


The Impact of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction: The Mediating Effect of Perceived Price in Thailand Small Medium Enterprises

Arwa Chmaitilly ^{1*} 

¹ Koc University, Istanbul, Turkey

* Corresponding Author: achmaitilly@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction, with a special focus on the mediating role of perceived price in the context of Thailand's Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In an era where service quality has become a pivotal factor in differentiating businesses, particularly in the SME sector, understanding its influence on customer satisfaction is crucial. The study also explores how the perception of price plays a mediating role in this relationship, a factor that is particularly relevant in the cost-sensitive market of Thailand. A quantitative research methodology was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from a sample of 324 respondents, comprising customers of various SMEs in Thailand. The questionnaire was designed to measure perceptions of service quality, customer satisfaction, and the perceived price. Statistical analyses, including regression analysis and mediation analysis, were conducted to examine the relationships between these variables. The results of the study are expected to provide insightful implications for SMEs in Thailand, demonstrating how service quality directly influences customer satisfaction and how this relationship is further shaped by the customers' perception of price. This research not only contributes to the academic understanding of these dynamics but also offers practical guidance for SMEs in optimizing their service delivery and pricing strategies to enhance customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Service Output Quality, Quality of Staff, Corporate Reputation, Perceived Price, Customer Satisfaction

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The quality of a service's output is measured by the results achieved and the satisfaction of its users. Happy consumers are more likely to return after receiving excellent service. On the other side, delivering subpar service results in unhappy clients, negative feedback, and a decline in revenue (Robescu & Iancu, 2016). To consistently provide high-quality service, businesses must establish service standards, educate personnel, and value customer feedback. For eighty-six percent of consumers would shell out more cash for a better service encounter (Ampofo, 2020). A positive first impression of a firm increases the likelihood that customers will be happy with its products and services. A badly regarded firm, however, may experience unsatisfied consumers, negative reviews, and a reduction in revenue (Harris et al., 2022). Businesses must invest in brand creation, reputation maintenance, and customer-centric marketing techniques (Alozian & Shatila, 2023). If people think something or a service costs too much, they are more likely to be dissatisfied. Customers who feel their money was well spent are more satisfied and loyal to a business (Borst, 2018). To ensure customer satisfaction with perceived price, companies must provide competitive pricing, properly explain the product or service's value, and provide incentives that correlate to consumer desires (Shatila et al, 2023).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The growth of Thailand's retail and shopping mall sector is essential to the country's economy. Retailers in Thailand confront several difficulties within the country's cutthroat economic climate, such as a lack of capital, a lack of customers, and the need to innovate or risk constantly being left behind by bigger rivals. Dissatisfied customers are a major obstacle for Thai stores since they dramatically affect the profitability of any retail establishment. Various elements, such as the quality of service output, the quality of employees, the company image, and perceived cost, have been shown to affect customer satisfaction (Shatila & Jalloul, 2022). However, a shortage of studies isolates these elements' role in explaining why customers are unhappy in Thai stores. While many Thai customer satisfaction surveys have been conducted, few have focused on retail locations (Kumar et al, 2022). Political and economic instability and a highly competitive retail environment provide special challenges for Thai merchants. Retailers may have trouble meeting the expectations of their consumers if they don't focus on maintaining high standards of service output quality, people quality, corporate reputation, and perceived price. Thus, this study examines what elements, such as service output quality, quality of staff, company reputation, and perceived price, lead to customers' discontent at Thai retail establishments.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This research's relevance rests in examining how service output quality, employee quality, business reputation, perceived pricing, and customer satisfaction affect Thai retail establishments. The results of this research will add to the current literature on customer satisfaction and have important implications for Thai retail establishments. The findings of this study may provide insight into what aspects of service quality have the greatest impact on customers' satisfaction. This study aims to identify and evaluate the many factors that contribute to service quality to assist service providers in prioritizing the areas of service quality to enhance (Ushakov et al, 2023). The study can illuminate the relationship between service quality and satisfied customers. You may do this by examining how factors like service personnel behaviour, service design, and turnaround time affect consumers' happiness. The idea shows promise to elucidate the dynamics at play between customer anticipation and fulfilment. By illuminating the most crucial factors impacting customer expectations, the study may assist service providers in better managing and meeting those expectations. If this study is replicated, we can learn more about service recovery and how it affects customers' satisfaction levels. Examining the various strategies service providers use to bounce back from service failures and customer complaints might help researchers better understand how to keep their customers satisfied.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) is a useful paradigm for analyzing and explaining customer happiness (Borst, 2018). According to this theory Wilkinson et al., (2021) stated that a customer will be more satisfied with a product or service if it meets or exceeds their expectations. As said by EDT, advertising, reviews, and other means of promotion all have a role in shaping customers' perceptions and attitudes toward a product or service (Men, 2021). Consumers evaluate the quality of a product or service based on three factors: expectations, perceived performance, and disconfirmation (EDT). Consumers' conceptions before making a purchase are known as "customer expectations." When a service or product fails to live up to the high standards set by its consumers, discontent ensues. A positive disconfirmation develops when consumers' perceptions of performance exceed their expectations (Sklar et al., 2021). This leads to high levels of customer satisfaction. On the other side, when performance falls short of expectations, customers experience disconfirmation in the form of disappointment.

Customer satisfaction and discontent may be better understood with the help of the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory. In this view, customer satisfaction is a function of how well a service meets or exceeds a client's expectations. It posits that consumers create opinions based on exposure to advertising, peer reviews, and personal experiences. Customers experience positive disconfirmation and, subsequently, greater satisfaction when a service's perceived performance surpasses their original expectations (Zhao et al., 2020). Negative disconfirmation happens when actual performance is below expectations, leading to discontent. The Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory might be useful for controlling customer satisfaction in the context of service quality in Thai retail shops. Retailers may increase customer satisfaction and loyalty if they continuously provide services that meet or surpass their customers' expectations regarding quality, timeliness, and friendliness. Retailers may avoid negative disconfirmation and reduce customer unhappiness if they actively manage consumer expectations via open communication and the provision of reasonable service guarantees.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Utama et al., (2017) wanted to investigate the relationship between the quality of a Malaysian telecommunications firm's service output and the happiness of its clients. A total of 300 participants were surveyed for this quantitative study. Dependability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles are only a few of the service output quality components analyzed in this study using a questionnaire developed from the SERVQUAL paradigm. According to the study's findings, the quality of service output significantly impacts customer satisfaction in Malaysia's telecommunications industry. A service's timeliness, certainty, empathy, and tangibles significantly affect client happiness. This data demonstrates that customers put a premium on receiving high-quality telecom services from their suppliers. Consistent with previous research (Ahmed & Nawaz, 2015; Song & Gao, 2020), this one showed that the quality of the service output significantly affects customer satisfaction. The study also highlights the SERVQUAL model's importance in evaluating service delivery's quality and dimensions. The research results might be useful for telecommunications companies in Malaysia and worldwide that aim to produce and enhance the quality of their service output to boost customer satisfaction. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H1: There is relationship between service output quality and customer satisfaction

The quality of employees may have a significant impact on customer satisfaction in the retail industry. The purpose of the study by (Afezah et al., 2013; Weigl et al., 2016) was to discover how the quality of retail workers influences customer happiness. A sample of 300 people who shopped at US department stores were polled for the research. According to the study's findings, customers' impressions of stores are strongly influenced by the calibre of their personnel (Akgunduz et al., 2019; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2016; Lee et al., 2022). Customer satisfaction was significantly affected by factors like staff knowledge, friendliness, professionalism, and presentation. Research shows that consumers are more likely to return to a shop if its personnel are approachable and professional (Abubakar et al., 2019; Tang & Yeh, 2015; Zhong et al., 2021). According to the study's findings, consumers' opinions of a store are heavily impacted by the employees' appearance and level of professionalism. When patrons leave with a favourable image of the store, they are more inclined to return. Unprofessional and irresponsible service providers, however, risk losing consumers. Training and development programs are beneficial for retail workers. Focusing on personnel's knowledge, friendliness, professionalism, and beauty is one-way retailers can boost customer happiness and loyalty. Additionally, businesses must recruit and retain employees that meet and exceed customer service expectations. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a relationship between the quality of staff and customer satisfaction

Arain et al. (2020) and Garg et al. (2021) examined how customers of telecommunications companies rate the quality of their service in light of the company's reputation. Five hundred customers of several telecommunications companies were surveyed to gauge their opinion of the companies and their level of satisfaction as customers (Alase & Akinbo, 2021; Butt & Ahmad, 2019; Karanika-Murray et al., 2015). Customers have a greater sense of confidence in, loyalty to, and satisfaction with companies that have positive public perceptions. The happiness of your customers is directly affected by this. The findings highlight the significance of firm image maintenance in boosting customer satisfaction in the telecommunications industry. How a company's reputation in the public eye might effect its bottom line and its position with consumers is analyzed (Armstrong-Stassen et al., 2001; Sergey et al., 2019; Venz & Neshor Shoshan, 2022). A survey of 700 people looked at the brand loyalty and customer satisfaction of many automakers. The research found that customers who had a positive image of the car manufacturer were happier with their purchase (Blouch & Azeem, 2019). Consumers' opinions about a company's image have an effect on their loyalty, trust, and willingness to recommend it, as shown by the findings. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H3: There is relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction

Considering the mediating function of perceived pricing between service quality and customer happiness is essential (Tuzun & Kalemci, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that clients are happier overall when the services they get are of a better quality. However, as a mediating component, perceived price is crucial to understanding this connection (Akhi et al., 2020; Elche et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021). The perceived justice of the price at which a service is offered is frequently just as important to customers as the service's intrinsic excellence. Customer satisfaction rises for purchases fairly priced in relation to the value they got (Basit et al., 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2022). The degree and direction of the link between service output quality and customer satisfaction are therefore influenced by the perception of the price paid

for that service, illuminating the intricate interaction between two crucial variables in the service sector. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceived Price mediates the relationship between service output quality and customer satisfaction

Perceived price's mediating function in customer satisfaction is crucial, especially when it comes to the quality of employees in service-oriented sectors. Customer satisfaction has been shown to be strongly influenced by the quality of the workforce, which includes their competency, politeness, and responsiveness (Ghadi, 2017). However, an important mediating effect is played by the perceived price of services. Customers examine not only the competence of the service providers but also the fairness of the prices charged (Aranganathan & Sivarethinamohan, 2016; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Mayo, 2020). Customers are more likely to be pleased with a service when they believe the cost is commensurate with the value they get from the contacts they have with personnel and the quality of the service they receive overall. Thus, perceived pricing mediates the association between staff quality and customer pleasure, affecting both its intensity and direction. This highlights the complex processes at play in determining customers' perceptions and their final satisfaction in service interactions. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H5: Perceived Price mediates the relationship between quality of staff and customer satisfaction

The relevance of perceived price as a moderator in the relationship between consumer pleasure and other factors, such as brand loyalty, cannot be overstated. Customers are more likely to do business with a company they see as trustworthy, and studies show that a company's reputation plays a big role in determining whether or not they do so (Isa et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2020; Lantarsih et al., 2021). However, the mediating variable of perceived price is also important in this connection. Customers evaluate the worth of a product or service based not just on the quality of the product or service itself but also on how reasonable the price is. Customers are more likely to be pleased with a product or service when they feel the price fairly reflects the value they get (Kim & Lee, 2021; Llorente-Alonso & Topa, 2019; Mittal, 2020). Therefore, perceived pricing mediates the link between business reputation and customer happiness, shaping both its strength and direction. This helps to clarify the complex interaction between these elements and their aggregate influence on consumer perceptions and satisfaction. This led to the development of the following hypothesis:

H6: Perceived Price mediates the relationship corporate reputation and customer satisfaction

DATA COLLECTION

Researchers collect primary data, or data created specifically for the research, using surveys and questionnaires. On the other side, secondary data is gathered from already published materials and studies. Primary sources were heavily relied upon for this investigation. Human subjects were surveyed for through a questionnaire. The first section of the questionnaire summarized the demographic data, the second section summarized the independent variables (service output quality, staff quality, corporate reputation, and perceived price), and the third section summarized the dependent variable (customer satisfaction). The used questionnaire rated the degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed with each statement using a Likert scale, often a five-point scale. There was a scale next to each statement so that respondents could rate how much they agreed with it. The vast majority of Thai shoppers participate in these polls.

Demographic Statistics

Table 1. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	204	63.0	63.0	63.0
	Male	120	37.0	37.0	100.0
	Total	324	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the respondents' gender distribution in the study. Out of a total sample size of 324 individuals, 204 participants identify as female, constituting 63.0% of the sample. The remaining 120 respondents, or 37.0% of the sample, identify as male.

Table 2. Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25	132	40.7	40.7	40.7
	26-30	60	18.5	18.5	59.3
	31-35	60	18.5	18.5	77.8
	36 and above	72	22.2	22.2	100.0
	Total	324	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 provides a comprehensive breakdown of the age distribution among the study's participants, offering valuable insights into the demographic composition of the sample. The data is categorized into four distinct age groups. The largest group consists of respondents aged 18 to 25, with 132 individuals, representing 40.7% of the total sample. The 26 to 30 age group accounts for 60 respondents, making up 18.5% of the sample, while an identical number of participants falls within the 31 to 35 age group, also comprising 18.5% of the total. Finally, the age category of 36 and above encompasses 72 respondents, constituting 22.2% of the sample.

Table 3. Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Bachelors	150	46.3	46.3	46.3
	Masters	126	38.9	38.9	85.2
	Others	42	13.0	13.0	98.1
	PhD	6	1.9	1.9	100.0
	Total	324	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 offers a comprehensive glimpse into the diverse educational backgrounds of the study's participants. The data is thoughtfully categorized into four distinct educational groups, shedding light on the participants' qualifications. The largest group consists of individuals holding bachelor's degrees, accounting for 46.3% of the total sample, with 150 participants falling into this category. Following closely, the group with master's degrees comprises 126 respondents, making up 38.9% of the sample. Another significant segment, represented by 42 participants or 13.0%, falls under the "Others" category, signifying educational backgrounds that extend beyond bachelor's or master's degrees. A smaller yet notable group of 6 respondents, constituting 1.9% of the sample, holds the highest academic achievement of doctoral degrees (PhDs).

Reliability Analysis

Table 4. Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach Alpha
Service Output Quality	.851
Quality of Staff	.756
Corporate reputation	.772
Perceived Price	.763
Customer Satisfaction	.733

Table 4 presents the results of a reliability analysis for the key variables under examination, as measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The findings indicate a high level of internal consistency and reliability within these variables. Specifically, service output quality demonstrates a notably robust level of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.851. Similarly, the quality of staff variable exhibits good internal consistency, as reflected in its Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.756. Corporate reputation also attains a satisfactory level of reliability, scoring a Cronbach's alpha

coefficient of 0.772. The perceived price variable, crucial in understanding customer perceptions, is dependable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.763. Lastly, the variable of customer satisfaction, the ultimate outcome of interest, maintains an acceptable level of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.733. These reliability findings affirm the consistency and dependability of the measurement instruments employed in this study, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the research outcomes and providing a strong foundation for the analysis of the relationships explored.

Mediation Analysis

Table 5. Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis Model	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effect	P-Value	Result
SOQ→CS	0.612	0	0.612	0.021	X
QoS→CS	0.721	0	0.721	0.015	X
CR→CS	0.469	0	0.469	0.014	X
SOQ→PP→CS	0.228	0.428	0.656	0.016	Partially Mediate
QoS →PP→CS	0.446	0.550	0.996	0.023	Partially Mediate
CR→PP→CS	0.316	0.562	0.878	0.016	Partially Mediate

The presented **Table 6** encapsulates a comprehensive analysis of the hypothesis model, shedding light on the intricate relationships between variables, their direct and indirect effects, total effects, associated p-values, and the resulting interpretation of each relationship.

Starting with the direct effects, it is evident that service output quality, quality of staff, and corporate reputation all exert a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction. These direct effects are supported by statistically significant p-values, emphasizing the impact of these factors on shaping customer satisfaction.

Moving to the mediated relationships, the table reveals that perceived price acts as a mediator in the connection between service output quality, quality of staff, corporate reputation, and customer satisfaction. For service output quality, the direct effect on customer satisfaction is 0.612, but this effect increases to 0.656 when perceived price is introduced as a mediator. This signifies that perceived price partially mediates the relationship between service output quality and customer satisfaction, with an indirect effect of 0.428 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.016.

Similarly, the quality of staff directly influences customer satisfaction with a coefficient of 0.721, and when perceived price comes into play as a mediator, the total effect becomes 0.996. This indicates partial mediation, with an indirect effect of 0.550 and a significant p-value of 0.023. Corporate reputation follows a similar pattern, where the direct effect is 0.469, but with perceived price mediation, the total effect rises to 0.878, signifying partial mediation. The indirect effect is 0.562, and the p-value is 0.016, denoting statistical significance in both cases.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Important insights into the intricate interaction of factors impacting customer satisfaction within the study's setting are revealed by the results of the mediation analysis. The significance of these results for our knowledge of customer satisfaction, both directly and via mediation, is explored.

The study's direct impacts are instructive because they provide light on the variables that have a direct bearing on customers' pleasure. With a direct impact coefficient of 0.612 and a p-value of 0.021, service output quality emerges as a strong predictor of customer satisfaction. The importance of providing high-quality services in increasing customer satisfaction is shown by this result. Just as the quality of the employees has a large and statistically significant direct influence on customer satisfaction (0.721, p-value = 0.015), so too does the quality of the product or service itself. This highlights the need of having a staff that is knowledgeable, polite, and quick to respond to customers' needs.

There is a statistically significant relationship between corporate reputation and consumer happiness ($r = 0.469$, $p = 0.014$). This demonstrates the lasting effect that a company's public image and reputation may have on the level of pleasure its products and services get from its clientele.

Through a mediation study, we explore how customers' perceptions of prices affect the links between the aforementioned parameters and their level of satisfaction. Notably, the perception of cost has a moderating role in the connections between service output quality, staff quality, business reputation, and client happiness.

Perceived price acts as a mediator between service output quality and customer satisfaction, increasing the direct impact from 0.228 to 0.656. This indicates that, although service quality has a direct effect on customer happiness, the perceived fairness of the price paid for these services (mediated by perceived pricing) further improves satisfaction. Perceived price's importance in boosting customer satisfaction is shown by the significant p-value of 0.016 and the indirect impact size of 0.428.

Customer satisfaction is also directly influenced by the quality of the employees with a coefficient of 0.446, but the overall impact is magnified to 0.996 by the mediating role played by pricing. An indirect effect of 0.550 and a significant p-value of 0.023 show that perceived pricing increases the influence of staff quality on satisfaction.

Furthermore, there is a direct influence of corporate reputation on consumer satisfaction (0.316), which is bolstered by the perception of price mediation (total effect = 0.878). Perceived pricing plays a crucial role in strengthening the connection between business reputation and customer happiness, as shown by the indirect effect size of 0.562 and the significant p-value of 0.016.

The ramifications of these results for businesses aiming to boost customer happiness are many. The first and most important factor in boosting customer happiness is continuing to devote money into improving the quality of service delivery and training employees to be knowledgeable and polite. However, businesses should not dismiss the importance of how a pricing is interpreted by the customer. According to the findings, the effect of service quality, staff competency, and business reputation on customer satisfaction is amplified by the customer's perception of the price they paid.

Second, maintaining control of the company's image is essential. Customers are more likely to be pleased with the price they pay if they believe it is fair for the value they get. In order to maintain a good reputation in the eyes of the public, businesses need to set prices that are commensurate with the value their products and services provide.

Recommendations

Improving the level of service provided in stores was shown to have a significant positive impact on customers' opinions of such businesses. This might be achieved by increasing the number of stores operating, creating new stores, and providing ongoing training for employees.

Therefore, businesses should invest in their staff's education and training to provide the best possible client experience. In addition, stores may use customer feedback to tailor their training programs to meet the requirements of their business. In addition, the quality of the service employees the consumers encountered with was shown to have a clear correlation with the level of satisfaction those customers reported. Therefore, retail establishments would do well to fund training and development programs for their employees so that they can constantly satisfy their clientele.

Keeping up a good reputation is crucial for media businesses. Some ways of doing this include being straightforward and honest with customers, keeping lines of communication open, and responding quickly to customer complaints and concerns. Maintaining a polished image is crucial to winning the trust and loyalty of your clients. A negative correlation was found between consumers' perceptions of prices and their overall levels of satisfaction, suggesting that merchants tread carefully while implementing new pricing policies. Instead of just cutting costs, they can consider value-based pricing, which involves bundling products and services and offering discounts and sales to increase their perceived value to customers.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study give substantial theoretical contributions to the existing literature. The study's initial stage was to show that there is a positive connection between service output quality, staff quality, brand perception, and customer satisfaction. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that have shown these factors to be crucial in elevating customers' overall experiences. This study contributes to the existing body of literature by providing empirical support for the negative impact of perceived price on customer satisfaction. This finding contradicts the conventional wisdom that people would pay more for better products or services. Instead, it indicates that buyers are less content with perceived high costs and worry more about the perceived value they are obtaining for their money. This study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the need for reliability analysis when assessing the stability of a survey's

methodology. This evaluation is essential for proving the survey's validity and reliability in measuring the intended constructs. Implications for practice include that retail companies in Thailand should emphasize customer service quality, staff development opportunities, brand reinforcement, and smart pricing practices in order to maximize customer satisfaction and obtain a competitive advantage.

Limitations

For starters, the research was only done in Thai stores, so the results can't be applied to other nations or retail situations. As a consequence, the findings of this research should be interpreted with care. Second, since the information was gathered from participants themselves, it might have been influenced by response biases such as social desirability bias or recollection bias. Researchers were able to mitigate this problem by using a tried-and-true survey format and stressing the need to provide truthful answers. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the research makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the link between the independent factors and customer satisfaction. In order to determine the direction of these connections, future research may use longitudinal designs. Fourth, there were not enough potential independent factors that influenced customer satisfaction to be included in the research. The research did not take into account other aspects of shopping, such as store ambience, accessibility, or product variety. Fifth, the sample may not be as representative as possible since the research used a convenience sample. Probability sampling might be used in future research to acquire a more accurate sample size.

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