

A comparative study of male and female perceptions of service quality in fast food industry

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Abstract: The development of technology has brought about sudden shift in the economy towards service economy. It becomes important therefore that marketers need to bring marketing principles, theories, and strategies to bear in this emerging economy if they must satisfy their customers profitably. The study makes use of SERVQUAL, a research instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry to measure the impact of customer expectations on the perceptions of service quality. Three hypotheses were put forward and tested. The first hypothesis was to determine whether there was any difference between customer expectations and perceptions of fast food service. Dependent t-test was used and it was discovered that there was no significant difference between the two parameters. The second hypothesis was to determine whether there was difference between male and female expectations of service quality. Independent t-test was employed and it was found that there was no significant difference between the two parameters. The third hypothesis of the study was to determine whether there was difference between male and female perceptions of service quality. An independent t-test was also used for this hypothesis and it was discovered that there was no significant difference between the two parameters measure.

Based on the findings above some of the recommendations made were:

1. It is important that Nigerian fast food restaurants established a strong presence in the cyber space by having a functional website.
2. There is a need for the fast food operators to improve upon working conditions, including salaries paid to workers in the sector.

Keywords: Service Quality, Expectation, Perception, Fast-food, SERVQUAL

Background of the study

The perception of individuals tends to differ based on their motives, need, expectations, previous experiences and present encounter. This is about the same way Nigerians perceive and adjust to the demands of modern living particularly in urban and metropolitan cities. The fast lane nature to modern living has forced most city dwellers to adjust their styles of living to fit into this kind of existence.

Some of the major players in fast food industry in Nigeria include Mr. Biggs, Sweet Sensation, Tantalizers, Southern Fried Chicken (SFC), Tastee Fried Chicken (TFC), Mama Kas, Favourites, Hunger Busters, Frenchies, Domino and Tetrazzini .

Each customer contact is referred to as a moment of truth, an opportunity to satisfy or dissatisfy the customer. The whole essence of marketing is to satisfy the customers profitably. Customer services in the Nigerian fast-food restaurant context is a bit different from what is in the western countries, where customer service has already moved on to the stage of relationship management, with companies introducing several loyalty schemes to attract and retain their customers. Almost every Nigerian fast-food restaurant uses doormen and women, their main job is to open the doors for customers and give them a welcoming smile.

However, this doorman concept, which originally was hailed by, is now being abused by the doormen. As a result customers normally leave the restaurants with complaints and 'bad tastes in their mouths' as a result of the antics and attitudes of the doormen, who have now converted the front doors to begging spots. Customers no longer receive the expected welcome smiles, those customers

who have no succumbed to the pleas for a tip are sometimes thrown a mean look, and that is if he or she has not already been sworn at or cursed in the doorman's native language.

The sales attendants dress in standard uniforms, usually in the corporate or house colours of the restaurants. It is worth mentioning that these salesmen sometimes mix up customers' orders and do not normally take it kindly to customers' complaints, most times refusing to change a customer's order.

According to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), when expectations are exceeded, service is perceived to be of exceptional quality also to be a pleasant surprise. When expectations are not met, however, service quality is deemed unacceptable. When expectations are confirmed by perceived service quality it is satisfactory.

There is, therefore, need to measure the difference between customer expectations and the perception of service quality. As there is no absolute service quality, the value received of a service rendered is a function of how close the customers' experiences match their expectations both of process and outcome (Bell and Zemke, 1987). In other words, service assessment is largely dependent on customer perception of what they have received (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990).

Considering the benefits inherent in customer retention through delivering quality service in fast-food outlets, it becomes important to identify those factors that influence the perception of service quality. The study therefore, seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

► Is there any significant difference between customer expectations and perception of service quality in Nigerian fast-food industry?

► Is there any significant difference

between male and female expectations of service quality?

► Does the gender of customers influence their perceptions of service quality?

Literature review

1. The competitive strategies of Nigeria's fast food restaurants

For Nigeria's fast food restaurants, the need to compete against one another is borne out of a desire to attract new customers, and also to satisfy and keep existing customers. Stewart (1996) writes that successfully implemented customer retention strategies are a point of competitive advantage. This means that the customer should always be treated as king, and should be at the core or heart of the operations of every business. For some of the fast-food restaurants, customer service is a key competitive strategy which for some others, customer service is not very high on their agenda, the latter operate as if it is still a seller's world, this may be the case for those restaurants operating in towns where there is less competition.

Nworah (2006) lists the competitive weapons of Nigerian fast food restaurants as including taste, prices, environment, class sensation, visibility and availability of parking space. They conclude by saying that for the restaurants, the critical factor remains the quality of products provided to customers at affordable prices. These classifications will appear to be consistent with the strategies adopted by the major players in the sector, this is because lesser known operators are not so much concerned with long-term brand building efforts which may be eroded by poor product and service offerings.

In the beginning Nigerian fast-food

restaurants sold mainly meat pies, fish pies, cakes, egg rolls, sausage roll and such other pastries that were culled from foreign cuisine books, they had adopted a standardized approach at this time, offering fairly similar products to the customers. This strategy was justified by Herbig (1998) who believed that firms may seek such approach to marketing their productions because of high costs of adaptation and differentiation of products.

Over time however, came the need to adapt the products to meet local needs, tastes, and culture. This was in recognition of the fact that marketing should only aim to satisfy the needs and wants of customers, which in the Nigerian context was very much culturally based. The shift from standardization to adaptation may also have been influenced by some of these classifications by Herbig (1998):

- Variations in consumer needs.
- Variations in conditions of use.
- Variation in ability to buy and differences in income levels.
- Strong cultural differences.
- Environment-induced adaptation, differences in raw materials availability, government requirements and regulations.

Unlike the fast food sector in the Western countries, Nigerian fast food restaurants do not engage in much sales promotion to encourage sales. If any the sales promotions they normally engage in are one-off activities rather than planned orchestrated sales promotion companies which is tied into the overall marketing plan. The reasons may be as a result of the fact that the sector is still believed to be driven by the fast food operators, rather than by the customers, so there is not a felt need to actively attract, keep and reward both new and existing customers.

2. Dimensions of service quality

The dimensions of service quality were identified by marketing researches studying several different service categories: appliance repair, retail banking, long-distance telephone service, securities brokerage, and credit card companies. They identified five principal dimensions that customers use to judge service quality – reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, which are listed in order of declining relative importance to customers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988).

Reliability: The ability to perform the promised service both dependably and accurately. Reliable service means that the service is accomplished on time, in the same manner, and without errors every time. (Fitzsimmons, J. A. and Fitzsimmons, M. J. (2001).

Responsiveness: The willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service. Keeping customers waiting particularly for no apparent reason creates unnecessary negative perceptions of quality. If a service failure

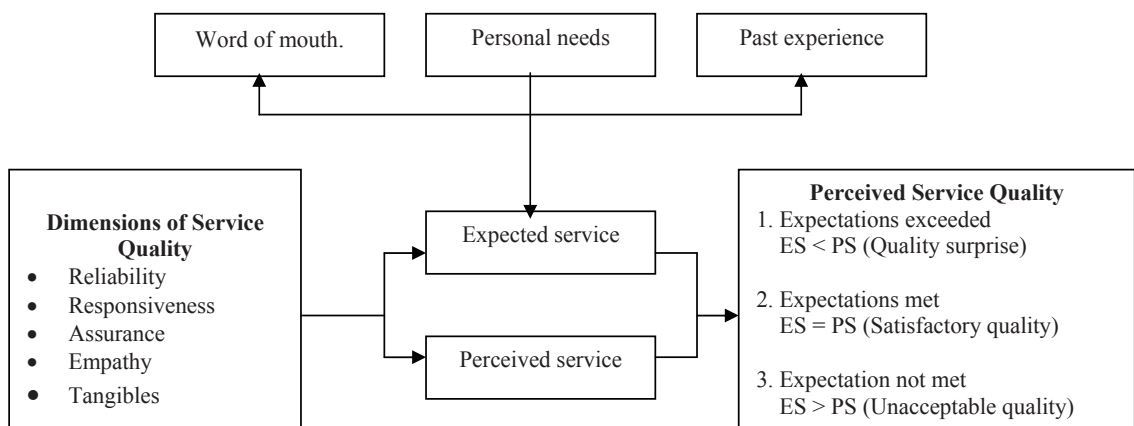
occurs, the ability to recover quickly and with professionalism can create very positive perceptions of quality (Gronroos, C. (1990).

Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of employees as well as their ability to convey trust and confidence. The assurance dimension includes the following features: Competence to perform the service, politeness and respect for the customer, effective communication with the customer, and the general attitude that the server has the customer's best interests at heart.

Empathy: The provision of caring, individualized attention to customers. Empathy includes the following features: approachability, sensitivity and effort to understand the customer's needs.

Tangibles: The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials. The condition of the physical surroundings is tangible evidence of the care and attentions to detail that are exhibited by the service provider. This assessment dimension also can extend to the conduct of other customers in the service.

Figure 1: Perceived Service Quality



Source: Adapted from Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., and Berry, L. L. (1985). "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research". *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 49, Fall P.48.

Research method

The study focused on the quality of service rendered by the fast food service providers in Nigeria. Although the service quality gap model contains five gaps, this study centered on measuring GAP5, which is referred to as customer gap. The study measured the difference between customer expectations and perceptions in the Nigerian fast food industry. The SERVQUAL instrument developed by the authors of the service quality gap model was adopted and modified by the researcher to suit the purpose of this research. It was a multiple-item scale for measuring the five dimensions of service quality (i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibility). This two-part instrument has an initial section to record customer expectations for the Nigerian fast food service followed by a second section to record customer perceptions for the same service industry.

The major source of data for this study is the primary data that was collected through the use of the administered SERVQUAL to patrons of fast food outlets that are residents at Allen Avenue and its environs. Copies of research instrument were distributed to three hundred patrons (respondents) of fast food in that locality. The sampling technique adopted was a random walk sampling technique.

Three hypotheses were formulated for the study. The first hypothesis was to determine whether there was no significant difference between customer expectations and perceptions of fast food service. The first hypothesis was tested using dependent t-test. The second and third hypotheses were tested using independent t-test.

For the purpose of the study, content validity was employed. This emphasizes the

adequate coverage of the scope of the study. The reliability method employed for this research is test-retest reliability. It has a very high Correlation Coefficient of 0.89 which was found to be significant and points to high reliability of instrument used.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the data collected from the research questions, the three hypotheses are tested using student t-tests. The hypothesis tests involved testing differences between two means. The first hypothesis was tested using the statistical formula for testing differences between two dependent matched samples.

It is represented by:

$$t = \frac{\bar{D} - 0}{\frac{S_D}{\sqrt{n}}} = \frac{\bar{D}}{\frac{S_D}{\sqrt{n}}} = \frac{\bar{D}}{\frac{S_D^2}{\sqrt{N}}} - 0$$

where \bar{D} is the mean of difference of means, S_D^2 is the variance of the difference of scores and is given by;

$$S_D^2 = \frac{\sum (D - \bar{D})^2}{N - 1}$$

This statistical test was appropriate for the study because both expectation and perception of service quality variables have dependent matched samples.

The remaining two hypotheses were tested using student t-test represented by:

$$T = \frac{\overline{X}_1 - \overline{X}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{(N_1 - 1)S_1^2 + (N_2 - 1)S_2^2}{N_1 + N_2 - 2} \left(\frac{1}{N_1} + \frac{1}{N_2} \right)}}$$

Where:

Degrees of freedom is $N_1 + N_2 - 2$

\overline{X}_1 and \overline{X}_2 are the respective sample means of the two groups

S_1 and S_2 are the standard deviations

N_1 and N_2 are the samples sizes of the two groups.

Source: Adedayo, A. O. (2000). *Understanding Statistics*. Lagos: JAS Publishers.

The formula was appropriate for the test of the remaining two hypotheses because population variance was known and male and female samples of the study were independent samples.

Hypotheses testing

The three hypotheses for this study are tested using t-test.

Hypothesis 1

H0: There is no gap (difference) between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality.

For the above hypothesis, the mean of the respondents' ratings for each of the service quality dimension was used. Table 1 below showed the difference between perception and expectation using matched samples test.

Table 1: Showing the Difference Between Expectations and Perceptions using Matched Samples.

Service Quality Dimension	Perception	Expectation	$D = X_1 - X_2$	$D - \overline{D}$	$(D - \overline{D})^2$
Reliability	5.17	6.09	-0.92	-0.56	0.31
Assurance	4.63	5.32	-0.69	-0.33	0.11
Tangibility	5.32	6.55	-1.23	-0.87	0.76
Empathy	3.43	3.01	0.42	0.78	0.61
Responsiveness	3.07	2.47	0.60	0.96	0.92
			-1.82		2.71

Source: field survey (2008)

From the analysis t_{cal} is -0.97.

The degree of freedom (n-1) is 4. At 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$), the tabulated value is 2.776 while at 99% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.01$), the tabulated value is 4.604.

Decision: Since the calculated value (-0.97) is less than the tabulated value (2.776, 4.604), then the null hypothesis (H0) was rejected and conclude that there is no significant difference between customer expectations and perceptions of fast food service quality.

Hypothesis 2

H0: There is no difference between male and female expectations of service quality.

Table 2: Showing the Difference Between Male and Female Expectations of Service Quality

	N	\bar{x}	S.D	t cal	$\alpha=0.05$ t tab
Male	90	4.76	1.5076	0.0487	2.306
Female	201	4.71	1.7295		

Source: Field Survey, 2008.

The table above showed the difference between male and female expectationst. The independent t-test was used.

The calculated value for t is 0.0487.

Decision:

Since the vertical values of 2.306 at α level of 0.05 and 3.355 at α level of 0.01 are greater than the calculated value then we accept the H_0 . There is no significant difference between male and female expectation of service quality.

Hypothesis 3

H0: There is no difference between male and female perceptions of service quality.

For the third hypothesis, the mean of the perception ratings elicited from the male respondents as well as from female respondents were used. Table 4.11 showed the difference between the male perceptions and female perceptions of fast food services quality.

Table 3: Showing the Difference Between Male and Female Perceptions of Service Quality.

	N	\bar{x}	S.D	t cal	$\alpha=0.05$ t tab
Male	90	4.384	0.6124	0.147	2.306
Female	201	4.296	1.0512		

Source: Field Survey, 2008.

At 95% confidence level ($\alpha=0.05$), the tabulated value is 2.306 while at 99% confidence level ($\alpha=0.01$), the tabulated value is 3.355.

Decision: Since the critical values are greater than the calculated value then we accept the null hypothesis (H_0), that is, there is no significant difference between male and female perception of service quality.

Discussion of findings

In order to measure the gap between expectation and perception of service quality in the Nigerian fast food industry, three hypotheses were put forward and tested. The first hypothesis was to determine whether there was any difference (gap) between customer expectations and perception of fast food service quality.. In this instance, the null hypothesis (H0) was not rejected at both 5% and 1% level of significance. This led to the conclusion that, "there is no significant difference between customer expectations and perceptions of fast food service Quality". This finding invalidates the existing belief that "there is significant difference between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality. Although the discrepancy between the findings of this study and that of the existing research works could be traced to the geographical location of the study as well as the industry under study. Most of these past research works were carried out in Western nations and also in other fields of service that are different from fast food service industry.

The research was also interested in measuring the influence gender may have on customer expectations and perception. As a result of this, the remaining two hypotheses were tested. The second hypothesis was to determine whether there was difference between male and female expectations of service quality. Independent t-test was used. In this case, the null hypothesis (H0) was not rejected at both 5% and 1% level of significance. This led to the conclusion that "there is no significant difference between male and female expectations of service". This finding validates the existing findings on the study. Some past research findings also agreed to

the fact that "there is no significant difference between male and female expectations of service quality". (Bitner, 1990); Brady and Cronm, (2001); Brown and Swartz. (1989).

The third hypothesis of the study was to determine whether there was difference between male and female perceptions of service quality. An independent t-test was also used for the hypothesis. In this instance, the null hypothesis (H0) was also not rejected at both 5% and 1% level of significance. It was, therefore, concluded that "there is no significant difference between male and female perceptions of service quality". These results also validate the existing findings on the related study. Most of the past findings agreed that there was no significant difference between male and female perceptions of service quality.

Conclusion

The researcher traced the origin of the Nigerian fast food industry. It highlighted the possible discrepancy between customer perceptions and expectations of service quality. Although the respondent ratings based on the five service quality dimensions showed that there were some slight discrepancies between expectations and perceptions, the result of the tested hypothesis showed that the difference was not significant. This invalidated most of the existing findings that concluded that there was significant difference between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality.

It has been discovered that the Nigerian fast food sector is still a seller's market. The operators of the fast food outlets in Nigeria believed that there is no cut-throat competition in the fast food sector and that they don't

see themselves as rivals. This explained why there is no significant difference between respondent expectations and perceptions. It can be inferred that it is either the Nigerian fast food operators provide very high service quality or the service providers. In this field survey, it was discovered that the patrons did not expect high service quality from the fast food provider.

Further, Liu and Sudharshan (2000) believe that there may be difference in the importance of Service Quality Dimensions across cultures as a result of cultural difference. These researchers used Hofstede's well-established cultural dimensions to assess whether service quality importance would vary across different cultural orientations. Although the findings of this research validate the existing findings that reliability is the most important service quality dimension but its insignificance difference between expectations and perceptions could be as a result of cultural difference.

The study also revealed that gender does not have any significant effect on the perceptions as well as the expectations of service quality. This is in tandem with the existing findings in that area.

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations were made so that fast food operators can manage customer expectations and enhance their perceptions of service quality.

- 1) The restaurants that will thrive in the future will be those that focus on their customers more, rather than on the products and services which they sell. There should be a conscious effort at not only attracting new customers, but also in making existing customers enjoy their current experience, this will help the different restaurants to actually begin to build a customer focused brand.
- 2) The essence of marketing is to satisfy the needs and wants of customers. Therefore, the shift from standardization to adaptation as well as introduction of Nigerian food into their product lines should be embraced by the food operators in Nigeria.
- 3) Currently, there is no form of students discount for purchases in any Nigerian fast food restaurant, it is ideal therefore for such students offers and discounts which are obtainable in McDonald's Burger King and some of the other fast food restaurants in Europe and America to be introduced by the Nigerian restaurants.
- 4) It has been discovered that most of the restaurants do not have any functional website. To complement any brand building programme, it is important that Nigerian fast food restaurants establish a strong presence in the cyber space.
- 5) There is need to improve upon the working conditions, including salaries paid to workers in the sector. While this practice of paying meager wages to staff in the sector appears to be a universal practice, the Nigerian fast food sector can do better in this regard, as this may actually be the reason why their staff resort to begging and harassing customers for tips, thus damaging their brand image.

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