

PREDICTORS OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY

Tarisai Fritz Rukuni, University of the Free State
Reabetswe Gladys Parkies, University of the Free State
Amos Khoza, University of the Free State

ABSTRACT

The South African fast-food industry is facing excessive competition amidst a rise in economic and household income constraints. Main players in the South Africa fast-food industry include the Kentucky Fried Chicken, Steers and Wimpy with the largest market share of 16 %, 11% and 10%, respectively. Achieving high service quality that leads to customer satisfaction is of paramount importance for these fast-food outlets. Among others, an understanding of customers' opinions of the predictors of service quality and applying it in creating efficient service delivery is of paramount importance to achieve consumer satisfaction. However, extant literature observes that most fast-food outlets ignore the importance of incorporating service quality when devising their competitive strategies. Consequently, such approach has resulted in the loss of market share. It was upon this background that the objectives of this study were two-fold, thus to (i) assess customers' perceptions of service quality; and (ii) determine how service quality influence customer satisfaction. A quantitative descriptive case study approach was conducted to collect data from a sample size of 300 customers using a structured questionnaire at fast-food outlets at the Menlyn Park mall in the City of Tshwane in South Africa. SPSS v28 was utilised to conduct descriptive and multivariate analyses including mean, standard deviation, correlation, and regression analyses. This study found that customers had negative perceptions of service quality measured through empathy, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and tangibility. Significance evidence also showed that there is a positive relationship between service quality predictors and customer satisfaction. From this study it is recommended that management of fast-food outlets should constantly improve their levels of empathy, responsiveness, reliability, assurance, and tangibility. Also, this study provides invaluable insights on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the context of the fast-food industry in South Africa an area that shows evidence of limited research.

Keywords: Service quality, Customer satisfaction, Fast-food, City of Tshwane, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The South African (SA) Fast-food industry is facing excessive competition amidst a rise in economic and household income constraints (Tuff, 2013). According to Business Tech (2015), the main players in this industry in SA include Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Steers and Wimpy with the largest market share of 16 %, 11 % and 10 %, respectively. Achieving high levels of service quality within the fast-food industry is a recommended strategy to gain customer satisfaction. Also, an understanding of customers' perceptions towards the predictors of service quality while applying such knowledge to inform service

delivery is associated with customer satisfaction (Brady & Cronin, 2001; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Akhtar, 2011; Wang & Wu, 2014). However, the extant literature shows that there is limited research that investigated the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction within the context of fast-food outlets in the City of Tshwane in SA. Based on such evidence, one can conclude that management within the fast-food outlets in the City of Tshwane in SA region have generally excluded a research agenda on the predictors of service quality and customer satisfaction (Wang & Wu, 2014; Tsai, Liao & Hsieh, 2014). Also, authors, for example, Tan, Oriade and Fallon (2014) bemoan the fact that most fast-food outlets are yet to realise the importance of incorporating the voice of the customers in developing service quality strategies. Furthermore, Harr (2008) observed that understanding predictors of service quality and customers’ satisfaction is rarely considered an issue of important by fast food management. Also, as already indicated, the SA literature as it stands has not yet sufficiently addressed service quality and customer satisfaction within the fast-food context which should considered a knowledge gap.

The SA fast-food industry has continued to experience tremendous growth in the past five years. The sector has experienced a sharp growth of consumers who are 16 years and above, from 66% in 2016 to 80% in 2021 (Maharaj, 2022). The exponential growth in the SA fast-food industry did not go unnoticed. Consequently, it has continued to attract competition from both global and domestic players (Ivy, 2008; Mataranyika, 2016; Maharaj, 2022). According to Business Tech news (2015), the South African fast-food industry saw the recent entry of two biggest brands in the world, Starbucks, and Krispy Kreme. Such entry has contributed to competition within the SA fast-food industry.

As mentioned in the previous section, South Africa’s top three fast food chains are KFC, Steers and Wimpy. According to Business Tech News (2016) and Maharaj (2022), the KFC, Steers and Wimpy are in the market with many other big global and domestic brands. Amongst other challenges such as rising concern of health consciousness and depreciating household income value, competition has taken a toll within the SA fast-food industry in recent times. Figure 1 provides a depiction of the competition experienced in the SA fast-food industry.

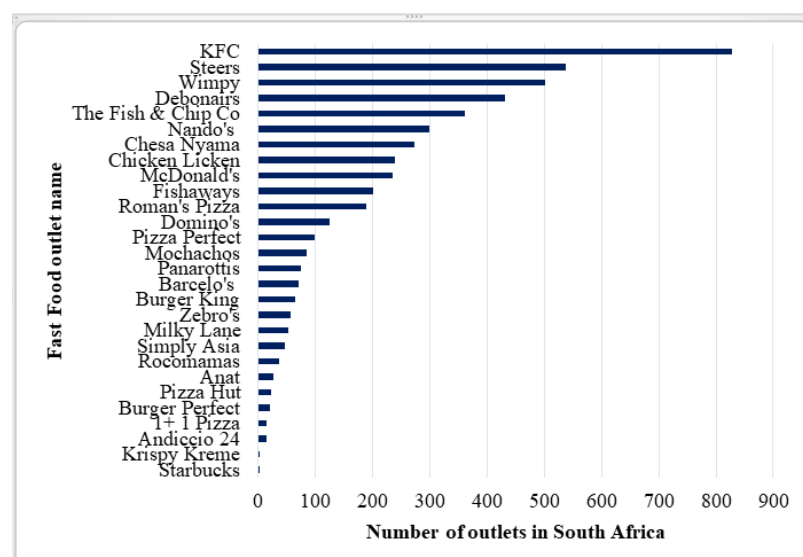


FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF MAJOR FAST-FOOD OUTLETS IN SA

Given the level of competition in the SA fast-food industry, survival can be assured through an engagement of customer perceptions of service quality as well as its influence on customer satisfaction (Mosahab et al., 2010; Jiewanto, Laurens & Nelloh, 2012; Prabha, 2012; Gergaud et al., 2015). Understanding customers' opinions of service quality and tailor make service delivery within the fast food industry is among one of the strategies that can be used to fight competition. The aforementioned background further justifies the need for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in this section is organized in two parts, thus (i) the theoretical and conceptual background and (ii) empirical review and hypothesis development. Authors (Cardozzo, 1965; Oliver, 1980; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Parasuraman, Zeithaml et al., 1988) in the past 57 years have contributed to theories of service quality and customer satisfaction. Such theories include the expectancy disconfirmation theory, the value-precept theory, attribution theory, equity theory, the comparison level theory, the evaluation congruity theory, the person-situation fit theory, the performance-importance theory, the dissonance theory, servqual theory and the contrast theory (Cardozzo, 1965; Oliver, 1980; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Although a number of theories exist, for the purpose of this study four theories (i.e., dissonance theory, contrast theory, expectancy disconfirmation theory, servqual theory) were of particular of interest shall be discussed in acceptable detail.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

The dissonance theory: The dissonance theory states that customers would experience cognitive dissonance when they receive a lower-level service than what they have been anticipating (Robbins, Judge, Odendaal & Roodt, 2016). In the fast-food environment customer do experience cognitive dissonance when they realize that the service is not as good as they expected. The dissonance is, however, reduced when a customer searches for attributes within the service that he or she regards as satisfactory. However, this theory has not received much support from researchers (Oliver, 1980), partly because it is not clear whether customers would engage in such discrepancy adjustment.

The contrast theory: The contrast theory states that a customer magnifies the discrepancy that is obtained between the received service and the expected. According to Oliver and De Sarbo (1988) and Robbins et al. (2016), the contrast theory predicts that service performance below expectations will be rated poorer than it is in reality. However, this theory is criticised because it was only tested in tightly controlled environment which makes it difficult to tell if the hypotheses tested could be accepted if applied on a survey situation. The current study was tested on a real situation involving fast-food outlets at the Menlyn Park mall in the City of Tshwane which is a real-world environment.

The expectancy disconfirmation theory: The Expectancy Disconfirmation Paradigm implies that customers purchase fast food services while having a pre-purchase expectation about the anticipated performance (Robbins et al., 2016). It is the expectation level which will be regarded as the standard against which the service is judged. Once fast-food customer use the service, its outcome is compared against expectations. The customer became either satisfied or dissatisfied as a result of positive or negative difference between expectations and perceptions. According to Robbins et al. (2016), the expectancy disconfirmation theory is

regarded the most promising theoretical framework for the assessment of customer satisfaction hence it appropriate for this study.

Customer satisfaction: Customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry is achieved through the understanding of customers' service quality needs while ensuring that delivery is matched accordingly (Frost & Kumar, 2000; Sharkey, Horel, Han & Huber, 2009; Quyet, Vinh & Chang, 2015). Zeithaml et al., (2009) define customer satisfaction as a customer's assessment of a product or service in terms of whether it has met the expected needs and wants. Gronroos (1984) states that an organisation, for example, a fast-food outlet can achieve customer satisfaction through ensuring that services are provided according to customers' needs and wants. According to Harr (2008) and Kotler and Keller (2012), matching customer's needs and service delivery is important in achieving customer satisfaction. Also, to be noted is that a service delivery that does not match customer expectations result in customer dissatisfaction. On the other hand, exceeding customer expectations lead to excess level of customer satisfaction.

The servqual theory: In order to understand the concept of service quality the servqual theory proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) was used in this study. Service quality relies on the ability of the organisation to provide service quality sub-constructs in the right specifications as recommended by Parasuraman et al. (1988). In the servqual theory, Parasuraman et al. (1988) state that service quality is explained through the organisation's reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness and empathy. Kotler and Keller (2016) further provides an explanation of these service quality sub-constructs in the context of a fast-food outlet.

Assurance is reflected in the capability of the fast-food employees to stick to the policies of the institution in a way that retains the trust of customers. The actions of employees that involve body language should give confidence to the customers. To emphasise the point made by Sharkey et al. (2009), Ibrahim, Rahman and Yasin (2012) and Kotler and Keller (2012) complement that an assuring behavior is expected from the fast-food employees.

H₁: There is a positive relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction at the fast-food outlet in the City of Tshwane.

Reliability is referred to as the ability of a fast-food outlet to provide what it promised to provide (Tahir & Abu-Bakar, 2007; Kotler & Keller, 2016). This aspect relates to the capacity of the kitchen team to cook food so that it tastes as advertised on the menu. This makes it important for the fast food to do everything possible to ensure that the customer receives the order as expected. It is upon this background that this study hypothesized that:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction at the fast-food outlet in the City of Tshwane.

Responsiveness of the fast-food outlets is reflected in the ability to respond to promptly to customer orders (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Such a scenario is created through a well laid out operational strategy. The needs and wants of customers should be provided as soon as they are needed. It is upon this background that the current study hypothesized that:

H₃: There is a positive relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction at the fast-food outlet in the City of Tshwane.

Empathy relates to the expression of warm emotions towards the customers. The sustenance of empathy within a fast-food outlet is much achieved when employees begin to practice emotional intelligence. Service quality increases with an increase in employee empathy (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It is upon this background that the current study hypothesized that:

H₄: *There is a positive relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction at the fast-food outlet in the City of Tshwane.*

Tangibility refers to the tangible aspects of the fast food service provider. Gergaud et al. (2015) agree that tangibility pertains physical aspects such as the chairs, tables, table clothes and staff uniform. These are meant to provide further validation of the service provided by fast food outlet. It is upon this background that the current study hypothesized that:

H₅: *There is a positive relationship between tangibility and customer satisfaction at the fast-food outlet in the City of Tshwane.*

The conceptual model: The conceptual model given in this section is grounded in the dissonance theory, contrast theory, expectancy disconfirmation theory and the servqual theory (Cardozzo, 1965; Oliver, 1980; Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1988). It is conceptualized that there is an existing relationship between service quality (i.e., empathy, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and tangibility) and customer satisfaction. The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 2 as follows.

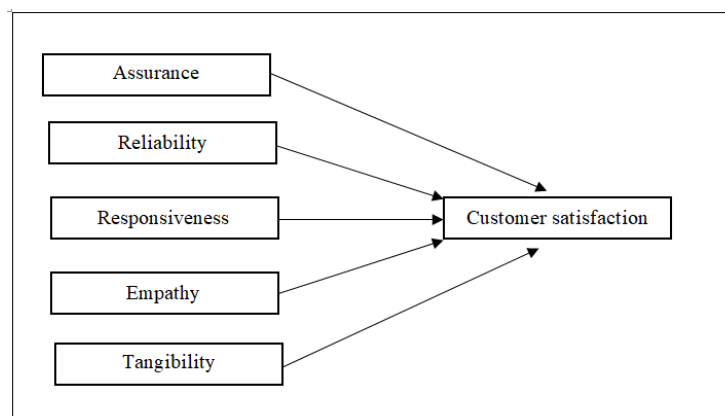


FIGURE 2
CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual model in Figure 2 presents five sub-constructs of service quality as predictors of customer satisfaction. In this study, customer satisfaction occupies the role of an outcome. Thus, a relationship is measured between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Empirical review: Various studies were carried out in the past to investigate service quality and customer satisfaction (Pollack, 2009; Yeo, 2009; Butt & Rehman, 2010; Naik et al., 2010; Cardona & Bravo, 2012; Tan et al., 2014; Gergaud et al., 2015). In their studies, and Yeo (2009), Ahmed et al. (2012) and Cardona & Bravo (2012) found that empathy is an important determinant of customer satisfaction. Since there is little evidence of research carried out in the SA service quality context, it was important in this study to find out whether empathy is related to customer satisfaction within the SA fast-food industry. Studies carried out by Ibrahim et al. (2012) and Serban, Gruiescu and Mitruit (2013) found that

tangibility is related to customer satisfaction. However, Al Khattab & Aldehayyat (2011) and Peer & Mpinganjira (2012) found tangibles to be performing very low when compared to other service quality constructs, for example, empathy, reliability and assurance within the general hospital industry. It was, therefore, important for this study to also find out customers' perception of tangibility as well as its relationship with customer satisfaction within the context of the fast-food industry. Studies conducted by Boonitt & Rompho, (2012) and Seng (2013) found that assurance such as skills and knowledge possessed by staff members, their approachability, enthusiasm, personal organisation and experience are important aspects that influence customer satisfaction. On the contrary, Zullig et al., (2011), Serban, et al. (2013) and Suarman, Aziz and Yasin (2013) found that assurance is not related to customer satisfaction. The aforementioned disagreement in literature made it important to carry out this study within the fast-food industry and find out the impact of assurance on customer satisfaction. Buultjens and Robinson's (2011) study at a higher education institution in Australia found reliability features such as academic records, financial aid, the cashiers' office and international services to be related to customer satisfaction. De Jager & Gbadamosi (2010) also found responsiveness to be positively related to overall customers' satisfaction. As already indicated, extant literature shows that there is limited research on service quality and customer satisfaction within the SA fast-food context. This study, therefore, sought to close this theoretical gap in the body of knowledge.

Research and methodology: This study was carried out using a positivist research paradigm (Ryan, 2018; Park, Konge & Artino, 2020; Usher, 2021). In line with the requirements of the positivist research paradigm, a quantitative descriptive research design was also used to understand customers' perceptions of service quality as well as its influence on customer satisfaction within the fast-food industry in the City of Tshwane (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). An adapted service quality and customer satisfaction structured questionnaire developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and later used by Peer and Mpinganjira (2012) was used to collect data. The self-completion questionnaire was administered 300 sample fast-food customers at the Menlyn Park mall restaurants in the City of Tshwane, in South Africa. Before carrying out the research, a pilot study was carried out from 10 fast-food customers at the Menlyn Park mall to ensure that questions are clear and understandable. The quota sampling techniques was used to ensure that the study sample is balanced between male and female. Also, important to note is the use of the convenience sampling technique in this study. The use of a convenience sampling technique was considered as a mechanism to select study respondents timeously in a cost-effective manner (McDaniel & Gates, 1996; Mouton, 2001; Babbie & Mouton, 2006; Best & Kahn, 2006; Stratton, 2021). SPSS v.28 was used to conduct descriptive and multivariate analyses including mean, standard deviation, reliability, validity, correlation and regression analysis to assess customers' perception of service quality and its relationship with customer satisfaction (Calder et al., 1981; Cook & Thompson, 2000; Industrial Research Institute, 2010; Blumberg et al., 2011). It should also be noted that ethics approval for this study was granted. Informed consent was also obtained from all participating respondents. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participating fast-food outlets. The researchers reported all results honestly without modifications. The right of respondents of agreeing or disagreeing to partake in the study were respected. The respondents had the right to withdrawal at any time from the research. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and care was exercised when drafting questions to ensure that they are not viewed as invasive (Evanschitzky et al., 2007; Field, 2009; Stangor, 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Customers' Perceptions of Service Quality And Customer Satisfaction

Findings relating to customers' perception towards service quality constructs on each of the 26 items, five service quality sub-constructs, and customer satisfaction are provided in Table 1. A five-point Likert scale with 5 = 'strongly agree' and 1 = 'strongly disagree' was used to measure each item relating to customers' perception towards service quality. Perceptions on each of the five constructs were calculated as a summated average of the items used under each dimension. Overall customer satisfaction was calculated as a summated average of all the items used under the construct.

Table 1			
PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY ON ALL RESPONDENTS – DESCRIPTIVE (N = 300)			
	Dimensions and items	Mean	Standard deviation
	Assurance	2.08	0.70
A1	Restaurant staff instil confidence in customers	1.66	0.69
A2	Restaurant staff are knowledgeable enough to answer all customers' questions	2.36	0.76
A3	Restaurant staff are consistently courteous	2.20	0.70
A4	Customers are made to feel safe in their interaction with restaurant staff, that is, their concerns and privacy are assured	2.13	0.68
	Reliability	1.97	0.77
RL1	The restaurant provides menu services at promised time	1.95	0.76
RL2	Restaurant staff are dependable in handling customers' concerns	1.99	0.78
RL3	The restaurant maintains error-free bill records of customers	2.13	0.80
RL4	Billing records (i.e. meal cost) of customers are accurate	1.82	0.77
	Responsiveness	2.07	0.75
RS1	The restaurant keeps customers informed of when the services will be performed	2.06	0.76
RS2	Restaurant staff always provide prompt service to customers	2.21	0.75
RS3	Restaurant staff are always willing to help customers	2.01	0.76
RS4	Restaurant staff are never too busy to respond to customers requests	2.03	0.74
	Empathy	1.93	0.74
E1	Restaurant staff give customers personal attention	1.79	0.70
E2	Restaurant staff treat customers with a warm and caring attitude	1.95	0.75
E3	The practice at the restaurant has customers' best interest at heart	1.85	0.69
E4	Restaurant staff are understanding and sensitive towards customers' feelings of discomfort	1.96	0.77
E5	The restaurant's operating hours are convenient to customers	2.10	0.83
	Tangibles	2.05	0.76
T1	Restaurant facilities and equipment (e.g. cutlery) are up to date	2.04	0.79
T2	Cleanliness and hygiene standards at the restaurant are maintained	1.96	0.73
T3	Staff always appear neat and professional	2.17	0.78
T4	Physical facilities at the restaurant for example waiting areas and tables are visually appealing	2.10	0.75
T5	Restaurant posters are visually appealing materials	2.00	0.79
	Customer satisfaction	1.96	0.71
SB1	Overall, I am very satisfied with the quality of services provided at restaurants	2.05	0.75
SB2	Overall, I am very satisfied with the way I have been treated at restaurant	1.92	0.66

SB3	I would be willing to return to a restaurant in future if need be	1.89	0.70
SB4	I would recommend a restaurant to my family and friends	2.00	0.74

Table 1 shows that customers had negative perception of service quality at the fast-food outlets at the Menlyn Park mall in the City of Tshwane. This is evidenced by mean values that were between the scale 1.0 to 2.45 that signifies a negative perception towards service quality. Empathy was the lowest with mean value of 1.93, it was followed by reliability with mean value 1.97, tangibility with mean value 2.05, responsiveness with mean value 2.07 and assurance with mean value 2.08. This is illustrated with the aid of a diagram as follows.

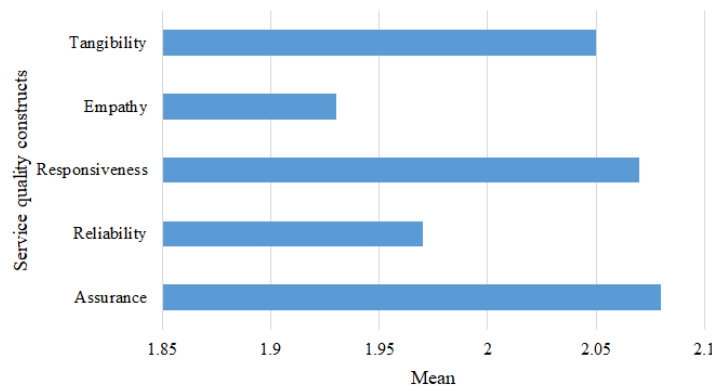


FIGURE 3
PERCEPTION OF CUSTOMERS TOWARDS SERVICE QUALITY AT THE FAST-FOOD OUTLETS

Overall, Figure 3 shows that customers had a negative perception towards service quality of the Fast Foods outlets found at the Menlyn shopping centre in the City of Tshwane. This is evidenced by mean values between 1 and 2.49 as given in Figure 3. Items that were found to be having the worst negative perception include (A1) restaurant staff instill confidence in customers, (RL1) the restaurant provides menu services at promised time, (RL2) restaurant staff are dependable in handling customers’ concerns, (RL4) billing records (i.e. meal cost) of customers are accurate, (E1) restaurant staff give customers personal attention, (E2) restaurant staff treat customers with a warm and caring attitude, (E3) the practice at the restaurant has customers’ best interest at heart, (E4) restaurant staff are understanding and sensitive towards customers’ feelings of discomfort and (T2) cleanliness and hygiene standards at the restaurant are maintained.

Results on Reliability and Validity

The assessment of the validity of the measuring instrument was achieved by means of confirmatory factor analysis using SPSS version 28. The 26 items of service quality and customer satisfaction were factor analysed to test for construct validity. Out of 26 items tested, one item A2 was removed from further analysis since it could not reach a recommended 0.4 threshold (Golafshani, 2003; Gilbert et al., 2005; Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2006; Field, 2009; Malhotra, 2010). The 25 items remaining were taken for further analysis as they demonstrated significant evidence about the correlation between the majority of factors. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
RESULTS OF VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY ANALYSIS ON 26

SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ITEMS						
	FACTORS					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
A1	.51					
A2	.34					
A3	.56					
A4	.59					
RL1		.66				
RL2		.62				
RL3		.71				
RL4		.68				
RS1			.50			
RS2			.45			
RS3			.54			
RS4			.48			
E1				.70		
E2				.74		
E3				.68		
E4				.79		
E5				.64		
T1					.67	
T2					.70	
T3					.57	
T4					.67	
T5					.65	
SB1						.55
SB2						.54
SB3						.58
SB4						.56
α	.70	.89	.93	.91	.89	.89

Having established the validity of the instrument, it was important to assess the reliability of each of the six service quality and customer satisfaction sub-scales. Reliability tests were measured using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Following standard practice, the minimum threshold of 0.7 recommended by Field (2009) and Tavakol and Dennick (2011) was used. In all the six sub constructs, the Cronbach's alpha met this threshold. After having established both the construct validity and reliability of the questionnaire, it was concluded that the items used to measure service quality and customer satisfaction, were indeed reliable. Thus, researchers proceeded with further analysis.

Results on Correlation Analysis

The underlying assumptions of conducting correlation and regression analysis were well met in this study. Correlation and regression are most suitable for a study which seeks to test a relationship between variables. They are also appropriate for a large sample size, such as 300 respondents utilised in this research. Responses utilised in the questionnaire were continuous in nature, since they were in the form of a five-point Likert scale. In order to test the relationships between service quality constructs (assurance, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and tangibility) and customer satisfaction, correlation and regression analyses were performed.

Note that customer satisfaction as a dependent variable was measured as a summated average of eight items, namely 'Overall, I am very satisfied with the quality of services provided at restaurants', 'Overall, I am very satisfied with the way I have been treated at

restaurant', 'I would be willing to return to a restaurant in future if need be', and 'I would recommend a restaurant to my family and friends'. A five-point Likert scale with 1 = 'Strongly disagree' and 5 = 'Strongly agree' was also used to measure items relating to customer satisfaction.

Correlation analyses was used to measure the strength of relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Table 3 presents a summary of the results of the correlation analyses. The Pearson correlation (r) indicates the strength and direction (negative or positive) of the correlation, while the p-value indicates the probability that the given r-value is seen by chance. The (r) value 1 indicate a positive perfect correlation, (r) value - 1 is a negative perfect correlation, (r) value 0.5 indicate a moderate positive correlation, (r) value - 0.5 indicate a moderate negative correlation while (r) value 0 has no correlation.

	1	2	3	4	5
Assurance	1				
Reliability	.37 *	1			
Responsiveness	.49 *	.34 *	1		
Empathy	.64 *	.53 *	.40 *	1	
Tangibility	.36 *	.65*	.23 *	.46 *	1
Overall satisfaction	.34 *	.38*	.59 *	.48*	.51 *

Table 3 shows that there is an existing moderate positive relationship among all the service quality sub constructs, as well as with each of the service quality sub constructs and overall customer satisfaction.

Regression Analysis and Hypotheses Test

After having observed the correlation of the five constructs of service quality (i.e., assurance, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and tangibility) among themselves, as well as to overall customer satisfaction was quite high Table 4, it was instructive to test how these constructs influenced overall customer satisfaction. Based on the findings Table 4 the hypotheses were tested as follows:

Based on results ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.34$, $\beta = 0.34$), hypothesis H1 which states that there is positive relationship between assurance and customers' overall satisfaction with the fast food outlets can be accepted at $p < 0.001$ significant level. This means that an increase in assurance attributes will lead to an increase in the overall customer satisfaction which is consistent with the findings in a study by Pollack (2009), Boonitt & Rompho, (2012) and Seng (2013) who found assurance to be significantly related to overall customer satisfaction.

Based on results ($p < 0.17$, $r = 0.38$, $\beta = 0.38$), hypothesis H2 stating that there is positive relationship between reliability and customers' overall satisfaction with the fast food outlets is accepted at $p < 0.001$ significant level. An increase in reliability will result in an increase in overall customer satisfaction. This confirms Bultjens and Robinson's (2011) results that found that aspects related to reliability are important in determining overall customer satisfaction.

Based on results ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.59$, $\beta = 0.59$), hypothesis H3 which states that there is a positive relationship between responsiveness and customers' overall satisfaction with the fast food outlets is accepted at $p < 0.001$ significant level. It can be seen that improvement in responsiveness within fast food outlets can lead to the overall customer satisfaction. This is consistent with De Jager & Gbadamosi (2010) and Arena et al. (2010), meaning that

attributes related to responsiveness within a fast-food outlet are related to the overall customer satisfaction.

Based on regression results ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.64$, $\beta = 0.64$), hypothesis H4 which states that there is positive relationship between empathy and customers' overall satisfaction with the fast food outlet can be accepted at $p < 0.001$ significant level. From this finding, it can be noted that empathy is positively associated with overall customer satisfaction. This finding is consistent with Yeo (2009), Ahmed et al. (2012), Rahman, Khan and Haque (2012) and Cardona & Bravo (2012) studies, which confirm that empathy is important in determining overall customer satisfaction.

Based on results ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.36$, $\beta = 0.36$), hypothesis H5 which states that there is a positive relationship between tangibles and customers' overall satisfaction with the fast-food outlets can be accepted at $p < 0.001$ significant level. Hence, it can be confirmed that tangibles of the fast-food outlet can lead to the overall customer satisfaction. This is in line with Ibrahim et al. (2012) and Serban et al. (2013) findings that show that tangibles are significantly related to overall customer satisfaction. On the contrary, the finding is different from Al Khattab & Aldehayyat (2011) and Peer & Mpinganjira (2012) who found that tangibles are not closely correlated to overall customer satisfaction in service organisations.

The listed hypotheses are based on the results of regression analysis done as shown in Table 4 also contains Alpha and regression coefficients, SEB which is the standard error of the coefficient of determination, β which is the standardised beta coefficient, and R2 which is the coefficient of determination as used to measure the explanatory power of predictor constructs (service quality constructs) to the outcome construct (customer satisfaction).

	B	SEB	β	t	Sig	R²	Hypothesis
(Constant)	4.27	.40		10.75			
Perceived empathy	.37	.04	0.64	9.52	0.000*	0.27	Accept H1
(Constant)	3.81	.41		9.26			
Perceived tangibles	.39	.04	0.36	10.31	0.000*	0.19	Accept H2
(Constant)	4.02	.67		6.00			
Perceived responsiveness	.35	.05	0.59	7.51	0.000*	0.26	Accept H3
(Constant)	3.47	.68		5.08			
Perceived assurance	.51	.06	0.34	8.19	0.000*	0.14	Accept H4
(Constant)	5.02	.42		11.90			
Perceived reliability	.29	.04	0.38	7.10	0.000*	0.20	Accept H5

The higher the value of R2, the greater the explanatory power of the predictor variable. The significance level and t-statistics are also shown. The β is used to measure the relationship between independent variables and dependant variables in the study.

CONCLUSION

In overall, it can be concluded that customers had a negative perception towards the five sub-constructs of service quality tested in this study. These factors included empathy, reliability, tangibility, responsiveness and assurance. It is also concluded that there is a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The results show that all constructs of service quality (tangibles ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.36$, $\beta = 0.36$), responsiveness ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.59$, $\beta = 0.59$), reliability ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.38$, $\beta = 0.38$), empathy ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.64$, $\beta = 0.64$) and assurance ($p < 0.001$, $r = 0.34$, $\beta = 0.34$) are positively related to customer satisfaction. It is also concluded that service quality constructs influence customers'

satisfaction at varying levels. This is obtained from the explanatory power of each construct. In this research, empathy was found to be having a higher explanatory power on customer satisfaction. Empathy was followed by reliability, tangibility, responsiveness and assurance, respectively.

This study implies that there is a positive relationship between empathy and the overall customer satisfaction. From this finding, it can be noted that empathy is positively correlated to customer satisfaction. This finding is consistent who found that empathy aspects are important in achieving a customer satisfaction within the fast-food industry. The current study also implies that tangibles are related to customer satisfaction. who found that tangibles are significantly related to customer satisfaction. However, the finding in this present study is different found that tangibles are not closely correlated to customer satisfaction. This study further implies that there is a positive relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction. This is consistent with and meaning that attributes related to responsiveness are related to customer satisfaction. It is implied that there is a positive relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction. This is in line with who found that assurance is significantly related to customer satisfaction. Also, this study implies that there is a positive relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction. This confirms results that found that reliability is an important predictor of customer satisfaction.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study show that customers had low perceptions of service quality and customer satisfaction. This reflects dissatisfaction among the customers at the fast-food outlets at the Menlyn Park mall in the City of Tshwane. Dissatisfaction results to loss of loyalty, decrease in market share, diminishing revenue and profits. Implications for practice are provided within the context of the fast-food industry so as to improve customer satisfaction.

Improve Restaurant Facilities and Equipment

Tangibles were perceived negative in this study. It is therefore important for management of the fast-food outlets to invest in improving their facilities and equipment. In order to have state-of-the-art facilities, management should outsource the services to an interior decor organisation. It will help in coming up with an excellent lay-out of the restaurant reception and sitting area. Apart from the layout, the fast-food outlets also need to benchmark themselves with the best fast food outlets in the industry.

Employ a Facility Maintenance Plan

Although new facilities can be instituted, it is necessary that an efficient and effective maintenance plan is adopted. The fast-food outlets need to be aware of when repairs are necessary on the existing facilities. This would require a facility maintenance department to be created. This will help to prevent the early dilapidation of equipment. A time frame for repairs should be in place. This should be managed by a selected standing committee.

Improve on Cleaning The Facilities

According to the findings, it was reflected that the cleaning of restaurant facilities is not done appropriately. It is important that cleaners are made to realise the importance of their duty towards customer satisfaction. Hence, it is important that they are encouraged to carry out their job as effectively as possible. Support facilities, like bins should be placed in all waiting

and sitting areas of the fast-food outlets. This makes it easy for customers and staff members to dispose waste material without littering.

Hire and Train Knowledgeable Employees

The Human Resources Department needs to hire employees who are knowledgeable in their area of work. It makes it easy for them to respond to customers' questions. This will also instil confidence in customers. It is important that job descriptions and specifications are clearly laid out and followed. Employees should not only possess technical skills, but also interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Training assists employees to adopt warm emotions when they deal with customers. It will go a long way in creating and maintaining a good relationship. It will also lead to loyalty and retention, which are needed for the success of the fast-food outlets.

Create Employee Key Result Areas Around Customers' Needs

It is indicated in the findings that restaurant staff are too busy to respond to customers' request. In order to eradicate this situation, key result areas of employees should be set to address customers' needs. This will help to align the activities of employees towards customer satisfaction.

Make Processes That Deliver Customers' Needs Simple and Easy

In order to achieve quick delivery of customers' needs, it is important that processes are made simple and easy. Sometimes employees are not able to quickly respond to customers' needs due to complicated processes that surround service delivery. It is important that unnecessary steps in service delivery processes are eliminated as they are a deterrent in the system.

Employee Empowerment

In most cases, employees are not able to respond quickly to customers' needs as they are not empowered to take certain decisions. Management needs to realise that front-line employees, such as waiters are the most critical employees in a service encounter in the fast-food industry. They need to be empowered in making decisions so that they do not waste time seeking or waiting for approval on trivial issues. Their empowerment will lead to quick responses on customers' needs. In order to empower sincerely and completely, employees need to be trained and so that a feeling of trust and confidence is created.

Institute Employee Motivation

It is important that management ensure that the system within which employees work, enhances motivation. Compensation, recognition and work environment should be carefully designed to motivate employees to achieve organisational as well as personal objectives the fast-food outlets needs to make use of both monetary and non-monetary rewards, like promotional gifts, sponsored trips and awards. The work environment should reflect care for its employees by introducing personal and career counselling, career development and special leave for family responsibilities. This will lead to employee satisfaction, which is a necessary condition for customer satisfaction. Happy employees lead to happy customers, as emotions are contagious.

Activate the Suggestion And Complaints Desk

There should be an easy and continuous communication between customers and the fast-food outlets. This can be facilitated by ensuring that it is possible for customers to forward suggestions and complaints. Although some fast-food outlets have suggestion boxes, they should be put to effective use. Suggestion boxes need to be checked constantly. Suggestions and complaints need to be addressed in time. This would build the needed trust between customers and the fast-food outlets. Customer loyalty and retention will be a result.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It has to be noted that this study was limited to a sample of customers within the fast-food industry at Menlyn Park mall in the City of Tshwane, South Africa. Hence, its findings cannot be generalised to all the restaurants in South Africa. Data was collected over a short duration of time, making it a cross-sectional study. This gave an indication of fast-food industry customers' perception within one month, excluding the change of opinions that could have taken place after the period of data collection. The current study was also conducted using quantitative research methods. The questionnaire used could not offer respondents an opportunity to give comments in their own words due to the structured nature of the questions. This study was also based on five constructs (i.e., empathy, reliability, assurance, tangibility and responsiveness) to represent service quality. Therefore, other constructs that could be influential towards service quality were not included.

Direction For Future Research

Future research can replicate the study by collecting data from fast food players in different towns and provinces. A further study can also be carried out from fast food outlets selling different food, for example, sea, chicken and beef to note if there are differences in the perceptions of customers. Alternatively, a study that compares local and international fast-food outlets, can be beneficial and is recommended. It would be interesting for future research to be carried out over an extended duration, for example six months (longitudinal study). This will help to note possible trends within the fast-food customers' perceptions over a longer period of time. Future studies can be carried out making use of qualitative research methods to allow respondents to provide responses in their own words.

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