The Influence of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction at a Selected Food Retailer in Durban

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the influence of service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction at a specific food retailer in Durban. Quantitative research in the form of a descriptive survey was carried out. The SERVQUAL instrument, a widely used tool in service quality research, evaluated customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality. It encompasses five dimensions: Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. 400 respondents participated in the survey, and the self-administered SERVQUAL questionnaires were distributed among them. The respondents were chosen using non-probability sampling, specifically convenience sampling. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) using various methods, and the results were presented graphically using bar and pie charts to offer concise summaries. The findings indicated that most respondents were generally satisfied with the quality of services provided by the selected retailer. No significant difference was observed between customers' expectations and their actual perceptions, but small gaps were identified as essential in identifying areas for improvement. Therefore, it is recommended that the selected retailer continues to prioritize service quality, recognizing that customer satisfaction is fundamental to the success of any retailer. Implementing best practices to ensure consistent customer satisfaction can give the retailer a competitive edge.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Customer Service, Retail Service Quality, SERVQUAL
JEL Classification: M31

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing diversity in the preferences of modern customers presents a significant challenge for retailers striving to cater to every customer's needs. This challenge is further complicated by the wide range of products available in the market (Peker et al., 2017). South African food retailers struggle to consistently deliver exceptional customer service, resulting in lower customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the landscape is fiercely competitive due to rapid market changes and evolution. According to Roberts-Lombard (2019), food retailers in South Africa are under substantial pressure to maintain competitiveness, invest in research and development, and continually engage customers in the demanding South African economy. Research by Chinomona

and Sandada (2013) and Setiawan and Patricia (2022) indicates that customer satisfaction significantly influences repeat purchases. These studies highlight the crucial need to consistently uphold customer satisfaction, as many South African retailers struggle to do so, resulting in business inconsistency and prompting customers to switch from one retailer to another.

In South Africa, food retailers are confronted with the significant challenge of customer satisfaction. In response, they are utilizing retail service quality as a competitive strategy. To remain competitive, retailers must thoroughly understand their target market and prioritize excellent service quality. Adopting and implementing service standards is critical to effectively managing business processes and achieving overall customer satisfaction.

This, in turn, fosters positive consumer behaviour and enhances the industry's competitiveness. By analyzing and refining implemented standards, retailers can continuously improve their strategies. A well-designed plan to enhance retail service quality involves setting clear service benchmarks, training employees to meet those standards, and continuously monitoring performance to address operational inefficiencies (Musasa and Tlapana, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Retail Service Quality

The retail industry presents a unique challenge involving the simultaneous provision of goods and services. Hence, the evaluation of retail service quality differs from that of other service environments. Consequently, enhancing customer service quality has become a crucial strategy for retailers to improve customer satisfaction and the shopping experience. Moreover, retail service quality is vital for enhancing customer satisfaction, revenues, cross-selling, and repeat purchase behaviour among customers (Chandel, 2014; Tlapana, 2020).

Retail service quality is gauged by the alignment between customer expectations and the level of service the retailer provides, aiming to meet or surpass customer expectations. It signifies the gap between customer expectations and the perceived service (Kant and Jaiswal, 2017; Saraswati, 2022). The assessment of service quality is pivotal in meeting customer expectations. It is a survival imperative in today's hyper-competitive retail landscape, reflecting the prevailing theme in contemporary literature and business practice. Furthermore, it is associated with numerous benefits, such as customer attraction and retention, positive word-of-mouth, increased productivity, expanded market share, enhanced employee morale, and improved profitability (Anabila et al., 2022).

Nowadays, delivering high-quality service is crucial for retailers to gain a sustainable competitive advantage, increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Yarimoglu, 2014). According to Terblanche et al. (2013), retailers must consistently deliver high-quality service to secure sustainable profits, attract customers, foster positive word-of-mouth, and cultivate customer loyalty. Maintaining service quality poses a continuous challenge, requiring an ongoing evaluation to identify areas accountable for service quality. Therefore, assessing service quality is imperative to enhance the value for the retailer and the customers (Farooqi and Banerji, 2013).

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

Al-Tit (2015) provides a comprehensive definition of customer satisfaction, describing it as a marketing concept that evaluates how well a retailer's products or services meet or surpass customer expectations. Customer satisfaction poses a significant challenge for food retailers, and, as a result, service quality is increasingly employed as a competitive strategy to meet customer needs in South Africa. To remain competitive, retailers must comprehend their target market and deliver exceptional service quality. Retailers must focus on developing and implementing service standards and utilizing service quality to manage business processes. This approach is pivotal in achieving overall customer satisfaction, ultimately fostering positive consumer behaviour

and enhancing the overall competitiveness of the retail industry. This will enable retailers to cultivate desirable customer relations. Analyzing and assessing the implemented standards will empower retailers to identify more effective strategies. Customer satisfaction is measured in how well a retailer's supplied service or product meets customer expectations. Satisfied customers significantly impact the profitability of any business. According to Anderson et al. (2013), understanding the customer guides how to fulfil their needs best. Customer satisfaction is the key reason a customer remains loyal to a retailer. This enables retailers to enhance the lifetime value of their customers towards products and services and minimizes negative word-of-mouth as the service or product meets customer expectations (Manyanga et al., 2022).

Customer satisfaction is a key factor influencing customers' perceptions of value and is a fundamental aspect of customer loyalty (Marcos and Coelho, 2022). Additionally, Koudehi et al. (2014) argue that there is a strong link between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and value and that this relationship greatly impacts performance. It is posited that satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal to the retailer and that loyal customers can, in turn, create value for the retailer and improve overall firm performance. Consequently, in today's competitive business environment, retailers must deliver lasting customer value consistently. Customers who receive services that surpass their expectations or high-quality services are likely to be satisfied and more inclined to remain loyal to the company. Additionally, it's important to note that customer loyalty stems from the mindset of a loyal person; customer satisfaction serves as the foundation for customer loyalty (Gunawan, 2022; Limna and Kraiwanit, 2022).

2.3. Customer Expectations of Retail Service Quality

Customer expectations refer to the anticipated outcomes during a transaction, which customers use to assess products and companies and compare subsequent purchasing experiences. These expectations are based on previous experiences, current circumstances, and other sources of information (Eposi, 2023; Kamaruddin et al., 2017). It is important to note that customer expectations vary depending on the purchased product (Tyagi et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is argued that meeting customer expectations and maintaining perceived retail service quality are vital for customer satisfaction. Failing to meet these expectations is considered poor customer service (Nguyen and Nagase, 2020; Ok et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding and meeting client expectations is essential for delivering quality service. Retailers should aim to exceed customer expectations by providing high-quality service, as this leads to increased customer satisfaction, trust, retention, and loyalty, ultimately resulting in higher earnings and competitive advantage (Balinado et al., 2021; Suchanek and Kralova, 2023).

Moreover, with technological advancements, customers' expectations have evolved, especially regarding online delivery, which is crucial for achieving consumer satisfaction (Awadhi et al., 2021; Vasić et al., 2019). The expectations for technology-based self-service quality have also changed, focusing on the speed of delivery, ease of use, reliability, enjoyment, and control (Rita et al., 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

The study is quantitative and descriptive, focusing on evaluating service quality and its impact on customer satisfaction at a specific retailer in the Durban area. A quantitative approach involves thorough measurement and statistical analysis of data collected through surveys (Labaree, 2013). The target population for this study consists of consumers of the chosen Durban food retail store, estimated to be over 10,000. A non-probability sampling method utilizing convenience sampling was employed to select participants. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) explain that the sampling process involves studying the sample and drawing conclusions from it, which are then used to generalize to the entire population. They further suggest that for a population size exceeding 10,000, a sample of 385-400 respondents would be sufficient to support the research findings.

Trained research assistants were involved in the data collection phase, using questionnaires as the measuring instruments. The questionnaire, adapted from SERVQUAL, included questions related to the five dimensions of service quality: Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It mainly consisted of closed-ended questions, where respondents used a five-point Likert scale to assess attitudinal variables. The research questions were carefully designed to ensure the respondents could easily understand them. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0. The questionnaires were thoroughly reviewed to ensure that all participants completed all the questions, and the captured data was checked to eliminate any errors. The data was analyzed using various methods, and the results were presented graphically using bar and pie charts to offer concise summaries. Frequency tables were used to enhance the accuracy and efficiency of data processing. Appropriate inferential statistics were used to assess relationships. Before data collection, ethical authorization was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee to ensure strict adherence to ethical considerations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on Table 1, the ratio of males to females is approximately 1:1 (47.8%: 52.3%). Within the age category of 30-40 years, 49.1% were male. Among the male population, 58.1% were between the ages of 30 and 40 years. This specific age group of males accounted for 27.8% of the total sample.

Figure 1 illustrates that 16% of the respondents visit the store once a month, 39% visit twice a month, and a significant portion of the respondents (45%) visit the store more than twice a month.

Table 2 depicts the ratings and scores given by customers at the retail store. The average difference between what customers expect and experience is small, at 0.0. The most significant discrepancies are in the cleanliness of the store, with average score differences of −0.1. Customers use the store's physical appearance to judge the service, and the store can improve its image and service quality by focusing on this aspect. It is worth noting that the Wilcoxon Test

Table 1: Demographics of the respondents

Age	Gender		Total
	Female	**Male**	
18-29			
Count	38	42	80
Percentage within age	47.5	52.5	100.0
Percentage within gender	18.2	22.0	20.0
Percentage of total	9.5	10.5	20.0
30-40			
Count	115	111	226
Percentage within age	50.9	49.1	100.0
Percentage within gender	55.0	58.1	56.5
Percentage of total	28.8	27.8	56.5
41-55			
Count	42	37	79
Percentage within age	53.2	46.8	100.0
Percentage within gender	20.1	19.4	19.8
Percentage of total	10.5	9.3	19.8
56 and above			
Count	14	1	15
Percentage within age	93.3	6.7	100.0
Percentage within gender	6.7	0.5	3.8
Percentage of total	3.5	0.3	3.8
Total			
Count	209	191	400
Percentage within age	52.3	47.8	100.0
Percentage within gender	100.0	100.0	100.0
Percentage of total	52.3	47.8	100.0

Figure 1: Frequency of store visits
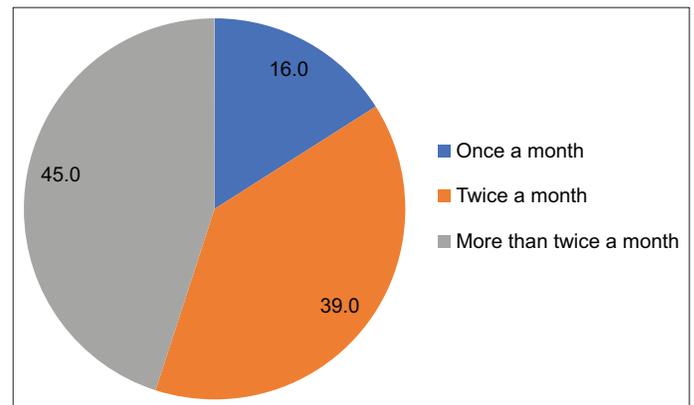
did not show any significant differences (P < 0.05), suggesting that the central values are similar. In general, the table indicates that the differences are relatively minor. Therefore, customers at the retail stores are generally satisfied with the service quality related to the physical aspects.

In Table 3, it is clear that the average reliability gap score is 0.1. The data shows that there is general agreement among respondents that the retailer's reliability should be at a high level. Additionally, the results indicate consistency across all statements, suggesting that the selected store consistently meets customer commitments, satisfying their expectations. However, the highlighted Wilcoxon Test P-value shows significant differences, indicating notable disparities between the average expectation and perception. As mentioned by Ramya et al. (2019), regardless of the type of services provided, reliability is universally recognized as a key attribute in achieving customer satisfaction.

The overall gap for responsiveness is 0.1. The findings disclose that the respondents at the selected stores agree that the retailer should have high levels of responsiveness. From this Table 4, the respondents are pleased with this service quality dimension. The retailer needs to maintain this with its customers. The highlighted Wilcoxon Test P-value shows significant differences. This means that the central values were not similar. That is, the differences between the average expectation and perception were substantial. Levy and Weitz (2012) explain that this dimension includes the desire to assist customers and provide quick services. This may be done by returning customer calls and replying to e-mails as soon as possible.

In Table 5, it shows that the overall assurance gap is 0.0. The average expected mean score for Assurance is 4.3, and the average perceived score is also 4.3. This means that the participants feel secure with their transactions in the store. The employees are polite, knowledgeable, and know how to assure customers. According to Dehghan et al. (2012), having knowledgeable and skilled employees is crucial in assuring customers.

The overall empathy gap is 0.0, indicating that the respondents are satisfied with the level of empathy they have received (Table 6). They feel understood and find the retailer's opening hours convenient. However, the highlighted Wilcoxon Test P-value indicates significant differences, suggesting that the central values were not similar. In other words, there were substantial differences between the average expectation and perception. Ramya et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of retailers understanding each customer's unique and individual needs.

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the findings. The results, as shown in Table 7, indicate that the reliability for each section exceeded the recommended Cronbach's alpha value, which ranges from 0 to 1. This suggests that these sections of the study were scored reliably and adequately.

Examining the selected retailer's expectations and perceptions of service quality has been conducted and presented. An analysis of the gap in service dimensions revealed disparities between expectations and perceptions, which were thoroughly examined. It can be inferred that the selected retailer is currently meeting its customers' expectations. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement, particularly in key areas essential for attracting new customers. It is crucial to maintain service quality standards to enhance customer service and satisfaction. The findings indicate that customers are highly satisfied with the retailer's service. The retailer consistently delivers on its service promises and has earned a reputation for reliability. Additionally, customers expressed satisfaction with the responsiveness of the selected

Table 2: Tangibles scoring patterns

Statement	Question Number	E	P	Gap	Wilcoxon test value
Excellent retail stores should have modern equipment	1	4.0	4.0	0.0	0.545
A retail store should have a physical appearance that is visually appealing	2	4.2	4.2	0.0	0.895
The physical environment of the store is clean	3	4.2	4.1	−0.1	0.508
Employees at an excellent retail store should be neat in appearance	4	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.026
	Overall	4.2	4.2	0.0	

Table 3: Reliability scoring patterns

Statement	Question Number	E	P	Gap	Wilcoxon test P value
When the retailer promises to do something by a specific time, they should do so	5	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.006
When I have a problem, the retailer should show interest in solving the problem	6	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.220
The store performs the service at the right time	7	4.1	4.3	0.2	0.001
The store provides their services at the time they promise to do so	8	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.137
The retailer should focus on error-free records	9	4.1	4.3	0.2	0.002
Employees should always make information easily obtainable by customers	10	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.157
	Overall	4.2	4.3	0.1	

Table 4: Responsiveness scoring patterns

Statement	Question Number	E	P	Gap	Wilcoxon test P value
Employees should offer quick and friendly service to the customers	11	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.002
Employees should always be willing to help	12	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.023
Employees should be able to respond to a customer's request	13	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.004
	Overall	4.2	4.3	0.1	

Table 5: Assurance scoring patterns

Statement	Question Number	E	P	Gap	Wilcoxon test P value
The behaviour of employees should instil confidence in customers	14	4.3	4.3	0.0	0.524
Customers should feel safe in their transactions with the employees	15	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.074
Employees should always be polite to customers	16	4.3	4.3	0.0	0.543
Employees should have the knowledge to answer to customers' questions	17	4.2	4.3	0.1	0.422
	Overall	4.3	4.3	0.0	

Table 6: Empathy scoring patterns

Statement	Question Number	E	P	Gap	Wilcoxon Test P value
The store gives customers individual attention	18	4.3	4.3	0.0	0.424
Opening hours of the store are convenient for customers	19	4.3	4.5	0.2	0.003
Employees should give customers personal service	20	4.4	4.4	0.0	0.675
The store has the customer's interest at heart	21	4.3	4.3	0.0	0.879
Employees should understand customers' specific needs	22	4.4	4.5	0.1	0.012
	Overall	4.3	4.4	0.0	

Table 7: Reliability statistics for expectations and perceptions

Dimensions of service quality	No. of items	Expectation Cronbach's alpha	No. of items	Perception Cronbach's alpha
Tangibles	4	0.857	4	0.838
Reliability	6	0.866	6	0.810
Responsiveness	3	0.796	3	0.808
Assurance	4	0.821	4	0.830
Empathy	5	0.840	5	0.792

retailer. There was no discernible contrast between customer expectations and actual experiences when evaluating the tangible dimension. Similarly, similar results were obtained when assessing the dimensions of Assurance and Empathy.

The study's results confirm that the selected retailer meets customers' expectations. When measuring the tangible dimension, there are no significant differences between what the customer anticipates and what they receive. The same holds true when investigating the dimensions of assurance and empathy. Surpassing customer expectations is critical in attracting new customers, a principle that all food retailers should uphold. The findings demonstrated that customers are highly pleased with the retailer's level of service. The retailer consistently and reliably delivers on its service commitments. Moreover, customers also expressed contentment with the responsiveness dimension of the selected retailer. When examining the tangible dimension, there was no discernible contrast between customer expectations and actual experiences. Similarly, parallel results were evident when assessing the dimensions of assurance and empathy.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the expectations and perceptions of customers at a selected food retailer in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The findings suggest that while the reliability scoring is acceptable, empathy shows the lowest score in terms of customer perception. Overall, consumers seem pleased with the service they receive. However, customer expectations and perceptions will continue to pose a challenge in gaining a competitive advantage and remaining relevant in this industry. Therefore, food retailers must continuously review their strategies and approaches to improve customer satisfaction. It is essential for food retailers to proactively engage in research to anticipate and fulfil customer demands, expectations, and perceptions effectively. Engaging with emerging trends, such as sustainability or personalized services, enables retailers to remain at the forefront of customer preferences and adapt to evolving expectations.

Retailers should conduct a competitive analysis by comparing their business with other retailers. By doing this, they can learn about the best practices and strategies within the industry. It is important to know what competitors are doing to satisfy their customers. Retailers should strive to maintain the high standards they have set with their customers. Research findings indicate no significant gap between customer expectations and perceptions, suggesting that customers are pleased with the service they receive. Retailers must maintain this level of satisfaction and continuously measure and monitor areas responsible for service quality. Therefore, managers need to be attentive when evaluating service quality. In conclusion, the South African retail industry is highly competitive, and regularly meeting or exceeding customer expectations is essential to earn customer loyalty.

This study has examined the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction at a specific food retailer in Durban. The sample was limited to the selected food retailer within the greater Durban area, using convenience sampling, so the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. Future studies are recommended to encompass all stores of the selected retailer in Durban. This would provide the retailer's management with insights into the expectations and perceptions of customers across different locations. Conducting such studies on a biannual basis would be beneficial, given the evolving nature of customer expectations. This approach would also enable the retailer to analyze how service changes have influenced customer expectations and perceptions over time. It was noted that some respondents had more to share about their expectations and perceptions of the selected retailer, but the survey format did not fully allow for their input. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies take a qualitative approach to delve deeper into the factors influencing service quality and customer satisfaction and understand customer expectations more comprehensively.

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