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THE RETAIL AVALANCHE: A STUDY ON CUSTOMER PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

With more than a decade since the onset of globalization initiated in our country India has witnessed tremendous transformation in the field of retailing. They are now well versed with the concepts about quality of products and services and have become more aware of the value of money. This has brought in the emergence of shopping malls in the country in not only metro cities but also in the tier II and tier III cities. With the increase in per capita income, demographical changes have taken place along with improvements in the standards of living and change in patterns of consumption a lot of trans national retail chains find India as their place for business expansion. Retail sector is one which has earned the image of being 'super saver location' in the country for the Indian middle class. One important thing that would bring in product differentiation among these stores is the consumers shopping experience and about how well the gap between consumers' expectations and their experience is brought down. This paper emphasizes on the gap between expectation and perception of the consumers of retail stores. SERVQUAL model of service quality has been used for research. This empirical paper highlights the gap that exists between customer expectation and perception. It also tries to answer the daunting proposition as how the gap needs to be closed.

KEYWORDS

retail, customer, perception, service quality.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years interest in retailing has grown considerably as retailers' activities have become increasingly complex, over the past three decades the organization's perceptions of retailing have changed from just selling goods to providing a wonderful shopping experience that makes a positive contribution to the organization by coordinating all efforts related to the workplace. Moreover, contemporary researchers have suggested that achieving best value and enhancing customer satisfaction are the two activities which are of core importance.

Consumer satisfaction is a critical issue in the success of any trade system conventional or online. In a turbulent business environment, in order to sustain the expansion and market share, firms need to understand how to satisfy consumers, since consumer satisfaction is critical for establishing long term customer relationships. What is unclear is the exact nature of the role, how satisfaction should be managed and whether managerial efforts aimed at increasing satisfaction lead to higher store sales. Today, managers in the retail sector undertake substantial efforts to conduct CS surveys. Thus studying customers has become unavoidable and one of the most reliable one is to analyze the perception of the customers.

Customer perception applies the concept of sensory perception to marketing and promotion. Just as sensory perception relate to how human perceive and process sensory stimuli through their five senses, customer perception pertains to how persons form opinion about company and the products they offer through the purchase they make. Merchants apply customer perception theory to determine how their clients perceive them. They also use customer perception theory to develop marketing and promotion strategies intended to retain current consumers and attract new ones.

To study and understand consumer perception and satisfaction towards retail store, service quality is measured using SERVQUAL method developed by Zeithmal.. The different dimensions of servqual are as given below:

1. Reliability
2. Assurance
3. Tangibles
4. Empathy
5. Responsiveness

- **Tangibles:** Tangibles dimension of service quality refers to those elements, which provide tangibles to the service and includes physical facilities, equipment's of the service contributor, dress and appearance of the service personnel.

- **Reliability:** Reliability refers to the ability of the service provider to accurately perform the promised service of right quality goods at right prices.

- **Responsiveness:** Responsiveness refers to the willingness of the service provider and his staff to provide assistance and prompt service to customers.

- **Assurance:** Assurance refers to the ability of the service provider and his employees to use their knowledge and courteous behavior to instill trust and confidence in customers regarding the services rendered.

- **Empathy:** Empathy refers to the care and concern shown to the customers and the capability of the firm to devote individualized attention to its customers.

INDUSTRY

The Indian retail industry has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fast-paced industries due to the entry of several new players. It accounts for over 10 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and around 8 per cent of the employment. India is the world's fifth-largest global destination in the retail space. The Indian retail industry in the single-brand segment has received Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) equity inflows totaling US\$ 275.4 million during April 2000–May 2015, according to the Department of Industrial Policies and Promotion (DIPP).

Organised retailing, in India, refers to trading activities undertaken by licensed retailers, that is, those who are registered for sales tax, income tax, etc. These include the publicly traded supermarkets, corporate-backed hypermarkets and retail chains, and also the privately owned large retail businesses.

Unorganised retailing, on the other hand, refers to the traditional formats of low-cost retailing, for example, the local corner shops, owner manned general stores, paan/beedi shops, convenience stores, hand cart and pavement vendors, etc.

Organised retailing was absent in most rural and small towns of India. Supermarkets and similar organised retail accounted for just 4% of the market. Most Indian shopping happens in open markets or numerous small grocery and retail shops. Shoppers typically wait outside the shop, ask for what they want, and cannot pick or examine a product from the shelf. Access to the shelf or product storage area is limited. Once the shopper requests the food staple or household product they are looking for, the shopkeeper goes to the container or shelf or to the back of the store, brings it out and offers it for sale to the shopper. Often the shopkeeper

may substitute the product, claiming that it is similar or equivalent to the product the consumer is asking for. But now the scenario is rapidly changing With the advent of new middle class that is a large young working population with a median age of 24-26 years with nuclear families residing in the urban setups and rising working women, shopping or buying has not remained any task. It has become more of a fun activity and organized retail has prospered on this idea. There has been tremendous competition to give customers the best shopping experience. Customers can be satisfied only when their expectations are fulfilled and there remains no gap in what they experience and expect from a service.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Amine et al. (2006) in their study concluded that customers' perceptions of the assortment range stems from the combination of few indicators, mainly number of stock keeping units proposed and availability of favourite brands. They also concluded that consumers overall evaluation of retail store depends largely on perceived choice within the product categories where they are highly sensitive to the assortment range.
2. Blanchard (1994) was of the opinion that quality is increasingly being seen as a key strategic differentiator within the financial services sector with most major players undertaking some form of quality initiative. The researcher describes an alternative basis for analyzing service quality based on the three dimensions of process/outcome, subjective/objective and soft/hard.
3. Carman (1990) in their paper have thrown light on how a generalized scale such as servqual can be modified and better used for retailing scenario.
4. Dr. Burcu liter (2006) highlighted that with increasing competition deeper understanding of consumer expectations, experiences, and perceptions regarding mall image has become much more essential. In this study, researcher identified image attributes of participants' ideal shopping mall, shopping motives and expectations of high school girls. It was found that participants mostly adopt malls for entertainment purpose. For this reason, for malls trying to attract teenage girls, the range offered and quality of fun and special events were crucial. On the other hand, some of participants claimed that if the malls did not renew it they might be bored because of repeated visit. It was suggested that the shopping malls should diversified entertainment venues such as opening a dance clubs in the mall and differentiate them from others, they might attract more adolescents.
5. Lin LZ et al, (June 2013), in their article deliberates the customs of a means-end approach with unsure conceptualization in provoking consumer requirements provides a better understanding of the consumers' perceptual orientation toward store image.
6. Newman et al (2006) in their study concluded that Computer aided observations, customers may be traced and their behavior analyzed in the context of consumer situation and contingencies. They also concluded that store layout and plan influences customers perception and behavior while purchasing the products.
7. Shergill et al. (2007) in their study compared these preferences across demographics. It explored four critical factors which significantly influence customers' perceptions of both types of retail store i.e. price, promotion, location and personnel interaction The findings pointed out that factory outlet stores were perceived as having comparatively lower prices and attractive promotions in comparison to traditional department stores, while traditional department stores had competitive advantages in terms of the other three factors. Also it was found that different demographic characteristics played an important role in influencing differences in customer perceptions regarding the different types of stores. The main implication of these findings was that factory outlet stores were perceived favorably and that they need to build more positive marketing strategies accordingly.
8. Tam J L (February 2010), in his article determined that consumer fulfillment, service quality and perceived value have interconnected relationship. These variables are increasingly recognized as being sources of competitive advantage.
9. Thang DCL et al (July 2003), in his study focuses on relationship of consumers in retail scenario. In particular, it focuses on how consumer perception of the attributes of store image affects their preference for the chosen stores. The inducements that relate to store aspects include merchandise display, store ambience, on-store service, convenience, status, campaign, amenities and after sales service. Consumers' liking is grounded on their after sales visit ranks the stores.
10. Vahie A et al (2006) in their study concluded that store atmosphere and store quality positively influence the perception of private label brand's quality, whereas the congruence between national brands and store image (NBSI) has negative influence on PLB's quality.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Retail stores face more competitions especially the apparel retail stores. The life style is changing every day, which leads to more needs and updates. With this organized retailing also develops high competition. Creating a good brand will need to understand customers perception and satisfaction level. So the study was conducted to know the perception and satisfaction of the customers of retail stores with the outcome which can be better used for marketing strategies and hence attract more and more customers and work on satisfying and retain the customer for long run profit.

Customer perception and satisfaction are important factors in customer decision making. The study was applicable in the area of designing marketing strategies and how well stores can satisfy the customer, and tries to analyze the influence of perception in the consumer's mind and how this information will be used successfully by marketers to gain entry into the minds of the consumers

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The study on customers in retail was undertaken with the objective to investigate the following

1. Measure the different dimensions of service quality (i.e. Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, Responsiveness)
2. Find out the gap in different dimensions of service quality.
3. Analyzing the servqual dimensions that contribute to customer satisfaction
4. To find out the dominant service quality dimensions that influence customer satisfaction in the retail sector

HYPOTHESIS

To have a better understanding the following alternate hypothesis was formulated and tested:

- **H1.** The level of sophistication of the physical facilities, equipment's of the service contributor, dress and appearance of the service personnel might play a positive role on service quality. Therefore it can be hypothesized that tangibility has an influence on service quality.
- **H2.** The ability of the service provider to accurately perform the promised service of right quality goods at right prices is likely to play a critical role on customer's perception about service quality. Therefore it is hypothesized that reliability has an influence on service quality.
- **H3.** The ability of the service provider to instill trust and confidence in customers regarding the services rendered might enhance beneficiaries overall experience. Therefore it is hypothesized that assurance has an influence on service quality.
- **H4.** The willingness of the service provider to provide assistance and prompt service to customers is bound to have an impact on service quality. Therefore it is hypothesized that responsiveness has an influence on service quality.
- **H5.** The capacity of the service provider to show care and concern and devote individualized attention might play a crucial role in the long run. Therefore it is hypothesized that empathy has an influence on service quality

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample size was set at 300 after studying the population and these included all the people who shopped at organized retail outlets. The data was collected through a sample survey by personal interviews using questionnaires and reviewing secondary data. Stratified random sampling is used to get data's with representative sample.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

ANALYSIS OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

From the analysis of the demographic variable, it would be concluded that both male and female respondent (54% & 46%) prefer to shop in such a segment. By analyzing the age and occupation variable it's very clear that the customer bases for such stores are young couples and youngsters and these people are very less loyal to a store as only 35% of them had membership cards. When we analyze the income variable we can understand that most of them belong to the group Of 1 lakh to 2 lakh (30%).

ANALYSIS OF SERVQUAL DIMENSIONS

TABLE 1

STATEMENT	MEAN	S.D	PERCENTILE	GAP
TANGIBILITY				
The retail store and its physical facilities are visually appealing	5.67	1.04	81.04	1.33
The employees of the store are well dressed and appear neat.	5.76	0.94	82.28	1.24
The presentation of the merchandise in the store is attractive.	5.68	1.13	81.14	1.32
The store layout is designed to move around and easy to access the merchandise.	5.94	0.98	84.94	1.06
store offer high quality merchandise like, colours don't run out, fitting is good, etc.	5.30	1.28	75.80	1.7
RELIABILITY				
The retail store promises to do something by a certain time, they do.	5.59	0.99	79.90	1.41
The retail store performs the service right the first time	5.68	0.96	81.14	1.32
When a customer has a problem, the store shows a sincere interest in solving it.	5.68	1.09	81.23	1.32
ASSURANCE				
Employees in the store have the knowledge to answer customers' questions.	5.76	1.06	82.38	1.24
The behaviour of employees in the retail store instils confidence in customers (security)	5.62	1.03	80.38	1.38
EMPATHY				
The retail store employees understand my specific needs.	5.47	1.11	78.11	1.53
The retail store employees are polite.	5.90	0.95	84.38	1.1
Employees are never too busy to respond to customers.	5.72	1.07	81.71	1.28
The store gives customers individual attention.	5.59	1.10	79.90	1.41
RESPONSIVENESS				
Speed of Response to Complaints	5.30	1.28	75.80	1.7
Stores operating hours are convenient to the customers.	6.28	0.87	89.80	0.72

By analyzing the tangibility factor we get to know two things firstly, the customers are very happy with the layout of such stores (percentile-84.95, gap of 1.06) which helps them in selecting the products they want. Secondly, the negative side which has come out is that they are not so happy with the quality of products offered not up to the mark, because in such a segment people expect better quality of products. In a service segment, being reliable is perhaps of prime relevance. The details listed in the above table show that on an average the degree of satisfaction is 80% regarding the retail outlets with a gap of 1.35.

Overall analysis of assurance component tells us that the even though there is a gap in the timely delivery of service promised, they are successful in gaining the confidence of the customers by instilling a sense of security in their mind and they are well trained and have appropriate knowledge about their product.

The analysis of empathy statement reveals that the employees are very polite and ready to help the customers, but the problem they are facing is that the employees are not able satisfy their customers, as they fail to understand their requirements that is never give individual attention to the customers which they get in the traditional shops in the unorganized sector. If they are able to interact more with their customers it can be a game changer for the stores.

By the analysis of the responsive component we can understand that more customers say they are satisfied with the operating hours of the stores because they feel that it's matching with their busy schedules (gap of just 0.72). Here the company's should focus on improving their grievance redressal mechanism because the respondents feel it's not done in a timely manner (with a gap of 1.7). Service recovery and its management generally are closely related to loyalty and customer word of mouth. Failure in grievance handling has long term repercussion on the brand image of the outlet. It is a gap that needs immediate attention of the organization

OVERALL ANALYSIS OF 5 DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY

TABLE 2

PARTICULARS	MEAN SCORE	GAP SCORE	PERCENTILE
TANGIBILITY	5.76	1.23	82
RELIABILITY	5.65	1.35	81
ASSURANCE	5.69	1.31	81
EMPATHY	5.67	1.33	81
RESPONSIVENESS	5.79	1.21	83

The overall analysis of the five dimensions of service quality revealed that the responsiveness and tangibility gave more satisfaction to customers. The reliability shows a gap score of 1.35 which is high compared to other component. Overall, the customers are happy with quality of service they get at a retail outlet.

To get a better picture of the impact of the five dimensions of quality on the overall impact further statistical tools were used. The results of the same are mentioned below:

HYPOTHESIS

In all the five hypothesis the alternate hypothesis was accepted & it could be inferred that all the five service quality dimensions significantly impact the service perceptions leading to an impact on customer satisfaction (p=0.00). Besides that high positive correlation was found in all the five dimensions. The highest correlation was found between empathy of employees and customer satisfaction (0.88) followed by tangible aspects in the store (0.87) and then by reliability of the service provider (0.86) followed by assurance given by employees (0.82) and lastly the responsiveness component (0.77).

It can be concluded that a retail outlets tangible and intangible dimensions together has an impact on customer satisfaction. Hence due weightage has to be provided to both.

H1: The level of sophistication of the physical facilities, equipment's of the service contributor, dress and appearance of the service personnel might play a positive role on service quality. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that tangibility has an influence on service quality.

TABLE 3

Regression Statistics		ANOVA					
Multiple R	0.87954						
R Square	0.773591		df	SS	MS	F	P VALUE
Adjusted R Square	0.772051	Regression	1	14753.81	14753.81	502.2686	0.00
Standard Error	5.41981	Residual	299	4318.028	29.37434		Significant
Observations	300						

From the above table it's clear that tangibility has a very significant influence on service quality (PVALUE: 0.00,). So the alternate hypothesis has been accepted. **H2.** The ability of the service provider to accurately perform the promised service of right quality goods at right prices is likely to play a critical role on customer's perception about service quality. Therefore it is hypothesized that reliability has an influence on service quality.

TABLE 5

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.866331
R Square	0.750529
Adjusted R Square	0.748832
Standard Error	5.689151
Observations	300

TABLE 6

ANOVA	df	SS	MS	F	P value
Regression	1	14313.97	14313.97	442.2473924	0.00
Residual	299	4757.866	32.36644		

From the above data we can infer that reliability has a very significant influence on service quality (PVALUE: 0.00,). So the alternate hypothesis has been accepted. **H3.** The ability of the service provider to instill trust and confidence in customers regarding the services rendered might enhance beneficiaries overall experience. Therefore it is hypothesized that assurance has an influence on service quality.

TABLE 7

Regression Statistics		ANOVA				
Multiple R			SS	MS	F	P value
R Square	Regression	1	12992.58	12992.58	314.1678	0.00
Adjusted R Square	Residual	299	6079.262	41.35553		Significant
Standard Error	6.430826					
Observations	300					

From the above data we can infer that assurance has a very significant influence on service quality (PVALUE: 0.00,). So the alternate hypothesis has been accepted. **H4.** The willingness of the service provider to provide assistance and prompt service to customers is bound to have an impact on service quality. Therefore it is hypothesized that responsiveness has an influence on service quality.

TABLE 8

Regression Statistics		ANOVA					
Multiple R	0.776821						
R Square	0.60345		df	SS	MS	F	P value
Adjusted R Square	0.600753	Regression	1	11508.91	11508.91	223.6976	0.00
Standard Error	7.172761	Residual	299	7562.93	51.4485		Significant
Observations	300						

From the above data we can infer that responsiveness has a very significant influence on service quality (PVALUE: 0.00,). So the alternate hypothesis has been accepted. **H5.** The capacity of the service provider to show care and concern and devote individualized attention might play a crucial role in the long run. Therefore it is hypothesized that empathy has an influence on service quality.

TABLE 9

Regression Statistics		ANOVA					
Multiple R	0.888943						
R Square	0.79022		df	SS	MS	F	P value
Adjusted R Square	0.788793	Regression	1	15070.95	15070.95	553.7349	0.00
Standard Error	5.216983	Residual	299	4000.886	27.21691		
Observations	300						

From the above data we can come to a conclusion that empathy has a very significant influence on service quality (PVALUE: 0.00,). So the alternate hypothesis has been accepted.

INTER RELATIONS

TABLE 10

	TANGIBILITY	RELIABILITY	ASSURANCE	EMPATHY	RESPONSIVENESS
TANGIBILITY	1				
RELIABILITY	0.75608322	1			
ASSURANCE	0.59042746	0.676530543	1		
EMPATHY	0.66680458	0.642592309	0.768074788	1	
RESPONSIVENESS	0.62976511	0.633351752	0.546070473	0.633033037	1

Correlation matrix helps us in finding out the relationships between different variables.. From the table above it's very evident that all the dimension has a positive relation and assurance, empathy gives a maximum impact (0.76) followed by tangibility, reliability(0.75) by this we can conclude that a higher service quality can be attained if the employees deal with the customers in an polite and caring manner.

CONCLUSION

In the era of globalization, competition has become a key issue in industry's as well as service sectors. The study suggests that customer satisfaction and perceived service quality both should be considered together for the stability of a organization in a competitive environment. The customer perception of service quality is

very important for the emerging and the existing retailers in the market. As the study reveals that perception of service quality is influenced in various ways among various customers. So the retail outlets have to frame their own strategies in order to attract the customers on a longer basis.

The research findings indicate that service quality attributes in totality play a vital role in customers' evaluation of retail stores. The behavioral components are important in the selection of the retail outlets, and the customer gives more importance to the intangible attributes of service quality than the tangibles. This may be attributed to the fact that many of the retailers are shabby in their appearance and conduct. If bigger retail stores, like discount and departmental stores, give importance to service personnel's behavior and conduct with the customers, they may be able to attract customers of the small retailers. The customers frequent the neighborhood stores because of the 'personal relationship' they share with the local retailers. This relationship or interaction is the factor affecting service quality. In conclusion it can be said that the service sector depends on the most important "P" of the P's- people. Emphasizing on the needs of peoples both customer and service personnel will take retailing to an escalated level.

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