

# An assessment of youth's perception of the service quality of large food retailers in South Africa

Shaheen Adam  
Robertson K. Tengeh  
Chris Cupido

Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

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## Keywords

Sustainability, entrepreneurship, food retailers, service quality, youth, perceptions, RSQS

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## Abstract

All retailers are obliged to compete in an environment which is characterised by increasing competition, uncertain economic conditions and the increasingly sophisticated desires of consumers. In response, retailers have been prompted to improve not only the ranges of products which they offer, but the quality of their service as well. Some food retailers, however, have gained a reputation for the poor quality of their service. By contrast, those food retailers which consistently provide their customers with service which is perceived to be of high quality are usually rewarded with high levels of both satisfaction and loyalty among their customers, which tends to minimise the likelihood of customers defecting to competitors and ultimately results in the retailers concerned maintaining their profitability in a sustainable manner. On the assumption that the youth represents a significant market for any retailer, it is a central tenet of this paper that retailers which are able to attract and muster support among the youth would inevitably increase both their viability and their sustainability. Accordingly, the study upon which this paper is based sought to gauge the perceptions of the youth of the importance of receiving high quality service from the large food retailers which they patronised most.

A quantitative research approach was adopted to gather the data from a final research sample of 176 first year students who were enrolled to study towards the National Diploma in Retail Business Management at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Students who were studying towards this particular qualification were purposively selected because it was assumed that they would be familiar with retail concepts and be acutely aware of concerns pertaining to service quality. A self-administered questionnaire was considered to represent the optimal means of gathering relevant and appropriate data. The findings suggest that although large food retailers were generally perceived as successfully providing high quality service in some respects, in others they were generally less successful. It was evident that the respondents perceived, to a very significant degree, that the physical attributes of large retail food stores were the most important determinants of service quality. Attributes which pertained to convenience received particularly high ratings from the respondents, as did the quality of the products which were offered by retailers. Those determinants of service quality which pertained to interactions with the sales staffs of the retailers received the lowest ratings. The fact that the respondents rated the quality of the products which were offered as being of greater concern than their prices suggested that they would be inclined to remain loyal to large food retailers which met their perceived requirements for overall quality, which would include that of the service which they received from the retailers concerned, even if their prices were higher than those of their competitors.

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Corresponding author: Robertson K. Tengeh

Email addresses for corresponding author: [tengehr@cput.ac.za](mailto:tengehr@cput.ac.za)

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## 1. Introduction and background

The retail industry remains extremely competitive, with an ever-changing business landscape, owing to low barriers to entry, the ever-changing needs of consumers as a result of the proliferation of information which the internet era has heralded and ongoing changes in the economic environment. Boone and Kurtz (2015:491) describe *retailing* activities as entailing the selling of goods or services to an

ultimate or final consumer. Dunne, Lusch and Carver. (2013:03) quote Warren Buffet as maintaining that retailing has contributed more to the financial well-being of American society than any other institution or sector. Throughout the world, retailing constitutes one of the largest business sectors, accounting for a significant proportion of the global labour market (Levy & Weitz, 2010: 07). With respect to service, *quality* refers to the ability of an organisation to meet or exceed the expectations of its customers (Terblanche et al., 2013:6; Brink & Berndt, 2004:46). In the context of retail transactions, service encounters are assessed or evaluated by customers in relation to their personal beliefs and expectations.

The consumer plays the principal role in deciding the precise nature of quality, as the perceptions of the customer of the service which he or she receives are the sole determinants of his or her satisfaction. *Customer service* entails the satisfying of customers and is measured according to their perceptions of whether or not their needs are satisfied by the transactions which they make with the organisation concerned (Odgers, 2008:06). As these perceptions are informed by previous experiences and knowledge which customers have acquired of business practices, interpretations of the quality of service will inevitably differ according to the understanding of individual customers of what constitutes service which can be rated as being of good quality. Kotler and Armstrong (2016:13) maintain that people do not buy only goods and services, but also the complementary 'benefits' which are associated with the products and services. A purchase includes, together with the product, augmented product elements, such as information, personal attention and the ease with which transactions are conducted.

As has been noted, retailing is a highly competitive industry (Terblanche, 2015:315). Although retailers provide tangible products to consumers, they are also required to offer a service component, in order to present the products to consumers in a manner which is conducive to their satisfaction and to optimise the overall experience of making purchases. The service component is comprised of an assortment of variables, including the physical aspects of the products, reliability, personal interactions between the staff and customers, the ability of the staff to solve problems and the policies of individual shops or stores (Boone & Kurtz, 2015). Providing high levels of service quality is a continuously demanding task for retailers (Fernie, Fernie & Moore, 2015:243). The enduring success of individual retailers is determined, to a very large extent, by the perceptions of customers and consumers of the quality of the service which they provide (Keevy, 2011:02). Providing good customer service has become increasingly difficult for retailers, because customers have become increasingly vocal and insistent upon receiving satisfaction and service which is of an acceptable quality (Ogden & Odgen, 2005:66). Owing to the crucial factor which the perceptions of customers of the quality of the service which is provided constitutes for the success and survival of retail enterprises, retailers need to set themselves apart from their competitors by providing service which is perceived to be of high quality, and not merely average (Hoffman & Bateson, 2016:333; Odgers, 2005:05).

For the purposes of this research study, **the primary research question** is: *What are the perceptions of the youth of the service quality which is to be found in the stores of large food retailers in the Cape Metropolis?* **The secondary research question** is: *Which determinants of service quality does the youth value more than others?* The following section is devoted to a review of the relevant available literature pertaining to the concept of retailing and service quality. The next section will take the form of a discussion of the research methodology which was adopted in order to conduct the study, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the research question. The conclusions which were drawn from the findings will be presented and the practical implications of the study will be offered.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Retailing

Although a number of definitions of retailing have been suggested by various researchers, there is a general consensus that *retailing* refers to all activities which are entailed in the selling of goods or services directly to final consumers for their personal consumption and not for resale (Terblanche et al., 2013:6; Ogden, 2005:23; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:397; Levy & Weitz, 2012:07). Retailers play a pivotal role in the business environment which they inhabit, by relaying information to manufacturers pertaining to the present and future needs of customers, the influence of competitors and other role players or 'forces' which may affect sales and profit potentials. Retailers receive goods from manufacturers, store them and make them available to final consumers. When retailers purchase products from manufacturers

or wholesalers and take ownership of them, they assume the risks which are entailed by moving the goods from manufacturers to consumers. For the purposes of this study, the perceptions of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by retailers concerned large food retailers only, which are defined as retailers which sell food and related items only (Berman & Evans, 2013:138). The authors of this paper wish to add that food retailers can be classified in a number of different categories, such as convenience stores, conventional supermarkets, food-based superstores, combination stores and warehouse stores. Levy and Weitz (2012:36) maintain that the *retail mix* is the most basic criterion for distinguishing one type of retailer from another. It is the considered opinion of the authors of this paper that in the implementing of a particular retail strategy, managers need to develop a retail mix which satisfies the “needs of the target market better than that of its competition”, which consists of six Ps, namely, the traditional marketing four Ps of Product, Price, Place and Promotion, and an additional two Ps, namely, Presentation and Personnel (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2012:552). The attribute of service quality is provided by the personnel and presentation components of the retail mix.

## 2.2 *The nature of services*

According to Fernie, Fernie and Moore (2015:245) and Blem (2008:257), a service is any activity or benefit which one party offers to another, which is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Services can be described as processes, which could take the form of a flight on an aircraft, a haircut, or an appointment with a doctor (Boone & Kurtz, 2015:457; Bruhn & Georgi 2006:13). Most researchers tend to agree that services have inherent characteristics which dictate how they are marketed, as opposed to physical products (Lovelock & Patterson, 2015:345). Owing to the unique characteristics of a service, services are more difficult and challenging to evaluate than tangible products (Thakor, Suri & Saleh, 2008:137).

In addition, the criteria for evaluating services are different from those which are applied to physical or tangible goods. Tangible goods are evaluated on the basis of the finished product alone, while services are evaluated in terms of the results which they achieve and the processes which they entail (Hoffman & Bateson, 2016:334). Consequently, a customer visiting a hair salon would often be inclined to evaluate the quality of the service which it provides solely on the basis of the hair styling which he or she received, but also on that of a number of considerations pertaining to the process, such as the friendly demeanour of the hair stylist, or his or her personal neatness or competence.

Fernie, Fernie and Moore (2015:245) and Blem (2010:248) list four characteristics which distinguish a service from a tangible product:

- Elusiveness: Services cannot be viewed, touched, smelled or overheard before they are provided.
- Perishability: Services cannot be stowed as products are: an empty seat in a cinema represents income which has been lost forever.
- Simultaneity: Services are received or consumed at the same time as they are provided, thereby placing great importance on the abilities of individual service providers.
- Heterogeneity: It is difficult to homogenise the quality of services, owing to human factors.

## 2.3 *Perceptions and expectations of the youth*

According to the National Youth Policy (1997:7) which was drafted by the National Youth Commission, the *youth* of the nation may be considered to comprise all men and women in the population between the ages of 14 and 35 years. The youth market represents huge opportunities in terms of present and future sales for retailers. Vazquez et al. (2001:1) explain that the concept of service quality is linked to the expectations and perceptions of those who are intended to receive a particular service. Their perceptions entail individual processes which are influenced by internal factors, such as their beliefs, experiences, needs, moods and expectations (Keevy, 2011:10). *Expectations* can be described as expressions of specific desires or perceived needs (Parasuraman, Zeithmal & Berry, 1985:17). The expectations of customers concern the quality which they believe that service providers should provide, as opposed to that which they actually provide. Levy & Weitz, (2012:543) maintain that the expectations of customers are influenced by numerous factors, including the information which is available to them, their experiences of receiving particular services, the equipment which is used by service providers and the type of service provider from whom the service is received.

#### 2.4. Service quality

Brink and Berndt (2008:03) qualify their definition of service as “any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything” with “Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product”. From this assessment it may be concluded that the marketing strategies which service providers employ and the ways in which they communicate the availability of their services are not frequently encountered in other sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture. It is evident that there is no universally acceptable definition of the concept of quality (Hardie & Walsh, 1993:75; Sower & Fair, 2005:08; Wicks & Roethlein, 2009:82). In relation to service, quality may be described as a summary of the assessments of each customer of each experience of the service, which together constitute the shared approval of customers (Wicks & Roethlein, 2009:90). From a retailing perspective, Levy and Weitz (2012:543) maintain that when customers evaluate the quality of the service of an individual retailer, they compare their assessments of the service which they have received with their prior expectations of it.

High quality service is of crucial importance for the overall success of any retailer. It is evident that service quality is one of the areas in which the most research has been conducted in the field of marketing (Zainal et al., 2012:304; Iacobucci, 1998:96). One of the few points upon which researchers tend to agree is that service quality is an “elusive and abstract concept” to define and measure (Cronin & Taylor, 1992:55). Service quality is vital and beneficial to entrepreneurial organisations for various different reasons. Research supports the contention that high levels of service quality which are rendered by organisations will result in customer satisfaction (Hoffman & Bateson, 2006:334). It has also been found that service which is perceived to be of high quality is positively associated with loyalty among customers (Wong & Sohal, 2003:495). Sophisticated and well-informed consumers demand high levels of customer service (Bitner, Brown & Meuter, 2000:139-149). Retailers are able to set themselves apart from their competitors through the quality of the service which they provide, thereby ensuring customer satisfaction (Jamal & Anastasiadou, 2007:398) and the quality of service can help to retain the patronage of customers and to increase the overall perceived value of transactions for customers (Kaul, 2005:3). Although the ability of retailers to provide excellent service is considered to be crucial to their success (Terblanche et al., 2013:272), the quality of the service which is provided by retailers is assessed in terms of different criteria from those which are applied to the service of organisations which are either solely manufacturers or service-orientated organisations. Retail organisations provide both service and products.

#### 2.5 Service quality models

A variety of models can be used to measure service quality, three of which are the GAP, SERVQUAL and Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) models. The GAP model measures the differences between the expectations and perceptions of a service experience (Terblanche et al., 2013:272). This model has little relevance for the purposes of this particular study, as only the perceptions of service quality of shoppers who fell into the age bracket which is associated with youth were measured, and not their expectations. The SERVQUAL model, which measures service quality according to specific criteria, such as tangibles and intangibles such as assurance, empathy, reliability and responsiveness (Boshoff & Du Plessis, 2009:43), was not used either. The model was considered to be unsuitable, owing to the length of the questionnaire and the fact that it is used to measure the quality of the service which is provided by organisations which render “pure services”, as opposed to retail settings, in which both goods and service are offered. The Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) model was considered to be the appropriate model for measuring perceptions of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by large food retailers, as it was designed specifically to measure the quality of service in retail settings (Metha, Lalwani & Han, 2000:63). The RSQS has been successfully “adapted and validated” in a retail store environment (Xiao & Chernetskaya, 2010:27) and used to measure the quality of the service in various types of retail enterprises, such as department stores, supermarkets and discount stores.

Measuring the quality of service in a retail setting is different from measuring the quality of the service which is provided by businesses such as manufacturers and wholesalers (Keevy, 2011:17). As can be seen in Figure 1 below, the quality of the service which is provided by retailers has a hierarchical structure, which is comprised of five dimensions (Dabolkar et al. 1996:24).



- Aesthetic aspects: Tangible factors such as the layouts of stores, furniture, fittings, fixtures, colours, materials, lighting and the overall styles of stores. Also included are stationery, brochures, posters and the appearance of the staff.
- Dependability: The extent to which retailers are able to fulfil promises, to provide suitable and appropriate service, to conduct error-free sales transactions and to have adequate quantities of stock available.
- Individual contact: The interactions of retailers with customers, including product knowledge, effective management of the staff and sales personnel, the ability to inspire confidence, displaying courtesy towards customers and telephone etiquette.
- Problem solving: The ability of retailers to take care of complaints and problems which result from poor service or the inadequate performance of products (Mehta et al., 2000:63).
- Wide-ranging policies: The policies of retailers which determine the ways in which they interact with customers. These policies affect how retailers manage their stores and provide service and ultimately determine the quality of the service which is provided. Together these policies determine store policies.

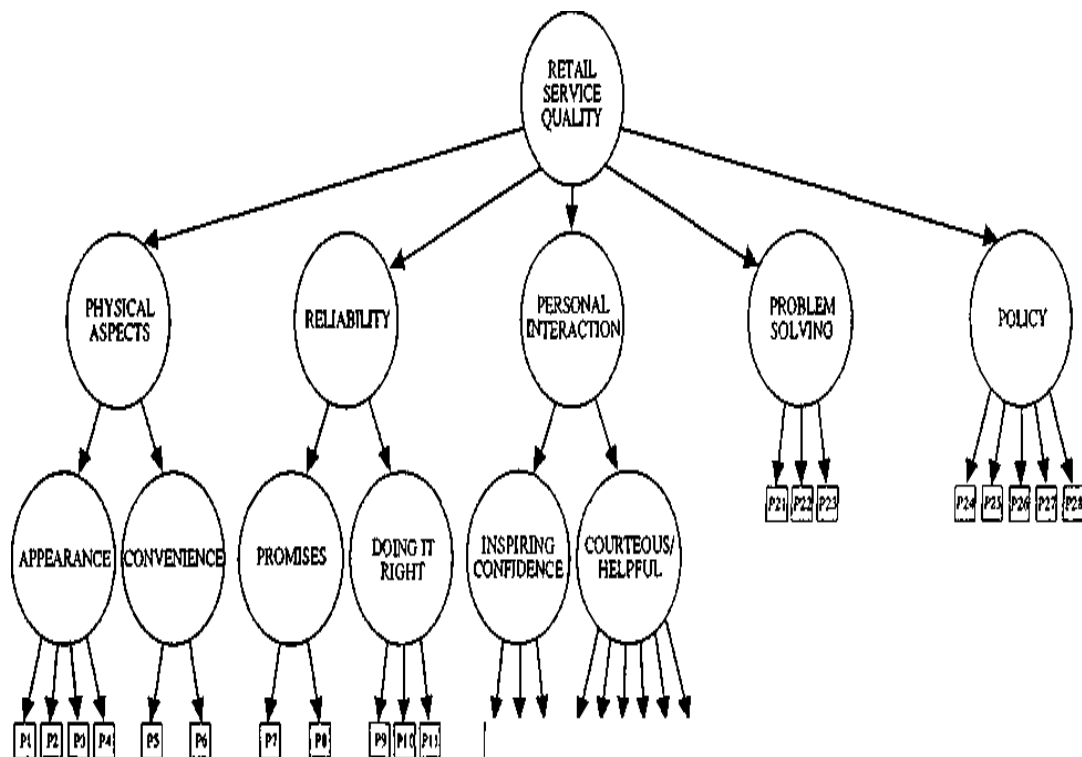


Figure 1: Proposed hierarchical structure of retail service quality  
(Adopted from Dabolkar et al., 1996:6)

## 2.6. The gap in the literature

The central theme of the majority of studies analysed is that customer consumer loyalty is inspired by customer satisfaction, which is result of product and service quality expectation being met or exceeded. However other studies acknowledge satisfaction and service quality as important, they argue that they are not synonymous with customer loyalty because there are many organisations with satisfied customers who are not loyal and dissatisfied customers who are loyal. With the growing dynamics in service quality perception and expectation in youth customers, there is still ongoing debate on the customer perception of service quality. More so, in the context of South Africa and particularly the youths studying towards a degree in retail management, who should have a reasonable understanding of the retail industry.

### 3. Research design and methodology

The research study attempted to measure the perceptions of a sample of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by large food retailers in the Cape Metropolis. The youth market is of great significance to retailers and marketers, as the youth represents an age group which has substantial purchasing power and exerts a direct and an indirect influence on the purchasing behaviour of both peers and families. In order to answer specific research questions which entailed precise measurements, it was decided to conduct a descriptive research study which employed a quantitative perspective, as quantitative methodologies are well suited to measuring the behaviour, knowledge, opinions and attitudes of consumers (Cooper & Schindler, 2006:217).

The target population was limited to students who were studying towards the National Diploma in Retail Business Management at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. A convenience sampling procedure was used to obtain the sampling frame, which comprised enrolled first year students only. An online questionnaire was administered to 213 students, of whom 176 responded. These students were invited to a designated computer laboratory in which the online survey was conducted through the student intranet online teaching system of CPUT, which is known as Black Board. The online questionnaire was based on the Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS), which had been adapted from the reputable SERVQUAL model for measuring service quality.

A descriptive research design was used, as students were required to rate their perceptions of the service quality of the large food retailers which they preferred to patronise. Employing a survey to collect data is characteristic of both descriptive research and a quantitative approach (Zigmund & Babin, 2013: 53; Bryman et al., 2011:31). This study did not endeavour to generate an indication of connection, but rather an improved understanding of an "existing situation" (Keevy, 2011:31).

As the study employed a quantitative perspective only, it may be concluded that the approach which was adopted in order to conduct it was a positivist one.

#### 3.1. Methods employed to collect the data

The main aim of collecting data through the conducting of surveys is to find differences and similarities from comparable data across subsets of a chosen research sample (Cooper and Schindler, 2013:273). For the purposes of this study, the primary data was obtained through a self-administered questionnaire. The selection of the target population for the study was motivated by the belief of the researcher that although the respondents were from a diverse demographic background, their shared decision to study towards the National Diploma in Retail Business Management would make them acutely aware of concerns pertaining to retailing and the standards which apply to service in the retail sector. On the basis of this assumption, it was concluded that there was a great likelihood that the data which was gathered from this research sample would yield relevant insights into how the youth rate the quality of the service which is provided by large food retailers.

Owing to time constraints and costs, the entire population of the youth of the Cape Metropolis could not be studied. Consequently, convenience sampling was employed in order to obtain a research sample which was representative of the population as a whole. *Convenience sampling* is a non-probability sampling procedure in which elements of the population are included in the sample on the basis of their being easily accessible (Brown et al., 2014:116). In the designing of the questionnaire, the type of data which was to be collected from the responses to each of the questions was taken into consideration. The content of the questions was based on Dabolkar's Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS), which was specifically adapted to measure service quality in the retail sector. The RSQS is an adaptation of the most widely known and acknowledged model of measuring service quality, namely, SERVQUAL (Keevy, 2011:17). In order to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner, the survey was approved by the Ethics Committee of CPUT. As no respondents were asked to reveal their identities, their anonymity could be maintained.

In research, reliability is often referred to as the "trustworthiness" of the findings of a particular study (Collis & Hussey, 2003:186). The findings of a study can be deemed to be reliable when another researcher is able to repeat the study and obtain the same results (Mult & Watkins, 2010:68). Consistency is the measure of reliability, and "as a result, improving reliability requires decreasing random error" (Brown & Suter, 2014:95). Brown and Suter also explain that although particular findings could be found

to be reliable, they would not automatically be valid, owing to the possibility of systematic errors. The draft questionnaire was moderated by senior research experts and a qualified statistician before it was distributed online. Pre-test questionnaires were administered in order to ensure the reliability of the instrument and to identify any shortcomings which could prevent the questions from being understood as they had been intended to be understood. The pre-test questionnaire was distributed among 20 first year students in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Management at the university. The results indicated that the students understood the questionnaire.

The validity of findings refers to the extent to which a study has measured what it had been intended to measure. According to Collis and Hussey (2003:186), validity pertains to whether or not data or findings generate a “true picture” of what is being studied. Any scale or other measure which assesses accurately what it intended to assess is considered to possess validity (Brown & Suter, 2014:95). This particular study was assessed by a supervisor and relevant experts in the fields of marketing and service. As the findings were deemed to be valid, it could be concluded that the self-administered survey accurately measured the perceptions of the research sample in accordance with the objectives of the study and the research questions.

As the study intended to measure the perceptions of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by large food retailers, the respondents were asked a number of questions pertaining to their perceptions of service quality. First, they were asked to indicate which determinants of service quality they considered to be more important than others. Secondly, they were required to rate their perceptions of the quality of the service which was provided by the large food retailers which they patronised most often. Thirdly, they were asked to identify areas of concern, with respect to the quality of the service which was provided by the large food retailers which they patronised, which they believed required attention.

#### **4. Presentation and discussion of the findings**

The findings are presented under the following headings:

- Which determinants of service quality do the youth value more than others?
- What are the perceptions of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by the large food retailers which they patronise most?
- Upon which determinants of service quality do retailers need to improve most?

##### **4.1 Which determinants of service quality do the youth value more than others?**

As is shown in Table 1, physical determinants of service quality ranked above the others and the subdivision of physical attributes was perceived as being the most important by the respondents. The ease with which goods can be found was rated as being important by 82% of the respondents, while 80% rated the quality of the products as important, as opposed to 73%, for whom the prices of products were important. These findings concur with a trend which has been identified in the retail sector in South Africa, which suggests that consumers, including young adults, seek value in terms of quality in the products which they purchase, instead of purchasing products solely on the basis of their prices.

Another physical attribute which was deemed to be of particular importance by the respondents was the visual appearance of stores, which was rated by 79%, while 79% also rated ease of movement in stores as being important. By contrast, the ability of retailers to respond to complaints and problems of customers, which resulted from either poor service or the poor quality or performance of products, was ranked 6th in descending order of importance, drawing ratings from 66% of the respondents. This result could suggest either the possibility that the respondents had not often perceived a need to complain or that young adults may tend to be reluctant to complain, perhaps owing to a lack of personal assertiveness.

The knowledge of the sales staffs of the organisations, including sales personnel, cashiers and other front line staff, was also perceived as being of lesser importance than physical attributes, drawing ratings from 65% of the respondents. This finding could be attributed to the fact that the respondents purchased convenience goods from the large food retailers in stores in which customers serve themselves, without requiring assistance from the sales staff, other than the cashiers. Finally, the importance of the friendliness of the staff received the lowest response of 62% of the respondents.

**Table 1: Summary of rankings of perceptions of the respondents of determinants of service quality**

Attributes	Ranking	Percentage of respondents
Ease with which goods can be found	1	82%
Quality of products	2	80%
Attractiveness of the store	3	79%
Ease with which customers are able to move around the store	3	79%
Price	5	73%
Problem-solving ability of the staff	6	66%
Knowledgeable staff	7	65%
Friendly staff	8	62%

Source: Author's fieldwork (2015)

#### 4.2. What are perceptions of the youth of the quality of the service which is provided by the large food retailers which they patronise most?

The answer to this research question revealed that a majority of 75% of the respondents rated the quality of the service which was provided by the large food retailers which they patronised most as being good to excellent, while 23% rated it as being either average or adequate and less than 3% rated it as being either below average or poor. The ratings of the respondents of the service which is provided by the large food retailers which they patronise most on the basis of specific determinants of service quality are summarised in Table 2 below. From the results it is evident that the respondents rated the service which is provided by the food retailers most favourably in relation to their physical attributes, namely, the neatness and cleanliness of stores, ergonomics, in terms of the ease with which goods can be found and the spaciousness of stores, parking and the visual appearance of the store, with respect to modern fittings, fixtures and equipment. The second highest ranking was on the basis of personal interactions, which indicates that the respondents chose to patronise food retailers which have sales staffs which are friendly, helpful, knowledgeable and available to provide assistance. The third highest of the determinants of service quality was the problem-solving ability of the staffs of the stores. The respondents rated the food retailers which they patronised most as being moderately effective in resolving the problems and complaints of customers. Reliability was the lowest ranked determinant of quality service. The majority of the respondents indicated that the service of the large food retailers which they patronised most was unreliable in several respects:

- Customers were required to wait for long periods in order to make payments for purchases.
- Cashiers frequently made errors during payment transactions.
- Sales staff were often unavailable.
- Goods on display were not always in stock and, consequently, could not be purchased.

Table 2: Attributes which prompted favourable perceptions of the quality of the service provided by large food retailers patronised most

No	Attributes which motivated favourable ratings of the quality of service provided by large food retailers patronised most	Weighted average
1	Physical attributes	87%
2	Reliability	49%
3	Personal interactions	73%
4	Problem-solving ability	53%

Source: Author's fieldwork (2015)

#### 3: Upon which determinants of service quality do retailers need to improve most?

On the basis of the findings, it is evident that the perceptions of the respondents of the reliability and the problem-solving abilities of the large food retailers which they patronised most were less favourable than they were of other determinants of service quality (See Tables 3 and 4 below). As the findings show that a large majority of 76% of the respondents, like most other consumers, irrespective of their ages, do not wish to spend time in queues waiting to pay for goods, it is incumbent upon food



retailers to increase their throughput, with respect to customers paying for goods and leaving their stores. In addition, food retailers need to improve their systems for controlling stock, in order to ensure that all of the various products are always available. With respect to personal interactions, retailers need to ensure that there are always adequate numbers of sales staff available to customers on the shop floor, to respond to enquiries pertaining to products or where specific products are to be found in the store. This consideration is of crucial importance, as most customers desire to find the products which they seek with a minimal expenditure of effort and in as short a space of time as possible. The ability of retailers to resolve the problems which are brought to their attention by customers as a determinant of service quality warrants improvement by food retailers.

The majority of the respondents believed that retailers did not make it easy for them to complain. However, customers who are reluctant to complain, including those whose reluctance stems from indifference or apathy, act in a manner which is actually detrimental to retailers, as weaknesses in their operations are not brought to their attention.

**Table 3: Ratings for reliability**

Attribute: Reliability	Frequency	Total
Goods are always in stock	112	64%
The sales staff are always available	114	65%
I never have to wait long periods to pay for goods	25	24%

Source: Author's fieldwork (2015)

**Table 4: Ratings for problem-solving ability**

Attribute: Problem-solving ability	Frequency	Total
The ability of retailers to attend to complaints from customers	93	53%

Source: Author's fieldwork (2015)

## 5. Discussions and practical implications of the study

The ergonomics of stores, the ease with which goods can be found, the ability of sales staffs to assist customers to do so, and the ease with which customers are able to move around stores were all rated as important by the respondents, which suggests that convenience has great significance for consumers. This finding resonates with a general perception that consumers have a great need for convenience when they are shopping. Having become increasingly "leisure time poor", people tend to prefer to make optimal use of their free time and to devote as little as possible of it to activities such as shopping (Baines & Page, 2013:345). The visual appearance of retail stores was also considered as a significant factor which encouraged the respondents to patronise particular stores. As the respondents participated in the study as representatives of a particular segment of the youth market of the Cape Metropolis, this finding, along with all of the others, suggests that there appears to be a definite profile of attributes which is deemed to be of particular significance to the youth market.

Although the ability of retailers to solve problems was not perceived to be a particularly significant consideration by the respondents, inadequate levels of service will nevertheless inevitably contribute towards negative general perceptions of the quality of the service which is provided by particular stores. It is also likely that manifestations of poor service may assume greater significance for other age groups of consumers.

The findings show that many of the food retailers were perceived to have insufficient levels of stock, in the sense that particular goods were not always available when they were needed by consumers. According to the Competition Tribunal (2003), it is imperative to maintain high stock levels at all times in the retail sector.

Although the friendliness or product knowledge of members of sales staffs were not considered to be of particular importance to the respondents, it needs to be added once more that the perceptions of other age groups of consumers could be significantly different in this respect.

It has been advanced that price and quality are the "two most central dimensions" of the perceptions of customers of particular retail stores and of their purchasing decisions (Fernie, Fernie &

Moore, 2015:243). Although this assertion was borne out by the findings, it emerged that the quality of products was generally perceived by the respondents to be of greater importance than their price. This finding could be attributed to general perceptions of quality being of greater importance than price and of the undesirability of cheap, poor quality products. However, the finding was still a surprising one in the light of the fact that most students do not have large amounts of disposable income, if any. Keevy (2011:69) supports this overall assessment, by maintaining that consumers in other age groups tend to be motivated to buy merchandise on the basis of high quality, rather than that of other motivators.

The respondents cited experiencing inconvenience as a result of sales staff not always being available on the shop floors. The respondents also cited experiencing inconvenience owing to being required to wait for long periods of time in order to pay for goods. Almost half of the research sample felt that the large food retailers which they patronised did not make it easy for customers to lodge complaints concerning problems, exchanges or refunds. This finding suggests that the mechanisms of large food retailers for obtaining either positive or negative feedback from their customers are inadequate. However, it is imperative to maintain communication with customers, as customers who are not given the means to complain are highly likely simply to defect to a competitor (Ferrell & Hartline, 2011:378).

The findings suggest that although all of the race groups who were represented in the research sample were generally highly satisfied with the overall quality of the service which they received from the large food retailers which they patronised, the white respondents tended to express a moderate degree of satisfaction.

## 6. Conclusions

Most of the respondents rated the quality of the service which they received from the large food retailers which they patronised most as being good to excellent. This assessment reflects positively on the large food retailers concerned. In terms of specific rankings, Pick n Pay was the most patronised food retailer, followed, in descending order, by Shop-rite, Spar, Woolworths and Checkers. It was quite apparent from the findings that an overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that the quality of the service which they received from food retailers was of great importance, irrespective of their gender or race. This overall finding, together with the finding that the students in the research sample indicated that they would be willing to pay more for goods which were of superior quality to cheaper goods, could suggest a similar tendency among the youth to chose to patronise particular large food retailers not solely on the basis of the prices of their wares, but also on the quality of their service.

This possibility could present problems for those food retailers who have not managed to maintain levels of service quality which are perceived to be excellent by their customers. The youth continue to constitute a vital market for most businesses. For large food retailers in particular, the youth present an opportunity to develop client bases of long-term repeat customers through the fostering of long-term relationships. From a strategic viewpoint, the managements of large food retailers need to inculcate among the members of their sales staffs a culture of providing excellent service at all times. In addition, the authors of this paper maintain that the managers of large food retail stores should lead by example, in order to demonstrate to the members of their staffs, particularly those who deal directly with customers, their absolute commitment to providing service which is of the best possible quality to customers. Apart from possessing the necessary aptitude for providing excellent service to customers, members of the front line staffs of large food retailers need to receive regular training and professional development, in order to enable them to develop their skills in interacting personally with customers. In order to increase their capacity for providing excellent service, emphasis should be placed on recruiting people who possess the personal competencies which are required for dealing with the general public.

All retail staff, including the management, should be given sufficient incentive to adopt a culture of service quality. In addition, retailers need to establish and to set appropriate standards for service, in order to guide employees (Levy & Weitz, 2012:09). The managements of retailers need to ensure that all of the determinants of service quality receive adequate attention, namely, physical attributes, reliability, personal interactions, problem solving and general policy. No retailer can afford to overlook the crucial importance of any determinant.

Retailers need to monitor and measure the perceptions of their customers of the quality of the service which they receive. The opinions of customers need to be solicited and feedback needs to be obtained on a regular basis, in order to assess the quality of the service which is provided to customers constantly and to ensure that the standards which have been set are maintained. In this study it was found that although the respondents were generally satisfied with the levels of service which they received, they perceived that members of staff were not always available to assist them, a perception which has adverse implications for overall perceptions of the reliability of particular retailers with respect to being able to provide acceptable levels of service. Proper systems need to be developed and implemented in order to ensure that the service which customers receive is optimal at all times.

The length of time which customers are required to wait in order to pay for their purchases was another perceived shortcoming of most large food retailers. Although the large volumes of customers which pass through the stores of large food retailers, particularly during weekends and holidays, make it exceedingly difficult to circumvent inconveniencing customers, retailers need to improve their systems in order to minimise delays. Food retailers need to research a range of different strategies for reducing waiting times in queues. In addition, increased numbers of staff should be employed during peak times and more efficient systems for paying for goods need to be developed. Creative strategies, such as rewarding customers for shopping during off-peak times, could also be introduced. Food retailers would be well advised to take cognisance of the fact that females were found to be more aware of poor quality service than males and that females were 10% more likely to defect to competitors if they perceived the quality of the service which they received to be poor.

Retailers need to be aware that the customers who comprise the youth market are likely to defect to competitors if the quality of their service is perceived to be superior to that which they have become accustomed to receiving, even if doing so entails higher costs for them. All retailers, need to become sufficiently aware that although retailing entails the selling of tangible goods, the service which they provide, in terms of all of the determinants of service quality dimensions is assuming ever-increasing significance in the minds of consumers.

## 7. Suggestions for further research

This study investigated the perceptions of a sample which was drawn from a particular segment of the youth market of the Cape Metropolis of the importance of the quality of the service which they received from the large food retailers which they patronized most. The study could be duplicated in other regions of South Africa, such as KwaZulu Natal, Gauteng or Limpopo, in order to assess whether or not the findings are consistent with those of the Cape. In addition, perceptions of service quality could also be measured and evaluated in other retail fields, such as that of consumer electronics.

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