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## SERVICE QUALITY AND CONSUMER EXPECTATION OF SELECTED ONLINE STORES IN PORT HARCOURT

<sup>1</sup>**Dike, Mercy Onyinyechi**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Marketing,  
Faculty of Management Sciences,  
University of Port Harcourt,  
Choba, Port Harcourt,  
Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>**Prof. Kalu, Sylva Ezema**

<sup>2</sup>Department of Marketing,  
Faculty of Management Sciences,  
University of Port Harcourt,  
Choba, Port Harcourt,  
Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

*Given the strategic importance of service quality in the service industry, this paper examines the expectations of consumers towards the quality of services provided by online stores in Port Harcourt. The study empirically examines the influence of service quality on consumer expectation of selected online stores in Port Harcourt. The study adopts a survey research design with a sample size of 120. Data was analyzed using the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient with the aid of SPSS. Amongst the findings was that reliability and empathy have a strong and positive relationship with adequate and deserved services. The paper concludes that service quality have a very strong association with consumer expectation of selected online stores in Port Harcourt and recommends the continuous adoption of both reliability and empathy in service deliveries as it enhances the attainment of consumer expectations which in turn leads to increase in profitability of online stores.*

**KEY WORDS:** Service quality, Customer expectation, online stores

### INTRODUCTION

As the internet has developed into new distribution channels, online transaction in Nigeria are rapidly increasing; customers' attention have gradually shifted from the physical analogy of buying products and services at a brick-and-mortar store to an online store in search for more quality and convenience (Ozuru, 2015). Quality focused organizations gain competitive advantage over competitors on the market place both locally and internationally (Dale, 2001),

this has therefore led to the expansion of internet shopping.

Quality is considered one of the top management's most competitive priorities and a prerequisite for sustenance and growth of businesses; the quest for quality improvement has become a highly desired objective in today's intensively competitive market. It is often said that quality is an antecedent of customer assessment of value which in turn influences customer's satisfaction (Babakus & Boller, 1992). More so, marketers have realized that to retain

customers and support market growth, they must provide high quality services (Zietaml, et al, 2002).

Online shopping is the process of buying goods and services from merchants over the internet. Consumers tend to buy a huge variety of products from online stores by just visiting the web stores from the comfort of their homes and offices, these products are delivered to them electronically (Ozuru, 2015). In the view of Yuliharsi (2011), online shopping is business transaction that takes place via the internet and then finally the goods are delivered physically or electronically to the customer. These purchasing patterns and habits help firms to improve on their products and services to customers (Lin & Hong, 2006).

Service quality serves as a measure of how well service level delivered matches the customers' expectation in a consistent basis (Lewis & Boom, 1993). Customers are always out to get satisfaction from every money spent, thus always desiring quality whenever they purchase. Babakus & Boller (1992), added that expectations and perceptions form the background of service quality. In the words of Singh (2013), perceived service quality is having a significant influence on purchasing decision, positive word of mouth as well as on consumer behaviors.

Observing from the popular and growing trend of online shopping, there is no doubt that businesses can now use the internet to interact with customers and gain competitive advantage (Kalidas, 2007). William and Prabakar (2012) stated, the consumer perception of online service quality is an important segment to the upcoming and the existing online retailers in the market as their study revealed that perception of service quality is influenced by the nature of customers. However, of all the studies evaluated above, none empirically evaluated the phenomenon of service quality and consumer expectation of selected online firms in Port Harcourt. This creates a gap which this study seeks to fill.

### **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Looking at the enormous ease that online shopping has brought to the consumers in course of their purchases, it is expected that online shop should attract tremendous patronage in a densely populated area like Port Harcourt; this is not the case as consumers have been more selective and demanding for services they consume and how it is being delivered; which has led to stiff competitive amongst online firms resulting in low and reduced sales (Authors observation). This therefore calls for greater attention to be paid in the quality of services delivered.

In view of the importance of service quality, (Parasuraman, 1991) posits that to perform the measurement of users satisfaction, it is necessary to

focus on the expectation and perceptions that the user has about the offered services which they receive, as they also compare among themselves in order to obtain value for their money (Anyanwu, 2011). Most online customers are not confident with online purchases as a result of lack of trust on service rendered (Asubonteng et al., 1996). In online purchases, expectation hardly meet reality, one only sees photo of what one wants to buy and not the quality as it is never guaranteed; this is contrary to what customers expects (Asaio-wen, 2008). It is on the basis of the above that this study is significant as its findings could be used as a strategic tool to redesign quality service processes for accomplishment of the expectations of the customers involved in online purchase in Port Harcourt.

### **AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between service quality and consumer expectation of selected online firms in Port Harcourt.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

This study is anchored on the Nordic Perspective Theory postulated by Gronroos in 1979. This theory defines the concept of perceived service quality as the outcome of an evaluation process; where customer compares his expectation with the services, he received. The theory is related to the servqual model and bases its definition of service quality on technical quality (the outcome or what) and functional quality (the process or how). The functional quality represents how the service is delivered; that is to say it focuses on the series of interaction that takes place during the service delivery; on the other hand, the technical quality refers to what the customers receives in the service encounter (Green, 2006).

Nordic perception theory also recognizes that corporate image is a moderating dimension for perceived and expected quality (Gronroos, 1984). For the purpose of this study, the relevancy of this theory is enormously felt on the consumer's decision as to the online firm he patronizes; which is based on the firm's corporate image, technical and functional qualities of a service rendered. The application of this theory to this study is worthwhile, as it explains that the presence of the above three factors are the major determinant as to whether or not a consumer perceives quality in any given service (Gronroos, 1984).

### **STUDY VARIABLES AND MODEL SPECIFICATION**

In this paper, Service Quality (SQ) is our predictor variable with its dimension as Reliability (R) and Empathy (E) while our criterion variable is Consumer Expectation with its measures as Adequate Service (AS) and Desired Service (DS).

**FUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

This study’s aim establishes the functional relationship amongst the measures of predictor and criterion variables. For the purpose of this study, a model specification is developed to guide the functional relationships as depicted herein:

$$\begin{aligned}
 CE &= F(SQ) \dots\dots\dots(i) \\
 SQ &= (R, E) \dots\dots\dots(ii) \\
 CE &= (AS, DS) \dots\dots\dots(iii)
 \end{aligned}$$

Where: CE = Consumer Expectation  
 SQ= Service Quality  
 R = Reliability  
 E = Empathy  
 AS = Adequate Service  
 DS =Desired Service

**Service Quality:** This is the consumer’s overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the firm and its services.

**Consumer Expectation:** The desires or wants of customers.

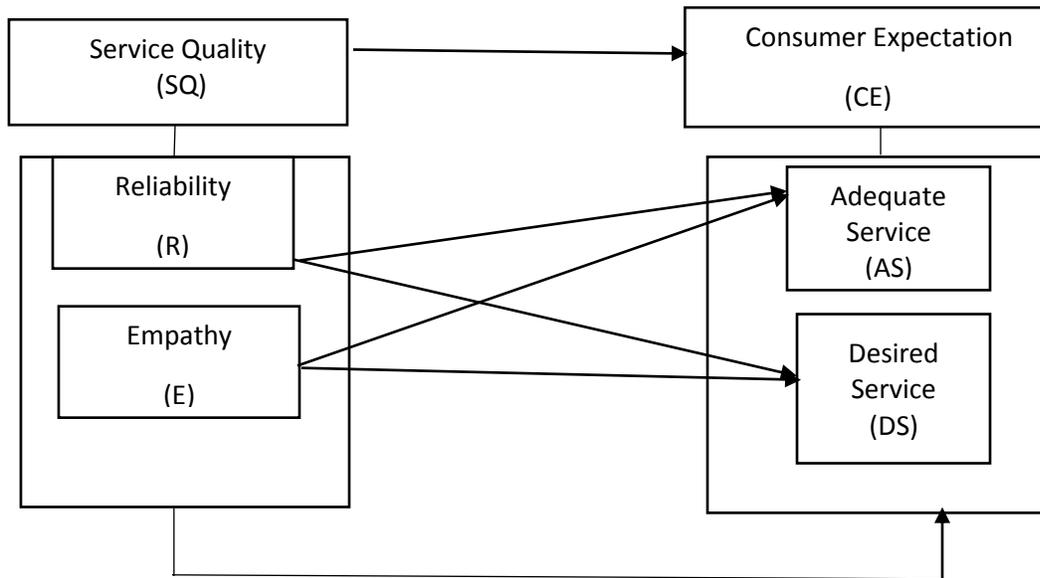
**Reliability:** This is concerned with the store’s ability to perform the service accurately and dependably.

**Empathy:** The Individualized ease of access and effort taken to understand customers’ requirements.

**Adequate Service:** This is the minimum level of service customers are willing to accept

**Desired Service:** The level of service representing a blend of what customers believe can be and should be provided.

**CONCEPTUAL/ OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK**



**Fig 1: Conceptual/ Operational framework on Service Quality and Consumer Expectation of Selected Online Firm in Port Harcourt**

Source: Desk Research, 2019

**RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

- Ho1: There is no significant relationship between reliability and adequate service of selected online firms in Port Harcourt.
- Ho2: There is no significant relationship between reliability and desired service of elected online firms in Port Harcourt
- Ho3: There is no significant relationship between empathy and adequate service of selected online firms in Port Harcourt.

- Ho4: There is no significant relationship between empathy and desired serviceof selected online firms in Port Harcourt.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Service Quality**

Since the pioneering work of Ziethaml et al (2002),the quality of online services have been explored to a large extent. Parasuraman et al (1985) opined, service quality is an abstract construct as a result of three features that are unique to service; which are intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability of production and consumption. The traditional approach,

views service quality as a comparison of consumer expectation with actual performance (Babakus & Boller, 1992). Contrary to this, Bitner and Hubbert (1994), viewed service quality as the consumer's overall impression of the relative inferiority or superiority of the firm and its services. Service quality entails customer expectations, customer perception and satisfaction.

Lewis & Boom 1989; Dale (2011), stated that the key element for business success is quality and that it is important for all businesses to put a lot of preferences on quality as consumers have become more selective and demanding of services they consume. Berry (1985) opined, quality is the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs. In the service industry, service quality is recognized as the degree of difference between consumer expectation and their perceptions of the service they receive (Parasuraman, Berry, 1985; Beoko, 2000; Zeithaml, 2002).

Parasuraman et al., (1988) developed a model to measure the expectation and perception towards any service, which he named as a SERVQUAL (service quality) model. In the retail service context, the model is based on the following five dimensions:

- Reliability: is concerned with the store's ability to perform the service accurately and dependably.
- Responsiveness: is related with the employees' willingness to help customers and provide prompt services.
- Assurance: is related with the employees' knowledge, courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
- Empathy: is related with caring, individualized attention given to customers or the ease of access, approachability and effort taken to understand customers' requirements.
- Tangibles: is all about the appearance of the physical facilities and material relayed at retail outlet.

Quality focused organizations gain competitive advantages over competitors on the market place both locally and internationally (Dale, 2011). Quality cannot be considered independently but only in relation to what is perceived. Zeithaml (1988), calls quality superiority; Parasuraman et al, (1990) sees service quality as exceeding what consumers expect from service providers. Thus, the conformance to requirements.

Gronroos (2001), described service quality in terms of seven perceived criteria which are mainly professionalism and skills, attitudes and behavior,

accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness, service recovery, service scape and reputation credibility. Aham & Nwokah (2008), argued that service quality is described when two standards of comparative element is experienced; quality is more generally conceptualized as an attitude, the consumer's global evaluation of a service offering. Furthermore, service quality is built up from a series of evaluated experiences and hence is less dynamic than satisfactions.

According to (Kumar and Barani 2012), service quality has long been accepted as the most essential marketing tool for retailers used to differentiate their retail offers, create competitive advantage and to enhance the customers' shopping experience. Nevertheless, maintaining excellent service quality within the stores is no simple task. Kumar and Barani (2012), further identified in their study that "tangibles, reliability, responsibility, competence, credibility, accessibility and customer knowledge are positively related to customer satisfaction.

Service quality is the ability of a service firm to hang onto customers (Kotler and Armstrong, 2009); in their opinion, customer retention is the best measure of service quality. Boulding (2009), developed a behavioral process model of perceived service quality relying on a Bayesian-like framework; to evaluate a service is more complex than evaluating a product as its defects can be detected meanwhile service is first purchased and then it is produced and consumed simultaneously (Zeithaml and Berry, 2002), this therefore calls for greater attention to be paid in service deliveries. To buttress the importance of service quality, Parasuraman (1990) claims, that to perform the measurement of user satisfaction, it is necessary to focus on the expectations and perceptions that the consumer has about the offered service.

### **Reliability**

Zeithaml (2001) opined, reliability is the most important dimension of service quality. It refers to the firm performing and completing their service with quality and accuracy as promised the customers; the firms deliver service as promised without errors that is, accurately. Reliability means that the firms delivers on it promises; promise about delivery, service provision, problem resolution and pricing.

### **Empathy**

This is the care and individual attention the firm provides its customers (Parasuraman, et al, 1985). It includes communication, access and understanding the needs of customers. In this service quality dimension, firms understand the problems of customers which results in the firm's giving the customers personalized attention which make them feel special and valued.

## CONSUMER EXPECTATION

Consumers' expectation about what constitutes good service vary from one business to another; expectations are also likely to vary in relation to differently positioned service providers in the same industry (Lovelock and Wright, 2002). The acquisition of information both from experience and the environment create service experience which has been operationalized by a number of authors as expectations. Olson and Dover (1976), described expectation as pre-purchase beliefs about service.

Consumer expectations have received increasing attention among researchers in the service sector. It has been explored in various research contexts, but have been most thoroughly investigated in the customer satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and service quality research studies (Zeithaml et al, 1993). There has been a consensus in the related literature that expectations serve as standards with which subsequent experiences are compared, resulting in evaluations of satisfaction.

Accordingly, Zeithaml et al, (1993) describes consumer expectations as desires or wants. Three related terms have been circulated within the literature on types of expectation: "ideal expectations" (proposed by Miller, 1977) meaning the "wish for" level of performance, "desired expectations" defined as "the level at which the customer wants the product to perform" (Zeithaml et al, 1983), and "normative expectation" addressing the way performance is taken for customers' complete satisfaction.

In addition to the two approaches above, Zeithaml et al, (1993) describes a list of other types of customer expectations standards; they are: "minimum tolerable expectations" which refers to the lowest level of performance acceptable to the customers, "deserved expectations" reflecting the customers' subjective evaluation of their own product investment and experience based norms which captures not only the ideal but also the realistic aspects of customer expectations.

In attempt to conceptualize the levels of customer expectation of service, Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, (1993) differentiated three kinds of service:

- Predicted service: the level of service customers believe they are likely to get.
- Desired service: the level of service representing a blend of what customers believe can be and should be provided.

- Adequate service: the minimum level of service customers are willing to accept.

These authors however, devised the term "zone of tolerance", which refers to the gap between the desired and predicted service. This study adopts two of this levels (the adequate and desired service) in measuring customer expectation.

### Service Quality and Consumer Expectation

Consumer expectation play a key role in consumers' evaluation of service quality (Gronroos, 1984; Lehtinen 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985; Zeithaml et al, 1993). In the services sector, to increase customer repurchase intention, it is crucial to enhance service quality. Enhancing service quality entails fostering customer satisfaction; necessitated by being aware of customer perception of service experience which is obtained by identifying customer expectations (Gronroos, 1984).

### METHODOLOGY

The population of this study consists of customers that patronize three selected online stores operational in Port Harcourt, these online stores were selected because of their considerable longer experience in online shopping systems. They include: Jumia, Jiji and Konga online stores. The actual size of their population could not be ascertained as records were not available, a sample of 120 was conveniently selected for this study. According to Dillman (2000), a sample size of 100 and above is sufficient to provide a good representation of the population and present a concise findings. After data cleaning, 20 copies were found invalid while 100 were valid and useful. Data was analyzed using Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Decision Rule: Reject null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) if  $PV < 0.05$  and  $\rho > 0$ . But accept  $H_0$  if Otherwise.

- 0.1 and above = positive relationship
- 0.1 and above = Negative relationship

**Table1: Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Reliability and Adequate Service**

**Correlations**

		Reliability	Adequate Service
Spearman's rho	Reliability	1.000	.938*
	Correlation Coefficient	.	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	100	100
Adequate Service	Correlation Coefficient	.938*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	100	100

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2019. SPSS 20 Output

Our first hypothesis shows a significant relationship between Reliability and Adequate Service with a coefficient of 0.938 and a p-value of 0.000 which is

less than alpha of 0.05. we therefore reject the null hypothesis

Table2: Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Reliability and Desired Service

**Correlations**

		Reliability	Desired Service
Spearman's rho	Reliability	1.000	.852**
	Correlation Coefficient	.	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	100	100
Desired Service	Correlation Coefficient	.852**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	100	100

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

Source: Field Survey Data, 2019. SPSS 20 Output

Our second hypothesis shows a significant relationship between Reliability and Desired Service with a coefficient of 0.852 and a p-value of 0.000 which is

less than alpha of 0.05. We also reject the null hypothesis

Table 3: Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Empathy and Adequate Service

**Correlations**

		Empathy	Adequate Service
Spearman's rho	Empathy	1.000	.740*
	Correlation Coefficient	.	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	100	100
Adequate Service	Correlation Coefficient	.740*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	100	100

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2019. SPSS 20 Output

Our third hypothesis shows a significant relationship between Empathy and Adequate Service with a coefficient of 0.740 and a p-value of 0.000 which is

less than alpha of 0.05. We also reject the null hypothesis

Table 4: Correlation Analysis showing the Relationship between Empathy and Desired Service

		Empathy	Desired Service
Spearman's rho	Empathy	1.000	.831
	Correlation Coefficient	.	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	100	100
	N	.000	1.000
Desired Service	Desired Service	.831	.
	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	100	100
	N	100	100

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Field Survey Data, 2019. SPSS 20 Output

Our fourth hypothesis shows a significant relationship between Empathy and Adequate Service with a coefficient of 0.831 and a p-value of 0.000 which is less than alpha of 0.05. We also reject the null hypothesis

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Table 1, 2,3 and 4 above reveals a Spearman rank correlation coefficient of 0.938, 0.852, 0.740 and 0.831 with probability value (PV) = 0.000 respectively. These results show that reliability and empathy have a very strong and positive significant relationship with adequate and desired services of selected online stores in Port Harcourt. Thus, we reject the null hypotheses 1, 2, 3 and 4, then accept the alternate hypotheses which states that reliability and empathy has a significant relationship with adequate and desired services of selected online stores in Port Harcourt.

The findings indicate that both the presence of reliability and empathy in service delivery process, ensures that the customers of online stores get the adequate and desired services they pay for and expect from the firms.

**CONCLUSION**

The study concludes that service quality has a very strong association with consumer expectation of selected online stores in Port Harcourt.

**Recommendation**

The continuous adoption of both reliability and empathy in the delivery of services as it culminates into the consumers' expectations being met which leads to further increase in the firms' profitability. Hence, online stores operational in Port Harcourt should ensure its adequate and continuous use.

**Practical Implication**

This study provides the online stores operational in Port Harcourt with ample ideas on the importance of reliability and empathy in order to ensure effective and efficient service deliveries which

will in turn increase its profitability. This study will also serve as a guide to online firms, especially in these contemporary times that service quality has been recognized as a strategic tool for attaining operational efficacy and better performance in the dynamic business world.

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