

# ASSESSING THE GENDER INFLUENCE ON PERCEPTION OF SERVICE QUALITY: A STUDY OF SHOP-IN-SHOP IN INDIA

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**Abstract** *Indian Retail is a USD 320 billion dollar industry, which is growing at CAGR of 5%. Business Monitor International (BMI) forecasted that the total retail sales in India will grow to US\$ 785.12 billion by 2015 from US\$ 395.96 billion in 2011. The market is full of opportunities but only those retailers will survive which offers high quality of service. Research suggests that demographics do make an effect on some service quality dimensions. The present study analyses that whether gender make an impact on different service quality delivered by shop-in-shop.*

**Keywords** *Organised retail, Gender, Retail service quality*

## INTRODUCTION

Indian Retail is a USD 320 billion dollar industry, which is growing at CAGR of 5 per cent (Thathoo and Kacheria, 2005). That's why Indian retail is considered as one of the strongest pillars of Indian economy. Business Monitor International (BMI) forecasted that the total retail sales in India will grow to US\$ 785.12 billion by 2015 from US\$ 395.96 billion in 2011 ([www.ibef.org](http://www.ibef.org)).

BMI India Retail Report forecasted that total retail sales in India will reach to US\$798bn by 2014 from US\$427bn (in 2009). The credit for such a rapid growth goes to the western concept of patronising i.e. organised retail formats. The non-fragmented organised sector is expected to contribute 12.4 percent to the total retail sales in 2014 (valued US\$99.09bn) (<http://softnetweb.com/>) and 25 percent by the year ending 2018 (<http://info.shine.com>). Shopping malls – a format of organised retail is also expected to accelerate, with a Compounded Annual Growth Rate of more than 18.9 per cent from 2007 to 2015 (<http://humaapkeliye.ning.com>).

Domestic and global players are facing a tight game to capture this giant industry. For competitive edge, retail companies have two strategies: cost minimisation and product/service differentiation. Mostly retailers are focusing on the delivery of excellent service quality for differentiating their service offering. People with different demographics like gender, age, education etc. perceive the service offering

in a different way. Therefore, the present paper ponders upon the gender influence on service quality or retail outlets.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

### Service Quality

Service quality can be defined as the difference between customer expectations of service and perceptions of actual service delivery (Wisniewski, 2001). It is the extent to which the offered service matches customer expectations (Lewis and Booms, 1983). Service quality is the key to promote business interests and endows companies with social and commercial significance (Newman and Pyne, 1996). And failure in delivery of service quality can result in loss of business, bankruptcy (Gabbie and O'Neill, 1997) and even winding up of the company.

A number of the authors acknowledged that service quality is the road to customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1980; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Stahl and Bounds, 1991; Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996; Gabbie and O'Neill, 1997; Harvey, 1998; Curry and Sinclair, 2002). Apart from this, improved service quality increases company's profits, cuts costs, and encourages word-of-mouth recommendations to potential customers (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

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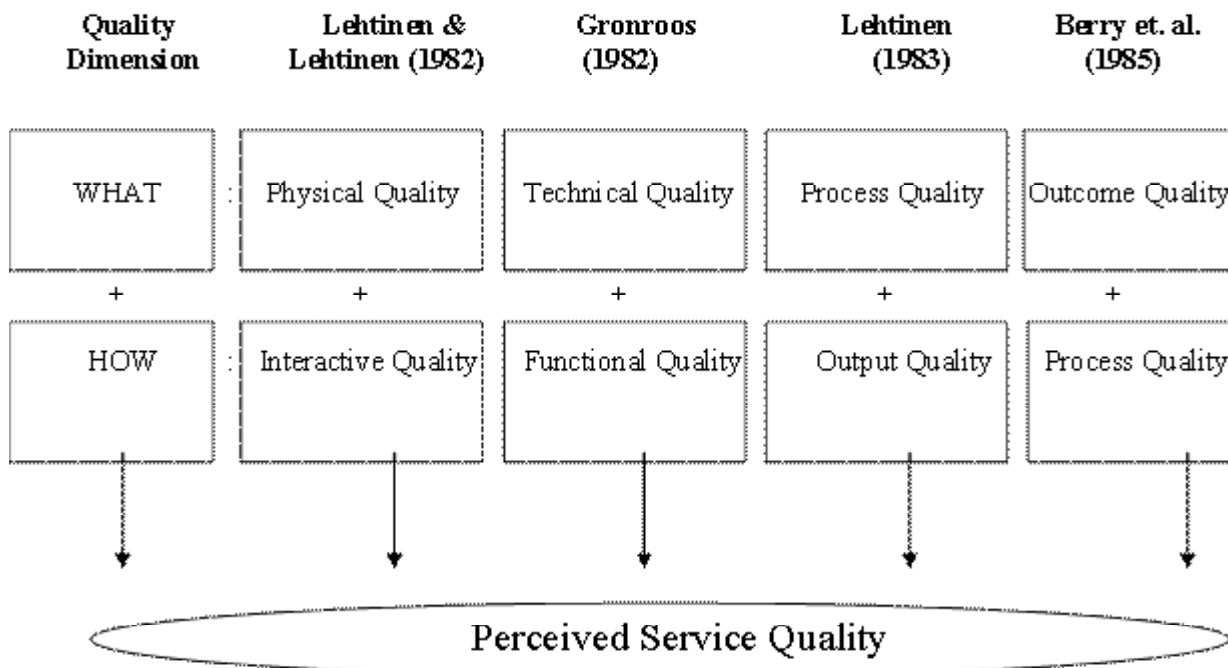
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Service quality has always remained a debatable issue regarding its definition and measurement, yet no consensus has been achieved (Gupta et al., 2005). SERVQUAL- a gap model is the prominent instrument to measure the service quality (Van der Wal et al., 2002; Wisniewski, 2001). SERVQUAL assumes that service quality is critically determined by the disparity between the expectations and perceptions of the customer, and the service actually delivered (Curry and Sinclair, 2002; Ninichuck, 2001). It is a better instrument over other developed tools because it takes into account the customer’s expectations along with their perception which was previously ignored (Gupta et al., 2005).

Service quality is a multidimensional or multi-attribute construct (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Gronroos, 1990;

Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988) and not a one-dimensional concept (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Over the period of time two perspective of service quality was identified: the American perspective and the European perspective. The American perspective of service quality focuses on functional quality attributes whereas the European perspective of service quality focuses on technical quality and image.

The quality of a service as perceived by customers has three dimensions: functional dimension, technical dimension, and image (Gronroos, 1982, 1990; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1982). Lehtinen (1983) regard service quality as a combination of “process quality” and “output quality”. The below diagram is a glance of service quality dimensions advocated by various authors.



Swartz and Brown (1989) categorised the service quality dimensions into “what” and “how” aspects by harmonising the work of Gronroos (1982), Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1982) and Parasuraman et al. (1985). Further, Rust and Oliver (1994) classified the service quality dimensions into “customer-employee interaction”, the service environment and the outcome.

**Retail Service Quality**

Measuring service quality in pure service setting is somewhat simpler in contrasts to retail setting. In retail setting there is a combination of product and service, therefore retailers are likely to have more impact on service quality than on product

quality (Dabholkaret al., 1996). That’s why offering service quality in retailing is a herculean task and somewhat distinct from any other product/service environment (Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994; Finn and Lamb, 1991).

Dabholkaret al. (1996) used both qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop a five-dimensional scale measuring retail service quality (RSQS). The multi-item scale composed of five dimensions, of which three dimensions comprises two sub-dimensions each. A number of the researchers advocated highly appreciable results for the applicability of RSQS in their respective studies (Nadiri and Tumer, 2009; Das et al., 2008; Leenet al., 2004 and Boshoff and Terblanche, 1997).

## Service Quality and Age

Research suggests that demographics do make an effect on some service quality dimensions (Paulins, 2005). Thus, in order to discover this relationship, demographic information such as age, gender, income level and education level need to be examined while measuring service quality (Ganesan-Lim et al., 2008; Siu & Cheung, 2001) especially in non-professional service like retailing.

A number of the researchers namely Liu & Tsai (2010); Raven & Welsh (2004) and Foucault & Scheufele (2002) confirmed that there were differences in shopping behaviour when it involves gender. But Snipes et al. (2006) believed that little attention was paid to gender based research concerned with perceived service quality. Kaushik (2009) found that females gave more importance to Empathy than males counterparts in aviation industry. Eagle (2009) elicit that females in Arab countries prefer those banks that have dedicated female staff. Singh and Khurana (2011) highlighted that male customers of private banks are more satisfied than the female customers. The mean value of satisfaction level of male (3.43) was more than the mean value of satisfaction level of female customers (3.33). On the same track, male customers of Hong Kong felt that departmental stores performed better in the Physical Appearance and Personal Interaction dimensions than females (Siu & Cheung, 2001).

*H1: There is no significant difference in service quality perceived by male and female customers of shopping malls.*

*H2: There is no significant difference in overall service quality perceived by male & female customers of shopping malls.*

However Yaghi (2010), Nadiri and Tumer (2009), Ganesan-Limet al.(2008) Sui & Chow (2004) and Gagliano & Hathcote (1994) reported that subjects of different gender do not have significant different perceptions of retail service quality.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine Gender wise customers' perceptions of service quality provided by the shopping malls.
2. To identify whether male and female customers perceive the overall service quality delivered by shopping malls differently.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population comprised retail shoppers as defined in similar studies (Kaul, 2007; Boshoff & Terblanche, 1997 and Dabholkar et al., 1996). The active garments shoppers of SIS (shop-in-shop) are taken as the sample unit. The sample was

selected from National Capital Region (NCR) in the months of Oct-Dec 2011. NCR accounts for the highest market share in retail spending in the entire northern belt and has a greater degree of stability in consumer expectations as compared to other cities.

In the present study, Simple Random Sampling was used for the selection of SIS whereas Judgmental Sampling was used for the selection of respondents from SIS. Due to the possibility of spoiled questionnaires, researcher targeted 525 retail shoppers. At the time of study there were 51 malls in NCR. On the basis of Simple Random Sampling 15 SIS were selected and out of each SIS 35 respondents were approached on the basis of Judgmental Sampling. Thus the total number of respondents came out to 525. Out of the 525 respondents, 424 questionnaires were received at a response rate of 80.76 per cent.

The primary data were collected by means of a structured comprehensive questionnaire. The questionnaire used in the present study consisted of two sections A and B. Section A dealt with background information of the participants and Section B consists of items evaluating service quality. The validated Retail Service Quality Scale developed by Dabholkar et al. (1996) was employed to evaluate perceived service quality. Two items of RSQS were not included in the questionnaire because of its inapplicability in the Indian organised retail (Kaul, 2007). Finally, the questionnaire included 26 statements on the retail service quality and one statement on the overall perception of service quality. The data were analysed using PASW 18 version. T-test was used for analysing the difference between two samples i.e. Male and female.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic profile of Respondent

The young blood i.e. "15-25" years accounts for the maximum footfalls (43 per cent). "25-35" years were taken as a second group and accounted for 27 percent. 18 percent comprises the third age group i.e. "35-45". Finally, last group comprises of respondents "more than 45" years which accounts for 12 percent. Regarding the gender, respondents were almost evenly distributed. The ratio of male to female respondents was about 54:46.

Out of the 424 respondents, 56 per cent were unmarried while 44 per cent were married. Occupation-wise classification shows that 11 percent, 19 percent and 25 percent respondents were from business class, government service and corporate sector respectively. 35 percent of respondents were students and rest 11 per cent were employed in other occupation. The tables elicits the cross tabulation of gender with different demographic profile of the respondents.

**Table 1** Demographic profile of respondent

		GENDER		
		Male	Female	Total
AGE	15-25 (42.5%)	91 (50.6%)	89 (49.4%)	180 (100%)
	25-35 (27.1%)	72 (62.6%)	43 (37.4%)	115 (100%)
	35-45 (18.4%)	40 (51.3%)	38 (48.7%)	78 (100%)
	More than 45 (12%)	27 (52.9%)	24 (47.1%)	51 (100%)
MARITAL STATUS	Unmarried (55.9%)	126 (53.2%)	111 (46.8%)	237 (100%)
	Married (44.1%)	104 (55.6%)	83 (44.4%)	187 (100%)
OCCUPATION	Business (10.8%)	30 (65.2%)	16 (34.8%)	46 (100%)
	Government Service (18.9%)	43 (53.8%)	37 (46.2%)	80 (100%)
	Corporate Employee (24.8%)	67 (63.8%)	38 (36.2%)	105 (100%)
	Students (34.9%)	69 (46.6%)	79 (53.4%)	148 (100%)
	Others (10.6%)	21 (46.7%)	24 (53.3%)	45 (100%)
Total		230 (54.2%)	194 (45.8%)	424 (100%)

In non-professional service like retailing, there is a need to examine the demographic characteristics of customers when evaluating service quality (Webster, 1989). In this study, Analysis of Variance had been used to determine whether the retail service quality was influenced by the gender. Significance value less than 0.05 indicate existence of some relationship between the independent variable (gender) and dependent variables (retail service quality).

Gender differences appeared in the statement 12 and statement 20. In other words, respondents differed significantly on the attributes “Employees in the Outlet have the knowledge to answer customer’s questions” and “The Outlet willingly handles returns and exchanges”. Significance value of the attribute 12 and 20 was .008 and .027 respectively. Significance value less than 0.05 express the association between gender and retail service quality (attribute 12 and 20).

**Table 2** Descriptive Mean scores & t-values of Male & Female respondents

	Statements	Male (Mean Score)	Female (Mean Score)	t-Value	p- value
1.	The Outlet has modern-looking equipment and fixtures/racks.	4.23	4.09	1.77	0.077
2.	The Outlet and its physical facilities (trial room and restrooms) are clean, convenient & visually attractive.	4.10	4.05	0.55	0.585
3.	Materials associated with the Outlet's service (such as shopping bags, loyalty cards) are visually appealing.	3.95	3.90	0.56	0.579
4.	The store has clean, attractive, and convenient physical facilities (restrooms, fitting rooms)	3.94	3.94	0.01	0.992
5.	The layout of the Outlet makes it easier for customers to find what they need.	4.05	3.99	0.65	0.514
6.	The layout of the Outlet makes it easier for customers to move around in the Outlet.	4.01	3.93	0.95	0.340
7.	When the Outlet promises to do something (such as repairs, alterations) by a certain times, it will do so.	3.47	3.59	-1.23	0.219
8.	The Outlet provides the services at the time it promises to do so.	3.61	3.76	-1.58	0.115

9.	The Outlet performs the service right the first time.	3.68	3.74	-0.57	0.568
10.	The Outlet has merchandise available when the customers want it.	3.54	3.43	1.17	0.243
11.	The Outlet insists on error-free sales transactions and records.	3.65	3.55	1.08	0.279
12.	Employees in the Outlet have the knowledge to answer customer's questions.	3.57	3.85	-2.68	0.008
13.	The behaviour of employees in the Outlets instills confidence in customers.	3.68	3.78	-1.00	0.319
14.	Customers feel safe in their transactions with this Outlet.	3.76	3.68	0.83	0.405
15.	The employees in the Outlet give prompt service to customers.	3.63	3.68	-0.49	0.626
16.	Employees in the Outlet tell customers exactly when services will be performed.	3.50	3.65	-1.69	0.092
17.	Employees in the Outlet are never too busy to respond to customer's requests.	3.47	3.45	0.25	0.806
18.	The Outlet gives customers individual attention.	3.47	3.58	- 1.01	0.312
19.	Employees in the Outlets are consistently courteous with customers.	3.35	3.54	- 1.69	0.092
20.	The Outlet willingly handles returns and exchanges.	3.55	3.34	2.22	0.027
21.	When a customer has a problem, the Outlet shows a sincere interest in solving it.	3.54	3.57	- 0.34	0.737
22.	Employees in the Outlet are able to handle customer complaints directly and immediately.	3.60	3.59	0.03	0.978
23.	The Outlet offers high quality merchandise.	3.79	3.91	-1.21	0.227
24.	The Outlet provides plenty of convenient parking for customers.	3.10	3.16	- 0.54	0.592
25.	The Outlet has operating hours convenient for all their customers.	3.68	3.72	- 0.40	0.689
26.	The Outlet accepts all major credit cards.	3.58	3.61	- 0.26	0.793
27.	Overall perception regarding service quality.	3.68	3.78	-1.00	0.319

For attribute 12, the mean score of “males” (3.57) was significantly lower than the mean score of “females” (3.85). It indicated that females gave more importance to the knowledgeable staff of the outlet who can answer their queries. Usually females asked for more and more options before making a purchase. They even asked a lot of questions and make queries before taking an action. Due to this characteristic female prefer such an outlet whose employees have handful information to answer their queries.

Regarding attribute 20, the mean score of “females” (3.34) was significantly lower than the mean score of “males” (3.55). It figured out that male respondents are more inclined towards the outlet who willingly handles the returns and exchanges of the merchandise. This led to conclude that H1 was accepted.

Regarding the overall perception of retail service quality, male and female respondents perceive it in a similar fashion. In other words, there is no significant difference in overall service quality perceived by male & female customers of shopping malls. The significance value (.319) was greater

than 0.05, which indicate that there was no relationship between the independent variable (gender) and dependent variable (overall retail service quality). It is therefore, concluded that H2 was not accepted.

This can be explained as follows: Due to the acute competition and burning issue of FDI investment in Indian organised retail, the shop-in-shop is delivering quite good level of service quality. The appearance of the shop-in-shop is very attractive; policies are customers friendly, employees are eager to sort out the problems of customers, employees are reliable and interact with courtesy. Overall the service quality offered is satisfactory (mean score of males =3.68 and mean score of females =3.78) and both males and females perceive it similarly.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Analysis of variance showcases that male and female customers do not hold the same opinion regarding the service quality delivered by shop-in-shop. They have different

opinion regarding the attributes “employees in the outlet have the knowledge to answer customer’s questions” and “the outlet willingly handles returns and exchanges”. Female customers give more importance to the personal interaction of staff while undertaking their queries. In order to increase footfalls (especially female) the retailer should enhance its employee’s knowledge regarding customer’s query. Also store employees need to be trained for reacting favourably on customer’s requests. In order to increase footfalls, the retailer should enhance its employee’s knowledge to answer customer’s query.

The findings of the current study provide additional insights concerning the perception of male customers. Male customers give more preference to the problem solving attitude of employees by willingly handling returns and exchanges. Therefore, retailers wishing to retain their customers are advised to increase ability of its employees to willingly handle the return/exchange merchandise, especially when the opposite party is a male.

The study also revealed that there is no significant difference between the satisfaction level of male & female customer related to overall service quality. This means that the customers of shop-in-shop whether they are male or females are satisfied with their offered services. It means that retailers are moving in the right direction, they are just required to put more efforts so that they can offer an excellent level of service quality.

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