

# **Measuring Continuous Improvement Culture in the Hospitality Industry in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Zimparks Lodges**

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**Abstract:** *The study focussed on measuring continuous improvement levels of Zimparks lodges in Zimbabwe. The basis for carrying out the research stemmed from the challenges faced by Zimparks lodges. Zimparks lodges are performing dismally yet other lodges are doing well in the same environment. It emerged that Zimparks lodges has outdated interior designs, furniture and premises which do not suit the modern day hospitality customers and guests.*

**Keywords:** *Continuous Orientation Culture, Lodge, Hospitality*

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## **I. Introduction**

The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (Zimparks) lodges have been experiencing low business as occupancy rate continue to plummet and few guests are visiting to enjoy its facilities. The Authority's lodges include Chivero, Matopos, Hwange, Nyanga, Victoria Falls and other units located in various tourist attraction centres. Some of the lodges exhibit some sorry look having been built during the colonial era. A look at the situation indicates that Zimparks lodges' management may be lagging in sprucing up the entity' image and harnessing new ways of doing business as other competing players are actually posting good business. Among other things, understanding the continuous improvement culture at Zimparks lodges may assist management in coming up with new ideas on how to improve the situation on the ground.

This study aimed at measuring the level of continuous improvement culture in the hospitality industry in Zimbabwe, taking a special focus on the Zimparks lodges.

## **II. Literature Review**

Gray and Hooley (2002) said that there is a linkage between market orientation and innovation which is likely to come from strong effective market scanning and response by service firms. Continuous improvement is the enhancement process used by an organisation to find the best ways of satisfying its customers (Harrel and Frazer, 1999). This process occurs as the organisation strives to find better ways of satisfying customers (Harrell and Frazer, 1999). Continuous improvement is one of the critical components of total quality management (TQM) that was developed by the Japanese and given the name Kaizen. Though TQM is also known for customer orientation, employee orientation, management commitment and zero defects, its emphasis on improving and upgrading systems (Kaizen) is central for ensuring a culture of being customer driven is entrenched in the hearts of both employees and managers. Continuous improvement was also linked to the balanced scorecard by Evans 2005), where 'internal business process' of the hotel was to be improved through retaining high quality staff, providing high quality service, providing superior accommodation, offering high quality physical facilities and having new ideas for revenue generation on their financial side.

The concept of continuous improvement is based on the assumption that continually striving to reach higher and higher standard in every part of the organisation will provide a series of incremental gains that will build superior performance. In an environment dedicated to continuous improvement, managers and team leaders have, as a prime objective, the bringing out of new ideas and concepts from their staff (Armstrong, 1996).

Victorino, Verma, Plaschika and Dev (2005) said hospitality industry, which also include lodges, are well positioned to benefit from service innovation since there are many substitutable services, industry changes due to information technology and existence of less brand loyal travellers. Key areas of service innovation and improvement analysed in the study were the hotel type, technology levels, and nature of customisation. 'Hotel type' innovation had style options of economy level, mid range hotels and upscale hotels. Technology included internet access in rooms, business centre and internet based reservations (Victorino et al, 2005). Customisation was covered by the pet policy, flexible check in, room customisation, child care and kitchen. Some of these strategies can be applied by the Zimparks lodges in their continuous improvement efforts.

Wang, Chen and Chen (2012) recommended measurement of market and technological turbulence as a basis for inferring the need for continuous improvement efforts. They went on to specify the continuous improvement survey items which measured whether employees had to suggest changes or modifications to existing processes, whether hotels encourage continual study and improvement of all its products, services and

processes, and whether the hotel get some compliments and recognition for improving its products, services or processes(Wang et al, 2012). Robbins and Coulter (1996) highlighted some factors that facilitate continuous incremental improvement which are; structure, technology, people and change agent. They also said that in continuous improvement, managers need to continually learn and upgrade their skills and also need to have different cultural experiences. Kohli, Jaworski and Kumar (1993)'s scale also support this study's items as they also considered new product development efforts, changes in customers' needs, business plans being driven by marketing research, levels of responsiveness to customer complaints, and changes in the quality of a service.

Continuous improvement measurement was covered by Tomaskova (2009) by his evaluation of whether the company offer products that reflect the latest demands and wishes of customers, responding fast to the market events of competitors, and on implementing the acquired information to the firm's decisions.

### III. Materials and Methods

A cross sectional survey was conducted on 207 customers and guests of Zimparks lodges. A reliability value of 0.807 was deemed acceptable since it is above the 0.80 benchmark. Construct validity was generally good since concepts in the literature review of continuous improvement were those maintained in the questionnaire used in data collection. The study hypothesis was as follows;

H: Continuous Improvement at Zimparks lodges is adequate.

### IV. Results and Discussion

The table below shows the research results that came from assessing the level of continuous improvements applied by the Zimparks lodges.

**Table 1: Continuous Improvements in Zimparks Lodges**

	Mean	SA	A	NS	DA	SDA
The furniture and premises are upgraded to meet new customers needs	3.17	4.3%	35.7%	11.1%	36.2%	12.6%
Interior designs reflect new trends in the market	3.47	2.4%	15.0%	29.0%	40.6%	13.0%
Information technology is upgraded continuously in relation to customer views	2.57	33.3%	21.7%	8.7%	27.1%	9.2%
Zimparks create services and activities that add value to customers	2.88	2.9%	44.0%	19.3%	29.5%	4.3%
The lodges are bench marked with the best performers in the industry	3.46	1.9%	13.0%	32.9%	41.1%	11.1%
Utensils, linen and cooking facilities are of modern outlook	3.49	2.4%	19.8%	15.9%	50.2%	11.6%
There is continuous monitoring and tracking of customer suggestions	2.99	4.3%	32.9%	29.0%	27.1%	6.8%

#### **The Furniture and Premises are Upgraded to Meet New Customers Needs (Mean=3.17).**

Zimparks lodges were found to be stagnant in terms of upgrading its furniture and its premises are maintained without adjusting these to meet changing visitor needs. This shows a lower customer orientation behaviour that confirms a below standard marketing culture. Furniture and premise are part of physical evidence features that are used by hospitality customers to judge the attractiveness of the total service package. The furniture and premises might need to be upgraded to portray the wildlife and natural feelings to the visitors.

#### **Interior Designs Reflect New Trends in the Market (Mean=3.47).**

The interior designs of the Zimparks lodges were said to be below standard old-fashioned and missing the current expectations by customers. Interior designs might need some walls with menus, new food products pictures, comfortable sitting arrangement well dressed and designed rooms. The lodges were found to be lacking on this dimension hence indicating a lower marketing culture. The interior designs might need some animal and vegetation pictures and flashy videos of animals to encourage customers to experience the environment.

#### **Information Technology is Upgraded Continuously in Relation to Customer Views (Mean=2.57).**

The research indicated that Zimparks lodges were moving at the same pace with customer's expectations on technology. Their television screens, internet facilities, booking systems and their electronic gadgets were found to be up to date. This demonstrates some high levels of marketing orientation culture. The new technology, however, need to be used for enabling collection of new needs and suggestions by customers if it is to be of any greater advantage.

**Zimparks Create Services and Activities That Add Value To Customers (Mean=2.88).**

Zimparks lodges were found to be able to create services and products that add value to customers. Such services include game drives, animal films, game meat and some unique self catering facilities. Though some products are created without much consultation with customers, the uniqueness adds value to visitors.

**The Lodges are Bench Marked with the Best Performers in the Industry (Mean=3.46).**

The customers add the stakeholders of Zimparks lodges perceived that the lodges were not benchmarked with other best performing firms in the industry. This comment could have come due to poor performance in delivering some services. Some best performers include Cresta Lodge and Safari Lodge, among others.

**Utensils, Linen and Cooking Facilities are of Modern Outlook (Mean =3.49).**

Visitors usually rate the kitchens of lodges for inferring the quality of food offered. The respondents viewed the utensils, linen and cooking facilities as failing to meet the modern grade. The lodges were supposed to continuously improve in the areas that are sensitive to the visitors' feelings. This indicates that the Zimparks lodges are less marketing oriented and likely to lose customers to other competing lodges.

**There is Continuous Monitoring and Tracking of Customer Suggestions (Mean=2.99).**

The tracking of customer needs, expectations and suggestions got an average rating of nearly 3.00. The collection of customer suggestions is done only informally by employees without much active and thorough formal research. This leaves out some useful ideas from customers that are relevance in decision making. For the Zimparks lodges to be marketing oriented, they need to engage visitors, employees and other stakeholders in contributing for changes and improvements.

**Hypothesis Testing: Zimparks' Continuous Improvement Levels**

A one tailed t-distribution test at 5% significance level was carried out and set to reject  $H_0$  if  $p\text{-value} > 0.05$ . While the mean value analysis used 3.00 as the benchmark, the hypothesis testing used 2.50 as a stricter version for recommending implementation of strategic decision.

$H_0$ : Continuous Improvement at Zimparks lodges is adequate.

$H_0$ : mean  $\leq 2.50$

$H_a$ : mean  $> 2.50$

**Table 2: T-Test: One Sample t-test Results for Continuous Improvement Means**

	Continuous Improvement
Mean	3.1471
SD	.35340
Observations	7
t Stat ( $t_{cal}$ )	4.845
p-value	.003

Since  $t_{cal}$  value of 4.845 had a p-value of 0.003 which is less than 0.05, it is concluded that Zimpark's continuous improvement is generally below the expectation of 'stakeholder-respondents' at 5% level of significance. This means there is no or less innovativeness and creativity within the Zimparks lodges. There is also no total quality management (TQM) within the organisation. This also means that there is less adoption of the TQM concept by Zimparks lodges. In this regards, the management is requested to reorganise themselves and make sure that skilled personnel with proper experience are recruited in to the organisation and are well placed and aligned and in turn continuous improvement is likely to be achieved. Continuous improvement within Zimparks should be the order of today, tomorrow and forever.

**V. Conclusion**

Concerning orientation towards continuous improvement, Zimparks did not fair enough in ensuring customer satisfaction. Information technology and use of modern gadgets was seen as a positive step towards Zimparks continuous improvement process. Although perceived by customers as marginal, there was monitoring and tracking of customer suggestions. Zimparks lodges also added value to its customers by including services with game experience. In spite of the strides in aspects mentioned above, Zimparks has had slow paced improvements in interior designs, furniture and premise to suit customer needs. Cooking utensils are not showing trends in the market and Zimparks lodges was generally been viewed as not benchmarking with best performers in the market.

### **Competing Interests**

The author envisaged no competing interests

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