses, especially those run by women-run hotels this study would facilitate broadening the understanding regarding the influence of perceived quality on customer satisfaction in respect to small hospitality enterprises in general and women-run outlets in particular.

Introduction:-

Small businesses are widely recognised as crucial and substantial contributions to economic development, job creation, creative revenue generation, and the overall health and welfare of regional, national, and global economies (Morrison et al., 2003; Ayyagari et al., 2007; Yolal et al., 2009). It is a fact that a large percentage of the hospitality sector consists of small firms (Sweeney and Lynch, 2009). Hotels and restaurants have an important role in the Indian economy, especially in the Kerala context.

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The hospitality sector is growing with the expansion of domestic and foreign tourism and with the daily travel of thousands of people across the state (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Kerala 2016).In Kerala, the words hotel and restaurant are used interchangeably, and in common usage, an outlet that serves food is termed a hotel. A restaurant is an eating place where prepared meals, other food refreshments, and/or snacks are sold for immediate consumption without any provision for lodging (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Kerala 2016). Food holds a special place in Indian culture and heritage. Kerala, a small state in India with high literacy and cultural heritage, is renowned for its traditional cuisine using a variety of spices. From high-end to small-end eateries, Kerala has something for everyone's budget and taste preference. Kerala's small hotel or restaurant industry is active and diverse, providing a wide range of culinary delights for both locals and tourists. In Kerala, women-owned eateries exist from decades ago. Women entrepreneurs in Kerala make significant contributions to the culinary landscape by owning and operating restaurants. Today, these small-scale food outlets are growing in popularity with the support of state government agencies, especially the Kudumbasree Mission. Kudumbashree, which commenced its operation on 1st April 1999, is the poverty eradication and women empowerment program implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. In Kerala, through several initiatives, such as the opening of 'Janakeeya Hotels or 'Kudumbashree Hotels', Kudumbashree has extended its support to women entrepreneurs. These hotels and restaurants, run by Kudumbashree women, stand for providing reasonably priced and hygienic food to customers and also for empowering women. Kudumbashree's women empowerment initiatives in the hospitality sector have been contributing to sustainable social and economic growth in Kerala.

Customer perceptions of quality and the degree of satisfaction toward the overall hotel experience are vital for any food service entrepreneur. This is especially important to the small-scale sector, which has constant competition from other entrepreneurs who offer comparable services. With the dynamic nature of today's business environment, customers, particularly the younger generation, are becoming very particular about their service outlets. Their preferences are influenced by factors such as food quality, hygiene standards, service responsiveness, ambiance, and overall experience. As a result, small hospitality businesses, including women-run food service enterprises like Kudumbashree hotels, must understand evolving customer perceptions and strategically adapt to meet their expectations.The survival and success of these community-driven enterprises depend on their ability to provide high-quality food and services that ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty. In response to this growing need, various researchers in the hospitality sector have identified a range of quality attributes that significantly influence customer satisfaction. These attributes include both tangible factors, such as food quality and cleanliness, and intangible factors, such as staff behavior, cultural authenticity, and emotional connection to the service experience.

Despite the extensive research on service quality in the hospitality industry, a critical gap remains in the study of small hospitality businesses. Notably, Morrison (2002) and Alonso and O'Neill (2009) have highlighted the persistent lack of research in this domain, even though small firms dominate the hospitality industry worldwide. This research gap is particularly relevant in the context of Kerala's small-scale food service enterprises, including Kudumbashree hotels, which operate as women-led, community-driven initiatives. Given the growing importance of small businesses in economic development, it is essential to explore the impact of perceived quality on customer satisfaction in these unique hospitality ventures.This paper aims to bridge this research gap by exploring the relationship between perceived quality and customer satisfaction in Kudumbashree hotels. The identification of specific quality dimensions that influence customer satisfaction will give valuable insights for small hospitality enterprises to enhance their service offerings and customer experiences. Furthermore, the study aims to provide practical recommendations for improving quality standards in Kudumbashree hotels, ensuring their long-term sustainability and competitiveness in the evolving hospitality landscape.By broadening the understanding of perceived quality and its impact on customer satisfaction, this study will offer a meaningful contribution to both academic research and practical business strategies in the small-scale hospitality sector.

Literature Review:-

The perceptions of customers regarding the quality of Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala can be characterized as moderate, reflecting a complex interplay of service quality, customer satisfaction, and unique contextual factors. Research indicates that customer satisfaction is closely tied to their perceptions of service quality, which encompasses various dimensions such as reliability, empathy, and the competence of staff (Marković and Jankovic, 2013). In the contextof Kudumbashree hotels, which are often community-driven initiatives aimed at empowering women and promoting local entrepreneurship, the unique attributes of these establishments may influence customer perceptions differently compared to traditional hotels. For instance, while customers may appreciate the social

mission behind Kudumbashree hotels, their satisfaction levels may not reach the heights seen in more established hotel chains, primarily due to varying expectations and experiences (Amfani-Joe et al., 2018).
Customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala is observed to be at a moderate level, influenced by various factors related to service quality, customer expectations, and the unique socio-economic context of these establishments. Research indicates that service quality is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction, with studies showing that improvements in service quality directly correlate with increased customer satisfaction levels (Li andJarinto, 2012). In the case of Kudumbashree hotels, which are community-based initiatives aimed at empowering women and promoting local culture, the perceived service quality may not always meet customer expectations, leading to moderate satisfaction ratings (Tindage et al., 2023). Additionally, the role of customer trust has been highlighted as a significant moderator in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, suggesting that building trust can enhance customer perceptions of service quality (Kaura et al., 2015).

Research indicates that service quality is a pivotal determinant of customer satisfaction in the hotel industry. A study developed SERQUAL model to study the customer perception towards service quality(Parasuraman et al.). A study by Sosianika et al. (2021) highlights that male customers prioritize service environment and delivery satisfaction, while female customers tend to focus on service product satisfaction (Sosianika et al., 2021). This distinction suggests that hotels in Kerala must tailor their services to meet the differing expectations of male and female guests effectively. For instance, male guests often value the expertise and civility of staff, which instills confidence during their stay (Sosianika et al., 2021). Conversely, female guests exhibit a higher level of involvement in their travel experiences, influenced by cognitive factors rather than emotional components (Lee and Kim, 2018). ge also plays a significant role in shaping customer satisfaction. Younger customers may prioritize modern amenities and technological integration within hotel services, while older guests might value traditional hospitality traits such as warmth and personal attention (Shyju et al., 2023). The differences in expectations across age groups necessitate that hotel operators in Kerala adopt a flexible approach to service delivery, ensuring that they cater to the specific needs of diverse age demographics.

Customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala has been observed to be moderate, and interestingly, it does not significantly depend on customers' perceived quality of these outlets. While service quality is often considered a primary driver of customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector (Hussain et al., 2014), studies suggest that in the context of Kudumbashree hotels, factors such as affordability and community impact may play more substantial roles (Onmanorama, 2022). Research indicates that customers often prioritize price over perceived service quality, especially in low-cost hotel settings (Meesalaand Paul, 2018). For instance, while guests may appreciate the affordability of meals offered at Kudumbashree hotels, their satisfaction does not necessarily correlate with the physical attributes or service delivery quality of these establishments (The Hindu, 2023). This disconnect suggests that customers may have different expectations regarding value and experience, leading to moderate satisfaction levels despite positive perceptions of service quality. Additionally, the community-driven nature of Kudumbashree Hotels enhances social value for customers but does not automatically translate into higher satisfaction ratings (Kudumbashree, n.d.). Therefore, while perceived quality remains an important aspect of customer experience, it is not the sole determinant of satisfaction in this unique hospitality model.

Research Gap:-
Although there are many studies that have discussed different aspects of customer satisfaction in Kudumbashree hotels, most of these studies concentrate on general service quality frameworks, operational challenges, or socio-economic impacts. Yet, there is a dearth of research focusing on how perceived quality, comprising tangible and intangible elements, directly affects customer satisfaction in small-scale, community-driven hotels like Kudumbashree. Many applications of broad service quality models like SERVQUAL exist in extant literature. However, relatively little empirical research exists to illuminate how subjective measures of quality-specifically Tangibles, Reliability, Food, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy shape the overall satisfaction perceived in this quite unique hospitality environment.The existing service quality studies mainly focus on various hospitality industries but there is no study on Kudumbashree hotels, which provides affordable and homely food, making it important to assess their service quality. With the background, the present study sets the following objectives and hypotheses.

Objectives of the Study:
1. To analyse customer perception towards the quality of Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala.
2. To examine the level of customer satisfaction in the context of Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala.
3. To analyse the age and gender disparities in customer satisfaction towards hotels in Kerala.
4. To study the influence of perceived quality on customer satisfaction towards Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala.

Hypotheses:-
H01: Customers perceive the quality of Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala to be at a moderate level.
H02: Customers report a moderate level of satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala.
H03: There is no statistically significant difference in customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala based on age or gender.
H04: Customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala is not significantly influenced by perceived quality.

Research Methodology:-
This present study is descriptive. Survey responses collected by administering a structured schedule from 163 sample customers having experience at Kudumbashree hotel outlets constitute the database of this study. The researcher conducted an online survey during the period from January 2024 to April 2024 among those customers who were voluntarily willing to provide their responses. The study adopted the construct of service quality for the hospitality sector developed by SanevaandChortoseva (2018) and the customer satisfaction construct developed by Arefin and Hossain (2021) and Almohaimmeed (2017). After collecting the perceptions of sample respondents on a five-point Likert-type scale, the study used both descriptive and inferential statistical tools, namely the t-test, ANOVA, and linear regression. The reliability of constructs is also tested with Cronbach's alpha.

Results and Discussion:-

(a) Profile and Perceptions of Customers on Quality of Kudumbashree Hotels

Table 1: Gender and Age Group of Sample Respondents

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	74	45.40
	Female	89	54.60
	Total	**163**	**100**
Age (Year)	Below 20	09	5.5
	20-39	78	47.9
	40-59	64	39.3
	60 and above	12	7.4
	Total	**163**	**100**

Source: Data Compiled

There are 163 customers in the sample, with a slightly higher percentage of female respondents, 54.6%, than that of the males, 45.4%. Regarding the age distribution, the largest proportion (47.9%) is aged between 20 and 39 years, then it goes down to 40–59 years, accounting for 39.3%. In contrast, a smaller proportion of the respondents are below 20 years old, that is, 5.5%, and 60 years or older, 7.4%. Thus, this demographic analysis gives an outlook on the clientele profile of Kerala's Kudumbashree hotels, composed mainly of youthful and middle-aged people, with gender representation nearly balancing out.

Table 2: Comparison of Customer Perceived Quality of Kudumbashree Hotels: Results of One Sample T-test

Attributes	Mean score	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Tangibles	3.84	16.594	.000
Reliability	4.03	22.053	.000
Food	4.12	25.263	.000
Responsiveness	3.67	11.828	.000
Assurance	4.22	26.093	.000
Empathy	3.80	13.967	.000
Overall Quality	3.95	23.659	.000

Source: Compiled Data - Note: Test Value 3

The study evaluated the quality of Kudumbashree hotel services on a construct having six dimensions with internal consistency that is measured in terms of Cronbach's alpha (α) equal to 0.91. Tangibles (3 items with α 0.71), responsiveness (3 items with α 0.75), reliability (3 items with α 0.72), empathy (3 items with α 0.84), assurance (2 items with α 0.77), and food quality (5 items with α 0.77) are the dimensions considered for the study. The analysis of the primary data on a five-point scale using one sample t-test reveals that the mean scores for all attributes of quality and overall quality are significantly higher than the moderate level (test value of 3). This indicates that customers perceive the quality of Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala to be above moderate across all evaluated dimensions. The significance level (Sig.) being 0.000 for all attributes confirms that these results are statistically significant. Thus, the null hypothesis (H01) is rejected, and it can be logically inferred that customers rate the quality of Kudumbashree hotels at a level better than moderate.

(b) Customer Satisfaction with Kudumbashree Hotels

Table 3: Comparison of Customer Satisfaction towards Kudumbashree Hotels: Results of One Sample T-test

Attributes	Mean score	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Customer Satisfaction	3.94	20.969	.000

Source: Compiled Data - Note: Test Value 3

The study collected the customers' responses on their satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels on a one-dimensional construct (3 items with α 0.81). The analysis of the primary data on a five-point scale using one sample t-test reveals that the mean score for customer satisfaction of 3.94 is significantly higher than the test value of 3. As the p-value (Sig.) of 0.000 is well below the alpha level of 0.05, it indicates that the result is statistically significant. From the analysis, it is evident that the null hypothesis, H02, which asserts that customers have a moderate level of satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala, is rejected. This means that customer satisfaction levels are significantly deviating from the moderate level, and it is logical to infer that the level of customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala is significantly higher than moderate

Table 4: Gender-Wise Comparison of Customer Satisfaction: Results of Independent Sample T-test

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2 tailed)
Male	74	3.91	.55	-.770	.443
Female	89	3.98	.60	-.775	.439

Source: Data Compiled

The study also investigated customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala, focusing on potential disparities based on gender and age. The mean satisfaction scores for male and female customers are 3.91 and 3.98, respectively. An independent sample t-test shows a p value of 0.443, which is greater than the alpha level of 0.05, indicating no statistically significant difference in satisfaction between genders.

Table 5: Age-Wise Comparison of Customer Satisfaction: Results of OneWay ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Between Groups	1.955	3	.652	1.966	.121
Within Groups	52.700	159	.331		
Total	54.655	162			

Source: Data Compiled

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA comparing satisfaction across different age groups yields a p-value of 0.121, which also stands above the alpha level of 0.05, indicating no statistically significant age-based differences (Table 5). Therefore, the study fails to reject the null hypothesis (H03) and logically infers that customer satisfaction levels are consistent across both gender and age groups, without any significant disparities.

(c) Influence of Perceived Quality on Customer Satisfaction:

The study looked at the relationship between perceived quality and customer satisfaction at Kudumbashree hotels using ANOVA and a linear regression model.

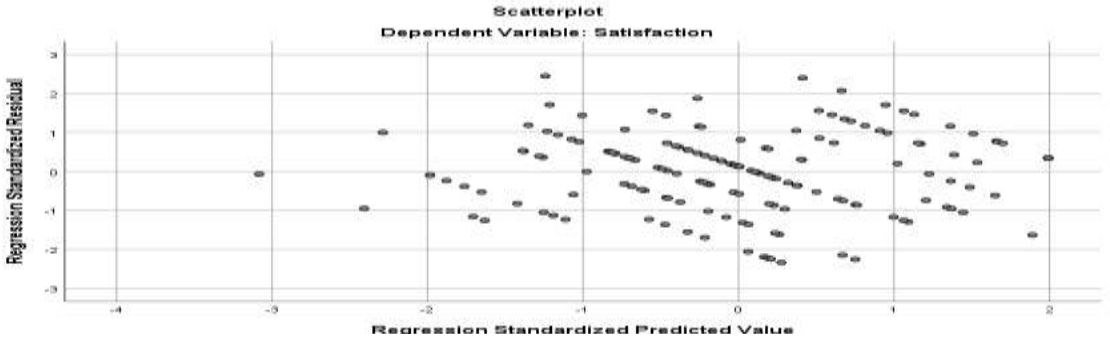
Table 6 ANOVA:

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	34.855	6	5.809	45.771	.000
Residual	19.799	156	.127		
Total	54.654	162			

Source: Compiled data Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

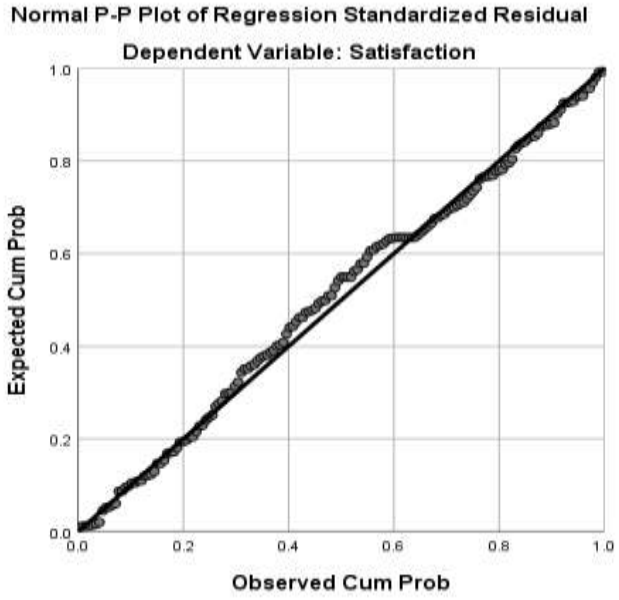
Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Reliability, Tangibles, Assurance, Food quality and Responsiveness. The ANOVA results for the regression model indicate that the regression sum of squares is 34.855 with 6 degrees of freedom (df = 6), and the residual sum of squares is 19.799 with 156 degrees of freedom (df = 156). The mean square for regression is 5.809, while the F-value of 45.771 is highly significant at $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$). This means that the regression model is statistically significant, thus the null hypothesis (H04) customer satisfaction with Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala is not significantly influenced by perceived quality is rejected, proving that independent variables added to the model impact customer satisfaction at Kudumbashree hotels.

Figure 1



Based on the visual inspection of the scatterplot, the residuals appear to have a constat spread indicating that the assumption of homoscedasticity is satisfied

Figure 2



The Normal P-P Plot (Probability-Probability Plot) of the regression standardised residuals indicates that residuals are approximately normally distributed, satisfying the normality assumption for linear regression.

Table 7: Linear Regression Results for Predicting Satisfaction

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.799	0.638	0.624	0.35626	2.146

Source: Compiled data -Dependent Variable: Satisfaction

Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Reliability, Tangibles, Assurance, Food quality, and Responsiveness The summary of the regression model shows that there is a very strong relationship between the independent variables and customer satisfaction, as the R-value is 0.799, meaning that the variables are strongly correlated. An R-Square value of 0.638 means that the model explains 63.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction, while an adjusted R-Square of 0.624 takes into account model complexity, meaning it is a good fit. The average deviation of the observed values from the computed values is referred to as the standard error of the estimate (0.35626). The Durbin-Watson statistic value is 2.146, which is within an acceptable range or near about 2; the residuals have no significant autocorrelation, which implies that the regression model is reliable.

Table 8: Regression Coefficients Summary

Model	Unstandardized CoefficientsB	Std.error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.269	.243		1.108	.270		
Tangible	.153	.055	.171	2.815	.006	.628	1.593
Reliability	.106	.061	.109	1.719	.088	.578	1.729

Food	.244	.076	.238	3.222	.002	.426	2.347
Responsiveness	.047	.064	.058	.729	.467	.364	2.751
Assurance	.190	.068	.195	2.787	.006	.476	2.099
Empathy	.183	.061	.229	2.978	.003	.392	2.552

Source: Compiled Data

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction:-

Food quality had the strongest influence on customer satisfaction at Kudumbashree hotels, with a value of B = 0.244, p = 0.002. The other significant predictors were empathy with a value of B = 0.183, p = 0.003; assurance with a value of B = 0.190, p = 0.006; and tangibles with a value of B = 0.153, p = 0.006. Reliability (B = 0.106, p = 0.088) shows a positive effect but is not statistically significant, while responsiveness (B = 0.047, p = 0.467) does not significantly impact satisfaction. Collinearity statistics indicate no major multicollinearity issues, as tolerance values exceed 0.1 and VIF values remain below 10, with the highest VIF (2.751) observed for responsiveness. These findings suggest that enhancing food quality, empathy, assurance, and tangibles can significantly improve customer satisfaction, while reliability and responsiveness may require further evaluation to determine their role in the customer experience.

Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Research:-

The results of this study reveal that Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala have built a good quality reputation, as the customers perceived the service and products offered by them to be far above the average level. This study also emphasizes that the customer satisfaction remains very high among different demographic groups, which supports the wide appeal of these women-managed small-scale food service businesses. While all key service quality dimensions contribute to customer satisfaction, tangibles, food quality, assurance, and empathy are identified as the most significant positive predictors. Responsiveness, though relevant, plays a comparatively lesser role in shaping customer perceptions. This insight provides a clear direction for Kudumbashree hotels to refine their strategies by focusing on the aspects that matter most to customers, thereby strengthening their competitive advantage in the small-scale hospitality sector.

Sustain and build more customer satisfaction; Kudumbashree hotels should have proper improvement of ambiance, hygiene, and quality food to bring satisfaction and enjoyable time for a pleasant dining experience. Investment in assurance and empathy should be carried on by upgrading training for the staff. Further, such understandings integrated into their marketing campaigns will also make Kudumbashree hotels more competent, reliable service providers in the hospitality industry of Kerala. Constant improvements in these core areas would bring repeat business to these businesses but also add value to these women-owned entrepreneurial activities for the sustenance and development of such local economies and businesses, reinforcing women's entrepreneurship for local economic empowerment.

While this study provides valuable insights into the perceived quality and customer satisfaction levels at Kudumbashree hotels in Kerala, there remain several areas that warrant further research. Future studies could explore the longitudinal impact of service quality improvements on customer satisfaction and business performance. Analysing how changes in tangible aspects, food quality, and staff training affect customer perceptions over time would provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of different improvement strategies. Additionally, comparative studies between Kudumbashree hotels and other small-scale food service enterprises could offer a broader understanding of how different business models impact customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Another key area for future research is the role of digital transformation and technology in enhancing customer experience at Kudumbashree hotels. Investigating the impact of digital ordering systems, online reviews, and social media engagement on customer perceptions could provide valuable recommendations for modernization efforts. Moreover, exploring customer behavioural patterns and expectations across different geographic regions within Kerala may help tailor strategies to regional preferences. Finally, further studies could examine the economic and

social impact of Kudumbashree hotels on women's empowerment, community development, and local employment, providing a more holistic understanding of their contribution beyond customer satisfaction.

Practical Implications:-

The outcomes of this research have great practical implications for Kudumbashree hotels, the policymakers, and stakeholders in the small-scale hospitality industry. First, it brings into sharp focus tangible aspects-food quality, assurance, and empathy-like ambiance, hygiene, and presentation of food to enhance customer satisfaction. Improving these aspects would make the dining environment of Kudumbashree hotels appealing and tempting for visitors to stay and stop more frequently. Additionally, assurance and empathy training for the staff would lead to improvement in service delivery. Thus, increased trust and loyalty among customers will be generated.This research paper highlights the scope for quality service improvement and thereby competitive advantage for Kerala's growing hospitality sector. Kudumbashree hotels can update their operations by introducing digital marketing, customer feedback mechanism, and social media engagement. In addition, this study's findings can help the policymakers to come up with more support programs and financial incentives that can be designed for women entrepreneurs in the food service sector for local economic growth and women's empowerment.

Theoretical Implication:

This paper contributes to the existing literature regarding service quality and customer satisfaction by the small-scale hospitality industry particularly in the community-driven, women-led enterprises. It reinforces the existing service quality models by establishing that tangibles, food quality, assurance, and empathy are the most significant predictors of satisfaction in small hotel businesses. Furthermore, findings add new insight into it as responsiveness, although relevant, plays a relatively lesser role in the context of a Kudumbashree hotel.It also helps fill the gap left by research on customer perceptions of small-scale hospitality businesses, traditionally less well researched as a whole compared to large hotel chains. Focusing on Kerala's Kudumbashree hotels, this research contributes empirical evidence for future comparative studies, particularly in those areas of women entrepreneurship, social enterprises, and rural economic development. This study has also shed lighter on demographic consistency in the satisfaction levels that could be pursued further to identify customer segmentation and preference patterns of similar community-based hospitality models.

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