

Perception of Quality Practices in Nigerian University Marketing Programs: Marketing Students' perspective

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Abstract

This study investigated the quality practices in a Nigerian Private university. The study examined the extent to which the identified dimensions of service quality were perceived by the marketing students. These dimensions include physical quality, interactive quality and corporative quality. Results implicated interactive quality as the most perceived dimension of the service quality and corporative quality as the least perceived dimension of the service quality. It was discovered that marketing students were willing to recommend the university mainly because of the perceived physical quality of the university. The research measures showed encouraging psychometric values. These findings were discussed and situated within the Nigerian university context and extant literature. Recommendations were made, and areas for further studies suggested.

Keywords

Physical quality, Interactive quality, Corporative quality, Marketing students.

I. Introduction

The increasing importance of the service sector and the emphasis on service quality has reached far beyond theoretical discussion (Shank, Walker and Hayes, 1995). Joseph (1998) found out, in his research on determinant of service quality in education in New Zealand, that in order to compete effectively in the market place, educational institutions need to differentiate themselves from competitors.

Worthy of note is the fact that higher education possesses all the features of service industry. Educational services are intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable, and perishable and the customers (students) participate in the process. The congruence between many service industries in the business sector and higher education suggests the applicability of research for the assessment of service quality to higher education. It is pertinent to note that the move towards a customer service model with its focus on customer expectations and needs, administrative commitment to training, development and recognition of frontline employees and service quality has not been an easy transition.

A good service marketer knows that the first component in service quality management is gaining a thorough understanding of the customer's needs and expectations. The second component is establishing a service strategy expressed in policies and procedures that reflects the organization's unique service propositions (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Unfortunately, today's universities are struggling with the classic marketing problems of slow growth, changing buying patterns, increased competition as well as increasing operating costs.

Literature search revealed that so many scholars in the field of marketing and service management have attempted to discover global or standard dimensions of service quality that are considered important by customers (Gronroos, 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985, 1988, 1994;

Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Brown, Churchill and Peter, 1993; Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000). However, the most significant contribution towards the development of a quantitative yardstick for assessing a firm's service quality is the work conducted by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988).

Parasuraman et al (1988) identified five dimensions of service quality: Tangible (the physical facilities, equipments, personnel and communication materials). Reliability (the ability to perform a promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness (the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service). Assurance (the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence) and Empathy (the caring attitude, which provides individualized attention to customers).

They developed a measuring instrument called SERVQUAL to measure customer perceptions of service quality. The SERVQUAL questionnaire elicits two parallel sets of data. Scores are obtained for customers' expectation (E) as well as their perceptions of the actual performance (P) of service quality. The difference between the actual performance and the original expectation is referred to as disconfirmation paradigm. Positive disconfirmation results occur when perception of service quality exceeds expectation while negative disconfirmation results if perception is below expectation. (Gronroos, 1990).

It is expected that high service quality should result in higher customer satisfaction. (Kwan and Hee, 1995). In addition, a satisfied customer is likely to be a loyal customer who will give repeat business to the company. Liljander and Strandviks (1993) in their report of the study of relationship between service quality, satisfaction and behavioural intention revealed that satisfaction was found to have positive correlation with intentions to repurchase.

Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) developed service quality gap model. They focused on the following five groups; Gap 1: Difference between customer expectations and management perceptions of customer expectation. Gap 2. Difference between management perceptions of Customers expectation and Service quality specifications. Gap 3: Difference between Service quality specifications and the service actually delivered. Gap 4: Difference between service delivery and what is communicated about the service to customers. Gap 5: Difference between customers' expected services and perceived service delivered.

This gap 5 is the customer-based definition of service quality. This gap shall form the basis of this study. However, it explains why disconfirmation theory is a theoretical framework for the study.

II. Literature Review

A. Quality and Assessment in Higher Education

The higher education literature recognizes that student

quality is used as a proxy for institutional quality and vice versa. Zimmerman (1999) argued that Universities have long recognized this strategic interplay in their admission – quality – pricing policies. Winston (1996) noted that sustainable separation of cost and price the continuing ability of a University to subsidize all of its customers is a defining economic characteristic of higher education. The price charged by Universities is typically less than production cost.

The student subsidy, that is, the difference between the production costs and price charged may effect the capacity of a higher education firm to deliver higher service quality.

Zimmerman (1999) described the uniqueness of the non profit Higher Education firm when he said that American Universities occupy a special hazardous zone in society between the competitive profit marketing business sector and the government owned and run state agencies. They constitute one of the largest industries in the nations but are among the least business like and well managed of all organizations. This unique nature of higher education firm may have an effect on service quality conceptualization and measurement within the non profit higher education firm.

But, the congruence between many service industries in the business sector and higher education suggest the applicability of research for the assessment of service quality to higher education. It is pertinent to know that the more tow and a customer expectations and need administrative commitment to the training, development and recognition of frontline employees and service quality has not been an easy transition for higher education. Keller (1993) noted that College and Universities across the land are realizing that they must manage themselves as most other organizations in society do.

Chaffee (1998) also corroborated this view when he said that students are the consumers of education services and that consistent failure to meet their expectations will lead to institutional decline..

Stated by Shank, Walker and Hayes (1995) that higher education possesses all the characteristics of a service industry. Educational services are intangible, heterogeneous, and inseparable from the person delivering it, variable, perishable and the customer (students) participates in the process. Additionally, Colleges and universities are increasingly finding themselves in an environment that is conducive to understanding the role and importance of service quality; this environment is fiercely competitive one (Shank, Walker and Hayes, 1995).

A student learnt through an entity called “University” from the time he enters until he graduates. The University, on the other hand, provides education to the student by way of academic, research and humanities according to its ideal and ideology. A student receives numerous “education” that are offered by the Universities, and thus evaluates the requirement of research activities carried out by faculty members and evaluate the current educational process as expressed through the pedagogical point view of the faculty, administrators, and staff of the University. In this way we can see that the student, faculty members, and staff of the University are international evaluators even though they are at the same time internal members who comprise the University.

Darlene and Bunda (1991) have pointed out that most assessments of higher education quality have not been based on merit assessment related to service provided. Austin (1982) describes a model of quality as comprising of reputation, resources measures based, outcome measure based, and added measure based. None of these approaches recognize the fact that student and parent are dominant forces in the choice process, and in essence understanding their choice process from a quality perspective provide a potentially useful information for educational institution as guidelines for TQM and other quality driven initiative, as well as the developments of marketing initiative.

In the study on student satisfaction with selected student support services, Ruby (1996) found that student evaluate service quality differently depending upon the service department being considered.

Differences in perception of service quality according to gender were also found with female student both expecting and perceiving higher levels of service quality than male student (Ruby, 1996). Moderate relationships were found between student satisfaction with support services and their commitment to the College or University attended. The study concluded that the SERVQUAL model is adaptable to educational support services.

Devine (1995) in the study of non institutional service quality factors reported by first year student and faculty found that expectation value across all SERVQUAL dimension were greater than perception values, except for the tangible dimension in the student group.

Finally, mean values were significantly lower than students ($C_p < .05$) across all SERVQUAL dimensions. Webb et al (1997) report the result of a comprehensive survey of both public and private College students. Student perceptions were obtained for a variety of factors, which can be summarized into three demand categories and one supply category. The three demand categories are: (a) Consumption oriented non-price factors (attractiveness of campus, availability of cultural events, availability of religious opportunities, ethnic and racial diversity, opportunity for personal contact with faculty); (b) investment return factors (schools accreditation and placement reputation, potentials marketability of degree, alumni and employer’s advice on school selection, reputation of alumni, cost of tuition plus availability of financial aid and assistantship or other on campus employment); (c) marketing and demand management effort (advertisement, admissions’ brochure pamphlets, course catalogs, on-campus and career day visit).

The supply factor reflect product differentiation factors (quality of computer, library and classroom facilities, availability of specific degree program and specific academic majors, availability of flexible schedules (weekends, evening, etc.) academic reputation of school/faculty, reputation of University in local community).

Based upon the finding of Webb et al. (1997) research private institutions tend to be more attractive to students who view the following factors to be important in their choice of school: perceived reputation of quality, effective promotional strategies, competitiveness of program length and availability of attractive

non academic opportunities.

Public schools on the other hand appear to have an attraction for students who view following factors as being important; financial considerations, access to further graduate study opportunities in the business area, and more modern and extensive physical facilities.

Carney (1994) proposed nineteen variables/attributes in studying a College's image i.e. student qualification (academic), student qualities (personal), faculty student interaction, quality instruction (faculty), variety of courses, academic reputation, class size, career preparation, athletic program, student activities (social life), community service, facilities and equipment, location, physical appearance (campus), on-campus residence, friendly and caring atmosphere, religious atmospheres, safe campus, cost/financial aid.

In a general sense, an image is a picture that customers (student), potential customers (potential student) the general public, the employee and all direct and indirect relation of an organization (University) have of a company (University) Peter (1999).

In a study of factors that contribute to academic achievement of student and job satisfaction of staff, Vieira (1996) found that positive student interaction with staff especially faculty, have an effect upon persistence and satisfaction with the institution.

Staff also benefit from this interaction with students as demonstrated by increase in job satisfaction with interaction with students, and feeling that their work has value for the educational process. According to Vieira (1996), factors contribute to positive interaction with student and the promotion of quality service among others include, empowerment, teamwork, rewards, training and association with other service provider.

In an attempt to understand the underlying patterns of service quality variables from these previous studies in higher education, a model proposed by Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) was used. They identified three dimensions of service quality; the physical quality (both products and support); the interactive quality (interaction between consumer and service provider); and the corporative quality (the image).

III. Research Method

The major source of data for this research was a set of questionnaire distributed to marketing students in a private University in Nigeria. The first section of the questionnaire dealt with the biodata of the respondents, while the second section of the questionnaire dealt with the perception of students about service quality. This section comprises of three subsections; physical quality, interactive quality and corporative quality. The third section of the questionnaire dealt with the willingness of the marketing students to recommend their university to other prospective students.

Each question in sections A, B, and C was designed so that respondents could react to the degree of agreement to the issue being discussed as follows:

Strongly Agree= 5; Agree = 4; Undecided= 3; Disagree= 2; Strongly Disagree=1.

Any response between 1 and 2 (inclusive) was considered

as disagreement overall, while responses 4 and 5 (inclusive) were considered as agreement overall for purposes of average responses. The undecided aspect of the responses was not used in this research in order to avoid the problem of central tendency and to gain more effective screening power (Sin and Tse, 2002). The fourth (and last) section of the questionnaire was designed so that respondents could provide absolute responses, though optionally.

The population for the study consisted of all students pursuing a degree course in marketing in the selected university. However, the research horizon was limited to a private university that has the largest number of students in marketing due to economic, time and geographical constraints. 100 copies of the research instrument (questionnaire) were hand-delivered to a convenience sample of 100 marketing students within the university. .

The key variables used in this research included perceived physical quality, perceived interactive quality, perceived corporative quality and recommendation of the marketing program by the students. These key research variables were developed from extant literature and supported by empirical and anecdotal evidence. All the data analysis procedure was done using the SPSS computer package. Data analysis was executed at 95% confidence level or better. The statistics, measurement scale, data analysis, and reliability validity tests used in this research followed the research suggestions in extant literature (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally, 1978; Churchill, 1991; Rust and Cooil, 1994; Malhotra, 1996; Ryan and Mohsin, 2001; Svensson, 2002, among others).

IV. Results and Discussion

This study centred around four major issues:

1. Physical quality dimension of perceived service quality.
2. Interactive quality dimension of perceived service quality,
3. Corporative quality dimension of perceived service quality, and
4. Relationship between perceived service quality dimensions and willingness to recommend the university marketing program.

Results and their associated discussions along these four main issues will now be presented.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the physical quality dimension of perceived service quality. From table 1.0, it can be seen that the respondents established the fact that their university has nice and pleasant campus-environment (P2, mean = 3.36), while the result also revealed that students' halls are not provided with adequate internet connections (P1, mean = 2.11.) Generally, it can be seen from table 1 that the perceived physical quality of the department (university) was above average as all the physical quality measures had mean values above 2.0.

Table1: Descriptive statistics of Physical Quality Dimension of Perceived Service Quality Measures.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
P1	2.1100	1.03372	.783	-.477
P2	3.3600	1.03372	.592	-.477
P3	3.2200	.59595	.783	-.408
P4	2.3900	.96290	-.235	-1.088
P5	2.6800	.81501	-.145	-.446
Overall PQ	2.7520	.50302	.585	-.390

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the interactive quality dimension of perceived service quality in the surveyed marketing students.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Interactive Quality Dimension of Perceived Service Quality Measures.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
I1	3.2700	.75015	-.491	-1.066
I2	2.9500	1.04809	-.543	-.965
I3	2.8900	1.20517	-.456	-1.422
I4	3.3900	.83961	-.491	-1.046
I5	3.1100	1.00398	-.652	-.918
I6	3.0100	.99995	-.020	-2.030
I7	2.8600	.99514	.287	-1.957
Overall IQ	3.0686	.68511	-.167	-1.320

Generally, it can be seen from table 2 that respondents strongly agreed that marketing program is intellectually challenging (3.2700). Clear and reasonable requirement for each module (Item I7) has the lowest mean (2.8600), although it is also above average.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the corporative quality of the university. From table 3, it can be seen that “the university marketing program has excellent reputation in Nigeria” (C3, mean = 3.6900) was the most perceived corporative quality while “accreditation by appropriate bodies” was the least perceived corporative quality.achieved (C5, mean = 2.8107. Generally, the overall corporative quality is above average (2.8940) as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Corporative Quality Dimension of Perceived Service Quality Measures (N=100).

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
C1	3.6500	.59246	-1.498	1.231
C2	2.9300	1.02745	-.200	-1.475
C3	3.6900	.58075	-1.735	1.996
C4	3.1600	1.08916	-.900	-.667
C5	2.8100	.81271	.364	-1.393
Overall CQ	2.8940	.82705	-.371	-.797

Table 4 shows the reliability coefficients of the research instrument. The reliability coefficient met the minimum recommended values in extant literature.

Table 4: Reliability Coefficients of Research Measures:

Cronbach’s Alpha	No of Items
0.911	24

Table 5 shows the relationship that exist between the perceived service quality dimensions (Physical quality, Interactive quality and corporative quality) and willingness of the students to recommend their university to prospective students who may be interested in studying marketing.. It was observed from the table that only the perceived physical quality dimension was significantly related to the students willingness to recommend the university marketing program.

Table 5 : Correlation Result Showing the Relationship between Perceived Service Quality dimensions and Recommendation

		Recommend your university to someone who wants to read Marketing	PQ	IQ	CQ
Recommend your university to someone who wants to read Marketing	Pearson Correlation	1	.537(**)	.077	-.026
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.446	.801
	N	100	100	100	100
PQ	Pearson Correlation	.537(**)	1	.714(**)	.317(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.001
	N	100	100	100	100
IQ	Pearson Correlation	.077	.714(**)	1	.548(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.446	.000		.000
	N	100	100	100	100
CQ	Pearson Correlation	-.026	.317(**)	.548(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.801	.001	.000	
	N	100	100	100	100

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

V. Conclusion

The findings from this research present some policy and research challenges. On the policy side, it is recommended that sustained efforts be made by management of the university to provide adequate and efficient internet facilities for the students in their halls of residence. Also, efforts should be geared towards providing modern equipments for the university sport centre. Adequate printer and photocopy facilities are also expected to be provided within the department and university at large in order to facilitate the students’ academic activities.

It is also suggested that marketing lecturers should ensure that clear and reasonable requirements for each module are made available to students.i.e students should know what are expected of them at the beginning of each module of each course. There is need for the management, both at departmental and at university level, to make frantic efforts on improving the international recognition of the university marketing program.

On the research challenges associated with this research, it

is suggested that future research efforts be directed towards comparing private and public universities. Such a study will reveal the differences that exist between the two categories of university in terms of the students' perceived quality. In addition, research efforts may have a broader scope thereby capturing all the universities in Nigeria offering degree program in marketing.

This study is not without limitations. Although it is logical to suspect that some of the findings from this research might also hold for other universities both in Nigeria and outside the country, there is no way to ascertain this logical extension and relevance of the findings (Honig and Karlsson, 2004)..It is suggested that replication of this study in other universities in Nigeria be undertaken to enhance generalizability.

Another likely limitation of the study lies with the adoption of the research instrument with little or no modification to reflect the peculiarities of the Nigerian Universities.

Future relevant research work on the perceived service quality may have to incorporate more testable hypotheses and employ other statistical techniques for a better critical analysis.

KEY TO RESEARCH VARIABLES

P1 = Adequate internet connections.

P2 = Nice and pleasant campus environment.

P3 = Wide range of books and periodicals in marketing.

P4 = Availability of modern equipments in sport centre.

P5 = Adequate printer and photocopy facilities.

I1 = Intellectually challenging.

I2 = Staff politeness.

I3 = Easy to make friends among other students.

I4 = Administrative staff are helpful.

I5 = Stimulation of critical analysis by lecturers.

I6 = Lecturers can be easily contacted.

I7 = Reasonable requirements for each module.

C1 = This university degree boosts my employment prospect.

C2 = The university degree is recognized internationally.

C3 = The university degree has excellent reputation in Nigeria.

C4 = The university linkage with local industry.

C5 = Accreditation of marketing program by the appropriate bodies.

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