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Measuring Perceived Service Quality: Rural vis-a-vis Urban Bank Customers

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to comparatively (rural vis-a-vis urban customers) analyze the factors influencing customer perception of service quality in banks. Customer perception of service quality is measured on thirty two variables and Factor Analysis has been used for variable reduction. After factor extraction, hypothesis is contrasted through Stepwise Discriminant Analysis. The research reveals that 'Employees' Assistance' is the most important service quality factor. 'Customer Convenience' and 'Employees' Assistance' have been found to be the most significant discriminating factors (underlying the satisfaction level) between rural and urban customers. Banks should conduct training programmes and personality development programmes to increase employees' efficiency and to improve their behavior/skills respectively. To achieve excellence in service delivery, public sector banks should improve their service quality by making investment, particularly in technology and product innovation. Banks are also suggested to form a 'Customer Service Cell' or 'May I Help You' counter to cater to the needs of large urban customer base.

Introduction

In today's world of liberalization and deregulation, banks are continuously forced to find out new ways to take an advantage over their competitors to reach out to new customers and retain them through innovative and sophisticated products and services. The banks have started introducing innovative and electronic services such as ATMs, Internet Banking, Tele Banking, etc. selectively in metros, then extended to cities, towns and finally to the villages.

The increasingly competitive world of retail banking necessitates the banking organizations to establish their presence that sets them apart from the crowd. Customer service, convenience, broad product lines and low cost have all been used to segment the banking industry. To survive in the competitive market, customer service has become increasingly important for the banks in India. This strategy has been primarily important for those banks that are unable to compete with the larger players in other key areas such as technology, infrastructure, modern equipment, etc. The process of obtaining new customers is costly as well as time consuming as compared to retaining the existing ones. Therefore, every bank has

been focusing on to invest a great deal of time and energy in improving customer service practices. Improved customer service will help to create relationships with customers that are strong enough to prevent them from leaving for potentially more attractive opportunities elsewhere and ultimately, it has a significant impact on the long-term profitability of the bank (Arora, 2005). To make the customers satisfied first and then to retain them in the long run, the banks need to conduct customer surveys at regular intervals to identify the factors influencing customer perception of the bank and quality of banking services and afterwards to find out the necessary actions that can be taken to make their perception more positive.

Review of Literature

Various studies have been conducted across different countries to measure service quality and its relationship with customer satisfaction in banks. Zhou (2004), Singh and Saklani (2004), Lopez et al. (2007) and Sharma et al. (2008) examined the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction and found that service quality was the key determinant of customer satisfaction and reliability was the most important dimension of service quality. Yavas et al. (2004) observed that service quality was the root cause of satisfaction and it was positively associated with commitment, word-of-mouth and complaint and switching behavior of customers. Sureshchandar et al. (2002) evaluated the service quality and investigated its relationship with customer satisfaction in 43 banks in India and observed that service quality and customer satisfaction were found as two independent constructs but closely related. Schneider et al. (1980); Maddern et al. (2007) and Blanchard and Galloway (1994) analyzed customers' as well as employees' perception of services in banks and found that role of customer contact employees significantly influenced customers' perception of service in banks.

Various researchers attempted to identify and analyse the determinants of customer satisfaction (Levesque and McDougall, 1996; Johnson, 1997; Jamal and Naser, 2002; Maddern et al, 2007; etc) and exposed that both core and relational performances were found as important drivers of customer satisfaction. Johnson (1997) observed that commitment, attentiveness, friendliness, care and courtesy delighted the customers and also proved that responsiveness was the most important and tangibles was the most unimportant factor influencing customer satisfaction. The studies were also conducted to compare the expectation and perception of service quality among different groups of customers (Kangis and Vouklatos, 1997 and Arasli et al., 2005). Kangis and Vouklatos (1997) discovered that customers of private sector banks had lower level of difference between perception and expectation of service quality than the customers of public sector banks. Convenient location, opening hours, friendliness and courtesy of employees were not considered as important factors by the customers of both sector banks as per the study.

Various studies have been conducted to analyse customer satisfaction in public sector banks in India (Bhat, 2003; Debashish and Mishra, 2005; Purohit and Pathardikar, 2007; etc). Customers were dissatisfied with the physical facilities, out dated equipment, banking operations and bank staff and satisfied with safe transacting with the bank (Bhat, 2003). Debashish and Mishra (2005) observed that customer satisfaction was strongly influenced by computerization in banks, accuracy in transactions, attitude of staff and availability of staff at respective bank counter. Purohit and Pathardikar (2007) exposed in their study that almost, all the respondents were satisfied with the services provided by their banks.

Bhat and Gani (2003) and Arora (2005) compared the customer satisfaction in public, private and foreign banks in India and found that customers of public sector banks were least satisfied with the services provided. Some researchers (Joshia and Koshi, 2005; Jain and Jain, 2006; Dash et al., 2007; Sharma et al., 2008 and Texak and Kaur, 2009) compared service quality and customer satisfaction in public and private banks. Public sector banks provided better services to customers than private sector banks and customers of public sector banks were found to be more satisfied with the traditional banking services (Texak and Kaur, 2009). Joshia and Koshi (2005) observed that new generation banks were performing better than old generation banks and they suggested that old generation banks need to improve their performance especially on assurance, tangibility and responsiveness. There was considerable gap between the expectation and perception regarding services like service delivery, query handling, mobile banking, net banking, phone banking and turnaround time (Jain and Jain, 2006). Dash et al. (2007) suggested that the bank management should give more emphasis on assurance, reliability and responsiveness to meet the customers' expectations and indirectly to improve customer loyalty. Sharma et al. (2008) enlightened in their study that there was more significant difference in the quality of services being provided by the selected public and private sector banks and it was also found that banks located in small cities and towns were legging behind their counterparts in big and metropolitan cities.

The review of the literature suggests that customer satisfaction is of utmost importance for the survival and growth of financial institutions. The growth of these nstitutions depends upon their ability to create or attract new customers and retention of satisfied customers leads to their survival in the long run. "Banks with high brand image scores typically engage in practices that focus on strong communication with customers, such as welcoming them to the branch office or following up on problems. By focusing on aspects most critical to the banking experience, banks can win the favor of their customers, which can lead to considerable financial rewards" (Beird, 2009).[1] As urban markets have adequately penetrated the competition, to sustain and grow the market share, banks are now looking for the new markets which are still unattended. Therefore, they are extending their branches to rural areas which are on the priority of government's development plan. oreover, rising income, awareness and aspirations of the rural population have attracted the attention of the financial institutions. Hence, banks have started performing very rapidly to establish their presence in these areas and are customizing financial products for the masses so as to capture growth opportunities. Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to analyze the factors influencing service quality and compare the level of satisfaction of rural and urban bank customers in Ludhiana district of Punjab. The present study has been lanned with the following research objectives:

1) To identify the factors influencing customer perception of service quality in banks;
2) To compare and contrast the satisfaction level of rural and urban customers and
3) To offer strategic implications to bankers to improve customer service.

Methodology

Sample Design: The study has been carried out in Ludhiana district of Punjab and a sample of 170 (85 rural and 85 urban) customers of five banks namely Punjab National Bank, State Bank of India, Punjab & Sind Bank, Oriental Bank of Commerce and State Bank of Patiala has been

selected for the study. The sampled banks are holding first five positions on the basis of maximum number of bank branches located in the rural areas of Punjab (State Level Bankers' Committee, September, 2007). Only public sector banks have been taken because the branches of private sector and foreign banks are rarely found in rural areas of Punjab. To collect responses from the customers, the researchers personally visited the bank branches. As the arrival pattern of the customers to the bank branch is expected to be random, the sampling technique used in the study can be referred to as random-cum-convenience sampling.

Table 1: Bank & Location wise Distribution of Respondents

Bank Name	Location Background		Total
	Rural	Urban	
PNB	23	24	47
SBI	17	16	33
PSB	14	13	27
OBC	18	16	34
SBP	13	16	29
Total	**85**	**85**	**170**

Data Collection Instrument: To collect primary data, the questionnaire was designed, pre-tested and modified as per the requirements of pilot survey. The respondents were given thirty two service quality variables (adapted and modified from Parasuraman et al., 1985, Galloway and Blanchard, 1996, Joseph *et al*, 1999, Lasser *et al*, 2000, Jamal and Nasser, 2003) to measure customer satisfaction in banks on a five point Likert scale ranging from 5 (Highly Satisfied) to 1 (Highly Dissatisfied). Besides, the respondents were also asked regarding their demographic profiles.

Statistical Techniques used for Analysis: Percentages, Mean Scores and Factor Analysis have been used to analyse the data and Stepwise Discriminant Analysis has been used to test the following null hypothesis:

H_0: there is no significant difference between rural and urban bank customers on account of their satisfaction level with regard to service quality factors.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Factors influencing Customer Perception of Service Quality in Banks

To identify the factors influencing the customer perception of service quality in banks, factor analysis has been employed using PASW Statistics 18.0 (evaluation copy). The research instrument is tested for reliability using composite Cronbach's co-efficient alpha and its value is determined as 0.954. In order to provide a more parsimonious interpretation of the results, factor analysis is performed to reduce the number of variables. A *Principal Component Method* with *varimax rotation* of thirty two variables reveals six underlying factors with Eigen value greater than one. The data are also examined with the help of KMO measure of sampling adequacy as 0.927 and *Bartlett's Test of Sphericity* as 5040.255 (significant at 1%, $p<0.000$) and are found appropriate for factor analysis.

Table 2: Factor Loadings and Communalities

Key Dimensions and Items	Loadings	Communalities
F1 – Employees Assistance		
1. Satisfactory redressal of complaints by employees	0.912	0.917
2. Employees explain banking rules to customers	0.911	0.920
3. Courteous and helpful behaviour of bank staff	0.909	0.908
4. Employees' interest to solve customers' problems	0.906	0.924
5. Employees understand the needs of customers	0.898	0.918
6. Employees give individual attention to customers	0.898	0.904
7. Employees behaviour instils confidence in customers	0.897	0.892
(Eigenvalue = 7.448; Variance = 23.274%; Mean score = 2.65)		
F2 – Service Time		
1. Waiting time in queues	0.878	0.912
2. Quick response to customers' queries	0.870	0.889
3. Dependable services from employees in time	0.866	0.883
4. Time taken for updating pass book	0.857	0.861
5. Prompt service by employees	0.855	0.871
6. Speed of depositing money	0.518	0.628
7. Speed of withdrawals	0.487	0.584
(Eigenvalue = 5.40; Variance = 16.875%; Mean score = 3.25)		
F3 – Availability of Diversified Products & Services		
1. Availability of employees at respective counters	0.738	0.656
2. Wide range of products and services	0.681	0.616
3. Availability of ATMs at convenient places	0.599	0.427
4. Innovativeness in introducing new schemes	0.591	0.661
5. Interest on savings	0.582	0.531
6. Error free records and less mistakes	0.553	0.626
7. Visually appealing service materials such as pamphlets, statements, etc.	0.545	0.609
8. Knowledge of employees about products and services	0.543	0.587
(Eigenvalue = 4.096; Variance = 12.80%; Mean score = 3.33)		
F4 – Tangibles		
1. Well dressed employees	0.785	0.682
2. Proper sitting facilities for waiting inside the bank	0.722	0.766
3. Working hours of the bank	0.713	0.612
4. Computerisation and modern equipments (Eigenvalue = 2.77; Variance = 8.657%; Mean score = 3.72)	0.468	0.557
F5 – Facilities and Service Charges		
1. Parking facilities	0.723	0.689
2. Service charges	0.550	0.638
3. Time taken for opening account	0.459	0.513
(Eigenvalue = 1.741; Variance = 5.440%; Mean score = 3.28)		
F6 – Customer Convenience		
1. Convenient location	0.758	0.636
2. Availability of top officials in case of need	0.688	0.635
3. Time taken in issue of pass book and cheque book	0.476	0.656
(Eigenvalue = 1.653; Variance = 5.166%; Mean score = 3.98)		
Total Variance = 72.21% and KMO = 0.927		

Six factors have been identified by the factor analysis, together explaining 72.21% of variation in data, which influence the customer perception of service quality in banks. Following is the brief explanation of the factors derived:

F_1 - Employees' Assistance: This factor is the most important factor on which seven variables are loaded and it explains 23.274% of variance with the Eigen value of 7.448. It deals with the customer perception of bank employees, their behaviour, their efficiency, interest and skills in delivering services and solving customers' problems.

F_2 - Service Time: This is the second important factor which deals with the time taken by employees in delivering services and handling queries. It is having an Eigen value of 5.40 and explains 16.875% of variance.

F_3 - Availability of Diversified Products & Services: This factor is concerned with the availability of diversified and innovative products/services/schemes and skilled employees having complete knowledge of services to be delivered. The factor also covers other aspects like promotion, technology and return. Eight variables have grouped under this factor and it explains 12.80% of variance and has Eigen value of 4.096.

F_4 - Tangibles: Tangibles deal with the physical facilities provided by the bank such as well dressed employees, proper sitting facilities and computerisation and modern equipment. This factor explains 8.657% of variance and carries Eigen value of 2.77.

F_5 – Facilities and Service Charges: It is concerned with customer perception of parking facilities, service charges and time taken in opening account which explains 5.44% of variation in the data.

F_6 - Customer Convenience: Three variables have loaded on this factor i.e. convenient location, availability of top officials in the case of need and time taken in issue of passbook and cheque book and it explains 5.166% of the variance.

Satisfaction Level of Rural vis-a-vis Urban Bank Customers

Stepwise Discriminant Analysis has been carried out to identify the differences, if any, between rural and urban bank customers on account of their satisfaction level with regard to service quality factors and to identify the most significant discriminating factors (underlying the satisfaction level) between rural and urban bank customers'. Dependent variable in discriminant analysis is a grouping variable i.e. either rural or urban customer and independent variables are the factor scores of six factors extracted (refer Table 3). Homogeneity of variance is tested with *Box's M* statistic, which tests the null hypothesis that the group variance-covariance matrices are equal. The assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied as the Box's M is 3.948 with F= 1.299 (p= 0.273), which is not significant at 5% level of significance. Explanatory power of the function is calculated as *square of canonical correlation* value. With only one function, it provides an index of overall model fit which is interpreted as being the proportion of variance explained. Table 4 evidences a canonical correlation of 0.447 which suggests that the model explains 19.98% of the variance in the grouping variable, i.e. whether the respondent is a rural or urban customer. *Wilks' Lambda* indicates the significance of the discriminant function and our results indicate a highly significant discriminant function ($p < .000$).

Table 3: Overall Model Fit

Function	*Eigen value*	*Canonical Correlation*	*Wilks' Lambda*	*Sig.*
1	*0.249*	*0.447*	*0.801*	*.000*

Next step was to identify the significant discriminating factors (underlying the satisfaction level), results of which are given in Table 5. It reveals that two out of the six factors became a part of the discriminant model and *Wilks' Lambda* of the two factors is highly significant at 1% ($p < .000$). So, 'Customer Convenience' and 'Employees' Assistance' are the best discriminating factors between rural and urban customers.

Table 4: Factors Entered in Analysis

StepEntered	Wilks' Lambda Statistic	Exact F Statistic	Sig.
1 Customer Convenience (F6)	.841	31.704	.000
2 Employees' Assistance (F1)	.801	20.797	.000

Table 5 provides an index of the relative importance of each factor. The *structure matrix* reveals the sixth factor 'Customer Convenience' as the most discriminating factor followed by 'Employees' Assistance'.

Table 5: Relative Importance of Discriminating Factors

S.No.	Factors	Standardised Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients	Unstandardised Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients	Matrix e Matrix
1	Customer Convenience (F6)	0.915	0.994	0.870
2	Employees Assistance (F1)	-0.494	-0.503	-0.412
			.000	

The predictive accuracy of the discriminant function is called the *'Hit Ratio'* as shown in the Table 6. It depicts that rural customers are classified with better accuracy (71.8%) than urban customers (67.1%). The classification results reveal the correct classification of 69.4% of analysis sample and 68.2% of cross-validated sample.

Table 6: Classification Accuracy Results

Predicted Group Membership				
		Rural	Urban	Total
Original	Rural	61 (71.8%)	24 (28.2%)	85 (100%)
	Urban	28 (32.9%)	57 (67.1%)	85 (100%)
Cross-Validated	Rural	61 (71.8%)	24 (28.2%)	85 (100%)
	Urban	30 (35.3%)	55 (64.7%)	85 (100%)

Note: Analysis Sample (Hit Ratio= 69.4%); Cross-Validation Sample (Hit Ratio= 68.2%)

According to the correct classification percentages of the analysis, the success of the discriminant analysis is found satisfactory. The results of discriminant analysis reveal that only two factors (out of six extracted from factor analysis) i.e. 'Customer Convenience' and 'Employees Assistance' have been able to discriminate between the satisfaction level of rural bank customers and their urban counterparts. The next task is to check that on two discriminating factors, whose satisfaction level is higher i.e. rural customers or urban customers? To answer this question, the descriptive statistics of two discriminating service quality factors have been computed and the results are shown in the Table 8.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics of the Two Discriminating Services Quality Factors

S. No.	Service Quality Factors	Location Background	Mean
1	Customer Convenience	Rural	4.2
		Urban	3.77
2	Employees' Assistance	Rural	2.46
		Urban	2.85

The above table shows that higher level of satisfaction has been observed in case of rural bank customers as far as 'Customer Convenience' is concerned. While conducting the survey, the researchers observed that rural customers found the bank branch to be conveniently located to them, reason being lesser area covered by the village than that of a city. Moreover, lesser customer base results in small queues which in turn make the services as well as top officials readily available to the customers. As far as 'Employees' Assistance' is concerned, both the rural and urban customers are not found to be satisfied with the way they are dealt with by the bank employees. Above all, rural customers are found to be slightly more dissatisfied as confirmed from the mean scores (refer Table 7).

Implications of the study

1. Every interaction between bank employees and customer has a direct impact on the customer's opinion of the organization and its products and services. The employees' performance in relation to customer service activities can either create a sale for the bank or loss of a customer. In the present research work, 'Employees' Assistance' is found to be the most important service quality factor underlying customer satisfaction as well as the second significant discriminating factor. Moreover, the overall mean score as well as individual mean scores of both the groups have found to be lower than 3 (implying dissatisfaction). Therefore, it becomes indispensible for the banks to increase the efficiency and performance of customer contact employees by organizing training and development programmes for them. Banks should also conduct personality development programmes to improve their behavior and skills.

2. Mean scores of all the service quality factors (except 'Employees Assistance') have found to lie in between 3 and 4 (refer Table 3) indicating that customer perception of service quality factors is below the level of satisfaction. Therefore, public sector banks are suggested to make investment, particularly in technology and product innovation to achieve excellence in service delivery.

3. The satisfaction level of urban customers scores low on the most significant discriminating factor i.e. 'Customer Convenience'. Thus, banks are (a) suggested to form a 'Customer Service Cell' or 'May I Help You' counter as the top officials remain busy on account of work pressure due to larger customer base and (b) suggested to expand their network of branches in urban areas to make the branch location convenient to customers.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Research Future

The results reported here are subjected to certain limitations. (a) The study is confined to only one district of Punjab; (b) perception of only individual depositors has been studied; (c) as the study is based on primary survey, respondents might have deliberately given the responses and hence, subjectivity might be present in the responses and d) only public sector banks have been selected for the study as the branches of private sector and foreign banks are rarely found in rural areas. Hence, a more robust analysis is needed to reach a strong conclusion; a) similar research could be conducted by collecting data from other districts with larger sample size; b) studies can be conducted to compare the perception of banking services among rural, semi-urban and urban areas of Punjab; c) a full-fledged research work can be planned to study the perception of corporate customers towards banking services and d) studies can also be initiated on borrowers' perception of loan services.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is concluded there are six factors which influence customer perception of service quality in banks i.e. 'Employees' Assistance', 'Service Time', 'Availability of Diversified Products & Services', 'Tangibles', 'Facilities and Service Charges' and 'Customer Convenience'. Results of stepwise discriminant analysis reveal that satisfaction regarding service quality factors of the rural and urban bank customers is different with respect to 'Customer Convenience' and 'Employees Assistance'

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