

Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in Flour Mill Industry in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This study focused on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in flour mill industry in Nigeria. The study adopted assurance in service provision and empathy as dimensions of service quality. The study adopted the cross-sectional survey method in the generation of data. The target population of the study included Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins' key customers/channels/partners in Nigeria's North Eastern region. According to their regional office, there are 37 channels and partners with an uncountable number of consumers. Due to the size of the entire population, the study used a census sample, so the sample size for this study would be 37 key customers. After data cleaning, only data of 33 respondents were finally used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank correlation were used for data analysis and hypothesis testing. Empirical results confirm that there is a positive significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the flour mill industry in Nigeria. The study concluded that service quality (assurance in service provision and empathy) has a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction. The study recommended that the management Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins should provide continuous training to employees on issues such as courtesy, etiquette, and communication skills when dealing with customers. Because transactions are sensitive for each and every customer, they must constantly maintain error-free transactions. Similarly, management must improve service quality in order to meet the needs of customers. They must pay close attention to customer complaints in order to meet the customer's expectations. Customers should be given individual attention in order to better understand and satisfy their needs.*

Key words: *Assurance in Service Provision, Customer Satisfaction, Empathy and Service Quality.*

INTRODUCTION

Service quality is a critical issue in the service industry as companies strive to maintain their competitive advantage in the marketplace (Othman, Harun, Rashid & Ali 2019). Flour mills face various types of competition in the marketplace as an industry firm. This emphasizes service quality as the primary competitive tool. Yiu, Ngai, and Lei (2020) defined services as actions, processes, and outcomes. Gummerus, Lipkin, Dube, and Heinonen (2019) defined services as "a process consisting of a number of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not always, take place in interaction between the customer and service employee and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider that are provided to solve customer problems."

Quality, according to Hole, Pawar, and Bhaskar (2018), is the value a customer derives from a specific product or service. Furthermore, Phuong and Dai Trang (2018) stated that service quality is determined by the gap between expectation and performance along the quality dimension. Service quality is a mental assessment. According to the service quality theory, customers will judge quality as 'low' if performance falls short of expectations and quality as 'high' if performance exceeds expectations. Closing this gap may necessitate matching expectations or increasing the customer's perception of what was actually received. Because consumers frequently compare the services they expect with perceptions of the services they receive, perceived quality of a given service is the result of an evaluation process (Zkan, Süer, Keser, & Kocakoç 2019).

To increase profits, flour mills must be able to differentiate themselves from their competitors in a specific market (Phiri 2020). As a result, in addition to product quality, these mills must prioritize service quality as their primary competitive strategy (De Souza, Damacena, Arajo, & Seibt 2020). Furthermore, all banking institutions around the world have emphasized both customer satisfaction and service quality (Fida, Ahmed, Al-Balushi & Singh 2020). Without a doubt, service quality is an essential component of any business activity. This is especially true given the perception that a customer's evaluation of service quality and the resulting level of satisfaction affect bottom-line measures of business success (Ali, Gardi, Jabbar Othman, Ali Ahmed, Burhan Ismael, Abdalla Hamza & Anwar 2021).

To establish the relationship between 'Customer Satisfaction' and service quality delivery, the concept of 'Customer Satisfaction' must be understood (Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp, & Oláh 2019). The phrase is more complicated than just referring to a satisfied customer. Customer satisfaction is a term that is commonly used in business and commerce. It is a business term that describes a measurement of the type of products and services provided by a company to meet the expectations of its customers. Some may regard this as the company's key performance indicator. In a market where businesses compete for customers, customer satisfaction is viewed as a key differentiator and has increasingly become a key component of business strategy (Hoe & Mansori 2018). A substantial body of empirical literature supports the benefits of customer satisfaction for businesses. It is well understood that satisfied customers are critical to long-term business success (Kurdi, Alshurideh & Alnaser 2020).

Because of the intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability of services, measuring service quality appears to be difficult for manufacturers (Gansser, Boßow-Thies, & Krol 2021). The intangibility of services refers to the fact that they cannot be perceived, tasted, felt, heard, or smelled before being purchased. As a result, customers attempt to assess the quality of a service by examining tangible components such as the location, people, price, equipment, and visible communications (Moon & Armstrong 2020). Furthermore, service inseparability refers to the fact that services cannot be separated from their providers, whether they are humans or machines. This means that the employee providing the service, along with the customer, becomes a part of the service.

As a result, the provider-customer interaction becomes critical in determining the service's outcome (Moon & Armstrong 2020). Heydari, Fan, Saeidi, Lai, Li, Chen, and Zhang (2022) explain service variability by stating that service quality is determined by who provides them as well as when, where, and how they are provided. This means that the quality of a service is determined not only by the company but also by the service provider. Understanding the role of

manufacturers is therefore critical for understanding perceptions of service quality. Finally, service perishability refers to the inability to store services for later sale or use (Helmold 2022). Customer satisfaction and service quality have a positive relationship, which is also true in the flour mill industry. Customer satisfaction increases as service quality improves. Competitive advantage through high-quality service is becoming an increasingly important survival tool. Flour mills now understand that providing quality customer service is critical to their success and survival in today's global and competitive environment (Hoe & Mansori 2018). According to research, simply satisfying customers is not enough to keep them because even satisfied customers 'defect' at a high rate in many industries (Hamilton-Ibama & Elvis 2022).

Customers today have an increasing number of options for the products and services they can purchase. Most customers have difficulty understanding the complex nature of products, so they frequently focus on brand names, which are built on quality service. When compared to information available about developed economies, service quality issues have long been overlooked in developing economies (Alam, Hoque, Hu & Barua 2020). Similarly, organizations in the same market sector must assess the quality of the services they provide in order to attract and retain customers. The purpose of this research is to look into the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the Nigerian flour mill industry.

The paper would address the following questions:

- i. What is the relationship between assurance in service provision and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins?
- ii. What is the relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

The Service Quality Theory

This study is founded on Gronroos' (1982) service quality theory, as advanced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985). It is founded on Howard and Sheth's consumer behavior theory (1969). According to the theory, consumers are influenced to buy by the significant and symbolic aspects of quality, price, distinctiveness, service, and availability. The hypothetical constructs have been divided into two categories: perceptual constructs and learning constructs. Perceptual constructs describe how an individual perceives and responds to information from input variables. All of the information received may not be worthy of 'attention,' and the intake is subject to perceived uncertainty and a lack of meaningfulness of the information received (stimulus ambiguity). This ambiguity may prompt an outright search for product information. Finally, the information received may be distorted by the buyer's own frame of reference and predisposition (perceptual bias). The stages of learning constructs are described as "from when the buyer develops motives to his satisfaction in a buying situation."

The purchase intention is the result of the interaction of buyer motives, selection criteria, brand comprehension, resultant brand attitude, and confidence in the purchase decision. The motives represent the goals that the buyer hopes to achieve through the purchasing process; these may stem from learned needs. Attitudes toward the existing brand alternatives in the buyer's evoked set also have an impact on buyer intention, resulting in the arrangement of an order of preference for these brands: Brand comprehension is defined as "knowledge about the existence and

characteristics of those brands which form the evoked set," and the buyer's level of confidence in brand comprehension, choice criteria, and purchasing intentions all converge on the intention to buy.

Service quality can be traced back to the pioneering works of Juran (1950) and Koiesar (1994), who laid the groundwork for measuring quality in manufacturing plants, paving the way for the modern subject of total quality management, and specifically service quality (Shewhart & Deming 1986). The SERVQUAL model, as conceptualized in the literature, posits that service quality is determined by the nature of the discrepancy between Expected Service (ES) and Perceived Service (PS) (PS). When ES exceeds PS, service quality is less than satisfactory; when ES equals PS, service quality equals satisfaction; and when ES equals PS, service quality equals satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

Concept of Customer Satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction has also received a lot of attention. Customer satisfaction has received a lot of attention in the literature because of its potential influence on consumer purchasing intentions and retention (Kumar & Ayodeji 2021). It is widely accepted that satisfaction is related to consumer expectations and is defined as an overall feeling or emotion resulting from the consumer's unconfirmed expectations (Meirovich, Jeon & Coleman 2020).

A feeling of devotion, duty, faithfulness to a cause, or attachment to someone, something, country, or group is what leads to loyalty. Satisfaction may be felt in relation to goods or services (Unaam, Adim & Adubasim 2018). This indicates that satisfaction has an impact on whether an individual believes that the product or service offered is of good quality (Chen & Lin 2019). In this sense, satisfaction is viewed as a subjective feeling that denotes the extent to which the consumer's expectations regarding a specific purchase encounter are met. Customer satisfaction can be measured by whether it meets a predetermined level of expectation. Such estimates can influence repurchase intentions (Cunningham & De Meyer-Heydenrych 2021), the proclivity to make recommendations (Sreepada, Patra, Chakrabarty, & Chandak 2018), positive word of mouth (Ryu & Park 2020), and repurchase intentions (Trivedi & Yadav 2020).

In today's world of fierce competition, the key to long-term competitive advantage is to provide high-quality services that result in satisfied customers. As a result, there is no doubt about the significance of service quality as the ultimate goal of manufacturers worldwide. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. (Hammoud, Bizri, and El Baba 2018) determined that service quality is one of the most important determinants of American customer satisfaction, and (Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh 2019) demonstrated that service quality is the difference between expected and perceived service.

Concept of Service Quality

The early investigation efforts focused on crucial and determining quality in the industrial sector stemmed from the evaluation of quality literature. Despite the fact that efforts began in the manufacturing sector in the 1920s and research in services began to increase in several parts of the world in the late 1970s (Gross & Sampat 2020). The service sector has become the dominant part of the economy over the last three decades, particularly in the industrialized nations, and research has revealed that service quality is a precondition for success and survival in this competitive environment, so interest in service quality has increased noticeably (Yoon & Suh 2021).

According to Ahmad and Zhang (2020), service quality is an evolving individual construct of values and expectations against which an individual evaluates a product or service. Gronroos (1984) defined it as the result of an evaluation process in which the user compares his or her expectations to the service perceived and received. Xu, Liu, and Gursoy (2019) defined service quality as an attitude that is related to but not the same as satisfaction and results from a comparison of expectations and perceptions of performance. Many goods quality ideologies, according to Li and Shang (2020), can be applied to the evaluation of service quality as long as the "L-factor: love, compassion, empathy, sense of humor, tacit knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, and insights" are considered. According to Zhong and Moon (2020), it occurs when a customer's perception of what service should be differs from what they expect to receive. Quality is driven by ideal expectations, whereas satisfaction is driven by desired expectations. Nunkoo, Teeroovengadum, Ringle, and Sunnassee (2020) believed that quality is more closely related to meeting customer expectations than to establishment classification. According to Milana (2018), there is a disconnect between customer expectations and the service they actually receive. According to Raza, Umer, Qureshi, and Dahri (2020), service quality is determined by associating a consumer's actual experience with his or her expectation of service.

According to Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh (2019), providing quality service entails meeting customer expectations on a regular basis. Choi, Choi, Oh, and Kim (2020) defined service quality as the degree and direction of dissatisfaction between consumer perceptions and expectations in terms of various but relatively important dimensions of service quality, which can influence future purchasing behavior. Quality, in the eyes of the customer, means suitability for use and satisfaction. Service quality is an important factor that influences business competitiveness.

Dimensions of Service Quality

i. Assurance in service provision

Assurance is evidence of employees' knowledge of customer service and courtesy, as well as their ability to inspire trust and confidence in customers. Customers seek assurance from employees and expect them to act confidently and confidently in their clients (Prentice, Dominique Lopes & Wang 2020). Knowledge to answer questions is an important aspect of the assurance factor. Customers expect to get the right answers to their questions quickly and without being passed around (Mogaji, Balakrishnan, Nwoba & Nguyen 2021). Customer trust is also thought to play a role in the formation of customer perceptions of their interactions with service firms (Sharma & Klein 2020). According to Mahmoud, Hinson, and Adika (2018), the evidence suggests that satisfaction and relationship marketing are built on trust. This assertion appears to be true for services, given their intangible nature and the prevalence of customer mistrust in the insurance industry. Trust is defined in this context as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has faith. Service recovery efforts include post-purchase activities, which can contribute to a better understanding of relationship marketing practices (Thaichon, Liyanaarachchi, Quach, Weaven & Bu 2019). One knowledge gap in the literature is how service quality and satisfaction judgments are made in the context of service recovery efforts and a relationship marketing orientation.

ii. Empathy

Understanding the needs of customers and giving them individual attention is the foundation of empathy. The empathy dimension reflects employee and customer interactions (Prentice, Dominique Lopes & Wang 2020). Service customers have an expectation that the service

provider will understand and care about their specific needs and desires. As a service provider, attempting to understand the situation from the customer's perspective provides a clearer picture of what is going on (Moorman 2020). Understanding and knowledge to solve customer problems are critical factors in the banking industry.

Giving customers individual attention, employees who deal with customers in a caring manner, and employees who understand their customers' needs are key aspects of empathy (Liu-Thompkins, Okazaki & Li 2022). According to Agnihotri, Yang, and Briggs (2019), customer satisfaction increases when customers believe they have been served in a way that considers their own personal needs. When providing customer service, businesses frequently deal with a large number of customers who appear to be the same, but it is critical to remember that each customer is unique. Anything that can be done to give each customer the impression that they have received the firm's full attention and have been dealt with personally increases their sense of satisfaction (Sasaki, Kotlar, Ravasi and Vaara 2020). Creating two-way communication between customers and businesses, tracking customer activities, and providing tailored information to customers all contribute to a sense of belonging to a specific brand or company (Wang 2021).

The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Although they are closely related, service quality and customer satisfaction are distinct concepts. Quality is a type of overall evaluation of a product that is similar to attitude in many ways. Quality serves as a global value judgment. The consumer's assessment of an entity's overall excellence or superiority is referred to as perceived quality (Prasadh 2018). It is a type of attitude that results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. It is related but not the same as satisfaction. According to Zobair, Sanzogni, Houghton, and Islam (2021), satisfaction is a summary psychological state that occurs when the consumer's prior feelings about the consumption experience are combined with the emotion surrounding unconfirmed expectations. As a result, satisfaction is tied to a specific transaction. According to comparative studies, regardless of the type of service, customers used the same general criteria to make an evaluative judgment about service quality. In order to improve competitiveness, service companies have recently focused on customers (Pambreni, Khatibi, Azam & Tham 2019). Customer satisfaction measurement regarding firm service quality is a necessary means by which organizations delve into the minds of their customers for useful feedback that could form the basis of an effective marketing strategy. Customer satisfaction is an important result of marketing activity (Sudari, Tarofder, Khatibi & Tham 2019). Customer satisfaction is regarded as the foundation of success in the competitive banking industry. Businesses understand that retaining current customers is more profitable than acquiring new ones to replace those lost. Customer satisfaction has an impact on nearly every business's profitability. According to Hamzah and Shamsudin (2020), satisfied customers improve business while dissatisfied customers harm it.

Pakurár, Haddad, Nagy, Popp, and Oláh (2019) identified 17 banking service quality dimensions that improve customer satisfaction: dependability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, access, communication, understanding the customer, collaboration, continuous improvement, content, accuracy, ease of use, timeliness, aesthetics, security, and diverse features.

These argumentations has led to the following hypothesis

HO1: There is no significant relationship between assurance in service provision and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

HO2: There is no significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

METHODOLOGY

The cross-sectional survey method was used to collect data for the study. The study's target population included Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins' key customers/channels/partners in Nigeria's North Eastern region. According to their regional office, there are 37 channels and partners with an uncountable number of consumers. Due to the size of the entire population, the study used a census sample, so the sample size for this study would be 37 key customers. With the help of the SPSS Package version 23, descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank correlation were used for data analysis and hypothesis testing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Bivariate Analysis

The primary data analysis was carried out with a 95% confidence interval using the Spearman rank order correlation tool. The tests specifically cover the bivariate hypotheses Ho1 and Ho2, which are all stated in the null form. To conduct the analysis, we used the Spearman Rank (rho) statistic. The 0.05 significance level is used as a criterion for the probability of either accepting or rejecting the null hypotheses at (p>0.05).

Table 1: Correlation Matrix showing relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

			Customer Satisfaction	Assurance in Service Provision	Empathy
Spearman's rho	Customer Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.671**	.713**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.002	.000
		N	33	33	33
	Assurance in Service Provision	Correlation Coefficient	.671**	1.000	.537**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.	.000
		N	33	33	33
	Empathy	Correlation Coefficient	.713**	.537**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	33	33	33

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

Source: Research Data, 2022 (SPSS output, version 23.0)

The table above illustrates the test for the two previously postulated bivariate hypothetical statements.

HO1: There is no significant relationship between assurance in service provision and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

The correlation coefficient 0.671 shows that there is a strong and positive relationship between assurance in service provision and customer satisfaction. The p value $0.000 < 0.05$ indicates that the relationship is significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between assurance in service provision and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

HO2: There is no significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

The correlation coefficient 0.713 shows that there is a strong and positive relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction. The p value $0.000 < 0.05$ indicates that the relationship is significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected and the alternate upheld. Thus, there is a significant relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins.

Discussion of Findings

Using the Spearman's rank order correlation tool and a 95% confidence interval, the findings revealed a strong and positive significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins. The findings of this study confirmed that in Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins, service quality (empathy and assurance in service provision) has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. This finding supports Ngoma and Ntale's (2019) argument that evidence suggests that satisfaction and relationship marketing are built on trust. This assertion appears to be true for services, given their intangible nature and the prevalence of customer mistrust in the insurance industry. In agreement with this study is the study Nielsen, Fletcher, Newman, Brennen, and Howard (2020), who stated that customers will be dissatisfied if they have to visit an insurance company's premises several times before receiving the necessary information. Insurance websites should contain a wealth of reliable and detailed information. According to this study, Rejikumar and Saha (2019) conducted a large insurance study on service quality judgments of claims and discovered that, on average, customers' expectations exceeded their perceptions of performance.

Similarly, Flstad, Nordheim, and Bjrkli (2018) stated that it is critical to understand not only what a customer says, but also how a customer feels, in order to give them the attention they deserve. Recognizing and understanding the emotional state of the customer is a required skill to assist in providing this. In addition, Wang, Lowry, Luo, and Li (2022) agree that offering a diverse range of service products that meet their needs and desires in the marketplace is a key determinant of attracting customers through caring. Furthermore, the study agrees with Foster, Roche, Giandinoto, and Furness (2020), who stated that mentally or physically assuming the role of the customer is a good approach in determining how to show care. Knowing what is expected

and demanded of customer service representatives from the perspective of the customers reveals previously unnoticed information.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The concept of quality is a topic of great interest in management literature. The character of service quality in organizational triumph cannot be denied. It is critical for flour mill managers to have a clear understanding of what their customers want. Recognizing the detailed consumer expectations, the scopes of service quality, and their virtual importance for consumers for each specific section of this industry would undoubtedly assist managers and leaders in the challenge of refining service quality. There is a direct and obvious link between service quality and customer satisfaction. As a result of this research, Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins has a positive significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the study concludes that the service quality dimensions of assurance of service provision and empathy positively significantly relate to customer satisfaction among Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins customers in north eastern Nigeria.

Based on this conclusion, the study recommends that:

- i. Crown Flour Mill Ltd - Animal Feeds and Proteins management should provide continuous training to employees on issues such as courtesy, etiquette, and communication skills when dealing with customers. Because transactions are sensitive for each and every customer, they must constantly maintain error-free transactions.
- ii. Management must improve service quality in order to meet the needs of customers. They must pay close attention to customer complaints in order to meet the customer's expectations. Customers should be given individual attention in order to better understand and satisfy their needs.

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