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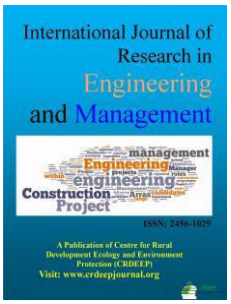

Full Length Research Paper

An Assessment of the Effect of Service Quality (SQ) on Customer Satisfaction (CS) in Mobile Service Delivery: A Case of Airtel Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

In the case of Airtel Zambia, despite its modernization and business remodelling efforts, Airtel Zambia, which was a market leader in 2007, according to a Central Statistics Annual Report (2007) has been unable to regain market leadership in the telecom industry in a country with 4,971,355 subscribers. The research problem addressed in the study was to find out whether or not Airtel customers were not satisfied with the Service Quality and delivery being offered by the company. The main research objective of the study was to find out if Airtel customers are satisfied with the SQ delivered by Airtel Zambia following modernisation and business remodelling efforts. In doing so, the researcher established the dimensions and perceptions of SQ that can be considered as main predictors of CS for Airtel Zambia. To facilitate the conduct, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods where a questionnaire composed of closed and open-ended questions was generated in order to collect data exclusively meant for respondents. A sample of 110 respondents was randomly selected and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), supported by Microsoft Excel. The findings generally revealed that 30 percent of the indicated that the services offered by Airtel Zambia were poor. The ability to provide quality products has been rated as poor by 40.9 percent of the respondents; very poor and very good as rating of the ability to provide quality products by Airtel have the same rating of 20 percent. The research strongly recommends continuous re-branding in order to meet the customers' expectations at the same time improving the quality of services offered.

Introduction

Background of the study

According to International Telecommunication Union (2020), globally, the Telecommunication (telecom) industry has become a vital revenue generation sector. For instance, at the end of 2008, worldwide mobile service revenues stood at USD 912.1 billion; outperforming the respective revenues generated by the pharmaceutical, IT hardware and semi-conductor sectors. Both in the IT and telecommunication industry, corporate directors, technology leaders, and industry pundits have over the years considered modernization and business remodelling as the most viable solutions to technological morass. Business remodelling is also seen to have the capacity of reducing the need for organizations to continually evolve their applications portfolios and thereby ensuring service quality (SQ) and customer satisfaction (CS) (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). Indeed, as in every other sector, quality in the telecom industry is generally regarded as the main factor in creating of wealth and also influencing customer satisfaction. In Zambia, the telecom industry, particularly the mobile phone sector, has been one of the fastest growing business segments of the country providing massive value addition to society with its services and creation of employment opportunities. Statistically, from the three mobile service providers in Zambia, Zamtel has the lowest subscriber base. -, MTN with a dominant subscriber base of 6million subscribers, followed by Airtel Zambia with 5million customers and Zamtel with 2.2million users (Zambia Daily Mail 23/05/2019) furthermore, new expectations from customers, internal operations leaders, employees and competitors have forced telecom companies to modernize and remodel their business operations and do so quickly. (Grzegorz Krzysztoszek, 1998), IAEA International Atomic Energy Agency (2009), and European Union, (2011) revealed that the desire to promptly remodel business operations has come with its own challenges and effects evidenced by customer complaints, high tariffs and network failure which have all led to

inability to achieve operational goals and objectives. In the case of Airtel Zambia, research conducted by the company's marketing department highlighted the areas to be considered for business remodelling which included; building of more network towers and its transmission, distribution, supply and customer service i.e. metering and meter reading, billing, complaints and faults management, communication and new service connections (Airtel 2015-16 Annual report). Notwithstanding the fact that Airtel customers have been complaining about service delivery and service quality by the company mostly in the areas deprived off network towers, faults management, billing, and mainly the quality of supply and delayed new service connections (Airtel 2020 facebook page). It is against this background that the company decided to invest in modernizing its operations by replacing the manually and semi-computer based systems with modern operations.

Airtel Zambia is not a start-up business in Zambia. The Company in Zambia has been in the transformative process of modernisation for nearly two decades. Airtel Zambia entered the Zambian market initially, as Zamcell communications limited in the year 2000. In the year 2004 Celtel International acquired Zamcell in order to have a large network coverage in Africa. With this strategy, Celtel entered into the Zambian market with hopes of becoming as dominant in Zambia as it is in the other African countries where it operates. This acquisition by Celtel was outlived because in the year 2007 Kuwait's MTC Group, which owns the mobile telephone operator Zain a market leader (CSO annual report 2007), bought Celtel's operations in African countries and was later re-branded to Zain international and in Zambia as Zain Zambia. This was a very expensive buyout which meant that Zain was the largest mobile phone service operator in Africa but still not able to conquer the Telecel (MTN) and the Zambian national company CellZ now Zamtel. In the year 2010 Zain was later bought out by Indian giant mobile operator Bharti Airtel and its now currently operating as Airtel Zambia.

All along through these acquisitions Airtel continued operating on the footsteps set out by the original company. This strategy of Zamcell was to target the low end consumers as it was to cater only for the mass and corporate members of the society. This was evident in the low prices that it was charging for its services which were affordable to a large number of citizens of the Republic of Zambia. Airtel 'slow market share means that it is not getting the profits which it might have been hoping to get as compared to its rival competitors that recorded profits in the billions. Therefore, it is very important to establish criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of income remodelling measures and compare the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery and service quality before and after income remodelling. Some of the criteria for measuring effective service delivery programs are frequency of complaints, types of complaints, stakeholders' acceptability of complaint resolutions and service delivered quality of service, and level of customer satisfaction.

In the case of Airtel Zambia, despite its modernization and business remodelling efforts, Airtel Zambia, which was a market leader in 2007, according to a Central Statistics Annual Report (2007) has been unable to regain market leadership in the telecom industry in a country with 4,971,355 subscribers. Furthermore, at the end of 2017, Zambia's Telecoms regulator Zambia Information Communications Technology Agency (ZICTA) penalized Airtel, alongside other mobile service providers, for failing to meet service standards on its provision of network (ZICTA, 2017). The problem rested on the poor quality of services delivery and subsequently affected the satisfaction. This case study of Airtel Zambia thus investigated SQ and CS vis-à-vis the company's recent business re-modelling in mobile service delivery. The research problem addressed in the study was to find out whether or not Airtel customers were not satisfied with the Service Quality and delivery of all its products being offered by the company. Therefore, the research was aimed at finding out the factors affecting the provision of Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction by the company mainly on the network connectivity to Airtel subscribers and indeed other mobile subscribers.

Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to establish the perspectives of Airtel customer's vis-à-vis the company's SQ and CS in light of the recent modernisation and remodelling of business operations. The previous chapter presented the problem statement, the objectives as well as the research questions which the study sought to answer. This chapter reviews literature on the study and was organized and guided by the study research questions. These include; modernization, factors leading to service quality, and measures employed to promote customer satisfaction. The chapter will further critically look at previous studies in the telecom industry and will analyse studies in terms of their focus and conclusions in order to learn and establish whether indeed a model meant for analysing the factors affecting SQ and CS on businesses in the telecom industry does exist. The study is based on the theory of service delivery, service quality and customer satisfaction in relationship to their applicability to the smooth operations of Airtel as a Mobile service provider.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

According to Melody (2001), success in the telecommunications industry depends on prudent efforts and feasible investment. In a competitive market, service providers are expected to compete on both price and quality of services and it is also necessary to meet the customers' requirements and expectations. (Melody 2001) In the industry, investigators have discovered that customer satisfaction is a function of satisfaction with multiple experiences with the service provider. In general, satisfaction is developed on the information from all prior experiences with the service provider and is considered a function of all prior transactions and information (Parasuraman et al., 2000). By and large, as a result of modernization and sophisticated data analytics, modern companies are able to collect infinite amounts of customer data. As such, the major source of competitive advantage has shifted from product and service differentiation toward the application of knowledge and information to achieve customer satisfaction. Therefore, in IT and

telecommunications, new modernization techniques utilize best-of-breed accelerators, adaptors, and tools and leverage open source, cloud, outsourcing, and reusability of architectural components to support business processes (NTT DATA, 2014: 6-8).

Service Quality
Service quality is a complex construct, which has been the focus of a number of studies in the services marketing literature. Two schools of thought dominate this literature: The Nordic school of thought and the North American school of thought. Specifically, the Nordic school of thought is based upon Grönroos' (2005) two-dimensional model while the North American school of thought is based upon Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) in (Karatepe 2013) five-dimensional SERVQUAL model. Other significant conceptual and empirical studies in this research stream suggest that service quality is comprised of service product, service environment, and service delivery, or consists of interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality (Karatepe 2013).

Customer Satisfaction
Hayes (1997) aptly describes "customer" as a generic term referring to anybody who receives a service or product from some other person or group of people. It commonly refers to the end-users of a product or service. Researchers suggest that, customers go through a five-stage decision-making process in most purchase situations namely; need recognition and problem awareness, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation (Kotler and Keller, 2006). Therefore, much of the extant literature on customer satisfaction is centred on the acceptance that customer perception is key to determining their satisfaction and the quality of a service. As such, a comprehensive definition of customer satisfaction is that "it is the consumer's fulfilment response and judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including level of under or over fulfilment" (Grigoroudis&Siskos 2010).

From extant literature, it is evident that many researchers have explored the issue of service quality and customer satisfaction in different business settings. What seems to consistently come to the fore when such literature is examined are the words of Edosomwan that customers as the final judges who determine product and service satisfaction level and without satisfied customers, a company can have no market value. In conclusion, the theoretical framework has been summarized and the conceptual frame work to the study has been discussed in relation to the performance of Airtel before and after income remodeling of its operations. The hypothesis that emerged from the concept was highlighted. The next chapter looks at the methodology that was adopted in pursuit of the research.

Technical and Functional Quality Model
Gronroos (1984), developed a service quality model that has three components of service quality, namely: technical quality; functional quality; and image (see Figure 2.1). He maintains that the customer evaluations of perceived performance of service against his/her perceived service quality result in a measure of quality.

Technical quality: is the quality of what a consumer actually receives as a result of his/her interaction with a service firm and is important to him/her and to his/her evaluation of the quality of service. In simpler terms, technical quality is how the service is delivered.
Functional quality: is how a consumer gets the technical outcome. This is important to him/her and to his/her views of service he has received. Technical quality describes what the customer received during a service delivery.

Gap Model
The Gap model was proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985.The model presupposes that service quality is the difference between expectation and performance relating to quality dimensions. These differences are referred to as gaps.

Theoretical Framework
Customer Satisfaction Vs Service Quality Theory. Customer satisfaction theory by Kotler (2011) postulate that for long term sustainability, business entities needed to build customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction involves, customer creation, customer maintenance/ retention and quality of service. Kotler (2011) argued that customer creation looked at the ways a business entity can create new customers.

Research Design and Methodology
The previous chapter discussed the appraised literature and theories on which this study was hinged on. This chapter describes the methods that were used by the researcher to answer the research questions set out for the study. The purpose of the study was to establish the perspectives of Airtel customer's vis-à-vis the company's SQ and CS in light of the recent modernisation and remodelling of business operations. The previous chapter looked at literature that was reviewed which was done by different researchers and scholars related to this study. This chapter looked at the methodology used in the study. The chapter outlined the research designs, the population and sample, sampling procedures, research instruments used procedures in data collection, processing and presentation. The chapter further explained the choice of the different techniques and how they were ideal for the study.

Research Design
The descriptive research design was considered ideal for the study because it is concerned with describing, recording, analyzing, and reporting conditions that exist or existed and was widely used to obtain data useful in evaluating present practices and providing basis

for decisions. Furthermore, as its research philosophy, the study used the positivist approach, along with a realist reflection. This allowed for the generation of both quantitative and qualitative data which was triangulated to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study. Given the descriptive nature (exploratory and explanatory) of the study, the qualitative research was used as the main research approach supported by quantitative research methodology to some extent. The aim of employing qualitative research as the main research methodology was to obtain a deeper understanding on the issues related to Service Quality and its relationship with Customer Satisfaction that leads to the achievement of organisational goals (Irby and Lunenburg, 2008).

Target population

According to the regulator ZICTA (May 2018) in their report showed the total number of subscribers in the country to be 13million out of the 16million people. Airtel was in second position with 5million subscribers representing 38.46%. According to Burns and Grove (1993:779), a population is defined as all elements (individuals, objects and events) that meet the sample criteria for inclusion in a study. The study population consisted of targeted commercial and consumers (end users of services and goods) adult, young adults as respondents in Lusaka. These were represented by a calculated average of the entire population of subscribers using the percentage representing Airtel subscribers in 10 provinces at calculated target figure of **500,000** subscribers were targeted for Lusaka district only. With 9 suburbs in Lusaka a calculated average of **55,556** subscribers represented a population per suburb. Out of the calculated average, 2 suburbs were randomly picked including Kabwata and the central business district (CBD) which was purposive thereby representing a target population of **111,111** subscribers. Should be current or previous

Sampling Procedures

In this research simple random sampling and purposive sampling procedure were used.The subjects corresponding to the numbers picked were included in the sample. According to Mugenda (2003) random sampling allows generalizability to a large population. This will be used to select participants from the regulating institutions. These are presumed to have information needed for the study because they regulate the operations of mobile service providers in the country. The procedure will involve selecting individuals who are involved with service quality inspections. From a Target population of 111,111 subscribers, a 10% was considered as a sample, but 11,111 participants was too large a sample. According to Mugenda and Mugenda 10% of 1000 will give a sample of 111 subscribers. Rounded off to the nearest 10, the Sample participants represented **110** consumers and commercial subscribers of Airtel Zambia.

Data Collection Methods

A questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument. A questionnaire is a printed self-report form designed to elicit information that can be obtained through the written responses of the subjects. The information obtained through a questionnaire is similar to that obtained by an interview, but the questions tend to have less depth (Burns & Grove 1993:368). Data was collected with the aid of questionnaires to evaluate the commercial and consumer's users of the service' knowledge on the effect of service quality and customer service of mobile service delivery at Airtel Zambia.

Hypothesis testing

The test method involved is a statistic and sampling distribution. Computed from the sample data, the test statistic meant a score, proportion difference between means, difference between proportions, z-score, t-statistic and its sampling distribution. The researcher assessed probabilities associated with the test statistic. This was where if the test statistical probability .The researcher used hypothesis testing to understand whether any differences or effects discovered in the study exist in the population. The testing was used to establish whether the research hypothesis extended beyond Airtel.The researcher generalised the results to a population of all service providers rather than just Airtel.Service quality definition: How service providers grow their market share in the service sector. These includedTangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy

Hypothesis: The effect of Service Quality On Customer Satisfaction in mobile service delivery
Dependent Variable = Customer Satisfaction.Independent variable = Service Quality dimensions
Null hypothesis - This was a position that assumed that what the researcher was trying to prove did not happen meaning it was equal to zero.
(Ho) ***Modernisation has no effect on customer satisfaction***
Alternative Hypothesis: This was the one the researcher needed to prove that 'service quality has an effect on customer satisfaction.(Ha) The mean between service quality and customer satisfaction variables is not the same in the population. This is because other service providers are able to have more subscribers than Airtel.

Data Processing and Analysis

Out of the 110 questionnaires distributed, 102 were collected. The researcher used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 to help analyse quantitative data, this is because SPSS program is found simpler and makes it easy to analyse and interpret social science findings. The process included the preparation of a simple grid to collate the data provided in the questionnaires, the designed a simple coding system of questions and the form that answers took was simplified in this process. then data was entered on to the grid. Percentages were calculated with the proportion of respondents who answered per category of each question among the 25 questions that were asked.In this regard, participants were asked to indicate the importance or level of agreement of factors (research variables) by rating them on a five point Likert scale, (1-Strongly Disagree, 2-Disagree, 3 – Uncertain, 4 - Agree and 5-Strongly

Agree) and it is used to calculate the importance index for each factor that is used to determine the relative ranking. The importance index for each variable of effect of service quality and customer care in the performance of mobile service delivery in relation to customer satisfaction was computed by using the following formula;

$$\textbf{Importance index } \sum i = \frac{(Wi \times fxi) \times 100}{3n}$$

Where
$\sum i$ = importance index
Wi = weightage given by the respondent
Fxi = frequency of each respondent
i = 1,2,3,4 and 5
n = total respondent

The data collected was analysed using the importance index method with the help of the SPSS software package, each factor was obtained which helped rank factors that determine service quality. The factors included; satisfaction, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance on the overall service quality.Further, a*t*-test was also used to analyse data to determine the significance of the gap between the perceived satisfaction and importance (P-I) on all of the service quality dimensions. The qualitative data was analyzed using concept analysis procedure. This procedure involved categorizing similar responses and identifying similarities and patterns among the responses (Lee, 1991). The first step of the process involved reading through all the questionnaires leading to the selection of one questionnaire and making notes from the emerging themes and ideas. Then responses from the interviews was compiled into concepts and clusters of the responses were entered into a fully coded SPSS data set.

Data presentation, analysis of findings and discussion

Data that was collected during the research study which was conducted in Lusaka's Kabwata suburb and to assess the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction in mobile service delivery using Airtel Zambia as a case study. Majorfindings were made and the data collected in the field was cleansed and coded. In order for the collected data to be understood, all information and the findings pertaining to the study were presented together. A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed and 106 were responded to representing 96% response rate. This was to the satisfactory of the researcher. The questionnaire had Twenty-Five (25) questions and the following is a presentation and analysis:

Results and Discussion of Findings

The first objective was to establish the dimensions of service quality that can be considered as main predictors of customer satisfaction for Airtel Zambia. These predictors ranged from tangibles, service assurance, staff responsiveness, service empathy, to general service provision. The findings from the research showed that customer satisfaction was far-fetched by Airtel Zambia. This was seen from the findings as indicated; for quality of service delivered by Airtel Zambia remained at 41% with the least indicating that it was superior standing at 4%, on the reliability, the findings revealed that Zambians reliability on Airtel Zambia was good standing at 46% and the timely delivery of services was poor with the majority (41%) indicating that. This negatively affected the customers' choice for this network provider. Results indicated that reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy significantly positively influenced customer attitudes in terms of satisfaction and loyalty. These are similar results studies conducted using the same parameters. However, the findings were different due to a number of reasons; context of the studies, population and the method of analysis played a role in these discrepancies. This one predominantly looked at the tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. These were variables assessed to ascertain customer satisfaction. The study revealed that Airtel Zambia provided poor (47.3%) services. The **second specific objective** was to assess the effect of service quality perception on customer satisfaction following Airtel Zambia's modernisation and business remodelling. The findings showed that due to very poor (46.4%) services provided by Airtel Zambia, customers are not likely to recommend the would be clients to subscribe with Airtel Zambia. The findings generally revealed that Airtel Zambia provided poor (30%) services, hence, customers were not satisfied.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, the purpose was to assess the effectiveness of service quality on customer satisfaction for customers in mobile service delivery. Airtel Zambia was used as a case study to appreciate this main idea. In order to achieve the above stated purpose, the research was guided by the following objectives:

1. To establish the dimensions of SQ that can be considered as main predictors of CS for Airtel Zambia.
2. To assess the effect of SQ perception on CS following Airtel Zambia's modernisation and business remodelling.
3. To determine how Airtel Zambia can improve its overall SQ and CS.

It was upon these objectives that the literature was reviewed to validate the hypothesis and methodology drawn to achieve them.

Conclusion

In this study it was realized that, AIRTEL's performance was below what its customers' expectations. The performance against the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) was average compared to what the customers and the regulator expected. The study was supported by the following three questions as presented below whose answers are shared in this section:

1. Which dimensions of SQ could be considered as main predictors of CS in Airtel Zambia?
2. To what extent has SQ perception translated into CS following Airtel Zambia's modernisation and business remodelling?

3. How can Airtel Zambia improve its overall SQ and CS?

The first question was answered when dimension such as assurance, reliability, responsiveness and empathy were used in the assessment. The second question was addressed by finding out about the amount of modernization that has taken place in AIRTEL in the service delivery systems and establishing how this has affected service delivery. Last but not least it was found from the field study that AIRTEL can develop initiatives which are useful in converting its weaknesses to strengths among them staff training in service quality practices in mobile service delivery in order to achieve maximum customer satisfaction.

Recommendations

In order for Airtel to realize profit and gain a competitive edge over other competitors in the industry, certain aspects must be put in to consideration like service empathy and service assurance. Customer service isn't just about fixing things and solving problems, it's all about exceeding customer expectations. The staff representing the service provider should understand the customer's frustration especially when the customer reports an anomaly with the service they are getting. In this case the feelings of a customer can't be ignored because the service provider is their last hope to addressing their matter. Customer service can't always deliver solutions but can deliver empathy by assuring the customer that they understand how frustrating they feel. Empathy is teachable and Airtel should invest in staff training ventures in this regard. This study has shown that people judge an experience based on its most intense point and end point. Ending on a high point is the best because it makes the customer feel great. The following are some of the recommendations drawn by the researcher from lessons acquired on the program of study as well as the survey carried out. As observed from the presented findings in the study, some of the respondents were in favour of Airtel whilst most of them were not in support of its mobile services particularly in network connectivity from the products they provide such as Airtel Money, Internet bundles (Mifis and routers). This fact can be augmented by the negative comments from its customers on their Facebook page which was opened for promotional basis. Therefore, in order for Airtel to regain its market leadership in the mobile service delivery, the organisation requires to re- position its marketing strategy as highlighted in the above paragraphs in this document. The organisation must work to improve its service quality dimensions up to the recommended standards as brought out in the research.

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