

Measuring Service Quality and its Relationship with Customer Patronage at a Car Dealership in South Africa

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Abstract

This study assessed the dimensions of service quality within a car dealership in Gauteng province in South Africa and further studied the relationship between the service quality dimensions on customer patronage. Valid responses using survey monkey were received from 74 customers out of a total of 750 who visited the dealership. Results indicated that there were negative gap scores for four out of the five service quality dimensions, these being reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The demographic profile (age, gender, income) affected perceived and expected service quality. Regression analysis revealed that reliability and assurance were positively related with customer patronage, while the tangibles - responsiveness and empathy did not have any statistically significant relationship with customer patronage.

Keywords : service quality, servicing, SERVQUAL, reliability, assurance, customer patronage

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The motor industry is a very competitive industry, specifically in the luxury segment where the segment is relatively small and vehicles are expensive. It is of great importance that a competitive advantage is gained over the competitors based upon the service quality given to customers. Hence, understanding service quality and the impact it has on customer patronage is a vital exercise for each dealership. Happy customers will result in repeat business.

There have been some complaints from customers about the service quality received at the selected dealerships. This is not unique to the dealerships, but it does reflect negatively on the brand. The said motor car dealerships currently use their own customer satisfaction and customer loyalty surveys. However, this does not address all the service quality dimensions. Furthermore, no formal study has been done into the service quality dimensions for this dealership under study, which is situated in Gauteng province of South Africa. The aim of this study, therefore, is to provide the management at a car dealership in Gauteng province of South Africa with feedback on where the dealership was performing well, but more importantly, where areas of improvement exist. Accordingly, this study measures the service quality dimensions at a car dealership in Gauteng, how the dealership rates on each one of the five service quality dimensions, and how do service quality dimensions relate to customer patronage.

Literature Review

Service quality plays an integral part in the motor industry in South Africa. According to the business dictionary online, “service quality is an assessment of how well a delivered service conforms to the client's expectations.” It is very important to understand the customers' views. “Customer's view of quality is shaped by the gap between perception and expectation” (Slack, Chambers, & Johnston, 2010, p. 499). The only way of distinguishing between

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them is the service quality that they offer to their customers. The focus should always be on the customer, since the customer is the one making the purchasing decision.

It is important to understand the background and different schools of thought pertaining to service quality. There are two schools of thought pertaining to service quality within the current literature. Crick and Spencer (2011) summarized them as the European school of thought and the United States school of thought. These models are also known as the North American school of thought and the Nordic European school of thought. It is important to note that the quality service experience will be different for each individual customer. The concept of quality service management has evolved from these two multi-dimensional models. However, the most notable disagreement between the different schools of thought is around what the exact number of service quality dimensions should be (Nam, Ekinici, & Whyatt, 2011). It differs between each specific service sector in question.

The foundation of the Nordic European model was first introduced by Gronroos (1984). Pollack (2009) stated that the European school of thought focuses on two broad aspects, that is, technical quality and functional quality. Technical quality looks at how well the core service is meeting the expectations of the customers ; whereas, the functional quality refers to the impact that the interaction process has and how the actual delivery process is perceived by the customer. However, there are limitations within the European school of thought. According to Brady and Cronin (2001), the European school of thought makes no reference to the physical service environment. They suggested that the service environment should be the third dimension, as it will focus on quality perceptions. The three dimensions will cover areas of outcome, interaction, and environmental quality. The physical environment must embody the fact that there is service of high quality delivered to the customers.

The U.S. school of thought, as pertaining to service quality, has identified five different service quality dimensions. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) were the first authors to identify 10 dimensions, which were later reduced to five. They are reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. These service quality dimensions are measured with a tool called SERVQUAL. It is widely used as the most popular tool for measuring service quality, although there are many authors who have criticized its shortcomings.

The U.S. school of thought also has its own criticism. Buttle (1996) indicated that the SERVQUAL model is solely based upon a disconfirmation paradigm, instead of using an attitudinal paradigm as basis and is more focused on the process of service delivery instead of focusing on the outcomes from the service encounter. Dimensionality is another issue, as it is argued that the five dimensions are not truly universal. Four or five different items are not enough to calculate the variability that exists in each service quality dimension. The SERVQUAL model does not account for moments of truth. There is a respondent error when it comes to polarity. There are also arguments that the 7 - point Likert scale has flaws in it. Due to the fact that two administrations are used, it could lead to boredom and confusion.

According to Kang and James (2004), the European school of thought had an extensive influence on the study field of service quality dimensions. Service quality dimensions had their origin in the European school of thought. The U.S. school of thought refined them and narrowed them down to five dimensions.

(1) TOPSIS or SERVQUAL : Mukherjee and Nath (2005) explained that the TOPSIS model, and the gap model are not a replacement of one another. They do not address the same aspects of service quality and could not be seen as an alternative to the other model. If anything, they could be seen as complementary to one another. TOPSIS focuses on operational aspects that will assist with delivery of customer satisfaction; it has been proven to be extremely helpful in the process of service design. The gap model, on the other hand, is extremely useful in identifying the current performance of the service provider. This is done by identifying the service-delivery gaps that exist. SERVQUAL measures service quality dimensions. The relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, loyalty, etc. has been studied by several researchers. The section below provides a summary.

(2) Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Patronage Intention : According to Ryu and Han (2010),

service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Conversely, customer satisfaction is not a predictor when it comes to service quality. Yap and Kew (2007) asserted that repurchase intentions are not all necessarily one and the same with repurchase patterns. Repurchase intention is a measurable component of the service outcome experience. Repurchase intention can also be seen as the customer's judgement regarding the service received on buying it from exactly the same company again. It also brings the current situation into consideration.

In their study, Yap and Kew (2007) found that there was a positive relationship between service quality and re-patronage intention. Furthermore, it was found that there is also a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and re-patronage intention. Finally, there was also a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The authors concluded from their study that customer satisfaction was a better predictor of re-patronage intention than that of service quality. It is, however, situation-specific and varies between the different types of services.

From a detailed literature review from 1993-2016, Nikou, Selamat, and Yusoff (2016) concluded that there were many studies conducted by several scholars to support the fact that service quality leads to customer satisfaction and consequently, to customer loyalty. They further indicated that there were some inconsistencies among the results. However, the findings of many researchers support the notion that service quality has strong prediction on customer satisfaction, and satisfied customers will bring loyalty of customer to the service industry.

(3) Service Quality and Customer Loyalty : Saravanakumar and Jayakrishnan (2014) explained that customer loyalty is a result of both the customer's attitude and behaviour. They tested the effect of service quality on customer loyalty and found that only two dimensions of service quality namely, reliability and empathy had a positive effect on customer loyalty, while tangibility, responsiveness, and assurance had no significant impact on customer loyalty. Sharma and Das (2017) found that the overall customer satisfaction, in the cab online industry in India, was positively related to empathy, responsiveness, and tangibles. Reliability and assurance were not related to customer satisfaction.

Poku, Zakari, and Soali (2013) used a probit regression model that was analyzed to determine the effect of service quality on customer loyalty and found that there was a positive correlation between service quality and guests who were patronizing particular hotels in Ghana. Fen and Lian (2007) conducted a study on service quality and customer satisfaction as well as the impact of it on customer re-patronage. It was found that there existed a positive relationship between that of service quality and re-patronage. Nagan (2017) found that all dimensions of SEVQUAL had a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Garga and Bambale (2016) found a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and patronage. Ali and Raza (2015) used five dimensions based on previous studies to find the relationship with customer satisfaction. They found that compliance, assurance, reliability, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness were all positively related to customer satisfaction.

(4) Customer Satisfaction in the Automotive Service Industry : Ažman and Gomišček (2014) confirmed from their study that there is a positive link between service quality and satisfaction. They found that customers who had a negative experience at a specific service centre will generalize it to all service centres of a specific brand. Their experiences could have a direct impact on customer patronage. Roberts - Lombard and Nyadzayo (2012) found that there was a significant relationship between customer relationship management (CRM) and customer retention as pertaining to a motor vehicle dealership. Their finding was that dealerships' profitability was reliant on the ability to get the existing customers to spend more on additional products and services. This is also referred to as cross-buying. The aim is to develop this cross-functional buying into long-term relationships between the customer and the dealership. Customer retention in the dealership is driven by trust, commitment, and relationship satisfaction. Relationship between leadership, internal quality, and customer satisfaction levels was established by Botha (2002) within a dealership in South Africa through the use of a multi-factor leadership questionnaire. Interestingly, her study could not prove that there was a relationship between leadership styles, internal quality, and

customer satisfaction levels. In other words, leadership styles will not necessarily determine the customer satisfaction level with the dealership.

Objectives of this Study and Research Design

There is no dearth of studies that have studied the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Several studies have explored the aspects of service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer patronage. However, there are not many studies that have studied the relationship between service quality and customer patronage. Accordingly, this study determines the relative importance of each service quality dimension and measured the effect of service quality dimensions on customer patronage at the selected motor dealership.

The SERVQUAL questionnaire was used for data collection and was divided into four sections. Section A related to biographical information. Section B asked the respondents to do an importance weighing of each service quality dimension. Sections C and D looked at the five dimensions of service quality individually. Another section E was added to the questionnaire to focus on the patronage intentions of the customers. This was based on behavioural-intentions battery (BIB) in order to determine whether the service quality dimensions, as explained above, will have an impact on customer patronage.

Each customer who brought his/her vehicle in for a service was e-mailed with a forwarding letter explaining the research objectives. The link for the questionnaire was provided as the questionnaire and data were administered by means of Survey Monkey. Only 74 valid responses were received from a total of 750 customers (who were sent the questionnaire) who came to service their vehicles. The study was conducted during the last quarter of 2016. Of the respondents, 65% were male and 35% were female ; 33.8% of the respondents were aged between 35 and 44 years, followed by those who were between 45 and 54 years (25.7%), and then those between 55 and 64 years (18.9%). Only 4% of the respondents were older than 65 years, and less than 3% were younger than 25 years.

Data Analysis and Results

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each dimension in order to test the overall reliability pertaining to each dimension as tested by means of the questionnaire. The Table 1 reports the Cronbach's alpha for each dimension. All the scale items have good reliability.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha for Each Dimension

	Number of Items in the Scale	Scale Reliability Coefficient (Perceived)	Scale Reliability Coefficient (Expected)	Scale reliability Coefficient (Customer Patronage)
Tangibles	4	0.7599	0.892	
Reliability	5	0.9366	0.955	
Responsiveness	4	0.9427	0.925	
Assurance	4	0.9249	0.935	
Empathy	5	0.9059	0.949	
Customer Patronage	5			0.9635

Note : Data were analyzed using EXCEL spreadsheet. Average values from 7-point Likert

Data were analyzed using EXCEL spreadsheet. Average values from 7-point Likert scale responses were thematically grouped into five sub-constructs (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). The respondents were asked to rate the importance of each service quality dimension. The Table 2 shows the relative importance of each quality dimension. The total points were 100.

Table 2. Weighted Score for Each Service Quality Dimension

Service Quality Dimension	Weighted Score
Physical appearance of dealership.	18
Promised service delivery.	27
The dealership's willingness to serve.	20
Trust and confidence in the dealership.	19
The way customers are treated.	16
All Dimensions	100%

Table 3. Gap in Service Quality Dimensions

Dimension	Perceived/Expected	Mean	Pr ($T > t$)
Tangibles	Perceived	6.14	0.242
	Expected	6.03	
Reliability	Perceived	5.30	0.0000*
	Expected	6.51	
Responsiveness	Perceived	5.61	0.00001*
	Expected	6.39	
Assurance	Perceived	5.67	0.00001*
	Expected	6.47	
Empathy	Perceived	5.73	0.00002*
	Expected	6.40	

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5% level.

The results depicted in Table 2 suggest that promised service delivery scores the highest weighting, and all other dimensions score fairly well.

(1) Gap Analysis : The main aim of the study is to determine the relative importance of each dimension and to identify the gap between perceived and expected quality. The Table 3 reports the mean values of each service dimension in perceived and expected category.

All the dimensions depicted in the Table 3 score more than 5 on a scale of 7. This indicates high level of perceived service quality. The results in the table suggest that the gap is statistically valid for all the dimensions except tangibles. Similarly, expected quality score is higher than the perceived quality in all the dimensions except tangibles. This suggests that customers' expectations were still higher than the service provided by the dealership.

Table 4. Average Scores on Customer Patronage

Statement	Overall Score	Male ($n = 48$)	Female ($n = 26$)	Pr ($T > t$)
Say positive things about the dealership.	5.52	5.48	5.58	0.396
Recommend this dealership.	5.53	5.6	5.38	0.285
Encourage others to use this dealership.	5.43	5.48	5.35	0.372
First choice of dealership.	5.41	5.46	5.32	0.374
Repeat business with this dealership in future.	5.61	5.73	5.38	0.204
Average	5.50	5.55	5.40	

This negative gap in the four dimensions indicates that the perceived quality of the service received was not of the desired standard when compared to the expected service quality.

(2) Customer Patronage: The average scores per customer were calculated and are reported in the Table 4. All the scores in all dimensions individually are above 5 on a scale of 7. This suggests strong customer patronage. The difference in scores between male and female are not statistically significant.

(3) Demographics and Average Scores in all Dimensions: Demographics were used to test the differences in responses for various quality dimensions in perceived and expected categories.

The Tables 5 - 8 show differences by gender, age, and income, respectively. The results suggest that there was a statistically significant difference in male and female responses with respect to expected service quality. This indicates that gender plays a role in expected service quality delivery. Similarly, statistically significant differences in responses were observed for different age categories for perceived service dimension, suggesting that age plays

Table 5. Service Quality Dimensions' Average Score vs Gender

Dimension	Perceived Average Scores			Expected Average Scores		
	Male (n = 48)	Female (n = 26)	Pr (T > t)	Male (n = 48)	Female (n = 26)	Pr (T > t)
Tangibles	6.05	6.30	0.025*	5.86	6.36	0.000*
Reliability	5.38	5.16	0.105	6.37	6.78	0.000*
Responsiveness	5.56	5.53	0.229	6.24	6.67	0.000*
Assurance	5.75	5.52	0.091	6.14	6.40	0.001*
Empathy	5.78	5.64	0.141	5.78	5.64	0.017*

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5%.

Table 6. Service Quality Dimensions' Average Score vs Age

Dimension	Perceived Average Scores			Expected Average Scores		
	≥ 45 Years	< 45 Years	Pr (T > t)	≥ 45 Years	< 45 Years	Pr (T > t)
Tangibles	5.99	6.28	0.006*	6.05	5.99	0.37
Reliability	4.92	5.67	0.0001*	6.65	6.23	.0043*
Responsiveness	5.30	5.89	0.000*	6.48	6.28	0.1095
Assurance	5.21	6.13	0.000*	6.55	6.32	0.084
Empathy	5.41	6.02	0.000*	6.41	6.38	0.479

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5%.

Table 7. Service Quality Dimensions (Perceived) vs Income

	1	2	3	1 to 2	2 to 3	1 to 3
Dimensions: Perceived	< R 50 000	R 50,001 - R 70,000	> R 70 000	Pr (T > t)	Pr (T > t)	Pr (T > t)
Tangibles	5.96	6.23	6.18	0.076	0.223	0.002*
Reliability	5.14	5.24	5.33	0.329	0.114	0.011*
Responsiveness	5.53	5.64	5.64	0.290	0.377	0.145
Assurance	5.49	5.80	5.74	0.078	0.380	0.020*
Empathy	5.52	5.73	5.81	0.116	0.051	0.000*

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5%.

Table 8. Service Quality Dimensions (Expected) vs Income

	1	2	3	1 to 2	2 to 3	1 to 3
Dimensions: Expected	< R 50 000	R 50,001 - R 70,000	> R 70 000	Pr (T > t)	Pr (T > t)	Pr (T > t)
Tangibles	6.18	6.00	5.85	0.13	0.23	0.01*
Reliability	6.75	6.05	6.38	0.000*	0.09	0.00*
Responsiveness	6.53	6.16	6.27	0.000*	0.30	0.020*
Assurance	6.62	6.39	6.35	0.020*	0.32	0.000*
Empathy	6.54	6.31	6.31	0.010	0.34	0.000*

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5%.

Table 9. Customer Patronage - Average Values with Age

Customer Patronage	> 45 Years	< 45 Years	Pr (T > t)
Say positive things about dealership.	5.13	5.77	0.012*
Recommend this dealership.	5.05	5.81	0.003*
Encourage others to use this dealership.	4.95	5.73	0.004*
First choice of dealership.	4.84	5.85	0.001*
Repeat business with this dealership in the future.	5.26	5.77	0.036*

Note : *Statistically significant at the 5%.

a role in perceived quality dimension. On the other hand, it is observed that income plays a role in both perceived and expected service quality dimensions. There is a statistically significant difference in responses between respondents earning lower than R50000 and earning more than R70000 per month. The statistical valid difference in response by the higher income group in both perceived and expected quality dimensions indicates that both the income customers were sensitive to quality.

The Table 9 shows the customer patronage response differences with age. The Table 9 depicts that age plays a role in customer patronage as the responses from people with different age groups are statistically significant.

(4) Regression Analysis : In order to understand the effect of service quality dimensions on customer patronage at the dealership, multi-variate regression analysis was run to determine the effects of perceived service quality dimensions (independent variable) on customer patronage (dependent variable). The Table 10 shows the results of multiple regression.

The equation for perceived service quality dimensions and their effect on customer patronage is as follows:

$$\text{Customer Patronage} = 0.59 + 0.21 (\text{Reliability}) + 0.35 (\text{Assurance})$$

There is lower likelihood that tangibles can have an effect on customer patronage (-0.03 ; $p < 0.05$) ; the results are statistically significant at the 5% level. This means that tangibles (the physical appearance and layout of dealership) may not be crucial in ensuring customer patronage in this sample. Similar are the results for responsiveness and empathy. Reliability and assurance are the two dimensions that are statistically significant with respect to customer patronage.

The data analysis reveals that all service quality dimensions scored well. The gap analysis shows that customers' expectations were higher than perceived service provided by the dealership. Demographics (gender, age, level of income) played a role in the level of service quality received and customers' satisfaction levels. Customer patronage scores suggest high patronage with the dealership. Tangibles, reliability, and assurance dimensions have

Table 10. Multiple Regression Analysis Results Between Service Quality and Customer Patronage

Perceived Service Quality	Beta Coeff.	Std. Err.	t -value	P > t (P-value)
Constant	0.59	0.48	1.22	0.025
Tangibles	(0.12)	0.09	-1.27	0.209
Reliability	0.21	0.09	2.44	0.018**
Responsiveness	(0.03)	0.11	-0.28	0.782
Assurance	0.35	0.12	3.03	0.004*
Empathy	0.22	0.13	0.22	0.829
Gender	0.03	0.14	0.2	0.844
Age group	(0.07)	0.06	-1.17	0.245
Average income	(0.04)	0.04	-0.91	0.367

Note : *Significant at the 1% level ; **Significant at the 5% level

no statistically significant relationship with customer patronage. Reliability and assurance matter the most for customer patronage.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the gap in perceived vs expected service quality in all four quality dimensions namely, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy is statistically significant. The tangible dimension does not show a statistical valid gap in perceived vs expected service quality. This suggests that customers were not concerned with this dimension and is supported by the fact that customers in this premium car segment were not very much interested in physical facilities, etc., which are normally of high quality in any case. These findings are similar and in line with most of the studies that have dealt with gap analysis. In specific, Ambekar (2013) found that there was no significant gap with regard to tangibles, while all other four dimensions of service quality had significant gaps between expected and perceived service quality.

This study establishes that demographic profile - age, gender, and income - affects perceived and expected service quality. Men and women expected service differently, while age played a key role in perceived service delivery. Differences in expected service delivery varied with the income group. This finding is similar to Juyal (2013), who reported from a study of 610 respondents that demographics influenced the customer purchasing behaviour. Furthermore, Suresh and Raja (2006) found that customer satisfaction for small car users varied on the basis of demographics.

Literature has suggested that service quality impacts customer satisfaction, patronage, and loyalty. This study establishes that only two service dimensions namely, reliability and assurance are statistically valid and are positively related to customer patronage. These findings are relevant to the motor dealership that was studied, but are slightly different from other studies in this respect. For example, Sharma and Das (2017), from a study in India, found that empathy, responsiveness, and tangibles were positively related to overall customer satisfaction. Saravanakumar and Jayakrishnan (2014) found that reliability and empathy were positively related to customer loyalty. Hence, the research in this area remains inconclusive. In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that service quality impacts customer patronage, and reliability and assurance are the two important dimensions of service quality for the selected motor dealership.

Managerial Implications

Service quality has a direct impact on customer satisfaction and patronage. This study provides insights into areas

of improvement that managers need to consider for improving service delivery and customer patronage. In specific, managers need to consider the reliability and assurance dimensions of service quality that matter the most. At the same time, the demographic profile also needs to be factored into the service-delivery system at the dealership, where by differentiation in service quality delivery for various class of customers can be designed to suit their needs.

Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

The study cannot be generalized for the entire motor industry in South Africa, while the study around quality dimension remains inconclusive and provides further scope of research in this area. As the next logical extension, this study can be replicated with other brands of motor dealerships in South Africa. Furthermore, the importance of various service dimensions can be established for each industry as the research is inconclusive on this aspect.

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