Qualitative Inquiry On Service Quality Of Academic Library In A Nigerian Technological University

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Abstract: The evolution of information technology (IT) has made students' needs for information services to change, which inevitably puts pressure on academic libraries, to work towards improving service quality and customer satisfaction in order to face competition in global higher education industry whilst meeting the specific information needs of users. Students who constitute major users of academic libraries in universities often consider library's service quality based its ability to meet or even exceed their expectations prior to enrolment, thus, influencing their overall perceptions of the overall service quality of the institution necessitating a review of quality issues associated with services of academic libraries in universities. Therefore this study, explored both expectations and perceptions of students on the service quality of the central academic library in a Nigerian technological university. Data for this study was collected by means of qualitative interview. Fifty final year undergraduate students organised into 10 focus groups of 6 each, drawn from faculties of engineering, management and science participated in the focus group discussion. This study reveals five factors: technology, facilities, currency of collections and materials, environment and professionalism as relevant in explaining both expectations and perceptions of students with regards to service quality dimensions of academic libraries in technological universities. Managerial implications, limitations and suggestions for further research were presented accordingly.

Key words: *Service quality; customer satisfaction; Academic Libraries; Expectations; Perceptions*

INTRODUCTION

The digitized global learning environment, combined with the information age, has affected the expectations of users, mainly students, in terms of information and knowledge search in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Kiran, 2010). Specifically, the world of information technology (IT) has made students' needs for information services to change, which inevitably puts pressure on academic libraries, as information hubs, to work towards improving services in order to face competition in global higher education industry and meeting the specific information needs of users to ensure satisfaction. These phenomenon calls for a continuous assessment of quality issues associated with services of academic libraries in universities.

For any type of organisation, it is necessary to evaluate service rendered to customers. Since students are essential customers of higher education institutions (Bejou, 2010; Watjatrakul, 2010), measuring their level of satisfaction with the library related services rendered would define their (students) perceived service quality related to the institutions. The library, an aspect of the tangibles dimension of service quality, plays a significant role in ensuring satisfaction and retention to the university (Edwards and Browne, 1995; Hernon, 1996; Hernon, and Calvert, 1996). In today's information age and society, delivering quality service in all dimensions is imperative if higher education institutions are to be relevant and reckoned with in the dynamic higher education market place (Hussin *et al*., 2000; Joseph *et al*., 1997; Athiyaman, A., 1997; Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Rowley, 1996; Hayes, 2008).

2.0 Literature Review"
2.1 Assessing Service Quality In Academic Libraries:

In the 1990s, assessment of quality in university libraries was based on the volume of collections held and the number of counts in terms of patronage and usage (Nitecki, 1996).as well as effectiveness of library staff (Nitecki and Hernon, 2000). But in recent years, marketing orientations (which emphasize meeting customers' needs and expectations), has significantly influenced researches in library and information science (Kiran, 2010), such that both academics and practitioners are now increasingly focusing attention on how academic libraries in HEIs can meet the expectations of users, as a basis for improving the overall service quality perceptions of their services. The aforementioned realisation has made librarians to review service quality measurement, by focusing on customer satisfaction and delight (Somaratna and Peiris, 2011)

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2.1.1 The Necessity Of Service Quality:

In the extant literature, scholars have defined service quality as the overall evaluation of a specific service provider based on comparison of performance with customers' overall expectations of what, and how the service organisation should provide its services (Parasuraman, *et al.*, 1988; Gronroos, 1984, 2006).

Also, studies have revealed that academic libraries are the hub of learning while servicing a host of users in the knowledge enterprise (Cullen and Calvert, 1995; Hernon and Altman, 1996; Hernon and Nitecki, 2001). The researchers conclude that since services are provided by academic libraries to different users based on needs, expectations and interest, assessing the services rendered is paramount. Therefore, since academic libraries are in the business of information service, then the concepts of service quality and customer satisfaction assumes importance, as it is an indicator of the overall ranking of the university, such as in the webometrics (Hernon and Nitecki, 2001; Hernon and Altman, 1996).

2.2 Service Quality And Customer Satisfaction With Academic Libraries:

Scholars have discussed on the desirability of identifying the needs of customers as a first step towards providing satisfactory services (Andaleeb and Simmonds, 2001). In a study on *service quality and satisfaction in academic libraries*, Hernon and Nitecki (2001) argue on three reasons why academic libraries in universities need to address service quality and customer satisfaction. Firstly, academic library customers share experiences on their expectations and perceptions on services provided, due to personal contacts. Such contacts lead to relationship and bonding amongst different users, whose information sharing may either project positive or negative image for the library as a service provider. The implication here is that, academic libraries in higher education institutions are expected to anticipate the common expectations of users and provide services that are both satisfying and delighting to customers resulting from developed relationships. This view is supported by a study by Somaratna and Peiris (2011:171), where they enthused, "relationships should result in libraries providing better service, after all, library staff are more knowledgeable about users' expectations and how to translate that knowledge into services that delight customers and create loyalty".

Secondly, due to competition and the increasing shift to marketing orientation by universities, academic libraries are pressurized and often supported by their parent institutions to render quality services, being the foremost aspect of tangibles dimension and influencer of perception of academic service quality. Finally, the necessity of competition has made academic libraries to strive towards effective service delivery in order to enable the institutions build attachment with its teeming customers, thus making it expedient for academic libraries to design and implement a service quality program (Hernon and Calvert, 1996).

In their seminal study, using SERVQUAL, to assess service quality and satisfaction in academic libraries, Hernon and Altman (1996), posit that quality should be considered as "perceived" rather than "objective" which means quality is dependent on customers' (i.e. library users) initial expectations and experiences with the library service. This view is consistent with a seminal study by Parasuraman *et al*. (1988) whereby *gap 5 defined as the discrepancy between customers' expected service and perceived service delivered*.

Also, some scholars posit that the correlation between service quality and satisfaction is rather not linearly defined, because of their belief on service quality as part of the total customer satisfaction experience, as such, concluding that, the two: service quality and customer satisfaction are related (Cullen, 2001; Cronin and Taylor, 1992, Elliot, 1995; Elliot and Shin, 2002). For instance, Elliot (1995) views satisfaction as the emotional reaction to a specific transaction or service encounter, upon which Hernon and Altman (1996:8) infer that "satisfaction may or may not be directly related to the performance of the library on a specific occasion". Hernon and Altman (1996:8) further exemplify by saying: "a customer can receive an answer to a query, but be unsatisfied because of an upsetting or angry encounter. Conversely, although the query might remain unanswered, another customer might feel satisfied, because the encounter was pleasant and the helper interested and polite". The above assertions mean that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction, such that higher levels of service quality may lead to corresponding increase in customer satisfaction.

In a subsequent study, Hernon and Altman (1998) proposed two perspectives to view satisfaction in the context of academic library services: (1) service encounter satisfaction, i.e. customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a specific library service encounter, and (2) overall service satisfaction, i.e. customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with an organisation based on the sum total of experiences on all dimensions, which is in concurrence with a study by Bitner and Hubbert (1994).

3.0 Methodology:

This exploratory study seeks to assess the expectations and perceptions of students with regards to library service quality of a technological university, with a view of exploring the service quality dimensions that are applicable to academic libraries in higher institutions. A second generation technological university, in Nigeria was selected for the study. Since library facilities and services constitute major aspects of the tangible dimension of service quality, as such, it is appropriate to explore users' opinions regarding services offered.

Focus group discussion was used as a methodology for this study. Fifty (50) students organised into 10 focus groups of 5 each participated in the study. For anonymity and confidentiality, the focus groups were labelled A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I and J accordingly. Participants were drawn from three faculties: Management, Engineering and Sciences.

The major objective of this study was to explore the expectations and perceptions of a key customer segment of an academic library, i.e., students from a technological university perspective. Our expectation in this study was to have insights into service quality issues in technological universities. As such we opted for a focus group discussion, as the "….intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalise but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (Krueger, 1994). Therefore we did not collect any personal information about the participants, except to confirm from the academic division that they are currently enrolled as final year undergraduate students.

Specifically, we aimed at:

i.   Uncovering students' needs regarding library before enrolment
ii.   Uncovering students' experiences with the library services
iii. Uncovering students' opinions on the performance of the library in terms of aesthetics, collections held, buildings and lighting and attitude of staff towards library patrons.

Incentives of a free lunch voucher at the university's main cafeteria were offered to each participant to encourage participation. The focus groups were conducted between Augusts to October, 2011and were held during lunch breaks in the meeting room of faculty of management and information technology which is furnished and air-conditioned, which encouraged candour and effective participation.

We hired 10 Masters Students from the Department of Management Technology as moderators, one for each group. The moderators had experience with focus groups, as they are lecturers in some universities in Nigeria. Each focus group discussion which was guided by 10 questions lasted for about 90 minutes. The moderators' experiences and handling of the respective sessions made the participants to feel secured (Morgan, 1995), which gave the desired information based on both the main and specific objectives on this study.

The focus group discussions were recorded on audio-tapes with the consent of the participants. The tapes were played back repeatedly (4 times) in order to have *feeling of the data* (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The tapes were transcribed verbatim in order to organise and analyse the data.

Results:

We organised the focus groups' responses into five themes that emerged: technology, facilities, currency of collections, environment and professionalism.

4.1 Technology

As customers of the university, students who are more IT-savvy nowadays they place high emphasis on the library to offer services which are powered by technology, failure of which will result to frustration and negatively perceived service quality, as illustrated by the following response from B:

"….well I was expecting everything here to be technologically-driven…. The teaching, the reading, the library, all should be based on technology".

The respondent went further to say:

"I did not see thing done using technology. Everything was manually done. I start asking myself whether I made the right decision to come to this university" .

Further expressing frustration with the library service quality, due to lack of technology application, a participant from C, who though seems to have an average perception of the general library service quality, however corroborated the concerns on technological application in the services of the library. He remarked:

"For other facilities, well, the library is a 50-50 impression; although the materials are there and good in my field of study [Business Management], the technology is not there".

4.2 Facilities:

One of the goals of establishing technological universities in Nigeria is to facilitate rapid growth and development by means of providing knowledge capital through researches (Donwa, 2011).

Therefore, most students enrolled into these universities hoping that resources that facilitate research and online teaching and learning should not only be available but in abundance, thus shaping their expectations of service quality. This assertion was supported from the responses gathered in this study. A respondent echoed:

"….. And most importantly I expected to see a well-equipped library with relevant and current collections and online resources". (Participant, A)

Similarly, a female respondent shared her view by emphasizing on the availability of not only good library facilities, but also online resources. She enthused:

"....as I said earlier, I decided to attend a technological university because I was looking for quality service in all aspects. I just expect to get online information and resources easily...... I mean to have all academic services given to me, including library services, in an online real-time manner". (Participant, E).

Students show preference for electronic (online) resources because of the perceived easiness and richness of data as compared to physical collections (Tenopir *et al*., 2003). However, this study reported negative students' perception of online resources in the library of interest, thus swaying their library service quality perception adversely. Two respondents confessed:

" when it comes to class work, actually this university has been trying....we have lecturers that are good, who gives us knowledge when it comes to class work....but on the library expectations, I was a sort of unimpressed with what is available.... Mostly, there are outdated collections, no online resources and the building itself used to be very dark, especially in the afternoons". (Respondent, C).

"If you want a material or piece of information online, it is not easy. This is really unfortunate in this world of information science, and they say it is a technological university". (Respondent, G).

4.3 Currency Of Books And Materials:

Interestingly, a female student's responses have further unearthed the fact that even the physical collections available in the library are not current, with engineering books, journals and serials mostly outdated and procured long time ago. The students' expectation of relevant and current books in their field of study remains unmet, as indicated by the response of a participant in group C: *"....but on the library expectations, I was a sort of unimpressed with what is available.... Mostly, there are outdated collections"*. Recounting her first time experience with the university library, a respondent expressed shock at what she saw, contrary to her expectations and referrals by friends at home. She ghastly retorted:

"When I saw everything, it's like ah!ah! [SHE WAS BAFFLED], is this the school and the library? Everything does not look like a technological university. I was expecting to see everything new like books, computers, air conditioners, etc I said to myself, this is totally different from my expectations".(Participant, J)

Of all the participants, only one (respondent, D) affirmed the availability of materials and books in his discipline, even though, they are inadequate, and journals that are not of world-class status and no impact factor. He said:

"...although the materials and books are there and good in my field of study [Business Management], they are few, and impact journals are not there". (Participant, D)

Although concerns on inadequate, obsolete and outdated collections are reported in this study, they do not seem to constitute the majority of what customers, in this case, students, expects from the library, and what they ended up getting. This is not surprising, as it is consistent with the extant literature. In exploring SERVQUAL application in academic libraries in Nitecki (1996) concludes that the size of a library's collections is not important in assessing the services of a library and its contribution to the overall perception of institutional service quality. What is important is the ability of the library to link users with information sources they need, notwithstanding the forms and formats, thus giving credence to the argument in the literature that access to information and digitization of resources are more paramount than collection of physical stocks (Nitecki, 1996; Hernon and Altman, 2006; Cullen and Calvert, 2001; Haliso, 2011).

4.4 Professionalism And Courtesy:

Also participants in this study regard assurance and empathy to be important service quality dimensions, by expecting error-free records and courteous services, respectively, from the library staff. But it turns out to be contrary. A respondent said:

"And what worries me most, is that the library staff are hostile and seem to be unprofessional [affecting assurance], and they [referring to library staff] do not like to help you [affecting empathy] find your individual needs. This is really frustrating". (Respondent, H).

Another participant remarked:

"Everything is processed manually, and sometimes the staff makes mistakes with your library membership and records....there was a time I borrowed 2 books, when I returned them on the due date, I was given a fine, which was not justified. I complained, and it took 3 months for the problem to be resolved, and they [referring to library staff] said it was a mistake... they even treated me harshly, no remorse or even to say sorry" (Respondent, I).

The unprofessional attitude of the library staff was earlier on highlighted by a respondent, C who said:

"....and their staff [referring to Library staff] are not in their best"

Considering the role which technology is now playing in academic libraries, staff can ill-afford to exhibit professionalism in meeting customers' needs. Emergent technologies in the information-rich world, has gone to increase the need for easy access to information. The key is to be professional in addressing patrons' needs in the most courteous and assuring ways possible. This is consistent with a study (Norliya and Khasiah (2006),

which reported that staff should be more friendly and knowledgeable (13.3%) in attending to students' library needs.

Environment:

A library's environment is another dimension that affects patrons' opinion on service quality. The influence of library environment was shared by some respondents in this study, who show concerns on the building and the general library aesthetics.   Some participants said:

".... Mostly, there are outdated collections, no online resources and the building itself used to be very dark, especially in the afternoons" (Participants, A)

The above views were corroborated by others, who echoed:

"We were sort of disappointed... the facilities are not enough. Just look at the library, it is in darkness most of the times, the lighting system is not working properly, it is too hot to be comfortable there". (Participants, C).

These responses are not surprising, as they correlate with earlier studies in the literature. In an earlier study, Campbell and Shlecter (1979; Oyedum and Nwalo, 2011) concluded that the design and the environment of a library can have significant influence on user behaviour and satisfaction. They found that, though, favourable comments were made on the staff attitude and materials, however, students (as users) show greater dislike with the physical surroundings and environment of the library.

Similarly, Clee and Maguire (1993) conducted a study which focused particularly on the effects of the environment on library usage, by interviewing both staff and students and found that perceptions on library environment far outweigh other factors such as collection size and staff attitude. The scholars suggested for purpose-built libraries, with better lighting, fresher atmosphere, more reading carrels, and quieter areas. While Clee and Maguire (1993) observe that the aesthetics of the library and its surrounding have impact on users' perceptions, others concludes that students' patronage of their institutions' library is significantly influenced by its aesthetics, beauty and surrounding environment (Watson, 2001, Oyedum and Nwalo, 2011). Hence universities need to invest not only in collections and databases, but also on the aesthetics of the library such as interior decoration and state-of-the art furniture.

One respondent captures the aforementioned scenario, where he revealed some of his expectations as thus:

"...also I want to see a good library atmosphere compared to what is available in private universities. Whenever I enter their library, I feel like not wanting to go out.... All the air conditioners are split ones, very cool, with nice reading tables, and very bright light. In fact, when you start reading there, you start grasping and comprehending very fast, because you don't have to sweat... this is good for effective learning and research".(Respondent, D).

Table 1 presents summary of respondents' views by frequency of mention/importance. From the emergent patterns in this study, the five categories are ranked accordingly

Table 1: Emergent Patterns by frequency of mention contingency table

Patterns	Themes	Frequency of mention	Rank
Technology-based	Technology deployment	7	1st
Collections and facilities	Facilities Currency of books, materials Environment	6 4 3	2nd 4th 5th
Staff-based	Professionalism and courtesy	5	3rd

Based on Table 2, three significant patterns emerged:

1.   Technology deployments help to ensure satisfaction with academic library services, once library services are driven by technology; overall service quality of the university would be perceived positively.

2.   Students' expectations and perceptions were influenced by collections and facilities, where availability of current books, materials, online resources, and library's environment contributes to service quality and many more.

3.   Professionalism of library staff would inspire confidence in users

In sum, based on the findings above, we conclude that there are five dimensions regarding service quality in academic libraries: technology, facilities, environment, professionalism and empathy

Discussion And Conclusion:

The finding related to failure of the library to adopt technology in its service provision is consistent with the extant literature, and further supports previous and similar studies, that view technology deployment as necessary tool for library users' satisfaction with a view of enhancing service quality delivery (Buckland, 1992: Corral, 1995; Haliso, 2011). For instance, Corral (1995:2) posits that "advances in information and

communication technologies have introduced new options for service delivery – notably for self-service and remote access – and raised the expectations of funding bodies and library customers".

Buckland (2006) viewed that access to needed information can be made through facilitators such as computers, information networks and software. However, Haliso (2011) maintain that technological tools such as computers, networks and software are only relevant if they can help academic libraries achieve the goal of providing quality service to patrons in effective and efficient manner.

In a technological university where research is supposed to be the fulcrum around which academic activities revolve, academic libraries need to ensure online resources are not only available but can easily be accessed by students. Academic librarians and information science specialists need to either identify the needs of library users in order to be competitive in higher education industry. In this regard, Altman and Hernon (1998: 54) maintain that libraries, in their quest for attaining service excellence raised the following strategic issues:

    i.   How services can be enhanced to attract continuous patronage.
    ii. Developing a Total Quality Management (TQM) culture across the library strata.
    iii. Investment in library human capital to develop the needed competencies to serve customers right.

Exerting efforts on the above issues, may underscore the strategic contributions of libraries in higher educational institutions due to growing sophistication of information needs of patrons. We conclude that academic libraries in technological universities in Nigeria are not living up to expectations of students, as such, leading to negative overall service quality perceptions of their parent institutions on one hand, and positioning to compete in the global higher education and digital environment on the other. These pose significant threats in terms of differentiation in the higher education marketplace.

Managerial Implications:

This study in its value will provide academic library professionals and library managers, means of monitoring users' expectations and perceptions on a systemic manner on how to improve library service quality. Since an important ingredient in the customer-oriented service provision is to anticipate, find and fill customer needs (Kotler and Andreasen, 2008; Maringe and Gibbs, 2009), then library staff in technological universities, as operators of the services would gain insights into the service quality dimensions as perceived by students as customers. Improving on these dimensions would significantly improves students' perceptions of overall service quality of the university.

As an exploratory investigation, we find the following four factors: *technology, facilities environment, and professionalism* as relevant in explaining both expectations and perceptions of students regarding service quality dimensions of academic libraries in technological universities, which deviates from the popular generic five dimensions of Parasuraman *et al*. (1988).

6.1 Limitations And Further Research:

As mentioned earlier, this study was an exploratory one aimed at finding out both expectations and perceptions of students on the service quality of their library – as a service unit in a university. Although six (6) dimensions are found to explain the service quality perspectives of the respondents, their adoption have to be with caution, as they have to be validated by replicative studies. Equally, as participants for this study come from only three faculties, a similar study should be conducted to draw respondents across all the seven faculties of the case university for proper representation. Most importantly, this study only considered the opinions of final year undergraduate students, thus excluding other levels (i.e. 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year students) and postgraduate students. Hence, we recommend future studies involving these aforementioned levels of students. Finally, an empirical study is suggested to test the five dimensions explored covering all technological universities in Nigeria.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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