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THE EFFECT OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY AMONG PASSENGERS OF RAILWAY TRANSPORT SERVICES IN KENYA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find the effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design and a pragmatism paradigm were used. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to pick samples from each railway service provider. Simple random sampling was used to select a representative sample size of 357 respondents for the study. The study population comprised all railway customers who had frequently used Madaraka Express, Nairobi Commuter Rail, Kisumu Safari Train and Nairobi-Nanyuki Train passenger services in Kenya. Primary data was collected by a self-administered semi-structured questionnaire. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Stepwise regression analysis was carried out to test the research hypothesis. The results showed that customer satisfaction significantly and partially mediated the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty (p-value<0.05, β= 0.400). The study contributes to the existing literature by revealing the partial mediating influence of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. The study recommends that policy makers should embrace perceived service quality to enhance customer loyalty and gain competitive advantage. Managers should use the study results to establish perceived service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction attributes for customer loyalty realization. Future studies may use longitudinal research design to establish causal relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty over a period of time.

Keywords: *Perceived Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Loyalty, Railway Transport Services, Kenya.*

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Introduction

Organizations have realized that in addition to offering service quality, maintaining customer loyalty is significant to the firm's survival. There is a need for organizations to improve service quality, increase customer satisfaction, and enhance customer loyalty for survival in competitive world of business. Oliver (1980) posits that in today's complex service sector, firms must understand how customers assess their actual purchase service experiences to meet the customers' pre-consumption expectations. Among all the perceived service quality aspects, assurance, empathy and responsiveness significantly predicted customer satisfaction, while only empathy, assurance, as well as reliability are significant customer loyalty predictors (Kheng et al., 2010).

Expectancy disconfirmation theory which is the anchoring theory for this study suggests that customer satisfaction is the outcome of a contrast between expected and perceived performance. The railways' transport sector is crucial in Kenya's economic development and passenger service improvement. According to Mugo and Zhao (2020) the railway sector is characterized by increased passenger service travels, and competition from other transport modes, in particular road transport. Njagi et al. (2019) posit that passengers search for service providers who offer service quality bringing about increased customer satisfaction, ultimately improving customer loyalty.

Perceived service quality is defined as an assessment process that customers use to differentiate between service delivery perceptions and expectations (Grönroos, 2007). Service features namely, heterogeneity, inseparability of production and consumption and intangibility lead to complexities embroiled in evaluating and managing service quality. The service characteristic's uniqueness complicates the consumers' service quality

judgment. SERVQUAL is the universal research model for perceived service quality measurement (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The model is a multiple-item scale used to evaluate perceived service quality. It consists of five elements: Tangibles include personnel appearance, equipment, and physical facilities. Responsiveness means willingness to assist consumers and offer timely service. Reliability concerns the capability to discharge the service perfectly and dependably. Empathy involves personalized attention the company offers the consumers. Assurance include employees' courteous and understanding and their ability to stimulate confidence as well as trust (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Customer satisfaction is described as customers' feedback in assessment of the anticipated variations between previous expectations and perceived performance during and after consumption experience (Oliver, 1980). In this regard, the conceptualization of customer satisfaction is judged by the customers' actual perception. Fornell et al. (1996) argued that according to the American customer satisfaction index (ACSI) customer satisfaction is operationalized through overall satisfaction, expectations disconfirmation, and desires disconfirmation. Disconfirmation occurs if a mismatch between the expected and perceived service performance exists. If perceived performance matches' expectations, the consumer is satisfied, but if perceived performance fails to meet customer expectations, the customer is dissatisfied. It is hypothesized that expectations have a positive effect on overall satisfaction (Oliver, 1980).

Customer loyalty remains a matter of debate among researchers and it has acquired lots of curiosity among marketing scholars due to its complexity in definition and measurement (Dick & Basu, 1994; Fornell et al., 1996). Customer loyalty is defined as an allegiance to repurchase or promote a favorite service

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subsequently, hence prompting repurchase of the service, despite marketing campaigns influence to trigger switching attitude (Oliver, 1980). Reichheld and Sasser (1990) and Fornell et al. (1996)'s ACSI model argued that customer loyalty, an outcome of customer satisfaction is operationalized by repurchase likelihood, price tolerance, word of mouth communications and complaint behavior. Repurchase likelihood is manifested by the likelihood to re-buy (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996). Additionally, Zeithaml et al. (1996) suggested that loyal customers have high repurchase likelihood, less sensitivity to prices and positive word of mouth. When consumers are loyal to firm offerings, price tolerance will be enhanced consequently. It is postulated that a positive word of mouth enables customers to give recommendations to prospective customers about consumptions of same services.

Passengers of railway transport services are customers traveling from one railway station to another by train. Passengers prefer rail transport services because of improved travel safety, reduced accident occurrences and it is faster particularly over long distances, contrary to road transport (Ortiz et al., 2008). As customers' numbers increases, expectations increase hence pressurizing the service provider to offer quality services. The Kenya's railways sector comprises four passenger transport services, namely the Madaraka Express Nairobi Commuter Rail, Nairobi-Nanyuki train and Kisumu Safari Train (KRC, 2021). Fu, Eboli, Mazzulla and Zhang (2017) noted that railway operators need to understand whether the commuters are satisfied with service quality attributes and how they can enhance the service quality and satisfaction levels. In this study, the focus was customers who had frequently used railways passenger services in Kenya, specifically the customers at the departure lounges in the Nairobi central railway station, as they wait to travel.

Problem of Research

The debate on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty is inconclusive given that some studies have provided inconsistent findings (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Buttle, 1996). Some of these contradictions are related to nature of perceived service quality dimensions which differ across service sectors and their effects on customer loyalty (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Parasuraman et al. (1988) advanced SERVQUAL model which was limited to external service quality conceptualization, disregarding internal service quality offered by employees. Service quality description is complex, and is not only about matching customers' expectations but also exceeding their desires (Sirgy, 1984). Contextually this study will help railways passenger service providers to gain competitive edge by offering quality services which satisfies customers and enhances loyalty.

Most studies examined the relationship linking perceived service quality and loyalty beyond establishing if satisfaction has intervening effect in that association and in the context of railways passenger transport had confusing results (Supriyanto et al., 2021; Akbar, 2013. Akbar (2013) argued that customer satisfaction positively intervened the relationship connecting service quality and loyalty. However, Supriyanto et al. (2021) noted that service quality had no direct effect on loyalty, but had indirect effect on loyalty through customer satisfaction as intervening variable. Thus, there was a need for this study to determine the significance of intervening role of customer satisfaction upon the association of perceived service quality and customer loyalty contextualized in the Kenya's railways passenger transport services.

Research Objective

The objective of this study was to assess the effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya.

Literature Review and Research Focus

Perceived service quality remains a key concept for marketing managers in their pursuit to offer quality services that satisfy customers' demands. Improved service quality enhances consumer satisfaction in addition to increasing loyalty. Consequently, many theories are advanced to describe perceived service quality, consumer satisfaction, demographic characteristics as well as customer loyalty. The study is anchored on the expectancy disconfirmation theory by Oliver (1980). Expectancy disconfirmation theory indicates that the level of satisfaction refers to the outcome of a disparity between expected and service experiences (Oliver, 1980). Other theories supporting perceived service quality, consumer satisfaction, demographics, and loyalty association include cognitive dissonance, cue utilization and social exchange.

Cognitive dissonance theory focuses on psychological discomfort caused by variations between customer perceptions and beliefs. Consumers who anticipate a certain service quality and perceives inconsistency from the expectation will be involved in the cognitive realignment process to minimize dissonance in the attempt of realizing consonance of service evaluation with performance, hence enhancing satisfaction and loyalty (Oliver, 1980). It is predicted that very satisfied customers are less discordant than the satisfied ones and presumed that cognitive dissonance theory is better correlated to dissatisfaction than satisfaction (Sweeny et al., 2000).

Expectancy disconfirmation theory explains the post-purchase satisfaction based on customer expectations and service experiences. Customer's expectations are confirmed only when services conform to expectations, negatively disconfirmed whenever service performance does not meet consumer expectations, and positively disconfirmed whenever service performance exceeds consumer expectations (Oliver, 1980). Marketing scholars have used expectancy disconfirmation theory to greatly comprehend service quality, customer satisfaction and re-purchase likelihood. However, expectancy disconfirmation theory has been criticized as inappropriate because service expectation could be judged as better than expected although it may not certainly match the customer's desired set of services (Khalifa & Liu, 2002).

Cue utilization focuses on customers' usage of service cues for pre-purchase service assessment to help in determining the perceived service quality. The theory posits that services comprise various batches of cues that act as a substitute service quality assessment (Olson & Jacoby, 1972). Consumers use a combination of these cues to make estimated judgments on the likely performance of a service and quality level to expect to simplify their decision-making processes (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005).

The social exchange theory focuses on the close transactions connecting the consumer and the service provider in providing service quality that creates a positive impression in the mind of the consumer, needs satisfying and enhancing consumer loyalty (Crosby & Johnson, 2002). Cognitive dissonance is a psychological discomfort state caused by the discrepancy between experiences and perceptions occurring simultaneously which a person tries to reduce and restore the balance (Festinger, 1957). It is predicted that very satisfied customers are less discordant

than the satisfied ones and presumed that cognitive dissonance theory is better correlated to dissatisfaction than satisfaction (Sweeny et al., 2000).

Perceived service quality leads to customer satisfaction and improves consumers' tendency to purchase again, purchase more, and be price tolerant; and conclude that positive relationships exist linking the three constructs (Aydin & Ozer, 2005). Perceived service quality directly influences customer loyalty in addition to negatively being by influencing customer satisfaction, as confirmed empirically by various researches (Rahim, 2016; Caruana, 2002). In conformity with this view, perceived service quality was hypothesized to directly influence loyalty. The attainment of customer satisfaction would eventually lead to customer loyalty in an organization.

In the study of relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty in the hospital sector, perceived service quality was regarded as a precedent to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Boshoff & Gray, 2004). Caruana (2002) examined the impact of perceived service quality on customer loyalty with customer satisfaction's mediation role in the retail banking industry. The postal survey results indicated that perceived service quality influence on customer loyalty is mediated by customer satisfaction. Namuksa (2013) found that customer satisfaction had significant intervening role in the relation between service quality and customer loyalty.

Kheng et al. (2010) did a case study which explored perceived service quality impact on loyalty and the intervening influence of satisfaction and concluded that consumer satisfaction intervenes the relation between perceived service quality and consumer loyalty. Rahim (2016) did a study of associations among perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty. The results suggested that positive relationships exist between service quality and customer satisfaction in addition to loyalty and conclusions showed that customer satisfaction intervened positively the association linking service quality aspects with consumer loyalty.

Methodology of the Research

General Background of Research Methodology

The paper used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The descriptive design is appropriate for the study as it attempts to present a correct and logical depiction of the aspects as well as approaches related to the research questions. A cross-sectional survey entails data gathering from representative sample at a particular point in time (Saunders et al., 2006). It is also used when the general aim is to determine the relationships among various variables under study. The study population comprised all railway customers who had frequently used Madaraka Express, Nairobi Commuter Rail, Kisumu Safari Train and Nairobi-Nanyuki Train passenger services in Kenya.

The unit of analysis was customers to railway passenger services provided in Kenya. The average number of all customers using the railways passenger services was 3,000,000 per year (KRC, 2022). The target population was 4660 customers, which was the total train capacity of customers of the four passenger railway services (KRC, 2022; Cuenca, 2020). The study was conducted at the Nairobi railway stations' departure lounges as passengers wait to travel.

Sample of Research

Krejcie and Morgan (1970)'s recommendations was used to determine a representative sample size, where the target population is 4660. Therefore, a

representative sample size of 357 respondents was selected.

Instrument and Procedures

The population is large therefore a representative sample would be determined. Proportionate stratified sampling technique was applied to verify representativeness pegged on the number of railway passengers within each passenger service provider. This is explained by the passenger variations within the four passenger services. Consequently, stratified sampling ensured all subgroups are represented in the sampling and help to get accurate description of all subgroups' attributes. A simple random sampling method was applied to choose respondents within each category. Primary data was collected by employing a self-administered semi-structured questionnaire.

Reliability, which is the extent to which consistent measurement results can be anticipated to be error-free was estimated using Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0 to 1. The closer the Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha is to 1, the higher the internal consistency of the items in the scale. The nearer the Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha is to 0, the lower the internal consistency of the items in the scale. This survey used an alpha coefficient cut-point of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Validity regards the accuracy of study instruments to measure what they are designed to measure (Sekaran,

2003). Validity was tested using exploratory factor analysis. Construct validity comprising convergent and divergent validity was tested using principal component analysis.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics using statistical package for social sciences. The descriptive statistics summarized the distribution of the study variables. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire. Factor analysis was applied to test validity of the research instrument. Regression analysis was applied for hypotheses testing. ANOVA test determined the significance of the regression models as depicted by the hypothesized relationships. Stepwise regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Results of Research

The objective was to establish the effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya. The hypothesis was that there was no significant mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya.

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Table 1: Results of Regression Model Summary for the Mediation Test

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.616[a]	.380	.377	3.53287	.380	147.444	1	241	.000	
2	.679[b]	.461	.456	3.30037	.081	36.151	1	240	.000	

a. Predictors: (Constant), PSQ

b. Predictors: (Constant), PSQ, CS

c. Dependent Variable: CL

The results displayed in Table 1 indicate that perceived service quality explained 38% ($R^2 = 0.380$) of the variation in customer loyalty. When customer satisfaction (mediator) was controlled for, the explained variation in customer loyalty increased to 46.1% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.461$). The results suggest that customer satisfaction accounted for the increased 8.1% variation in customer loyalty.

Table 2: ANOVA Results for The Mediation Test.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1840.268	1	1840.268	147.444	.000[b]
	Residual	3007.956	241	12.481		
	Total	4848.224	242			
2	Regression	2234.042	2	1117.021	102.550	.000[c]
	Residual	2614.182	240	10.892		
	Total	4848.224	242			

a. Dependent Variable: CL

b. Predictors: (Constant), PSQ

c. Predictors: (Constant), PSQ, CS

The results contained in Table 2 showed that both models were significant and robust. The Model fitting the direct relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty was significant (F=147.444, p-value≤0.05). The second model, in which customer satisfaction was controlled for was significant and robust (F = 102.550, p-value≤0.05). The results indicate the presence of partial mediation of customer

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satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

Table 3: Results of Mediation of Customer Satisfaction On the Relationship Between Perceived Service Quality and Customer Loyalty.

Regression Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3.323	1.210		2.746	.006		
	PSQ	.886	.073	.616	12.143	.000	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	3.741	1.133		3.303	.001		
	PSQ	.483	.096	.336	5.047	.000	.508	1.968
	CS	.428	.071	.400	6.013	.000	.508	1.968

a. Dependent Variable: CL

The results displayed in Table 3 showed that both perceived service quality and customer satisfaction independently explained the variation in customer loyalty. The results reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant mediating effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya. Using the resulting coefficients, the fitted model was:

$CL = 3.741 + 0.336 PSQ + 0.400 CS$ p-value < 0.05, $R^2 = 46.1\%$

Where: CL = customer loyalty

3.741 = Constant

PSQ = Perceived service quality

CS = Customer satisfaction

The significance findings for the direct relation and the mediated relations imply that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

Discussion

The study sought to assess the effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. After analysis, the results in Table 1 and Table 3 indicate that both perceived service quality and customer satisfaction independently explained the variation in customer loyalty. Perceived service quality explained 38% ($R^2 = 0.380$) of the variation in customer loyalty. When customer satisfaction (mediator) was controlled for, the explained variation in customer loyalty increased to 46.1% ($\Delta R^2 = 0.461$). Customer satisfaction had a statistically significant influence on

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customer loyalty as a mediating variable (P-value=.000, β= .400), meaning that the mediating variable accounts for the increased 8.1% variation in customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction slightly weakens the direct relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. The significant findings for the direct relation and the mediated relations imply that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

The results paint a picture of pre-perception satisfaction and post-perception satisfaction. Although perception of service quality leads to satisfaction which in turn creates loyalty among customers, the results suggest that satisfaction (pre-perception exposure) may exist concurrently with perception of service quality. Hence, customer satisfaction and perceived service quality concurrently influence loyalty to a service provider, wherein the latter does so indirectly. If passengers perceive that service quality is delivered, they will be willing to be loyal to the railway train service provider, have repeat purchases and recommend the services to other potential travelers. The results meant that customer satisfaction contribute in influencing the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

The results are consistent with study findings by Rahim (2016) who noted that positive and statistically significant relationships existed between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction in addition to customer loyalty and that customer satisfaction mediated the relationship linking perceived service quality dimensions with loyalty.

Conclusions and Recommendations
The objective of the study was to establish the effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in Kenya. The findings showed customer satisfaction partially mediated the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. However, customer satisfaction slightly weakens the direct relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty. The results echoed expectancy disconfirmation, cognitive, cue utilization and social exchange theories which explains the differences which exists between customer pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase satisfaction based on customer service experiences. The results imply that railway train service providers should evaluate their transportation services and strive to satisfy their passengers by matching not only their expectations but also their desires. Thus, passengers will make frequent travels when the transport service quality offered satisfy their desires.

Implication for Theory and Practice
This study concurs with expectancy disconfirmation theory that indicate that a customer is satisfied as an outcome of positive differences between perceptions and expectations which results to customer loyalty (Oliver, 1980). When perceived service quality exceed the customers' expectations, the outcome would be customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ekinci & Sirakaya, 2009). The close relationships among customers and service providers have a positive effect in the customers' minds resulting in satisfaction and customer loyalty (Crosby & Johnson, 2002).

Therefore, the study contributes to the existing literature by revealing the partial mediating influence of customer satisfaction in the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty among passengers of railway transport services in

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Kenya. The findings showed a significant and moderate positive correlation between perceived service quality and customer loyalty and that this association can be increased by enhancing customer satisfaction. The study results contribute to the existing body of knowledge by adding customer satisfaction as intervening variable in the relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty in addition to presenting a significant relationship between the variables. The results imply that the railway train service providers can have a competitive edge if the managers establish customer perceptions and experiences in evaluating customer satisfaction and loyalty.

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