Customers’ Evaluation of the Service Quality of the Appliance Sales Departments of Retail Stores in a South African Context

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Consumers in developing countries apparently have lower expectations of the service quality (SQ) in retail than consumers in developed countries. A survey was done in the appliance departments of 20 stores in Gauteng, RSA: 296 respondents judged the SQ of the particular departments and completed an appliance knowledge test. When subjected to factor analysis, an adapted version of Dabholkar’s five dimensional SQ scale collapsed to two dimensions, which suggests a simpler evaluation of SQ in this context. Low means scored in the knowledge test contradict the above average means for both dimensions of SQ, which indicate shortcomings in the facilitation of buyer decisions that need to be addressed to augment the service offering.

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Customer’s Evaluation of the Service Quality of the Appliance Sales Departments of Retail Stores in a South African Context

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates consumers’ perception of the service quality in appliance departments in major retail stores in an emerging economy to ascertain whether the service supports informed, responsible buyer behavior as to a complex product category. Consumers completed a total of 296 questionnaires immediately after closure of a purchase transaction in 20 stores of five retail chains in Gauteng, RSA. Factor analysis of data indicated a collapse of the original five dimensional SERVQUAL scale into two dimensions. This suggests a more generalized judgment of SQ in this context. Low mean scores in the product knowledge tests contradict above average positive judgments for both dimensions of SQ. Findings confirm the challenges faced by retail due to a paradoxical situation where retail thrives on positive SQ judgments despite critical shortcomings in their service offering.

INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

Services in retail have apparently been neglected for some time (Calif, 2001; Dawson, 2005; Gowan et al., 2001) notwithstanding evidence of increased consumer dissatisfaction. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (University of Michigan) reported a decrease of twelve percent in customers’ satisfaction with services in retail in the USA between 1996 and 2001 and indications are that customers are no longer loyal to a specific store as a direct consequence of unsatisfactory customer service (Gowan et al., 2001).

Attempts to improve customer service in contexts where retail stores have to address the needs of diverse consumers groups, are even more challenging. Department stores in South Africa e.g. have to take into consideration that the country acknowledges eleven official languages and that customers who patronize these stores come from different backgrounds. Customers of department stores vary from sophisticated middle to higher income groups whose product needs may be very similar to those of consumers in first world countries, to more vulnerable consumers from lower socio economic groups who strongly depend on in-store customer services to facilitate their buyer decisions (Internet: Executive Briefing: South Africa:35-40). Dramatic socio political changes in South Africa since 1994 have allowed major changes in the life styles and living conditions of millions of previously disadvantaged citizens: middle-income earners have increased as a result of increased educational status, better job opportunities and higher earnings and have contributed to the country’s biggest economic wave yet (Black middle class on the rise, 2004; Wortley and Tshwaedi, 2002). In this emerging economy, many households can thus now afford products and services such as home ownership, electricity and household appliances that they have had limited exposure to, and experience with in the past.

A key concern within the discipline of Consumer Science is that consumers’ in/ability to make responsible, informed buyer decisions where complex, durable products are concerned, bearing in mind the financial- and long term implications of high risk buyer decisions, consumers’ limited product related consumer socialization and their consequent inadequate product knowledge and experience (Erasmus, 2005). Another concern is that the local white-goods industry in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa is predominantly import-orientated. Refrigeration equipment worth 630 million US$ were imported by RSA in 2001 (19.7% more than the previous year). Whirlpool (US); LG Electronics (South Korea); Samsung (South Korea) and Carrier (US) are brand leaders in the country at present (Internet: Executive Briefing: South Africa:35-40). Global influences thus enable exposure to products and brands that compare favorably with that of affluent first world countries although consumers are not necessarily competent to make informed buyer decisions or responsible product judgments. Retail, especially department stores that target middle and lower income groups, therefore has a major responsibility to support and facilitate consumers’ buyer decisions.

Consumers with limited product related consumer socialization apparently tend to rely on cues such as store image, brands and salespeople to determine product quality and to conclude product decisions (Erasmus et al., 2005; John, 1999). More experienced consumers, on the other hand, apply product and brand information that is based on personal experience in different usage situations. The household appliance industry is however characterized by continual and rapid change in technology and sophistication in design. Despite extensive experience even more experienced consumers may thus experience confusion when confronted with product alternatives in the store (Wingo, 1996).

Service quality (SQ) in retail has thus become crucial in terms of the potential to facilitate consumers to conclude informed, responsible buyer decisions. The idea that SQ needs to be defined within context, and the notion that different countries should refrain from a standardized marketing approach, has been raised before (Williams, 2003; Winsted, 1997) as a result of significant differences between the perception and practical implementation of the dimensions of SQ between developed and developing countries (Malhotra et al., 1994). In developed countries, service reliability for example evolves around consistent, dependable and accurate service performance, while human related aspects, i.e. the assistance of personnel seems more crucial in developing countries. It is also proposed that consumers with lower education levels prefer familiar products and have lower quality expectations. They unfortunately thus demonstrate more tolerance for ineffective services, compared to consumers in developed countries or more experienced, sophisticated consumers who patronize the same store (Henry and Caldwell, 2006).

Most of what has been published on customer service and related topics in various accredited journals during the past two decades reflect upon scenarios in first world circumstances and generally only emphasize a particular aspects of customer service such as price. Research on the sales of household appliances that represent a category of complex, durable and expensive merchandise are equally limited despite the fact that globalization has enabled the proud presentation of sophisticated household technology to all corners of the globe—even to consumers who regrettably do not necessarily possess the product knowledge or experience to handle buyer decisions (Erasmus et al., 2005).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In South Africa, that characterizes an emerging economy, consumers in middle and lower income groups frequent major department stores for many commodities such as major household appliances. These channels thus have to deal with third world elements as well as characteristics of a sophisticated first world environment. The objective of this research is to investigate con-
consumers’ perception of SQ in this context in order to identify shortcomings in the service offering that could be augmented in lieu of the seemingly paradoxical situation where the supply of appliances in retail and consumers’ ability to conclude informed responsible buyer decisions when confronted with the broad selection of major household appliances, are incongruent.

This study thus answers the following questions:
Considering a very similar service offering by various department stores (in South Africa) and that consumers in emerging economies not necessarily have alternative frames of reference to facilitate or impede their judgment of an in store buyer experience: 

What is consumers of major department stores’ perception of the SQ of the appliance sales departments of these stores?

Based on evidence that men tend to be more involved and even more skeptical when sophisticated technology and more expensive products are involved: Does gender have a significant influence on consumers’ judgment of the SQ of appliance sales departments?

Based on the notion that consumers who have had more extensive first hand experience with appliances might challenge the in store service offering more severely: Is consumers’ judgment of the SQ of appliances sales departments significantly influenced by personal experience with appliances in their own households?

Based on the notion that consumers with more extensive product knowledge might be more inquisitive about the service offering: Is consumers’ judgment of the SQ of appliances sales departments significantly influenced by their knowledge of the functional and performance attributes of appliances?

Is consumers’ judgment of the SQ significantly influenced by the difficulty experienced during the buying encounter?

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Service Quality Defined

More recent literature define service quality (SQ) as a simple, primarily cognitive, evaluative and objective construct (Shemwell et al., 1998) while former definitions include attitude formation that results as a consequence of consumers’ comparisons between their expectations and their perception of the actual service performance in the retail context (Bahia and Nantel, 2000; Cronin et al., 2000; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml, 1996). There is ample empirical support for SQ as an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1994; Oliver et al., 1997; Parasuraman et al., 1988) that involves a type of attitude that will predict future and repurchases intentions (Clarke, 2001). SQ is also viewed as a hypothetical construct that is instrumental in consumers’ efforts to minimize perceived risk: it comprises of two concepts, namely quality in fact and quality in perception. Quality in fact is achieved when an organization does what it sets out to do. Quality in perception occurs when the organization’s overall excellence is judged within a consumer’s expectations (Kang, 2006). SQ is eventually determined by the evidence, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of the actual shopping experience that occurs in interaction with customers (Shemwell et al., 1998); it is judged by a consumer during a service (process quality) as well as after the service has been concluded, i.e. “output quality” (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Turley, 1990).

Dimensions/ Elements Of Service Quality

SQ per se has been a topic of investigation for some time and efforts to explain and define the concept confirm the complexity of the construct. SQ inter alia involves structure, i.e. referral to the physical environment and physical facilities that forms part of the service encounter as well as process that involves the interaction with service personnel in the store. SQ further involves technical quality (what is done) and functional quality (how it is done) (Grönroos, 1988). The “Nordic school” specifies six areas for the judgment of SQ, i.e.: professionalism and skills; attitudes and behaviour; accessibility and flexibility; reliability; recovery reputation; control (Turley, 1990). Sureshchandar (2002) however propose that five factors are critical in terms of SQ from customers’ point of view, i.e.: core service; the human element—and the systematization of service delivery (the non-human element); tangibles of service; and social responsibility.

Service marketing literature specify four essential components of the measurement of SQ that will explain why SQ may be rated high while it is not necessarily impressive, or the contrary, i.e.: perception, prior experience/ expectation and importance (Clarke, 2001) as well as perishability that accounts for intangibility and inseparability (Vandamme and Leunis, 1993).

The importance of Service Quality

SQ differentiates one service provider from another (Dabholkar, 1996). A positive SQ judgment inevitably encourages repeat purchase behaviour and an increase in a store’s profitability (Townsend and Gebhardt, 1988). From retailers’ point of view, a positive SQ judgment is considered essential for success and survival in a competitive environment (Parasuraman, 1988; Rust et al., 2000). In order to improve its service offering, a store has to pursue a goal of zero defects through the implementation of better systems, better staff, improved internal marketing, enhanced involvement of customers, “pleasant-to-patronage” premises, better relationships among staff on all levels (Townsend and Gebhardt, 1988), superior after sales service and-complaint handling (Gummesson, 1988). Indications are that financial investments that are made to upgrade a store’s SQ are worth while: consumers in Europe are apparently more concerned with quality and are more than willing to pay more for it (Turley, 1990).

Evaluation Of Service Quality

SQ is an elusive concept that is measured in terms of perception, prior experience/expectation and importance (Clarke, 2001).

Because of the intangibility, heterogeneity and the inseparability of the various elements of customer service, SQ is difficult to evaluate (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Parasuraman and co workers’ (1985) Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL) is based on the comparison of perceived performance with expected performance on the basis of the disconfirmation paradigm. The initial purpose of SERVQUAL was to diagnose and uncover broad areas of a company’s SQ shortfalls and strengths regarding executive perceptions of SQ as well as tasks associated with service delivery to consumers. SERVQUAL’s in fact measures perceived quality, i.e. an attitude that is related but not necessarily equivalent to consumer satisfaction. Despite SERVQUAL’s extensive implementation in retail, objections to its focus on the service delivery process and an apparent neglect of technical quality (Kang, 2006; Grönroos, 1988). The adapted version of the SERVQUAL scale (Dabholkar et al., 1996) was thus chosen as a diagnostic tool for this research project because of its specific application for retail settings where a mix of merchandise and services are offered. This scale proposes a hierarchical factor structure with five dimensions that are considered central to SQ, i.e.: Physical aspects, Reliability, Personal interaction, Problem solving and Policy. Three of these dimensions are more complex and contain sub-dimensions that combine related attributes. The scale provides opportunity to analyze SQ at the overall level (using the full scale in an additive fashion) as well as dimension quality (using items within a dimension in an additive fashion) whereby specific problem areas could be detected.
It is postulated that consumers in developed and developing countries judge SQ differently: consumers in developed countries are apparently satisfied with SQ when the service offering extends benefits beyond the functional, i.e. when it is more intangible than the core service. Consumers in developing countries, however, due to personality factors that are shaped by culture related characteristics and philosophy of life tend to focus on the core benefits of the service, thus the functional aspects in their choice criteria. They would typically also consider choice alternatives in terms of product ranges second to the importance of the human touch of the service; indicate lower quality expectations and show a wider zone of tolerance for ineffective services, compared to consumers in developed countries. Consumers in developing countries thus show a higher regard for personnel in terms of a positive SQ judgment while consumers in developed countries regard time related aspects more important, i.e. responsiveness through effective, correct transactions and competency of personnel (Malhotra et al., 1994).

Shortcomings in the offering of Service Quality
SQ is unfortunately not necessarily regarded top priority in every retail setting. Errors are sometimes considered inevitable, even expected. Various shortcomings may obstruct optimal service delivery, e.g.: a gap between customers’ expectations and management’s perceptions and specifications of SQ; a misinterpretation of customers’ expectations of SQ specifications; consumers’ risk perception; a gap between SQ specifications and actual service-delivery (e.g. an inability of employees to meet set service-performance standards for whatever reason); inadequate resources and poor external communication that cause a discrepancy between the actual service and the promised service (Zeithaml et al., 1990). Although a store’s sales figures and reputation are bound to benefit from an excellent SQ judgment, it unfortunately not necessarily induces informed responsible consumer decision-making. Within the systems perspective (Spears and Gregoire, 2003:5) one may reason that consumers interpret attributes/elements of a service offering in a hierarchical order and that certain shortcomings may be compensated for by other elements of the service offering that are perceived to be exceptional. Poor support by sales personnel, which is essential to facilitate inexperienced consumers during a buying encounter, may thus be negated by an impressive visual in store display of appliances, exceptional price offerings etc. In addition to an overall SQ judgment, a store thus also needs to attend to consumers’ judgment of the individual dimension/elements of SQ to fully identify specific shortcomings and strengths.

The importance of SQ in the context of appliance sales
Household appliances are regarded as complex, high-risk purchases because they are relatively expensive, durable and involve technological features that change too frequently to keep track of easily (Wingo, 1996). Buyer decisions may thus incur lengthy pre purchase deliberation and may create a considerable amount of confusion and tension, especially for less experienced consumers (Beatty, 1996; Buttle, 2004:15; Cronin et al., 2000; Erasmus, 2005). An informed, responsible buyer decision requires that a consumer at least becomes acquainted with the basic functional and performance attributes of an appliance; has a realistic service life expectancy; accepts responsibility for correct installation, use and maintenance procedures and acknowledges the stipulations of the guarantee and after sales service.

Benefits of appliances that are considered during the pre purchase stage involve utilitarian, i.e. objective, economic, rational and functional attributes as well as hedonic (abstract) benefits that arise from experiential, abstract, subjective, emotional, symbolic, sensory, non-rational and aesthetic attributes (Buttle, 2004:26; Sweeney et al., 1999; Sarin, 2003). In emerging economies, visual consumption, i.e. the intentional acquisition of commodities for their symbolic value, e.g. to indicate social status may be regarded of greater importance than the design and/or functional attributes of a product (East, 1993:19-21; Charon 1979:23, La Rossa and Reitzes, 1993; Malholtra et al., 1994). This challenges the nature of assistance that is required in store and inevitably affects SQ judgments.

METHODOLOGY
Research Setting, Instrument Design, Sample Selection and Data Collection
The research was executed during May to July 2007. The survey was cross sectional and involved a pre tested structured questionnaire of which three sections are relevant for this report:

1) The adapted SQ scale (Dabholkar et al., 1996) included 28 items that were judged on a 5-point Likert type scale: the top end of the scale represented impressive service. A direct-measure, instead of the two-part measurement approach that requires expectations and perception-minus-expectation gap scores, was used. The original wording of the scale was modified in terms of two items that referred to “fitting rooms” and “shopping bags” that could not be associated with the context of an appliance sales department. The inclusion of the SERVQUAL scale was to quantify consumers’ judgment of the SQ of the store in terms of overall as well as specific dimensions of the service offering to ultimately diagnose and uncover broad areas of a company’s SQ shortcomings and, as well as tasks are associated with service delivery to consumers (Dabholkar et al., 1996).

2) The product knowledge test comprised of ten statements that pertained to each of five different major appliances: True/False/Not sure discriminations were used. Respondents completed the sub section on the specific appliance that they purchased on that particular day as well as any other two appliances they already owned and were experienced with. Knowledge tests were expected to disclose evidence of consumers’ pre purchase information search and their ability to make informed buyer decisions.

3) Due to the length of the questionnaire, demographic information was limited to age, gender and indication of years of personal experience with appliances in their own households. Respondents were recruited from different stores that were well distributed in the geographical area. It was thus assumed that the sample would represent the typical customer profile of retail stores. Respondents were recruited in prominent department store chains in Gauteng, RSA, that were identified through liaison with industry and through the cooperation of store managers (Internet: Dion file://F:\Dion\%20, %20Store\%20Locator\%20and\%20Advert\%20Tracker.htm, 2006; Makro, 2006 file://F:\Makro.htm). These stores were located in trading areas with generally similar customer profiles, which promised a fair representation of the target group of department stores (Walliman, 2004:276), i.e. lower and middle-income groups of all cultures and different age groups.

Purposive sampling involved the approach of every customer that purchased an appliance in the store on the specific day. Questionnaires were filled in on the spot under supervision of trained co-workers to contextualize respondents in the environment that they were evaluating so that their contributions would reflect on actual, recent experiences for the sake of the credibility of data (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Between 15 and 20 questionnaires were completed in any particular store on a specific day. A store was only visited once to prevent transferal of information amongst customers and/or personnel (Miller et al., 2005).
DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Demographic information

A total of 20 stores of five department store chains in Tshwane, RSA were involved in the study. A sample of 331 was obtained of which 296 (201 female (68.3%); 93 male (31.6%); missing: n=2) questionnaires were useful for further analysis: 35 were discarded because they were incomplete in terms of one or more of the sections, i.e. Service Quality (SQ); and/or Product Knowledge (PK) that were fundamental to perform the statistical procedures. Respondents’ age distribution varied from 17 to 73 years: 47 (15.9%) were between 17 and 25 years and 75 (25.3%) were 26 to 35 years (they were expected to be less experienced in terms of the purchasing of appliances and were expected to include first time buyers, as well as those who came to purchase a gift for someone else; 75 (25.3%) were 26 to 35 years. Those that were 36 years and older (136 to 45 years: n=100; 33.8%) (46 to 60 years: n=65; 22.0%) (Above 60 years: n=7; 2.4%) (Missing: n=2; 0.6%) were supposed to be more experienced provided that they had access to electricity and have owned appliances during the time.

When grouped in terms of their personal experience with appliances in their households, 35 respondents (11.8%) had 0 to 2 years’ and 70 (23.6%) had 3 to 8 years’ experience; 80 (27.0%) had 9 to 15 years’; 62 (20.9%) indicated 16 to 25 years’ and 46 (15.5%) indicated experience in a household of 26 years and more. Respondents with 16 years’ and more experience were expected to include second or third time buyers of appliances, to be more discriminative about the SQ and to be more knowledgeable about product characteristics and basic functional attributes.

Service Quality Redefined

Dabholkar et al.’s (1996) SERVQUAL scale was used to measure customers’ perception of SQ in department stores. A scrutiny of the findings of previous SERVQUAL replication studies (Dabholkar et al., 1996) confirmed the necessity to ascertain the relevance and the reliability of the scale in the context of this research first. The sample’s (N=296) responses to the 28 item multi attribute scale were thus subjected to factor analysis using squared multiple correlations as initial communality estimates with direct oblimin rotation. The following occurred: (1) Contrary to the initial five-dimensional structure, the Scree test verified only two dimensions for this context. These two factors were subjected to oblique rotation. In interpretation of the rotated factor pattern, all items that loaded high on one specific construct but low on the others were identified to produce a factor-loading matrix. (2) Factors that loaded high on more than one factor were removed from the factor-loading matrix, resulting in near-zero correlations between some of the remaining items. This suggested a reduction in the presumed dimensionality of the service-quality domain. (3) Some of the items loaded high onto factors they were not originally assigned to in the original scale, which required a reassignment of some items. The reduction in the number of dimensions/factors from five to two, the deletion of certain items and the intentional reassignment of certain items required a re computation of alphas and item-to-total correlations as well as the reexamination of the factor structure of the reduced item pool. A repeated process revealed a final pool of 25 items.

Only two distinct dimensions that included 12 and 13 attributes respectively were identified and the a priori five dimensional structure of the Dabholkar scale could not be confirmed in the context of this study. Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.93 and 0.86 for the respective dimensions suggest acceptable levels of reliability and validity. Table 1 reveals the rotated factor loading matrices and alpha values for the eventual 25-item instrument. Three items of the original scale were eliminated because they were not statistically coherent with the newly identified dimensions and neither did their factor loadings signify another dimension (Table 1).

The newly identified dimensions were labeled according to the interpreted meaning of their respective attributes, namely Supportiveness and Impressiveness. Supportiveness represents an integration of four of the original dimensions in the Dabholkar scale, namely Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy. Six of the twelve attributes signify characteristics of personnel that suggest compassion and effort to assist/support customers’ buyer decisions i.e. presentable, courteous, assertive/confident, capable sales assistants that provide personal attention promptly. The remaining six attributes indicate attention to fundamental aspects of the environment and image, i.e. store layout that reduces effort, assurance of product availability, error free transactions and supplementary items such as documentation that create a good impression. The thirteen attributes that differentiated the second dimension, namely Impressiveness, are associated with above average effort to satisfy consumers’ expectations and to distinguish one store from another. Attributes imply attention to the physical environment to create a modern, visually pleasing, attractive, uncluttered environment where sales personnel are willing, knowledgeable, meticulous in performing transactions and where clients enjoy good after sales service, convenient parking, convenient operation hours and where various payment methods are accepted. Most of the attributes in this dimension originated from two sub dimensions, i.e. Appearance and Convenience that signified Physical aspects in the Dabholkar scale. Means and standard deviations for the newly identified dimensions are presented in Table 1.

Consumers’ judgment of the SQ of the appliance sales departments

The calculated means for the two dimensions of SQ (Supportiveness: 3.88; Impressiveness: 4.08) (Table 1) considering a maximum possible mean of 5.0, suggest an above average positive judgment of both dimensions. Means ranged between 3.56 and 4.08 for items associated with Supportiveness and between 3.77 and 4.40 for descriptors of Impressiveness.

Table 2 indicates that when respondents’ gender; years of personal experience and the difficulty experienced during the buying encounter were considered, the means confirmed an above average positive judgment for both dimensions of SQ irrespective of the factors considered. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that respondents’ perception of dimension 1: Supportiveness, was neither significantly influenced by gender, nor by years of personal experience, nor by the difficulty experienced to conclude the buyer decision. The same applied for dimension 2: Impressiveness, in terms of the influence of age and years of personal experience. Those who considered it easy to conclude the buyer decision seemed significantly more impressed with one of the dimensions of SQ, i.e. Impressiveness that suggests particular effort with more sophisticated aspects of SQ.

Consumers’ perception of SQ related to their product knowledge

Mean scores obtained for the various knowledge tests are presented Table 3. Respondents only completed tests on those appliances that they purchased on the particular day of their participation in the study, as well as any other two appliances that they already owned.

The results of the knowledge tests were disappointing, particularly because tests were completed after the in store buying encounter where consumers were supposed to have gained knowledge through exposure to visual and written stimuli as well as the personal assistance of sales personnel, also because tests were
restricted to only those appliances that they had personal experience with. Means ranged from 3.29 (lowest) for dishwashers to 5.46 (maximum) for microwave ovens on a scale of 10. Keeping in mind customers’ positive judgment of the SQ, i.e. an above average judgment of both the dimensions of SQ, it was assumed that respondents’ knowledge of the functional and performance attributes of the appliances would at least be satisfactory and that it would suggest an ability to make informed, responsible buyer decisions. It was expected that a positive perception of the SQ would reflect in terms of consumers’ competence during the knowl-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception Item</th>
<th>Dimension/ Factor 1</th>
<th>Dimension/ Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary items create good impression</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store lay out– easy to find appliances</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td>0.467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store keeps its promises</td>
<td>0.593</td>
<td>0.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct transactions the first time</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise available when wanted</td>
<td>0.653</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neatly dressed salespeople</td>
<td>0.381</td>
<td>0.229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespeople instill confidence</td>
<td>0.351</td>
<td>0.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers trust dealings with store</td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompt attention to customers</td>
<td>0.597</td>
<td>0.249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attention</td>
<td>0.973</td>
<td>0.156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courteous salespeople</td>
<td>0.930</td>
<td>0.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespeople handle complaints themselves</td>
<td>0.760</td>
<td>0.097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasing environment</td>
<td>0.484</td>
<td>0.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern impression</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>0.502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually pleasing impression</td>
<td>0.205</td>
<td>0.314</td>
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<tr>
<td>Store lay out– easy to move around</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.584</td>
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<tr>
<td>Error free sales transactions</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>0.531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespeople have sufficient knowledge</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespeople inform when services will be performed</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>0.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespeople always willing to help</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store will return or exchange goods</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient parking</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenient operating hours</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts major credit cards</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers enough credit options</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| % Variance explained                                 | 40.0                | 4.7                 |
| Cronbach Alpha                                       | 0.93                | 0.86                |
| Mean                                                 | 3.88                | 4.08                |
| Standard Deviation                                   | 0.8                 | 0.5                 |
edge tests. The outcome of the knowledge tests however indicates otherwise. Table 4 represents the results of the knowledge test for dishwashers as an example of the tests that respondents were subjected to.

The knowledge tests indicate that, even after exposure to the in store environment and despite positive SQ judgments, consumers’ could not convince that they have the ability to have concluded informed, responsible buyer decisions. Low Cronbach Alphas are ascribed to low item total correlations.

**DISCUSSION**

An investigation of customers’ perception of the SQ in appliance departments in retail stores first required an evaluation of the chosen Dabholkar SERVQUAL scale in the context of the research.
Empirical analysis through implementation of factor analysis revealed a collapse of the original five dimensional scale of into only two distinct dimensions that distinguished between basic attributes of the service offering (dimension 1: Supportiveness) and more sophisticated attributes (dimension 2: Impressiveness). This suggests that, in the context of this setting where customers in an emerging economy were asked to judge the SQ of department stores that are frequented by consumers from a broad socio economic spectrum, the service offering was evaluated on a more integrated level. The collapse of the original five dimensional scale into two dimensions suggests that customers in the context of this research seem less discriminative when judging service delivery. Means calculated for both dimensions of SQ indicate that the service offering (i.e. so-called “quality in perception”) in appliance departments in retail stores largely coincide with customers’ expectations (Kang, 2006). These judgments did not differ significantly when specific variables, i.e. gender, age, personal experience or difficulty experienced during the buying encounter were considered. The situation as is, thus seems conducive for repeat purchase behavior (Townsend and Gebhardt, 1988).

Non-effect of increased experience on consumers’ perception of SQ supports the notion that consumers in emerging economies may judge the service offering from a lower expectations frame- work. In South Africa, department stores are the main suppliers of major household appliances. Consumers thus form their SQ expectations frameworks within the parameters of what are offered in general. The few up market specialized stores that offer more personalized services are primarily frequented by higher income groups because they stock more expensive brands. Customers who indicated that it was easy to conclude the buyer decision, were significantly more impressed with the second dimension of SQ, i.e. Impressiveness. “Easy to conclude the purchase” does however not necessarily reflect informed, responsible product judgment.

The product knowledge tests revealed that consumers’ knowledge of the functional and performance attributes of the appliances they were supposed to be more familiar with, would not support informed responsible buyer decisions. Mean scores ranged from 3.29 (dishwashers) to 5.46 (microwave ovens) on a scale of 10. Consumers’ limited product knowledge confirms findings of a previous study (Erasmus et al., 2005) although it was hoped that the scores would be higher in this study where consumers were asked to complete the task in the store immediately after they had concluded a purchase. An above average positive judgment of both dimensions of SQ does imply a positive in store experience but does unfortunately not provide reason for excitement in terms of the consumer facilitation process. In terms of the system’s perspective problems relating to apparent inadequate support of consumers’ buyer decisions in the stores in terms of sharing relevant product information, is probably negated by other aspects of the service offering, e.g. price offering, friendliness and prompt attention of personnel. Findings thus concur with the view of Malholtra et al. (1994), namely that SQ is judged differently in developed and developing countries and that consumers in developing countries are more tolerant of ineffective service delivery, have lower expectations and will probably be satisfied if the core benefits of the service offering is satisfactory. The unfortunate consequence is that retailers could capitalize this “halo” effect and make little effort to improve their service offering.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>% Correct</th>
<th>Item total correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detergents for dishwashers are more alkaline than washing machine detergents</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If stainless steel cutlery is washed in a dishwasher regularly, it will discolor.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The various washing programmes of a dishwasher require different amounts of detergent.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Fuzzy logic” indicates that a dishwasher will automatically select an appropriate washing programme based on the type of dishes.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of salt in a dishwasher is required for sterilization.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer washing programmes also use more water.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The capacity of a dishwasher is indicated in litres.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All dishwashers with a metallic exterior are made of stainless steel.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The drying elements of modern dishwashers are concealed to prevent electric shocks.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All dishwashers distribute water from two angles, namely from the bottom and the middle of the machine.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean for the scale</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.29</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variance</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.47</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard deviation</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.86</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cronbach Alpha</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.44</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETAIL

It is suggested that retailers attend to in store assistance of their customers during the pre purchase phase, despite evidence of positive SQ judgments that may create a halo effect. Specific attention should be given to technical quality (what is done, i.e., intentional provision of product information) and functional quality (how it is done, i.e., empathetic assistance in terms of personal product related needs and requirements). On the positive side, consumers’ already positive perception of sales personnel could be taken advantage of to expand consumers’ frame of reference in terms of product alternatives and product attributes. Non-formal consumer education is required to encourage evaluative rational product judgment based on attributes that would address households’ needs, requirements and preferences on the long term. Sales personnel probably function within an economics perspective where sales, profit and sales incentives dictate their sales operations. Informed, responsible buyer behaviour does however have consequences for proper use and maintenance of appliances that are supposed to have a service life of ten years and more.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The scales used to judge SQ depend on intangibles. In the context of emerging consumer markets where less sophisticated consumers are involved, it might be useful divert the focus to tangible aspects of customer service, i.e. consumers’ judgment of the visible presence and conduct of personnel; the physical environment in terms of store display, product range; availability of product information in written format, etcetera. This might provide clear guidelines in terms of how to augment the service offering.

QUALITY OF DATA

The questionnaire was pre tested for understandability and to attend to the length of the questionnaire (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:76, 92). The entire research process was planned in advance to enable conditional inter-subjectivity (Stenbacka, 2001). Internal validity, i.e. efforts to establish close interaction with the real phenomena (Gummesson, 2002; Hughes, 2006) and transferability were attended to through recruitment of willing consumers who had just made a purchase at 20 branches of five different department chain stores in Gauteng, a densely populated geographic area to adequately involve representations of the constructions of reality. To prevent misinformation and misrepresentation, data collection was limited to one day per store and completion of questionnaires was done under the supervision of trained assistants who were fluent in at least two of the official languages to provide assistance with the interpretation of scales if necessary (Wallendorf and Bellk, 1989). Generalization is restricted to the context of appliance sales departments of major retail channels in South Africa as an example of an emerging economy. The pretence of replication is not offered because control over the research setting would affect the underlying philosophy of this research method, i.e. to purposely select potential customers at point of sale without prior warning (De Ruyter and Schol, 1998).

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