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EXPLORING RETAIL CUSTOMER SERVICE, A CASE OF RETAIL FOOD CHAINS IN KWAZULU-NATAL

This study aimed at determining and evaluating the efficacy of customer service in independently owned retail food chains within the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa; managers; between customer's expectation and their perceived satisfaction. Furthermore, it included assessing the level of retail service quality, current customer service tools employed by independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal, and the extent to which customer service tools are being used. The study was also about establishing if there was a significant relationship between retail service quality and customer satisfaction. The study targeted both customers and managers of independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal from whom a sample of four mangers were interviewed and 444 customers were conveniently selected to participate in the study. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the collection of data.

The findings revealed that the majority of the customers were generally dissatisfied with the quality of services offered by independent food chains owing to lack of complementary services (ATM terminals, parking, and toilets), facilities for shoppers with special needs (physically handicapped, wheelchaired, or translators), inability to offer customers credit, failure to provide wide product assortment, short operating hours and general appearance of the store (cleanness, good product display, presentation on how to use merchandise and availability of shopping trolleys, signage to locate and identify merchandise). The results, however, revealed that there is a relationship between customer's expectation and their perceived satisfaction. Equally significant, the results showed that customers were satisfied with the accessibility and safety of the stores and that they will be considering independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal as their primary stores.

Keywords: Customer service, Independent food chains, service quality, retailing, customer service quality

1. INTRODUCTION

Independent food chains play an integral part in the distribution chain of goods and services, uplifting the economy and advancement of the retailing industry (Radder, 1996). More recently, independent food chains in South Africa have begun entering the townships and expanding into rural areas. The opening of independent food chains has provided exposure to new segments of the population. Whereas many of the independently owned retailers have been seen as being culturally and empathetically linked with their customer base, larger national firms have emphasized issues such as

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customer service, operational standards, and organizational training (De Bruyn and Freathy, 2011). It is therefore unknown as to what customer service strategies independently owned food chains are embarking on to counter the strategies of national retailers in competing for a shrinking a share of consumers' wallets; preference; and patronage. Moreover, the customer service phenomenon is increasing, but little is known about its role (Hunter, 2006).

Customer service is about understanding the needs of different customers, keeping promises, and consistently delivering high product and service standards. The success of any retail entity is determined by customer service (Kimando and Njogu, 2012), as customer service has that ability to heighten the level of customer satisfaction and act as a differentiating factor amongst retailers aiming to have the competitive advantage over their competitors (Srivastava et al., 2015). It further, can increase product quality, gaining profitable opportunities, and eventually increasing sales and income (Jahanshani et al., 2014).

Recent surveys have also confirmed that consumers think retail customer service is inadequate in retail outlets, and realizing the escalating importance of customer service, an increasing number of retailers have attempted to improve their service strategy (Bishop Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994), by improving their service quality to the customers, which has become the basic tool for retailers to enhance the shopping experience, customer satisfaction, revenues, cross-selling and also repeat purchase behaviour (Chandel, 2014). Delivering high-quality service and having satisfied customers are viewed as indispensable for gaining a sustainable advantage (Shemwell, Yavas, and Bilgin, 1998). However, retailers are still unable to effectively cater to the needs and wants of customers and risk not only losing dissatisfied customers to competitors but also the erosion of profits and consequently failure (Wong and Sohal, 2003).

Measuring customer service quality in the retail setting is different from any other product or service environment. It is for this reason that Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz developed the Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) for measuring retail service quality. It should, however, be strongly emphasized that service quality in retailing is different and complicated from any pure service environment, as it incorporates a mix of merchandise and services offered concurrently (Siu and Tak-Hing Cheung, 2001). This is because of the unique nature of retailing, and as such, improvements or measurements of quality in retailing cannot be approached in the same way as in any services setting. In a retail environment, it is, therefore, necessary to look at quality from the perspective of services as well as goods and derive a set of items that accurately measure this construct.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Found in the literature review is a detailed discussion of an overview of two constructs namely, retailing and customer service.

2.1. Retailing

Retailing is the set of business activities that adds value to the products and services sold to consumers for their personal or family use and also involves the sale of services (Levy and Weitz, 2012). It is the heart of marketing and it is not a new concept in the history of marketing, retailing is the interface between the producer and the individual consumer for buying personal consumption. It is the final activity in the supply chain

(Chakraborty, 2014), and also a tail activity in the business chain that links the end-user and last middlemen in the business process (Prabhakar, 2012).

The retailing concept is an overarching business philosophy that creates superior value for customers (Themba and Marandu, 2013) by attracting, recruiting, and retaining a competent workforce to successfully compete in the 21st century. Retailers operating under the retail concept provide services and assist in providing more product selections (Liao, Chen and Wu, 2008). The concept further encourages retailers to provide time, place, and possession utility through their store location, environment, merchandise, and salespeople (Singh, 2009), by also providing an assortment of products and services, breaking bulk, holding inventory, and providing services (Levy and Weitz, 2012).

Retailing in South Africa is a rapidly changing scenario with new competitors and technological advances in doing business. South Africa has a wide range of retailers who have evolved to serve the needs of a marketplace that is characterized by many different groups of potential customers in terms of race, income, and culture (Terblanche, et al., 2013). The retail industry is divided into organized and unorganized sectors. Organized retailing refers to trading activities undertaken by licensed retailers, while unorganized retailing, on the other hand, refers to unlicensed or informal retailers (Bawa, Gupta, and Sharma, 2013). Retailers are classified into two major areas, namely: food retailers and general merchandise retailers. The most common food retailers that are apparent in South Africa are full-service supermarkets, hypermarkets warehouse clubs, and convenience stores (Terblanche et al., 2013). The South African food retail sector is highly concentrated and dominated by four retailers namely: Pick 'n Pay, Shoprite/Checkers, SPAR, and Woolworths. All the larger retailers in South Africa have been expanding their activities within South Africa, the number of retail stores in South Africa increased by 77 percent to a total of 2 125 stores from 1994 to 2005. Growth in the retail sector is also sustained and stimulated by the good performance of the South African economy and the emergence of a strong black middle socio-economic class (Bienabe and Vermeulen, 2007).

The retail sector in South Africa continues to grow exponentially, as evidenced by the increase in the number of new shopping malls. South Africa has some of the largest retail enterprises in the world and is the largest economy in Africa (Mafini and Dhurup, 2015). Over the past decade, supermarkets have emerged as important agents of change in developing countries. Supermarkets have gone beyond the upper-income consumers to penetrate the mass market middle class, lower middle class, and the poor (Neven et al., 2006). South Africa's retailing industry has also witnessed an increase in hypermarkets. While hypermarkets have been in existence in South Africa for quite a while, the past decade has seen a remarkable shift from convenience store investment to hypermarket investment (Chinomona and Omoruyi, 2015).

Since the late 1990s, the number of supermarkets in South Africa has been steadily growing (D'Haese and Van Huylenbroeck, 2005), and have progressed exponentially in the retailing field in the last two decades. Such progression is evident in the retail sector, where major retail stores (including supermarkets and hypermarkets) were responsible for more than half of South Africa's turnover on groceries, toiletries, and confectionery (Dhurup, Venter and Oosthuyzen, 2014). Supermarkets are not a new phenomenon in South Africa. OK Bazaars introduced the concept of the supermarket into South Africa in 1948 and by 1999 the top five South African supermarket chains had a total of 1763 stores and a 72.1 percent market share. The other six major chains are Shoprite, Pick 'n Pay, Woolworths, Spar, Massmart, and Metro Cash and Carry (Metcash) with the last two performing both retail and wholesale functions (Louw et al., 2007). Supermarkets are spreading quickly in developing countries, the take-off is driven by an avalanche of foreign direct investment (Reardon and Hopkins, 2006), and as such South African supermarkets have expanded their operations into foreign countries and are beneficial to small-scale farmers in those host countries. South African supermarkets expand their market share in foreign countries through buying other supermarkets, franchising, and forming partnerships with other supermarket chains (Emongor and Kirsten, 2009).

The South African retail trade environment in townships and rural areas was dominated by small, mainly informal, business traders offering basic products to a low-income consumer market. Now of late, South African townships are emerging as the new markets for national retailers, especially supermarket chains. The increasing movement of formal retailers into previously untapped middle-and low-income markets has increased shopping center development in townships (Tustin and Strydom, 2006).

2.2. Customer service

According to Andreassen and Olsen (2008), customer service comprises creating and delivering the service in the customer's presence, providing information, making reservations, and receiving payment. It is an element of the retailer's market offering that takes place in all phases of a service's life cycle in the pre-purchase phases (e.g. providing information to make a better decision or training customers in using the service), during the purchase (e.g. front-line employees service mindedness, skills, and competences when attending and responding to customer needs) and post-purchase (e.g. providing information about usage, honoring guarantees or providing repair and spare parts). Customer service is the provision of service to the customers before, during, and after a purchase (Dhammi, 2013). It is all about the retailer activities that increase the value received by consumers when shopping. Customer services are tangible or intangible value increasing activities that are related to products or services directly or indirectly to meet customer expectations and finally to provide customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kursunluoglu, 2014).

The customer service process is defined as structured sets of work activities that lead to specified business outcomes for customers (Setia, Venkatesh, and Joglekar, 2013) which can be categorized into three tiers. The first tier is reliability, which means performing the basics well. The second tier is resilience or the ability to respond to failures of the customer service systems. The third tier is referred to as creativity or innovation. Creativity means developing value-added programs for customers such as direct store delivery or packaging innovations (Theodoras, Laios, and Moschuris, 2005). Elements of customer service comprise all the external factors that incite the consumer's mind. The interpretation of the individual elements of Customer service is considered a cognitive activity that involves interpretation within established schemata in memory that are based on existing knowledge structures (Marx and Erasmus, 2006). Customer service can be measured in many dimensions such as service empathy, access time, and courtesy of staff but this study will consider the main dimension of service quality, service speed, and responsiveness (Hassan, 2013).

Customer service has become a dominant objective for retail managers. In this competitive world, high levels of service have become a minimum requirement for establishing and maintaining a presence in the market (Schary, 1992). It is how the retailer would like to have the services perceived by customers, employees, and shareholders. It is also referred to as the retailer's business proposition or customer benefit package, things that provide benefit and value to the customer (Goldstein, et al., 2002). Customer service is seen as another source of competitive advantage with greater revenue-generating potential among retailers (Sade, Bojei, and Donaldson, 2015). Fallah (2011) affirms that customer service is a competitive means that differentiate retailers. Customer service greatly affects customer satisfaction and loyalty, which results in the organisation's profitability. Therefore, providing satisfactory service levels to customers must be the priority for any retailer. Providing high service levels is costly, so it is important to set service levels cost-effectively.

3. ROLE AND BENEFITS OF GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE

In today's competitive retail environment, retailers must understand the importance of consumer services. For retailers to be successful, retailers should develop a culture that embraces service ideologies, thus encouraging the retention and growth of their customer base (Beitelspacher, Richey & Reynolds, 2011). Investing time and resources to satisfy customer's perceptions and expectations show the retailer's orientation to develop a long-term relationship with customers, which, in turn, encourages the customers to stay in that relationship and sets an expectation of reciprocation. When a retailer makes any kind of relationship investment for customers, it creates a favorable impression in the minds of customers (Deb, 2014) and pays off because it creates true customers who are like annuities, they keep pumping revenues into an organization (Kimani et al., 2012).

As observed by Bouzaabia, Bouzaabia, and Capatina (2013), retailers must understand the needs of customers and provide them with the highest value. A certain number of factors contribute to the customers' experience: comfort, product availability, the delivery, the return policy to satisfy the customer, and consequently to guarantee loyalty. If the customer's needs are unmet, the effects of dissatisfaction can quickly multiply. The consumer may go to another store, enjoy another retail experience, and complain about the earlier negative experience. Retailers that have recognized and implemented several customer services programs have derived benefits including increased customer satisfaction, customer retention, customer loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth, increasing opportunities for cross-selling, employee benefits, improved corporate image, profit gains, and financial performance (Kumar, Shivashankar & Manjunath, 2012).

Customer service is an important means for retailers to gain a competitive advantage, customers who are satisfied tend to return for future business and sometimes assist in marketing service organization through word-of-mouth (Hassan, 2013). Good customer service can significantly influence store loyalty, customer satisfaction (Hirogaki, 2014), high revenues, increased customer retention and leads to repeat customer purchase behaviour which ultimately increases the market share of the retailer (Ramakrishnan & Ravindran, 2012). Generally, good customer service enhances customer trust and satisfaction with the retailer. Customers may be more willing and intend to do something beneficial to the strategic health of the retailer as a result, customer loyalty will gradually form. It is believed that positive perceptions of customer service increase the chance of customers being involved in supporting the firm and developing loyalty behavior (Yuen & Chan, 2010).

Hassan (2013) concludes that customer service could aid a retailer in continually satisfying its customers and lead to increase sales growth and employee growth. Hence, customer service acts as a driver of organizational growth.

4. OBJECTIVES

This study aims to determine and evaluate customer service undertaken by independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal and the applicability of any strategies thereof. To accomplish the primary objective, several secondary objectives have to be met, namely:

- To assess retail service quality in independent retail food chains; and
- To assess the level of customer satisfaction from services offered by independent retail food chains;
- To identify what customers, perceive to be their key influential factors of retail customer service;

5. METHODOLOGY

The target population was all customers of independent food chains in the Kwa Zulu Natal. A total of 444 useable responses were gathered.

The study engaged both qualitative and quantitative interviews to gather data from customers. The researcher constructed an interview schedule that listed all the questions that were asked. A funneling approach was adopted, whereby questions were arranged to start from broad questions and gradually leading to more focused questions (Tofade Haines and Elsner, 2013), to allow the respondents to gradually adapt to the line of the questioning. The Interviews were recorded on an audio-tape and responses were recorded with notes taken during the interviews which both formed part of the raw data that was analyzed.

Responses were recorded coded, and analyzed using a qualitative research software (NVivo) and SPSS for quantitative responses. NVivo helped to manage, shape, and make sense of unstructured information, it reduced a great number of manual tasks and gave the researcher more time to discover tendencies, recognize themes and derive conclusions (Hilal and Alabri, 2013).

6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Along with the request to cooperate in the study, participants being customers and retail managers were provided with an explanation of the purpose, outline, and ethical considerations of the study in writing and verbally. It was explained and emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary, that agreeing to be interviewed was taken as consent to participate in the study, and that the anonymity of the respondents would be protected. Furthermore, all of the processes involved in this study were conducted following the research plan as approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology. Ethical clearance was obtained as per regulations of the university before recruitment of participants, as ethics in research do not solely rest upon the relationship between the researcher and participants but upon the wider research community (Miller and Brewer, 2003), and participants were also entitled to withdraw their participation from the study at any point (Jirojwong, et al., 2014: 70).

7. RELIABILITY

Reliability pertains to the consistency of scores (Ritter, 2010), dependability, and replicability of the results obtained from a piece of research (Zohrabi, 2013), and the extent to which results are consistent over time (Bashir, Afzal, and Azeem, 2008). Sekaran and Bougie (2013) further postulate that the reliability of a measure indicates the extent to which it is without bias (error-free) and, hence, ensures consistent measurement across time and the various items in the instrument. In other words, the reliability of a measure is an indication of the stability and consistency with which the instrument measures the concept and helps to assess the goodness of a measure.

To provide a measure of the consistency and validity, Cronbach's alpha was used as an important measure of reliability (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011), as it is a test reliability technique that requires only a single test administration to provide a unique estimate of the reliability for a given test (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Cronbach's alpha measured how well a set of items (or variables) measured a single one-dimensional latent construct (Hussain, 2012), and the interrelatedness of a set of items (Grau, 2007).

8. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

All the data in the sections below were statistically analyzed in an attempt to determine and evaluate customer service undertaken by independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal. The research instrument consisted of 82 items, with a level of measurement at a nominal or an ordinal level. The questionnaire was divided into 7 sections which measured various themes as illustrated below:

Biographical data

1. The physical aspects of independent food chains
2. The reliability of services provided by independent food chains
3. Personal interaction with independent food chains
4. Problem-solving at independent food chains

The results were presented in descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistics were in the form of graphs, cross-tabulations, and other figures for the quantitative data that was collected. Inferential techniques include the use of correlations and chi-square test values; which are interpreted using the p-values.

9. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

This section summarises the biographical characteristics of the respondents. In total, 500 questionnaires were despatched and 444 were returned, which constituted a response rate of 88.8%. Respondents were described in terms of the following demographic characteristics: age and gender (Table 1), educational qualification (Fig. 1), and the frequency of their shopping (Table 2). Respondents were mainly females (64.0%), with males constituting (36.0%). The results are in line with observations by Dholakia (1999) who observed that women enjoyed going shopping more than men and that shopping is still considered a gendered activity with women assuming primary responsibility for household grocery shopping. Overall, the ratio of males to females is approximately 1:2 (36.0%: 64.0%) concluding that women are the predominant shoppers.

In terms of age group, 29.5% of respondents were between 18–29 years old; 25.0% were between 30–40 years old, 27.5% were between 41–55 years old and 18.0% were between 56–65 and above years old. It is worth noting that in the age category of 30–40 years, 37.8% were male. Within the category of males (only), 26.3% were between the ages of 30 to 40 years. This category of males between the ages of 30 to 40 years formed 9.5% of the total sample.

In terms of the frequency respondents going shopping, 36.0% shopped once a week, 33.8% shopped twice a week, and 30.2% shopped thrice or more in a week. It is worth noting that two-thirds (50.5%) of the respondents reported that the choice of the store they shopped was influenced by the prices offered by the retailer as outline in (Table 3), and 19.8% of them indicated that complementary services such as ATM terminals, parking, and toilets were the best service offered by the store as illustrated in (Table 4).

Table 1. The overall gender distribution by age

			Gender of Male	respondents Female	Total
Age in years	18-29	Count	49	82	131
		% within Age in years	37.4%	62.6%	100.0%
		% within Gender of respondents	30.6%	28.9%	29.5%
		% of Total	11.0%	18.5%	29.5%
	30-40	Count	42	69	111
		% within Age in years	37.8%	62.2%	100.0%
		% within Gender of respondents	26.3%	24.3%	25.0%
		% of Total	9.5%	15.5%	25.0%
	41-55	Count	39	83	122
		% within Age in years	32.0%	68.0%	100.0%
		% within Gender of respondents	24.4%	29.2%	27.5%
		% of Total	8.8%	18.7%	27.5%
	56-65 and above	Count	30	50	80
		% within Age in years	37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
		% within Gender of respondents	18.8%	17.6%	18.0%
		% of Total	6.8%	11.3%	18.0%
Total		Count	160	284	444
		% within Age in years	36.0%	64.0%	100.0%
		% within Gender of respondents	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	36.0%	64.0%	100.0%

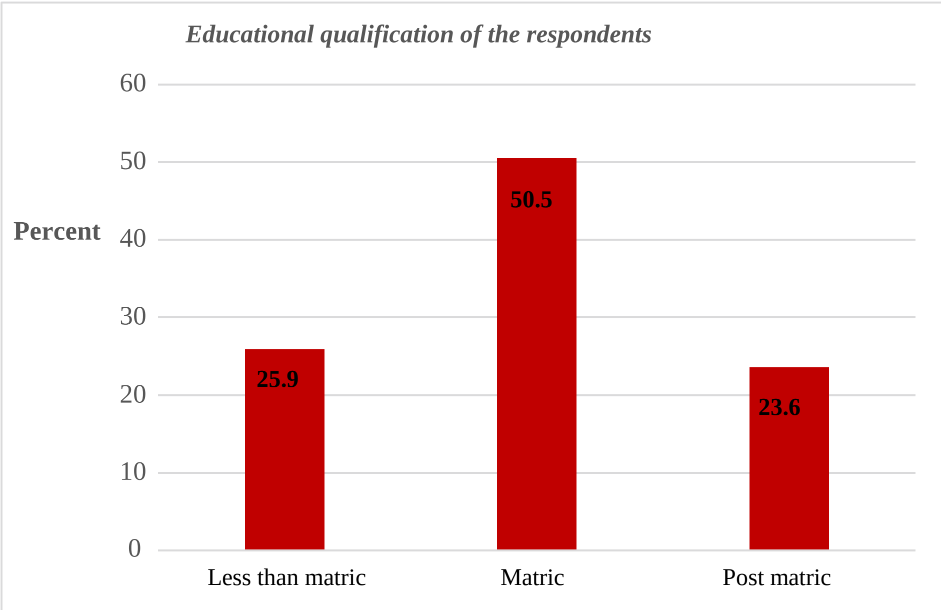

Fig. 1. Educational levels of the respondents

Fig. 1 depicts that 25 .9% of the respondents had less than a matriculation certificate, while 50.5% of respondents do hold a matriculation certificate and 23.6% of the respondents had post matriculated. Therefore, the majority of the respondents (50.5%) had a matric qualification. It can, therefore, be concluded that the majority of customers of independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal have higher education.

Table 2. Frequency of shopping

	Frequency	Percent
Once a week	160	36.0
Twice a week	150	33.8
Thrice and more	134	30.2
Total	444	100.0

Illustrated in Table 2, 36% of respondents indicated that they did their shopping once in a week, 33.8% of them did their shopping twice in a week and 30.2% did shopping thrice and more in a week. The results imply that the majority of customers visit independent food chains in KwaZulu-Natal more than twice in a week. Maruyama and Trung (2009) also observed a similar trend in Vietnam and concluded that almost all supermarket consumers shop at least five or six times a week or every day or even more.

Table 3. Key factors that influence store choice by customers

	Frequency	Percent
Prices offered by the retailer	252	56.8
Convenience of the store	101	22.7
Services offered by the store	53	11.9
Other	38	8.6
Total	444	100.0

As exemplified in Table 3 above, the majority of respondents indicated that price is the key influencer on their store choice, followed by the convenience of the retailer, and services offered by the retailer. Munnukka (2008) further supports the finding that price is an important element that affects store choice. Other influencers of the store as noted by Sinha and Banerjee (2004) are the prices offered by the store, nature, and quality of product and service, and customer proximity of residence to the store. It is therefore apparent that the majority of customers shop at independent food chains because of the prices they offer and convenience.

Table 4. Factors that describe good customer service offered by retailers

	Frequency	Percent
Helpfulness of store staff	81	18.2
Complementary services offered by the retailer (ATM terminal, parking, and toilets	88	19.8
Appearance of store (cleanness, good product display, and presentation	84	18.9
Store operating hours (Extended hours)	57	12.8
Facilities for shoppers with special needs (physical handicapped, wheelchaired or translators)	45	10.1
Ability by the retailer to offer customers credit	40	9.0
Proving wide product assortments	49	11.0
Total	444	100.0

Customers were then again asked to rank what they would consider good customer service offered by independent food chains. Complementary services offered by the retailer which few include ATM terminals, parking and toilets constituted 19.8%, the appearance of the store made 18.9%, helpfulness of store staff 18.2%, store operating hours 12.8%, product assortment 11%, facilities for shoppers with special needs (physical handicapped, wheelchaired or translators) 10.1% and ability by the retailer to offer customers credit constituted 9%. It is worth noting that majority of customers perceived complementary services offered by retailers to be good customer service practices. It is therefore recommended that independent food retailers further adjust their setting and offer more complimentary service to allure more consumers into the unplanned purchase, thus boosting the sale volume and profits. Retailers should further place more attention on keeping the fresh and healthy shopping atmosphere as this will entice consumers to stay longer and become more loyal to the retailer (Cho, Ching, and Luong, 2014).

10. PHYSICAL ASPECT OF INDEPENDENT FOOD CHAINS

A large proportion of the respondents (60.8%) disagreed that the merchandise of related products is shelved together. Similarly, and as shown in Table 7, 54.7% of the respondents disagreed that the independent store has modern-looking equipment and fixtures, while 50.0% of them also disagreed that the physical facilities at the store are visually appealing. It was no surprise that the majority of the respondents (40.8%) disagreed that materials associated with the independent store's services such as shopping bags, catalogues, or statements are visually appealing.

40.8% of the respondents disagreed that the store layout makes it easy for customers to find what they need, and 45.9% of them equally disagree that the store layout makes it easy for customers to move around in the store. This may be related to the general ergonomic layout of the independent food chain stores. As was observed that 50.0% of the respondents disagree that the stores' ventilation system is satisfactory, and 53.4% of them also disagree that the store can handle a lot of people. In contrast, the majority (50.2%) of the respondents, agreed that the stores provide appropriate lighting.

In general, a noteworthy attribute of the respondents' description of the physical aspects of the independent stores was that majority of their opinions were negative with the average level of disagreement indicated as 47.9% (Figure 2). This was further expressed by the majority of the respondents who disagreed that the stores provide directional signs to merchandise and departments (51.1%); the store provides parking facilities (57.2%); the store has clean, attractive, and convenient public areas (48.8%); and the store offers online shopping or mobile application (62.4%).

Table 5. Respondents scoring pattern on the physical aspect of independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
I encounter problems with merchandise display in this store	250	56.3%	100	22.5%	94	21.2%
The merchandise of related products is shelved together.	138	31.1%	36	8.1%	207	60.8%
This store has modern-looking equipment and fixtures.	144	32.4%	57	12.8%	243	54.7%

Table 5 (cont.). Respondents scoring pattern on the physical aspect of independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
The physical facilities at this store are visually appealing.	137	30.0%	85	19.1%	222	50.0%
Materials associated with this store's services (such as shopping bags, catalogues or statements) are visually appealing.	140	31.5%	123	27.7%	181	40.8%
The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to find what they need	149	33.5%	91	20.5%	204	45.9%
The store layout at this store makes it easy for customers to move around in the store.	155	34.9%	81	18.2%	208	46.8%
The store's ventilation system is satisfactory.	149	33.6%	71	16.0%	224	50.5%
The store provides appropriate lighting.	223	50.2%	89	20.0%	132	29.7%
The store can handle a lot of people.	123	27.7%	84	18.9%	237	53.4%
The store provides directional signs to merchandise and departments	141	31.8%	76	17.1%	227	51.1%
The store provides parking facilities.	99	22.3%	91	20.5%	254	57.2%
This store has clean, attractive, and convenient public areas (toilets).	147	33.1%	89	20.0%	208	46.8%
The store offers online shopping or mobile application.	94	21.2%	73	16.4%	277	62.4%

11. RELIABILITY OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY INDEPENDENT FOOD CHAINS

With regards to the respondents' perceptions of the reliability of services provided by the independent food chain stores, results were statistically different. A point deserving mentioning is that majority (57.9%) of the respondents agreed that an independent food chain store has merchandise available when customers want it.

Table 6. Reliability of service provided by independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
When this store promises to do something by a certain time, it will do so.	109	24.5 %	87	19.6 %	248	55.9 %
This store provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	126	28.4 %	52	11.7 %	266	59.9 %
This store performs the service right the first time.	145	32.7 %	49	11.0 %	250	56.3 %
This store has merchandise available when customers want it.	257	57.9 %	38	8.6%	149	33.6 %
This store insists on error-free sales transactions and records.	162	36.5 %	61	13.7 %	221	49.8 %
The store does promote its product offerings.	238	53.6 %	70	15.8 %	136	30.6 %

12. PERSONAL INTERACTION WITH INDEPENDENT FOOD CHAINS

On the issue of customer's interactions with the independent food chains, the majority of the respondents were in disagreement that employees in the store know to answer customer's questions (59.2%); that the behavior of employees in the store instills confidence (50.7%); employees in the store give prompt service to customers (54.1%); employees in the store tell customers exactly when services will be performed (39.2%); employees in the store are never too busy to respond to customers request (53.6%); the store gives customers individual attention (54.1%); employees in the store make customers feel important and appreciated (52.9%); employees in the store have a positive attitude, helpful, and friendly towards customers (51.6%); employees in the store are consistently courteous with customers (53.4%); employees in the store understand customers' needs and want (50.9%), and employees in the store go an extra mile to make customers shopping experience enjoyable and memorable (51.6%). Despite the negative agreement on customers' interaction with independent food chains, it was worth noting that the majority (49.1%) of the respondents agreed that customers feel safe in their transactions with the store, while (47.1%) of them also agreed that employees in the store are readily available and accessible to help the customers.

Table 7. Personal interaction with independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Employees in this store know to answer customers' questions.	106	23.9%	75	16.9%	263	59.2%
The behavior of employees in this store instills confidence in the customer.	125	28.2%	94	21.2%	225	50.7%
Customers feel safe in their transactions with this store.	218	49.1%	47	10.6%	179	40.3%
Employees in this store give prompt service to customers.	136	30.6%	68	15.3%	240	54.1%
Employees in this store tell customers exactly when services will be performed.	157	35.4%	113	25.5%	174	39.2%
Employees in this store are never too busy to respond to customers' requests.	125	28.2%	81	18.2%	238	53.6%
These stores give customers individual attention.	130	29.3%	74	16.7%	240	54.1%
Employees in this store make customers feel important and appreciated.	142	32.0%	67	15.1%	235	52.9%
Employees in this store have a positive attitude, helpful, and friendly towards customers.	148	33.3%	67	15.1%	229	51.6%

Table 7 (cont.). Personal interaction with independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Employees in this store are consistently courteous with customers.	133	30.0%	74	16.7%	237	53.4%
Employees in this store understand customers' needs and want.	144	32.4%	74	16.7%	226	50.9%
Employees in this store are readily available and accessible to help customers.	209	47.1%	69	15.5%	166	37.4%
Employees in this store go the extra mile to make customers' shopping experience enjoyable and memorable.	127	28.6%	88	19.8%	229	51.6%

13. PROBLEM-SOLVING AT INDEPENDENT FOOD CHAINS

With regards to problem-solving abilities at the independent food chains, 50.9% of the respondents believe that when a customer has a problem, the store does not show a sincere interest in solving it. Similarly, 51.6% of them believed that the employees at independent food chain stores cannot handle customer's complaints directly and immediately. As such, it was understandable that 45.5% of the respondents disagreed that employees resolve customer's complaints speedily, efficiently, and fairly. This is concerning, particularly as 45.0% of the respondents think that the stores do not seek customer's opinions and suggestions. Overall, there was a general disagreement amongst the respondent on the problem-solving abilities of independent food chain stores with the level of disagreement given as 45.65%. Notwithstanding this, and in terms of the accessibility of the independent food chain stores, 46.2% of the respondents are in agreement that the store is easily accessible.

Table 8. Respondents scoring pattern on problem-solving at independent food chains

	Agree		Uncertain		Disagree	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
This store offers high-quality merchandise.	125	28.2%	142	32.0%	177	39.9%
When a customer has a problem, this store shows a sincere interest in solving it.	143	32.2%	75	16.9%	266	50.9%
Employees resolve customers' complaints speedily, efficiently, and fairly.	175	39.4%	67	15.1%	202	45.5%
The store does seek customers' opinions and suggestions.	141	31.8%	103	23.2%	200	45.0%
The store is easily accessible.	205	46.2%	58	13.1%	181	40.8%

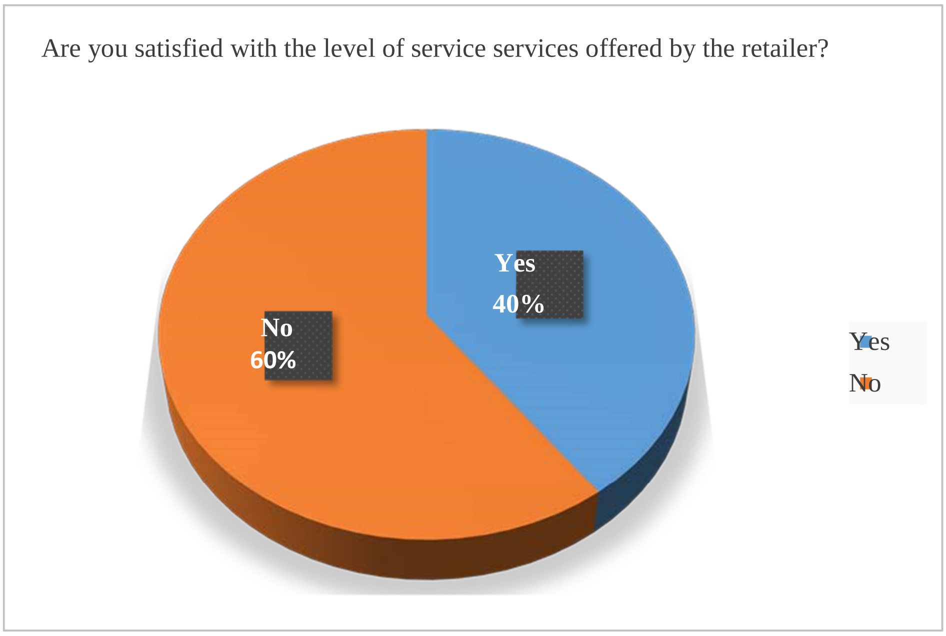

Fig. 2. Customer's satisfaction of service received from the retailer

Figure 2 depicts customers' satisfaction levels with services received from independent food chains. 60% of the respondents were not satisfied with the level of service they received from independent food chains, while 40% of the respondents were satisfied. Similar trends of results were also observed by Grzeskowiak, Sirgy, Foscht, and Swoboda (2016) and they recommend that retailers may, for example, structure assortments around different shopper lifestyles and also retail services and the presentation of products could be used to reinforce the connection between the retail experience and shopper identity.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes by recommending that independent retail food chains study their customer profiles as it was evident during interviews that customer profiling or segmentation was not undertaken in detail; retailers are edged to identify and establish customer service needs and requirements so as to facilitate proper product and service mix design; retailers are also recommended to keep regular communication with customers to inform them about promotions or any new developments taking place; retailers should introduce customer loyalty programs; provide regular staff training on customer service continuously through workshops and follow-up refresher courses; retailers should offer quality merchandise and incorporate latest technological innovations; handle and process third party payment; meet and exceed customer service expectations of customers; upgrade their facilities to accommodate customers with disabilities; and finally retailers should have well defined returns policy, parking facilities, restrooms and introduce trolleys with baby seating facility

15. FUTURE RESEARCH

It is recommended that other studies using a survey and observation method be done that will explore and discover, in-depth, more about retail customer service. It was also noted that some respondents needed to say more about customer service and service quality but the questionnaire was not designed in a manner that allowed them to elaborate. Therefore, further research is recommended.

It is further recommended that other studies of a similar nature be undertaken or extended to other provinces as this would be of great benefit to the South African retail sector. This type of researches could enable independent retail food chains to learn more from one other or provide a platform to share good and best practices.

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