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Analysis of Moderating Role of Customer Communication on the Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction: Evidence from Kenya's Mobile Phones Sector

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Abstract:

The study examined the moderating effect of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in mobile phone firms in Kenya. By utilizing, correlational survey design, the study focused on primary data collected from Kenya's mobile phone sectors by targeting 384 sample respondents out of the possible 32.7 million mobile phone subscribers. Specifically, one null hypothesis was formulated and tested. Pre-validated questionnaires were used to collect data. Moderated regression analysis was used to address specific objective on the moderating effect of customer communication on the relationship between quality and satisfaction separately as well as test the corresponding hypothesis. The study revealed that the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction was positively moderated by customer communication. The study concludes that customer communication strategies as practiced by mobile phone firms improve the satisfaction levels through its interactive effect. Thus, it is recommended that firms in the mobile phone sector should consider integrating all customer communication efforts to achieve the common purpose of enhancing customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Service quality, Customer satisfaction, customer communication

1. Introduction

Service quality can be perceived as the result of customers' comparison of their expectations about a service and their perception of the way the service has been performed (Gronross, 1984; Caruana, Money and Berthon; 2000). Further, when all service quality features such as tangibility, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and reliability are effectively implemented; it may result in enhanced satisfaction of service clients (Gronross, 1984, Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Azman, 2009). With regard to mobile phone services, service quality relates to issues to do with net quality which include indoor and outdoor coverage, smoothness of connectivity along the effective delivery of other value-added services (Gerpott, Rams and Schindler, 2001). Since the mobile phone market is in a highly competitive service sector, service quality becomes a very critical success factor for gaining sustainable competitive advantage that will translate into customer satisfaction and profit for the firm.

Customer satisfaction relates to the extent to which a product's perceived performance matches a buyer's expectations (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012). Kotler (2006) observes that modern organizations are endeavoring to become customer oriented by adopting customer-driven initiatives that seek to build long-term profitable relationships with their customers. Consequently, there is a paradigm shift of focus from merely satisfying customers to achieving ultimate customer delight thereby making customer satisfaction gain more attention from both practitioners and scholars in recent times (Nimako, Dokor and Veronica; 2012). Since customers play a vital role in the success of an organization (Agbor, 2011; Lee and Ritzman, 2005) they should be placed first in management priorities.

Customer communication refers to the ability to freely converse with the service firm. Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) perceived that customer communication will play a critical role in the service delivery process; by eliminating ignorance regarding customer's expectation by service firms. This was further supported by Mohr's and Nevin's (1990) theoretical model which suggested that communication, among other things serves to moderate the effects of circumstance and conditions in the service exchange process. This study explored the following dimensions of customer communication: complaints, suggestions, compliments and abandonment of usage. Excellent customer service and communication programmes can make companies stand apart from their competition, stand out as accomplished in the business world and stand out with their customers and employees. Even though customer communication was theoretically perceived as a plausible moderator in the service quality-customer satisfaction relationship, its moderating role has not been tested empirically yet.

Despite growing at 119.9% adoption rate and contributing 8% GDP growth in 2020, Kenya's ICT sector has experienced myriad challenges that have held back its growth. The 2020 sectorial report by Communication Authority of Kenya (CAK), revealed that frequent service interruptions, numerous customer complaints, increased cyber-crimes on

customers, increased competition and high regulatory requirements, impending challenges of poor quality of services as reported by subscribers. Moreover, CAK have rated all four Kenyan mobile phone operators as non-compliant (62.5%) in terms of set quality of service targets of 80 per cent. Service quality management literature shows plausible but mixed relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Moreover, many of such studies focused on establishing the relationship between service quality and customers satisfaction in high end market and in high contact services with high service standards and high customer expectation such as the banking and hospitality sector. Consequently, aspects of quality-satisfaction relationship particularly in the case of low contact services offered by mobile phone firms is not known. Furthermore, the inconsistent findings regarding the effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and the weak explanatory power of the service quality on satisfaction suggests that moderating processes may be involved. However, the studies in other context on the relationship have yielded inconsistent results with limited effort to resolve the conflict through moderator investigation. While customer communication are theoretically plausible moderators of the service quality-customer satisfaction relationship, there is no empirical evidence on Kenya's mobile market sector, particularly on the inclusion of these plausible moderators in the elusive customer service quality - customer satisfaction relationship.

Therefore, this study investigated the moderating effects of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction among mobile phone firms in Kenya.

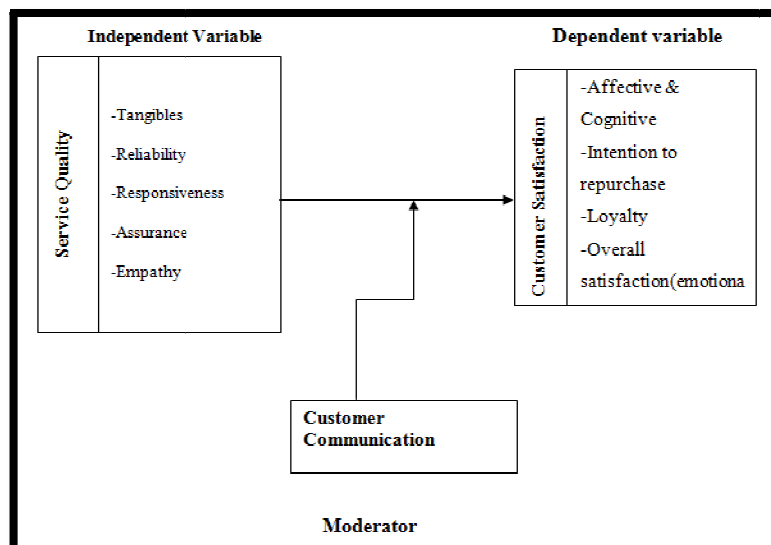


Figure 1: Operational Framework on Customer Communication and Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction

Source: Adapted From Walfriedet.al, (2000, Pg. 11)

From the above framework, customer communication is hypothesized to moderate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction model. Consequently, the study was guided by one objective and the corresponding null hypothesis which is stated as below:

Analyze the moderating effect of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in mobile phone firms in Kenya.

1.1. Hypothesis

- $H_0: \beta_i = 0$ The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is not moderated by customer communication among mobile phone firms in Kenya.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Service Quality

Service quality is the extent to which a firm successfully serves the purpose of the customer (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990). The sum total of customers' expectations, service delivery process and service outcome will have an influence on service quality. Moreover, Edvardsson (2005) note that service quality perception is formed in the process of production, delivery and service consumption. Furthermore, prior experience with a particular service will largely influence the extent of their customer perceptions of service quality (O'Neill and Palmer, 2003). In the current study, SERVQUAL Model was used to measure service quality. The SERVQUAL model has five dimensions of service quality across a variety of services include: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1991, Carman 1990, Crompton and Mackay, 1989). Tangibles relate to the physical evidences of service such as facilities, tools and appearance of the personnel; reliability is concerned with the consistency of performance and dependability; responsiveness deals with the willingness of employees/staff to deliver services; assurance covers issues relating to the courtesy of staff and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. Finally, empathy relates to the personalized contact that a firm gives to its customers.

2.2. The Concept of Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to a post consumption evaluative judgment concerning a specific product or service (Gundersen, Heide and Olsson, 1996). The customer contrasts pre-purchase expectations with the perceptions of performance during and after the consumption experience (Oliver, 1980). Despite customer satisfaction being a popular subject of great interest among marketing practitioners and academic researchers, there still does not appear to be a consensus regarding its role (Giese and Cole, 2000) and this has remained a critical gap in knowledge even in terms of designing appropriate service quality standards.

Customer's satisfaction levels can be best understood by analyzing the expectancy disconfirmation theory that seeks to explain how a customer compares the expected and perceived performance of service quality to arrive to a state of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. In the current study, the following dimensions of customer satisfaction were explored: Intention to purchase, loyalty, overall satisfaction and affective and cognitive elements. Customer satisfaction status with regard to mobile service quality worldwide is varied. In Europe for instance, customer satisfaction levels with regard to service quality provided by mobile phones firms are inconsistent (Oracle white paper, 2011). In Africa and in particular in Ghana's mobile Network, customer satisfaction level was reported to be moderately low at 43.5% (Nimakoet *al.*, 2012). In Kenya, however, customer satisfaction levels with respect to Kenya's mobile services remains unknown due to scanty documentation.

2.3. The Concept of Customer communication

Walfried *et al.* (2000) postulated that the ability of a customer to communicate freely and easily with the service firm will moderate the quality/satisfaction relationship. This is further supported by Mohr's and Nevin's (1990) theoretical model which suggests that communication, among other things, serves to moderate the effects of circumstance and conditions in the service exchange process. Moreover, Zeithamlet *al.* (1990) perceive that communication can play a critical role in the service delivery process by eliminating ignorance regarding customers' expectation by service firms. In the study, customer communication is operationalized by complaints, suggestions, compliments and abandonment of usage.

Despite advances in the theoretical literature (Zeithamlet *al.*, 1990; Mohr and Nevin, 1990) that customer communication can moderate the quality/satisfaction relationship, there is no known attempt to empirically establish the moderating role of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. This is particularly so especially in the context of low contact service settings such as the case of mobile phone services.

2.4. Empirical Literature

Researches on the role of communication as a moderator in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction are indeed limited. Empirical evidence by Juaidet *al.* (2012) only tested for direct effect of communication on customer. Similarly, Rezaie and Forghani (2011) also tested direct effect of communication on customer but differed with Juaidet *al.* (2012) in the direction of effects. Whereas Juaidet *al.* (2012) found that communication has exerted negative insignificant direct effect on customer satisfaction, Rezaie and Forghani (2011) on the hand found that among other factors, communication plays a vital role in explaining variation in customer satisfaction among IT service users. Despite Juaidet *al.* (2012) focusing on telecommunication services, their study did not establish the moderating role of communication on the quality-satisfaction relationship. Elsewhere, Gantasala and Padmakumar (2013) modelled and tested the mediating effects of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The studies by Gantasala and Padmakumar (2013) and Junaidet *al.* (2012) were similar in terms of the context as both were done in telecommunication sector in Asian market but differed in terms of focus of their studies. Whereas Junaidet *al.* (2012) tested for the direct effect of communication on customer satisfaction and confirmed its significance, Gantasala and Padmakumar (2013) on the other hand tested for the its mediating role and found it significantly so.

In addition, most studies reviewed (Juaidet *al.*, 2012; Rezaie and Forghani, 2011; Gantasala and Padmakumar, 2013) did not shade light on the likely effect of communication as a moderator variable on quality-satisfaction relationship as some only tested direct effect while others tested mediating effects. Furthermore, these studies, as reviewed, were conducted in the context of developed countries hence missing the analysis of Kenya's mobile phone sector. This is despite the fact that Kenya's mobile sector is currently experiencing many challenges like low access to telecommunication infrastructure, high operation and regulation costs and stiff competition that has forced small operators like Essar Yu to quit the sector and put off many potential developers of mobile services. Theoretically, customer communication is seen as a sound moderator but empirically, there was no known attempt to establish the moderating role of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. As such, the status and the likely effect of customer communication on quality-satisfaction relationship in Kenya's mobile phone sector is not known.

3. Methodology, Data Analysis and Results

The study adopted a correlational survey method. Under this research design, Mobile phones subscribers of all the four operators were surveyed to obtain their views on the moderating role of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction among mobile phone sector in Kenya. The research instrument was the questionnaire, properly designed to extract information pertaining to service quality, customer satisfaction and customer communication in the mobile industry of Kenya. The population of the study was 32.7 million mobile phone subscribers. Since the study considered drawing a sample from a large population of over 10,000 members,

the sample size was determined according to the formula suggested by Mason, Lind and Marchal (2002) and Nargundkar (2003) as below:

$$\text{Let sample size } n = p \cdot q \left(\frac{Z}{e} \right)^2 \dots\dots\dots \text{equation 3.1}$$

The sample size for the study was 384 respondents which is drawn from the population of mobile phones subscribers in Kenya. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to collect data and 381 copies were retrieved yielding a satisfactory response rate of 99.2%. Moderated regression analysis was used to address specific objective on the moderating effect customer communication on the relationship between quality and satisfaction separately as well as test the corresponding hypothesis.

		Overall Mean Score	Std. Dev
1.	Service quality measures	5.324	1.557
2.	Customer Communication	5.153	1.681
3.	Customer Satisfaction	5.08	1.599

Table 1: - Summary of Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs
 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3= Somewhat Disagree, 4=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 5=Somewhat Agree, 6=Agree and 7=Strongly Agree

On a seven-point Likert scale, it is evident that the prevalent view among the respondents regarding service quality as was practiced among the surveyed mobile phone firms was at a moderate level as revealed by an overall mean score of 5.324 (SD=1.557) representing 76.08% of responses in support of that view. All variables have mean values around or slightly below the mean composite service quality of 5.324. This further suggests that service quality is applied to a moderate extent. From Table 1, the responses revealed that most of the variables measuring customer communication had mean values close to the mean point of five. Based on the overall mean of 5.153 (SD =1.681), it appears that the level of customer communication practices associated with mobile phone services in Kenya has been reported to be moderately high among mobile phone users. On a seven-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to show their level of agreement with 9 items used as indicators or measures of customer satisfaction. The findings revealed that customer satisfaction levels among mobile phones users in the study area is at a moderate level of 72.6% (mean score 5.08, SD = 1.599).

3.1. Hypothesis Test

The objective of the study sought to establish whether the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction was moderated by customer communication. This procedure involved testing the third null hypothesis sated as: (H₀: β_i = 0); the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is not moderated by customer communication among mobile phone firms in Kenya. In order to test this hypothesis, moderated regression analysis was done and results were displayed in Table 2 and Table 3.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-.122	.202		-.604	.546		
	Service quality	.269	.049	.173	5.444	.000	.578	1.729
	Customer communication	.793	.033	.760	23.841	.000	.578	1.729
2	(Constant)	-.156	.174		-.896	.371		
	Service quality	.168	.043	.109	3.885	.000	.555	1.801
	Customer communication	.453	.041	.434	11.092	.000	.283	3.538
	Interaction term	.640	.055	.443	11.621	.000	.299	3.349

Table 2: Estimated Regression Coefficients for Variables in the Effect of Customer Communication on the Relationship between Service Quality-Customer Satisfaction
 a. Dependent Variable: Customer Satisfaction
 Source: Survey Data, 2019

Table 2 above Shows the standardized (β) and un-standardized (B) coefficients for Service quality and service failure with and without the interaction term. Without the interaction term, B for Service quality and customer communication are 0.269 and 0.793 respectively with both being significant at (p=0.000). The B coefficient when the interaction term was introduced for service quality, service failure (moderator) and interaction term are 0.168, 0.453, and 0.640 respectively.

As a result, the hypothesized moderation model was confirmed as;

$$\hat{Y} = -0.156 + 0.168X + 0.453Z + 0.640XZ \dots \dots \dots \text{Equation 4.3}$$

The model can be re expressed as;

$$\hat{Y} = (-0.156 + 0.453Z) + (0.168 + 0.640Z) X \dots \dots \dots \text{Equation 4.4}$$

In the model, the intercept and the XY slope is influenced by Z (the moderate variable) intercepts and slopes of line $\hat{Y} X$. The un-standardized co-efficient of the moderator model b_3 is 0.640. This means that for each unit increase in Z, the slope relating X to Y increases by 0.640. This means that as customer communication levels increases by one unit, the satisfaction level of customers' increases by 0.640. The summary statistics for moderator regression model are shown in Table 3.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	.882	.778	.777	.68195	.778	662.870	2	378	.000	
2	.915	.837	.835	.58593	.059	135.039	1	377	.000	1.670
a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer communication, Service quality										
b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer communication, Service quality, Interaction term										
b. Dependent Variable: Customer satisfaction										

Table 3: Model Summary of Effect of Customer Communication on The Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction
Source: Survey Data, 2019

As shown in Table 3 above, the full model 3 includes service quality as the independent variable, customer communication as the moderator and the interaction effects. This model is significant at ($R^2=0.837$, Adjusted $R^2=0.835$, $F(1,377) 135.039, p=.000$) thus rejecting null hypothesis three which states: ($H_0: \beta_i = 0$); the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is not moderated by customer communication among mobile phone firms in Kenya. When compared to the reduced Model 2, which only includes predictor variable and moderators in step 2, the addition of the interaction terms in the full model significantly increases the R^2 ($\Delta R^2=0.059$; $p=0.000$ or 5.9 %). Fairchild and Mackinnon (2009) noted that interaction effect, though small, was significant and depict moderation. Therefore, the moderating effect of customer communication which improves the model's goodness of fit is statistically evident. The hypothesised contingency model thus explains 83.7 % of the variance in customer satisfaction among mobile phone firms in Kenya. The low shrinkage between the R^2 and adjusted R^2 in each model depict that the both models are valid and stable for the prediction of the dependent variable, customer satisfaction, at 77.8 % and 83.7 % variance respectively. Therefore, the presumed moderator (customer communication) does actually moderate the effect of the predictor (service quality) on the outcome variable (customer satisfaction) among mobile phone firms in Kenya as was shown by the significant interaction. Furthermore, the results imply that service quality does not operate independently as a determinant of customer satisfaction but rather its predictive power can be enhanced by customer communication. The greater the effort by firms to put in place customer communication mechanisms, the greater the intensity of influence of service quality on customer satisfaction levels.

4. Discussion of Results

This result suggests that aligning service quality with customer communication will lead to higher satisfaction levels for customers. The notion that customer communication may play a moderating role is derived from Mohr's and Nevin's (1990) theoretical model which suggests that communication, among other things, serves to moderate the effects of circumstance and conditions in the service exchange process. Therefore, among other contextual variables, a proper alignment between customer communication and service quality can be used to better address the customer satisfaction level. This was further supported by Walfriedet al., (2000) who postulated that the ability of a customer to communicate freely and easily with the service firm will enhance the quality/satisfaction relationship. Overall, the study findings find general support that high level of customer satisfaction and subsequently higher long-term profitability can be achieved by aligning or focusing firm's communication activities and strategies with service quality practices (Oliver, 1980; Zeithaml et al., 1990; Gantasala and Padmakumar, 2013; Mohr and Nevin, 1990). Moreover, the resulting clarity facilitates better customer satisfaction by setting service quality performance standards, goals, criteria and actions (Oliver, 1980). Zeithamlet al.(1990) concluded that communication will play a critical role in the service delivery process by eliminating ignorance regarding customers' expectation by service firms.

Empirical studies on the role of communication as a moderator in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction are indeed limited. For instance, contrary to the findings of the present study, Walfriedet al.(2000)

found that moderating role of customer communication in quality/satisfaction relationship was implausible. In addition, Walfriedet *al.*(2000) differed from the current study in that, whereas the former conducted a study in banking services regarded as a high contact services, the latter was conducted study in mobile phone sector regarded as low contact services. Other studies such as Juaidet *al.* (2012) only tested for direct effect of communication on customer satisfaction. Similarly, Rezaie and Forghani (2011) tested direct effect of communication on customer satisfaction but differed with Juaidet *al.* (2012) in the direction of effects. Whereas the later found that communication has exerted negative insignificant direct effect on customer satisfaction, the former found that communication plays a vital role in explaining variation in customer satisfaction. However, Juaidet *al.*, (2012) differed from the finding of the present study that tested and established customer communication as a moderator in quality-satisfaction relationship.

Furthermore, these studies as reviewed were conducted in the context of developed countries hence missing the analysis of Kenya's mobile phone context. Therefore, despite customer communication being seen as a theoretically sound moderator, there was no known attempt to empirically establish the moderating role of customer communication on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in a low contact services like telecommunication services. As such, the status and likely effect of customer communication on quality-satisfaction relationship in Kenya's mobile phone sector is not known. It is for this reason that the present study provided an insight into this elusive explanation by hypothesizing and confirming moderation effect of customer communication ($\Delta R^2=0.059$; $p=0.000$) in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings of the present study on the moderating role of customer communication underscore the notion that a match between a company's communication strategy and overall service quality strategy is critical in order to satisfy customers. Through a moderator investigation, the study has made immense contribution to the body of new knowledge by isolating and studying customer communication as a more refined construct that facilitates avoidance of ignorance by customers regarding the perceived level of service quality.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the foregoing results, the paper concludes that customer communication strategies as was practiced by mobile phone firms in Kenya improves the satisfaction levels through its interactive effect. Further, this conclusion is important as it provides an explanation to the hitherto low predictive power of service quality in the quality-satisfaction model. When applied in a low contact services as in the case of mobile phone services, customer communication can moderate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

In line with this conclusion, the following recommendations can be drawn:

- First, mobile phone firms should consider integrating service marketing communications to achieve common purpose of enhancing customer satisfaction.
- Secondly, these firms should institute customer expectation management programme through all forms of communication.
- Thirdly, they should emphasize on interactive marketing in their communication plan. People in research, design, sales, and production must work as a team to foresee problems of production and use that might be encountered with the product or service.
- Further, recommendations are that service managers should increase internal communication and track service performance on satisfaction through customer feedback systems that will allow customers communicate directly with their service providers.

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