

# Role of Consumption Intent in Service Quality : Perceived Benefit Relationship

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it explained the relationship between service quality and benefit perception. Second, it studied the role of customers' intent in the relationship. Following a descriptive design, data were gathered from a sample of 202 restaurant customers in Goa, India during the year 2017. Empirically validated tools were used for data collection. Data were statistically analyzed for direct as well as for moderated impacts using regression analysis and testing coefficient differences. Service quality was found to be positively impacting overall benefit perception. The impact of service quality on utilitarian benefits was stronger than that on hedonic benefits. While all five dimensions of service quality were found to be impacting utilitarian benefit perception, only tangibles and assurance dimensions were found to be impacting hedonic benefit perception. Customer intent, whether hedonic or utilitarian, moderated the relationship between service quality and benefit perception. A utilitarian intent positively moderated the relationship, while a hedonic intent moderated negatively. Besides its theoretical relevance, the study is also relevant for practice. The areas of practical relevance included market segmentation based on customer intent, service quality levers that influence utilitarian versus hedonic benefit perception, and adaptations in service design and delivery to address customer induced variability. As a first effort to understand the role of intent in quality-benefit relationship, the study makes original contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

**Keywords :** service quality, hedonic and utilitarian intents, perceived benefits, moderation effect

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Consumption behaviours are driven by two kinds of expectations : (a) affective or hedonic gratification, and (b) instrumental or utilitarian gratification (Vieira, Santini, & Araujo, 2018). Since expectations of a predominantly hedonic consumer differ from those of a utilitarian consumer, the consumers' assessment of quality and benefits of the service would also differ. Service quality, constructed as how far performance exceeds expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), has been found to positively influence perceptions of service benefits (Kuo, Wu, & Deng, 2009). The current research postulates that the relationship between service quality perception and perceived service benefits would be influenced by customer expectations, whether hedonic or utilitarian. This study is unique and first of its kind which proposes to study the impact of consumption intent, whether utilitarian or hedonic, on the relationship between quality perceptions and perceived service benefits.

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This research gap has been brought out in the development of hypotheses based on extant literature in the following section. The study has been carried out based on data gathered from 202 restaurant customers in Goa, India during the year 2017.

## **Hedonic and Utilitarian Expectations and Benefits**

Desire for pleasure, joy, and fun inspire hedonic consumption ; whereas, desire to solve problems and address needs and wants inspire utilitarian consumption (Yim, Yoo, Sauer, & Seo, 2014). Even though, in most cases, both hedonic as well as utilitarian motivations inspire consumption decisions, either of the two has been found to be dominating the decision making (Alba & Williams, 2013). For e.g., one might visit a coffee shop with the primary intent of having a cup of coffee (utilitarian benefit) or to hang out with a group of friends (hedonic).

The term 'utilitarian benefits,' as distinct from utilitarian intent, refers to the functional, instrumental, and practical benefits of consumption offerings, and the term 'hedonic benefits' refers to their aesthetic, experiential, and enjoyment-related benefits. Previous studies have shown that consumer value is an experience that results from the consumption of such benefits (Rajeswari, Srinivasulu, & Thiyagarajan, 2016). A consumer who finds food in a restaurant filling and palatable derives his/her consumer value from primarily utilitarian benefits, while another customer who finds the ambience soothing or relaxing, making the experience of the meal more enjoyable, derives his/her customer value from primarily hedonic benefits (Holbrook, 1999 ; Yang, Yu, Zo, & Choi, 2016).

Utilitarian services, when treated as a class of service, are more rational and functional in nature and fulfil consumption needs that are considered necessary to consumers (Albers - Miller & Royne Stafford, 1999 ; Baudrillard, 2016). Since customers have the expectation that a utilitarian service will fulfil certain needs, it is likely that customers will cognitively evaluate the consumption of these services. Utilitarian services are typically evaluated based on service quality measurements due to their cognitive characteristics and the service outcome is , therefore, assessed based on an evaluation of service excellence (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). Researchers in the past have suggested that perceived quality is an antecedent that has a positive effect on perceived value (Chen & Chen, 2010 ; Chen & Dubinsky, 2003 ; Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015). We, therefore, propose that service quality cognition precedes benefit perceptions. Thus, higher perceived service quality perception results in superior service benefits.

➤ **H1** : Higher the overall service quality perception, the higher are the overall service benefits.

Traditionally, the two dimensions of consumer attitudes have been studied as dimensions along which product categories could be classified (Panigrahi, Azizan, & Khan, 2018 ; Sharma & Verma, 2015). However, this method of classification is inherently flawed for two reasons – one, this works on a law of aggregates, where different people's overall classifications of products are averaged to find the dimension along which a category lies. If this type of classification were truly universal, then different studies would not report contradictory findings for the same product categories (Voss, Spangenberg, & Grohmann, 2003). Second, research suggests that all products and services have both hedonic and utilitarian aspects in their evaluations. Therefore, classification of product categories might be misleading or a factor explaining this classification is missing. A basis for this classification can be implied when we consider two sets of independent research.

First, all product categories lie in the high hedonic, high utilitarian quadrant on a two dimensional hedonic - utilitarian (H/U) product map, which varies from high to low on the x and y axis, respectively. We can therefore look not at the "absolute" quadrant that the categories land in, but the relative position for each product category within the quadrant combining both hedonic and utilitarian dimensions.

Second, the importance of the environmental stimulation and of the hedonic tone, both influencing individuals' emotional states and behaviours, was stressed (Apter, 2001, 2007 ; Apter & Carter, 2002) in Apter's Reversal

Theory. According to this model, the individual experience is 'bi-stable' rather than homeostatic – that is, it implies the existence of two points of equilibrium, rather than one (like a switch that can be turned on or off). Therefore, in relation to a stimulus, individuals (e.g. consumers) can be in one of two motivational states : either a telic state, when individuals perform behaviours in order to achieve specific goals (e.g. shopping to buy specific products), or a paratelic state, when they get benefits from their behaviour in itself, without pursuing any specific objective. In other words, individuals in a telic state tend to perform goal-orientated activities, while individuals in a paratelic state are mostly interested in getting pleasure from the behaviour. The key notion here is that each subject during his/her everyday life – and even for very short periods – can frequently shift from one motivational state to the other, without being in both states at the same time.

Some additional support for individual intent playing a moderating role in consumer behaviour comes from research on emotional and/or multi-sensorial aspects of shopping activities (e.g. shopping for fun) as opposed to the utilitarian consumption, typically focused on functional aspects of shopping activities (e.g. shopping for specific needs). According to past research, consumers' tendency to engage in a hedonic or utilitarian shopping behavior relies not only on products' characteristics and/or shopping contexts (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008), but also on their own individual characteristics (Guido, 2005). Specifically, Guido found that openness to experience, agreeableness, and extroversion traits are correlated to the hedonic shopping value ; whereas, emotional stability and conscientiousness traits are correlated to the utilitarian shopping value. Therefore, classifying products or services as innately hedonic or utilitarian may be misleading because of the drawbacks of using averages and overlooking the richness of understanding that lies in individual differences.

Overall, customer benefits may be considered as a combination of utilitarian and hedonic benefits. Out of the two benefit dimensions, the utilitarian dimension is expected to be evaluated cognitively ; whereas, the hedonic dimension is evaluated emotionally. Service quality by design is a cognitive/rational measure of performance - expectation gap. We ,therefore, expect a strong positive link between service quality perception and utilitarian benefits. For the same reason, we don't expect such a strong relationship between service quality and hedonic benefits. Therefore, while quality-overall benefit relationship holds in general, we expect quality to be of specific impact on the utilitarian benefits dimension. Hence,

➤ **H2 :** Higher the overall service quality perception, the higher are the utilitarian benefits.

Hedonism reflects characteristics such as pleasure, enjoyment, or delight (Campbell, 2018). Specifically, hedonic services highlight the importance of experiencing personal pleasure and enjoyment during the service consumption episode. Hedonism is a significant contributory motive in much consumer behaviour and nearly every product or service might be sold or consumed as play (Taquet, Quoidbach, de Montjoye, Desseilles, & Gross, 2016). Hedonic value has been considered as an antecedent of perceived value and a key dimension of consumer value. Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold (2006) argued that the hedonic categories such as play, aesthetics, and altruistic are more reflective of consumer value in the service context than are the extrinsic categories such as efficiency, quality, and social, thereby emphasizing the role of affective in addition to cognitive aspects in service value. Hedonic service outcomes are evaluated based on the customers' enjoyment of the experience (Khanna & Seth, 2018).

Services are processes that lead to outcomes during partly simultaneous production and consumption processes (Sony & Mekoth, 2012, 2016). Interactions between customers and quality-generating resources controlled by the service provider form the heart of services marketing (Barnabas & Mekoth, 2010). In an interactive service delivery context, resources including people, equipment, and physical facilities come together to perform the service delivery. These components, especially the equipment and ambience, are clearly tangible and ,therefore, can be evaluated experientially. Experiences are hedonically evaluated. Hence, we expect that the

tangibility dimensions of service quality measure would have a significant impact on the hedonic benefit perception. Hence,

✎ **H3**: The higher the tangibility dimension of service quality, the higher the perceived hedonic benefits.

Consumers are benefit seekers (Khandelwal, Bajpai, Tripathi, & Yadav, 2016). Hence, they intent certain benefits out of consumption and evaluate the received benefits. The received benefits as well as any antecedents contributing to the received benefits are evaluated by consumers vis - a - vis the intention behind consumption. Therefore, the relationship between service quality and service benefits is expected to be moderated by the intent of the consumer. Therefore,

✎ **H4**: The association between service quality and perceived service benefits are moderated by the consumption intent.

## Methodology

In order to empirically test the proposed relationships, data were gathered directly from 202 restaurant customers. The customers who had just consumed restaurant services were met outside the restaurants and were interviewed using a structured interview schedule. Intent and benefits were measured using Holbrook's scale and service quality perception was measured using SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The items in Holbrook's value scale were presented to the respondents as to mention what value they expected (intent) and what value they believe they received (benefits).

The data were gathered from the respondents during the year 2017. The sample consisted of 147 males and 55 females. While 150 respondents visited the restaurants for personal purposes, 52 respondents visited for business purposes. Of the total respondents, 41 were single, 76 were couples, and 85 were in groups. While 128 visited frequently, 74 were infrequent customers.

The measurement procedure followed in this research assumes that intent is a continuum which ranges from utilitarian to hedonic and is measured in such a way that higher value of the variable indicates hedonic intent and lower value indicates utilitarian intent. This measurement procedure is particularly suitable for testing moderation since it is different levels of the same variable. In contrast, the perceived hedonic and utilitarian benefits have been conceptualized and measured as different constructs. Hence, it is possible to have hedonic and utilitarian benefit perceptions by the same respondent. The same respondent may judge the service as to how exciting it is as well as how functional it is. This conceptualization and measurement again facilitate testing and comparison of moderation for the same set of respondents.

## Analysis and Results

The analysis reveals that service quality positively influences overall benefits perception ( $R^2 = 0.306$ ,  $\beta = 0.554$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); hence, H1 is accepted. As hypothesized, service quality positively affects utilitarian benefits (effect on utilitarian benefits:  $R^2 = 0.364$ ,  $\beta = 0.603$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); hence H2 accepted. The effect is greater than that on the hedonic benefits (effect on hedonic benefits:  $R^2 = 0.203$ ,  $\beta = 0.451$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

Similarly, all the dimensions of service quality positively influence utilitarian benefits. As hypothesized in H3, only tangibility and assurance dimensions impact hedonic benefits. Of these, tangibility has a greater impact on hedonic benefits ( $R^2 = 0.345$ ,  $\beta = 0.442$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) than on utilitarian benefits ( $R^2 = 0.537$ ,  $\beta = 0.394$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Assurance has a relatively lesser impact on hedonic benefits as compared to utilitarian benefits.

The interaction effects are explored using interaction software developed by Daniel Soper (Soper, 2013).

**Table 1. Hedonic Benefits Predicted by the Interaction Terms**

	Beta	Standard Error	Sig	+1 $\sigma$	Mean	-1 $\sigma$
Assurance * Intent	-0.026	0.0100	0.008	0.0233	0.0000	0.0000
Empathy * Intent	-0.016	0.0078	0.043	0.3016	0.0003	0.0004
Reliability * Intent	-0.034	0.0084	0.000	0.8704	0.0000	0.0000
Responsiveness * Intent	-0.022	0.0091	0.016	0.7730	0.0045	0.0003
Tangibles * Intent	-0.011	0.0112	0.333	0.0015	0.0000	0.0000
Total Quality * Intent	-0.007	0.0023	0.002	0.0813	0.0000	0.0000

Further, to test the impact of service quality dimensions and total service quality on perceived benefits at different levels of the moderating variables, the significance of beta coefficient has been calculated at the mean, one standard deviation above the mean, and one standard deviation below the mean of the moderating variable, consumption intent. The output of the analysis is presented in Table 1 (hedonic benefits), Table 2 (utilitarian benefits), and Table 3 (overall benefits) followed by interpretation for each.

The results provided in Table 1 support the hypothesis H4 and indicate that the relationship between total quality and perceived hedonic benefits is moderated by the intent. The beta coefficient of the interaction term is significant at the 5% level. Further analysis of the simple slope of the relation between total quality and hedonic benefits indicate that when the intent is hedonic (+1  $\sigma$ ), there is no significant relation between total quality and perceived hedonic benefits as revealed by the non-significance of the coefficient at the 0.0813 level. However, at mean level and -1  $\sigma$  level, the relationship is found to exist as revealed by the significance levels.

The relationships between the dimensions of service quality and perceived hedonic benefits are found to be moderated by the intent except in the case of tangibles as revealed by the significant beta coefficients of the interaction terms. The simple slopes of the relation between empathy, reliability, and responsiveness with perceived hedonic benefits are found to be non-significant at the hedonic levels of intent (+1  $\sigma$ ), indicating an absence of relationship between these dimensions and perceived hedonic benefits when the intent is hedonic. When the intent is utilitarian, all the simple slopes of the relation between dimensions of service quality and perceived service benefits are found to be significant, indicating the presence of a relationship. This leads us to the conclusion that when the intent is hedonic, three of the service quality dimensions are not important in predicting perceived hedonic benefits, but when the intent is utilitarian, all the dimensions are important in predicting the perceived hedonic benefits ; also, the relation between tangibles and perceived hedonic benefit is significant but unaffected by the intent. As per the results depicted in Table 2, the relationship between total quality and perceived utilitarian benefits is found to be moderated by intent as indicated by the significance of the beta coefficient of the interaction term with a  $p$  - value of 0.0076. Examination of the simple slope of relationship between total quality

**Table 2. Utilitarian Benefits Predicted by the Interaction Terms**

	Beta	Standard Error	Sig	+1 $\sigma$	Mean	-1 $\sigma$
Assurance * Intent	-0.005	0.0090	0.5784	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Empathy * Intent	-0.022	0.0072	0.0022	0.1252	0.0000	0.0000
Reliability * Intent	-0.020	0.0076	0.0082	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Responsiveness * Intent	-0.025	0.0087	0.0043	0.8048	0.0013	0.0000
Tangibles * Intent	-0.002	0.0100	0.8341	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Total Quality * Intent	-0.005	0.0021	0.0076	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000



and perceived utilitarian benefits at different levels of the moderating variable shows that the relationship exists at all the levels of the moderating variable. Hence, the perceived utilitarian benefit is based on perceived service quality whether the intent is hedonic or utilitarian, although the relationship changes based on the intent.

An examination of the relationship between dimensions of service quality and the perceived utilitarian benefits shows that empathy, reliability, and responsiveness have moderated the relation with perceived utilitarian benefits ; whereas, assurance and tangibles have non moderated relationships. The relationship coefficients of the simple slope and their significance indicate that when the intent is hedonic (+1  $\sigma$  of the moderating variable), there is no significant relationship between empathy as well as responsiveness and perceived utilitarian benefit. All other dimensions do have a significant relationship with the perceived utilitarian benefit, irrespective of the nature of intent. This indicates that when the intent is hedonic, assurance and tangibles do not matter in the judgment of perceived utilitarian benefit. In determining the utilitarian benefit, reliability is found to be important even when the intent is hedonic. This is in stark contrast with the finding that reliability is not important in predicting hedonic benefits when the intent is hedonic.

**Table 3. Total Benefits Predicted by the Interaction Terms**

	Beta	Standard Error	Sig	+1 $\sigma$	Mean	-1 $\sigma$
Assurance * Intent	-0.032	0.0170	0.0631	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Empathy * Intent	-0.039	0.0138	0.0058	0.1773	0.0000	0.0000
Reliability * Intent	-0.053	0.0145	0.0003	0.0183	0.0000	0.0000
Responsiveness * Intent	-0.048	0.0163	0.0033	0.8211	0.0009	0.0000
Tangibles * Intent	-0.012	0.0190	0.5099	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Total Quality * Intent	-0.013	0.0041	0.0017	0.0014	0.0000	0.0000

The relationship between total perceived quality and total perceived benefits is found to be moderated by the intent as revealed by the significant beta coefficient with a  $p$  - value of 0.0017 based on the results in Table 3. Out of the five dimensions of perceived service quality, intent is not found to moderate the relation of assurance and tangibles to perceived total benefits and intent is found to moderate the relation of empathy, reliability, and responsiveness to total perceived benefits. These results are similar to moderating relationships with perceived utilitarian benefits, indirectly indicating that the predominant perception in the sample is utilitarian.

Total quality, assurance, reliability, and tangibles have significant simple slopes of the relationship with perceived total benefits, irrespective of the level of intent, indicating that significant relations exist whether the intent is hedonic or utilitarian. Empathy and responsiveness have no significant relation with total perceived benefits when the intent is hedonic (at +1  $\sigma$  level of the moderating variable) but have significant relations at all other levels of the moderating variables.

## Discussion

Our finding that overall service quality positively impacts customers' value perception of service corroborates the recent findings of Bain & Company (Almquist, Senior, & Bloch, 2016). In a large sample study spanning multiple industries, they found that of the many elements that contribute to the customers' value perception, quality is the most critical. Since service quality is defined and measured as how far customers' assessment of the service provider's performance exceeds their expectations, both performance and expectations have to be managed to create a greater positive gap. For a starting point, one could distinguish the benefits sought by customers into the utilitarian ones and hedonic ones. Food and beverages business, in general and restaurants, in particular would

have to cater to customers prioritizing utilitarian benefits over hedonic benefits and vice versa. While overall service quality would have to be improved to create a greater utilitarian benefit perception, for a greater hedonic benefit perception, as we find in this research, the tangibles and assurance dimensions of service quality have to be specifically improved. Hedonic benefits may be distinguished by their sensory and emotional nature. The sensory appeal and aesthetics that are communicated through the tangibles and service personnel behavior that communicates assurance are key to enhancing the hedonic benefit perceptions.

Marketers usually cater to differing demands of customers by designing and delivering a variety of services, each designed to match a unique set of customer expectations. Customers may have a predominant utilitarian or hedonic intent as they consider a service for consumption. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider these differences in customers' intent while designing and delivering services. Our research finds that pleasure seeking customers' perception of hedonic value is impacted by a subset of service quality dimensions ; whereas, utilitarian benefit seeking customers' perception is impacted by all of service quality dimensions. When the intent is clearly pronounced as pleasure seeking, the customers seem to be primarily driven by the tangibles and assurance. We also observe that pleasure seeking customers' assessment of utility from the service received is impacted by their perceptions about the reliability (able to provide as per promise), tangibility, and assurance dimensions. In contrast to the pleasure-seeking customers, the utility-seeking customers' benefit perception (both hedonic and utilitarian benefits) is found to be impacted by all the dimensions of service quality.

Utility-seeking customers may be considered to be more rational in their assessment of benefits compared to the pleasure-seeking customers. Rational assessment is likely to consider all dimensions of the service experience as against an emotional assessment that could over emphasize some elements and ignore some others.

## **Managerial Implications**

It is important to consider service quality improvement as it contributes to creation of perceived benefits of consumption. Service quality may be considered of higher importance in generating higher utilitarian value perception. As the analysis reveals in the current study, overall service quality with all its dimensions is important for generating utilitarian benefits perception. However, regarding hedonic value generation, not all dimensions of service quality are found to be significant. The significant impact of tangibility on hedonic benefits calls for special attention to provide an ambience and equipment directly affecting hedonic value generation.

It is also important to recognize customer intent and adapt one's service to the identified intent to generate perceived value for customers. Customers who come with greater utilitarian intent as compared to the ones with higher hedonic intent find service quality generating higher benefits. Improving on all dimensions of service quality helps generate higher value for these consumers.

Some thumb rules can be used by managers to help them guide their front-end personnel in assessing intent and customizing their service delivery accordingly to maximize customer satisfaction. Take, for example, a restaurant or coffee shop, much like the ones used in this study. This coffee shop may have an executive or professional clientele in the afternoons for lunch and a crowd of mainly families and groups of friends in the evenings and for dinner. For the former, a more utilitarian intent could be inferred, and thus, a more responsive approach, based on speed and operational efficiency of service, could be focused on in the afternoons. For the latter crowd, a more hedonic intent could be assumed and a more assurance-oriented, courteous style along with a positive mood generating ambience with required visceral cues could be deployed. Thus, a little managerial insight in combination with this framework could be used to optimize the delivery capability of the front-end personnel.

As customers vary in their benefit expectations, they would also induce varying demands on the service delivery personnel. Both design as well as delivery aspects of service that these consumers induced variability are accounted for. What these segments consider "highly important" in service delivery would be different and

,therefore, the service provider must deliver the service keeping these in mind. Customer satisfaction and loyalty are found to be positively correlated to the performance of firms in what they consider highly important. Unless there is a clear differentiated positioning communicated to the value segments, there are chances that confusion is created in the customers' minds w.r.t the brand image of the service provider. Meaning, there must be a clear understanding of the value segments priorities so that a clear brand image is maintained. On another note, as service quality literature establishes, if there are varying customer expectations for a standard service delivery, there would be greater P-E differences.

## **Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research**

This study has been carried out in the specific settings of restaurants and hence may not be easily generalized to other services. The specific cultural aspects of Goa as well as the presence of some tourists may have some impact on the results. However, replication of the study in other contexts may have good value.

The role of consumption intent may be further studied in relation to customer experience. For example, effect of consumption intent on “mechanic” and “humanic” service delivery cues (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002) as well as on overall service benefits could be further studied. This study has been conducted in the context of restaurant services. It could be carried out in the context of other services as well as in the manufacturing context. The definition of intent as situational personality based as in the case of Guido's (2006) research could be examined more closely. Such examination could have relevance for market segmentation.

## **Authors' Contribution**

All three authors - Barnabas Nattuvathuckal, Nandakumar Mekoth, and Dr. Michael Sony contributed equally in conceiving the research proposal, collected data, designed the analysis, performed the analysis, and wrote the paper.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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