

# PERCEIVED QUALITY, FIRM CHARACTERISTICS AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: AN INDEPENDENT STUDY PAPER

<sup>1</sup>Amos Musili King'ola, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Raymond Musyoka, PhD.

<sup>1</sup>PhD Candidate, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya.

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**Abstract:** Organizations are realizing the importance of customer-focused concepts and embracing perceived quality practices to help in business survival. Perceived quality and customer satisfaction are critical constructs that businesses need to emphasize to have an added advantage. Satisfied consumers contribute to the success of businesses as consumer satisfaction results to re-purchase, good-mouthing and customer loyalty. The conceptual paper starts with a critical literature review on the constructs of perceived quality, firm characteristics and customer satisfaction, followed by theoretical framework. In the subsequent sections, perceived quality and firm characteristic concepts and their relationships to customer satisfaction are discussed. Then literature review summary and knowledge gaps are discussed. The paper closes with conceptual framework and hypotheses.

**Keywords:** Perceived quality, Firm characteristics, Customer satisfaction and Expectation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the study

Organizations are realizing the importance of customer-based concepts and have embraced quality management strategies to aid in business operations. Perceived quality along with customer satisfaction are critical constructs that firms adopt to leverage over rivals. Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on firms' success. Satisfied customers are the basis of well performing ventures as satisfaction leads to re-purchases, positive word of mouth and loyalty. Firm characteristics have effect on the perceived quality and statistically significant moderating impact on customer satisfaction (Macharia et al., 2017).

Shahin (2010) suggests that organizations in the service sector are pressurized to show that they are customer-focused as well as delivering constant quality improvements. Customer service entails developing ties with customers, resulting in value-laden interrelationships. Consumers benefit since the firm is delivering a service that exceeds their needs. The firm benefits since satisfied consumers will repurchase the firms' offerings. They will be loyal to the business.

Organization's customer satisfaction perception looks at how employees perceive the scale to which the consumers of their offerings are satisfied. Consumer satisfaction is the result of the difference among pre-purchase expectation and post-purchase disconfirmation (Clemons & Woodruff, 1992). Fournier and Mick (1999) indicated that confirmed expectations results to satisfaction, positively disconfirmed results to delight, and negatively disconfirmed outcome is

dissatisfaction. However, complaints are consumers' perceptions about dissatisfactory experiences. They aid businesses identify marketplace problems in addition to being important indicators of business performance (Oliver, 2015).

The independent study paper starts with a critical literature review of the concepts of perceived quality, firm characteristics and customer satisfaction, followed by theoretical framework. In the subsequent sections, perceived quality and firm characteristic concepts and their relationships with customer satisfaction are discussed. Then literature review summary and knowledge gaps are discussed. The conceptual paper also describes conceptual framework and hypotheses.

### **Perceived Quality Concept**

Businesses are delivering quality products and services to attract customers from rival firms perceived to deliver low quality products and services. Zeithaml (1988) noted that perceived quality is the judgement of product's performance by consumers. It contrasts objective quality, which entails an objective attribute of a product (Rowley, 1998). Perceived quality is the appraisal of the firm performance from the customer's perspective which positively influences customers' attitude and behavioral intentions relating to the service provider (Anderson et al., 2006). Perceived quality is an abstract concept that accord variations with regard to product/service objective quality.

Angelova and Zekiri (2011) posit that customers expect quality offerings from their service providers. Delivering quality products and services is associated with customer satisfaction. Organizations are finding new ways to measure quality that include customers' perception and expectations. Quality improvement reduces costs since firms have fewer consumers to replace, less corrective measures to undertake, minimum complaints to handle, and reduced staff turnover to deal with (Lovell, 1996). An effort to acknowledge the way quality is perceived by consumers, Gronoos and Christian (1982) classified customers' perception into two approaches-the technical quality, specifically, what the consumer receive in the practical result in the service delivery procedure as well as the functional quality, how the consumer receives the technical results. He deduced that functional quality is perceived as better than technical quality indicating that service quality need to encompass the mode of its delivery.

### **Defining Service Quality**

Quality is defined distinctively by various scholars; Crosby (1984) referred quality as conformance to requirements. Quality is also described as one that fulfills the consumer (Eagler & Langeard, 1987). Conceptualizing product quality is measured objectively with criterion such as durability and defects, however, service quality is an abstract concept. Parasuraman et al. (1988) noted that service quality comprises distinct service dimensions: heterogeneity, intangibility as well as inseparability. Quality happens during service delivery, during interaction among customers and service providers. Therefore, firms try to get competitive edge by offering quality service.

Service quality is reviewed as distinctive from objective quality because it is grounded on customer assessments (Lee & Hwan, 2005) whilst Spathis et al. (2004) described service quality as an attitude for being customer's evaluations on the overall service. Zeithaml et al. (1990) and Nam (2008) described perceived quality as the consumer's overall feeling of firm's offering.

Firms should offer their customers quality services, with the aim of customer satisfaction, because satisfied customers repurchase the similar products and services (Yildiz, 2017). Angelova and Zekiri (2011) noted that today customers demand quality in products and services than previously. With service quality assurance, organizations retain customers and also enhances the probability of attracting potential ones.

### **Service Quality Models**

Service quality measuring is an abstract construct, different from objectively evaluated goods' quality. The commonly used service quality approaches namely SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. (1985) and Cronin and Taylor's (1992)'s SERVPERF. SERVQUAL model is employed to operationalize service quality perceptions in various sectors by correlating service perceptions and expectations (Nam, 2008). Hinged on SERVQUAL and its five elements, namely assurance, responsiveness, reliability tangible and empathy while SERVPERF is a performance-based model, for service quality measuring (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1985). This reaffirms that firms must emphasize on service delivery according to consumers' assessment instead of the difference of perceived and expected performance (Lee & Hwan, 2005).

### **SERVQUAL Model**

Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed SERVQUAL model for measuring customer quality perceptions. SERVQUAL reduced service quality dimensions to five aspects of reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. As per the SERVQUAL model, service quality is conceptualized by identifying the gaps between consumers' expectations and actual service experiences. The SERVQUAL model has been criticized since the five service quality aspects cannot be employed in all service industries. There is inadequate evidence that consumers assess the service quality according to the variations between perceptions and expectations (Buttle, 1996).

### **SERVPERF Model**

SERVPERF as advanced by Cronin and Taylor (1992) is a performance-centered model. The model proposes that a consumer's service quality perception is linked to performance. SERVPERF measures service quality by employing customer perceptions and that expectations need not to be incorporated as proposed by SERVQUAL (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

However, SERVPERF model has been criticized for its inconsistency in service quality measurement (Gilmore & McMullan, 2009). While SERVQUAL measures service quality through the contrast of perceptions along with expectations of consumers, SERVPERF makes use of perceptions only. In addition, SERVPERF embraces SERVQUAL's five dimensions in measuring service quality; hence Cronin and Taylor (1992) could not insist to have advanced a new model. It was just a proposal they made.

### **Firm Characteristics**

Zou and Stan (1998) detailed that firm characteristics comprises the company's internal environment. Firm characteristics attempt to give firms competitive edge, since it aids them to demonstrate uniqueness that cannot be duplicated with ease by rival firms. Firm demographics namely the firm's age, which is total years of business operations, firm's size, which is the numbers of personnel and the organization's ownership structure's effects on the performances (O'Sullivan, et al., 2009). Scholars differ in their firm characteristics conceptualization. However, firm size is prevalent in most studies involving firm characteristics. Firm size impacts organization's needs to call for action for instance larger firms are risk averse (Hitt et al., 1990). Small organizations have greater demands than the larger firms and responds well to threats and opportunities by coming up with competitive marketing strategies for their survival (Chen & Hambrick, 1995). Firm size is associated with operation costs and general success of a firm. Large firms have more operational units, demand for skilled employees than the small organizations (Daft, 1995).

Firm age is a dimension commonly involved in firm characteristics. Halliday and Powell (1993) opined that when firms get aged, they improve business operations. Older firms are efficient in their procedure and positioning and returns are assured hence resulting to higher sales margin and strong reputable image in relation to age, past studies show that older firms are inclined to fewer challenges of new venture operations. Gradually, firms unearth their capability and master on how to remain competitive (Ericson & Pakes, 2006). However, Boeker (1997) noted that older firms' inability to compete and adopt new innovative and creative measures for survival lead to poor performance and eventual divest from the business operations. Firm culture is termed as laid down shared expectations and beliefs about a firm. Organizational culture, comprise people's way of thinking, their beliefs and behaviours. It is a firm characteristic aspect which distinguishes firms from each other (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972).

### **Customer Satisfaction**

Customer Satisfaction is a key construct in marketing, crucial for business survival. Satisfaction is customers' feelings of perceived service's experiences and expectations (Anderson & Fornell, 2000). Zeithaml et al. (2006) described customer satisfaction as the consumers' product assessment in relation with how the offering matched the customers' expectations. Customer satisfaction outcome is organizational profitability and improved market share. Satisfaction can be realized in different ways which are determined by the customers' pre consumption expectations ranging from feelings of fulfillment, pleasure, contentment, delight and relief (Zeithaml et al., 2006)

The commonly recognized customer satisfaction construct conceptualization is the expectation disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1997). Satisfaction level is an outcome of the contrast between expectation and performance. Positive disconfirmation happens if product or service performance exceeds expectations hence the customer is satisfied. Negative

disconfirmation, occurs if service experiences does not match customer expectations hence, the customer is dissatisfied (Oliver, 1997). Customer satisfaction enhances customer loyalty; effects repurchase likelihood and results to good mouthing. Customer satisfaction affects the consumer behavior with respect to perceptions as well as expectations of the service or product delivered (Oliver, 1997).

Various studies indicate that, customer satisfaction has positive relationships with customer re-purchase likelihood, overall satisfaction, retention and customer loyalty. In addition, customer satisfaction is negatively related with customer complaints as well as switching behaviors (Bearden & Teel, 1983). Nevertheless, customer loyalty and intension are usually not resultant to customer satisfaction since consumers could be dissatisfied with firm offering but may find it hard to switch brands because of the switching barriers. Organizations have emphasized on enhancing customer satisfaction, because dissatisfied customers are inclined to switch when they find superior offerings (Kotler, 2000). Dissatisfied customers reduce the dissonance by looking for details that could give assurance of the offering value (Kotler, 2000).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The section describes the study's theoretical approach. The approach outlines an explanation for envisioned relationships among study variables. It serves as a guide to exhaustively pinpoint logical, clearly defined relations among variables, thus indicating the study variables. Theories make conclusions about observations and comprise interrelated, articulate ideas and models by explaining the starting point of the research problem and determining the vision to which the problem is directed (Kerlinger, 1986). Key theories on which this paper is anchored include, Resource Advantage Theory, Disconfirmation Theory and Cue Utilization Theory.

### **Cue Utilization Theory**

The theory proposed that products comprise various arrays of cues that act as substitute product quality elements. It consists of a procedure of establishing inferences about from the layout of cues available namely advertising and price. Reimer and Kuehn (2005) suggested that intrinsic cues show details on the physical aspects while extrinsic cues indicate details like prices and brands. Cue utilization theory describes how customers use cues to bring conclusion on product quality and aid in making buying intentions (Olson, 1972). The theory argues that customers use a combination of the cues to come up with approximate evaluations on the product or service quality to aid in making decisions.

Customers depend on both extrinsic and intrinsic cues for pre-consumption evaluation of products and services (Szybillo & Jacoby, 1974). A quality cue is valued to the level that it is assumed to indicate product quality. A number of authors criticized this theory (Adiwijaya, 2008; Dahari, 2007). A product assumption is described as being a complex process of information, concerning cue utilization. It consists of ways for making conclusions about products from cue configuration (Adiwijaya, 2008; Dahari, 2007). A customer in a purchasing situation is faced with evaluating the value of the product or service and cannot fairly analyze based on consumption and perception of its dimensions.

### **Resource Advantage Theory**

Resource advantage theory emphasizes on firm's variables such as firm characteristics from competitive's viewpoint. This theory presumes that varying resources such as firm size and age which are imperfectly immobile when united with varied customer expectations indicate significant variations in the extent and intensities of businesses success within the same sector (Barney, 1991). Barney (1991) noted that firms' resources include all assets, processes, information, capabilities, attributes, controlled by a company that helps to execute procedures to enhance efficiency along with effectiveness. Resources are valuable if they are able to satisfy customers, and if they increase a firm's profits. However, Resource advantage theory was criticized by Hodgson (2000) which indicated it is hard to understand what not a resource is in an organization.

### **Disconfirmation Theory**

Disconfirmation theory postulates that satisfaction is correlated with the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that is as an outcome of difference between experiences and expectations (Ekinici et al., 2009). Oliver (1997) asserted that the theory indicates that satisfaction is the customer's fulfillment response. Disconfirmation is the gap which exists among customers' pre-consumption expectations and perceived product/service performance (Mattila & O'Neill, 2003). Consumer's expectations are confirmed if the product meets the consumer expectations, negatively disconfirmed if

perceived performance fall short of customer expectations and positively disconfirmed when the satisfaction exceeds customer expectations (Anderson, 1973).

The theory notes that consumers buy products with pre-consumption expectations of the company performance. The extent of expectation is the measure against which the product is evaluated. For instance, product or service experiences are collated versus expectations. If the outcome meets the expectations, confirmation happens while when there is a contrast between expectations and perceived product or service quality, disconfirmation occurs (Oliver, 1977). Various studies have noted that service quality best be explained as a disconfirmation paradigm where expectations are either matched or falls short or exceeded (Brown & Swartz, 1989; Parasuraman, et al., 1994). However, the disconfirmation theory has been criticized; customers might be satisfied or dissatisfied for attributes where expectations never existed (McGill & Iacobucci, 1992). The critiques indicated that expectation of a service could be termed as better than expected though it could not match customers desired set of product/services. It was deduced that expectation and desire disconfirmations significantly influences customer satisfaction (Khalifa & Liu, 2002).

### 3. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Perceived Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and perceived quality are distinct constructs that are growing theoretical and managerial significance, to both researchers and marketing practitioners. Research has been done to scrutinize the correlation of perceived quality with customer satisfaction (Udo, Bagchi & Kirs, 2010; Cronin et al., 2000). Despite notable uncertainty in the differentiation between quality and satisfaction, it is presumed that the two concepts are distinct. However, Ting (2004) noted that studies differ over the precedents of perceived quality as well as satisfaction. Numerous studies indicate that perceived quality results in customer satisfaction, others have contrary opinions. asserted that customer satisfaction results to perceived quality (Tam, 2000; Petrick & Backman, 2002). Newman (2001) argued that perceived quality in addition to consumer satisfaction are positively linked while enhanced perceived quality results to consumer satisfaction with and eventually to consumer loyalty and enhanced relationships among customers and firms.

Analysis of the association of service quality along with consumer satisfaction towards contributions of buying intentions in several distinct service sectors have been carried out (Taylor & Baker, 1994). The analysis outcome illustrated that customer satisfaction has a moderating impact on the perceived quality and buying intentions' association. In addition, the study outcome indicated that consumer satisfaction and perceived quality are distinct, although DeRuyter et al. (1997) opined that perceived quality and consumer satisfaction are correlated, synonymous and interchangeable

#### Firm Characteristics and Customer Satisfaction

The firm characteristics encompasses structure and market-allied dimensions. Structure-allied dimensions comprise firm size, firm age as well as ownership. Market attributes comprises sector type, market environment and environmental instability. Golan et al. (2003) noted that firm characteristics affects organizational performance. Kisengo (2012) showed that market and structure-associated characteristics moderately and positively impact on firm performance. Customer satisfaction aids firms in retaining existing consumers and also in attracting potential customers via good mouthing by the already satisfied customers (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Macharia et al. (2017) found that firms' characteristic namely culture have a pivotal role in influencing consumer behavior; the finding demonstrated that the correlation of firm characteristics and satisfaction was statistically significant and positive.

#### Perceived Quality, Firm Characteristics and Customer Satisfaction

Organizational characteristics have effect on the firm perceived quality and have a moderating impact on the interrelationship between firm characteristics and consumer satisfaction (Macharia et al., 2017). The tangible evidence is a key attribute particularly when communicating the goal and image of the service firms to consumers. Customers look for cues about the 's potential firm to offer service quality prior to the actual purchase. Cues in the organizations business environment influence service delivery process, customer behavior and customer satisfaction.

The evaluation of the interrelationships between firm characteristics and customer satisfaction in inpatient care found that the firm size, is described by the population of employees, and that perceived quality is positively associated with customer satisfaction. Increased staffing ratios and perceived quality are interrelated with improved consumer satisfaction (Kraska et al., 2017).



### Summary of Empirical Literature Review and Knowledge Gaps

This part of the paper will focus on past studies their methodology, results as well as knowledge gaps. The findings indicate results from previous studies and how future researchers may use them as a pool of knowledge. Table 1 Outlines a summary of empirical studies, the research methodologies applied, results and knowledge gaps.

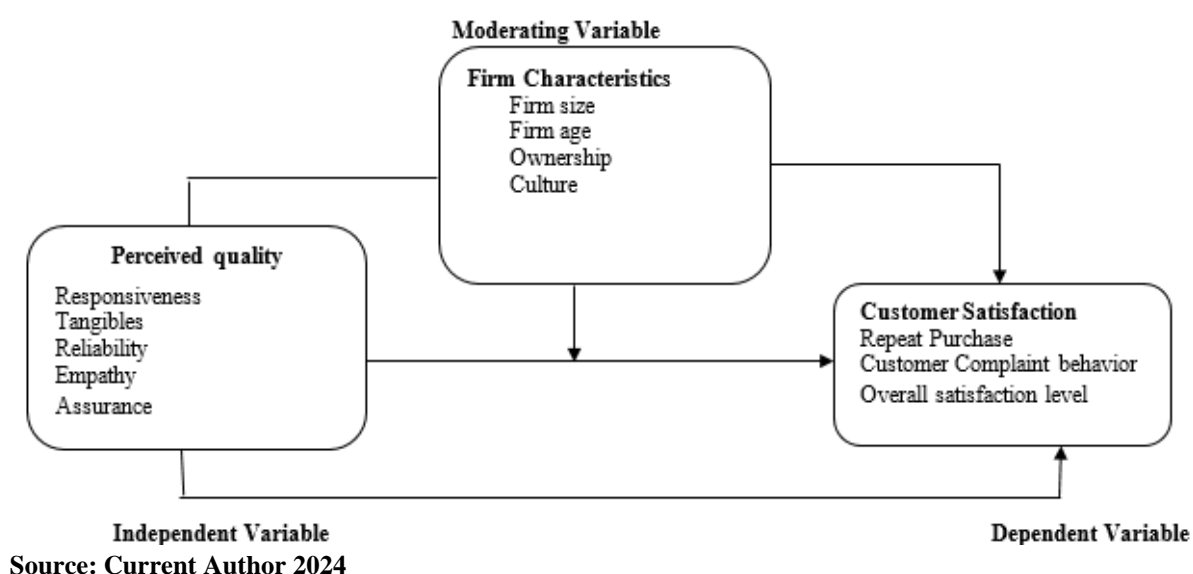
**Table 1: Empirical Studies and Knowledge Gaps' Summary**

Year & Journal	Author and Journal Title	Methodology	Results	Knowledge Gaps/Remarks
1972 Proceedings of yearly Conference of the Association for Customer Research	Olson, J., & Jacoby, J. Cue utilization in the quality perception approach.	Experimental research	Hypotheses enhanced interaction influence among the predictive cue and confidence cue on cue choice as well as impact	The data was poorly corroborative of the presumed predictive cue as well as confidence cue influence and the cue model
1985 Journal of Marketing	Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. & Berry, L. Conceptual approach of service quality and significance for subsequent studies.	Exploratory study, Applied Focus groups and in-depth interviews	Findings showed 10 attributes that are applied in forming expectations and service perceptions, attributes that cut across numerous service sectors.	Failed to develop appropriate rating scales to measure customers' perceived quality for different services. The relationships and service quality according to consumers perceptions indicators was not evaluated
1988 Journal of Retailing	Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. and Berry, L. SERVQUAL: A Model For operationalizing Customer's Perceived Service Quality	Cross-sectional research design Quota sampling procedure	SERVQUAL aids numerous service and retailing firms in evaluating consumer expectation about and perceived service quality The results revealed SERVQUAL 5 aspects of service quality	Service quality as well as its precedents and outcomes not incorporated
1992 Journal of Marketing	Cronin, J., & Taylor, S. Measuring Service Quality: A Re-evaluation and Extension.	Confirmatory factor analysis capabilities of LISREL VII	SERVPERF could be a better model for service quality measurement, measured as perception and is also a precedent of customer satisfaction	The study failed to integrate numerous measures of all of the constructs examined The services analyzed are all low involvement service categories.
Ekinci & Sirakaya (2009).	An evaluation of the precedents and Consequences of Consumer Satisfaction.	Conveniently sampling procedure	Service quality judgments results to customer satisfaction. Both expectations and Desires' disconfirmations and expectations operationalize consumer satisfaction	Sampling technique applied was biased and did not generalize the study results Perceived quality and firm characteristics concepts not considered
2012 International Journal of Science and Research	Kisengo, Z., & Kombo, H. Firm demographics influence on Performance of the Kenya's Micro-finance industry in Nakuru.	The study applied census	Firm characteristics positively influenced service quality	The study did not evaluate customer satisfaction influence on the relationship between the study variables
2017 Journal of Marketing and Customer Research	Macharia, R.W. Kibera, F.N. Munyoki, J.N Influence of firm demographics on the association among green marketing strategies and consumer satisfaction in Kenya's soft drink industry.	Descriptive cross-sectional research design	Firm characteristics statistically significantly moderating impact on the association between green marketing strategies along with consumer satisfaction.	The associations between firm characteristics and consumer satisfaction was ignored
Kraska., et al (2017)	Hospital characteristics, patient satisfaction in Germany	Descriptive cross-sectional survey	There exist a relationship among firm characteristics and customer satisfaction	The study focused on customer relationship management practices.
Owino & Kibera (2019)	Firm culture and performance: the case of Kenya's microfinance firms.	Descriptive cross-sectional research	Strong culture leads to sustainable competitive edge	The study was unable to test causality. Results suffer limited generalization.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the interrelationships among the study variables. The conceptual model, a diagrammatic representation of the association of the variables in the study is link of perceived quality, firm characteristics and customer satisfaction. Perceived quality is conceptualized as independent variable while customer satisfaction is the dependent variable. The firm characteristic is conceptualized as the moderating variable. The model describes the direct as well as indirect interrelationships between perceived quality, firm characteristics as well as customer satisfaction. It is hypothesized that firm characteristics has moderating influence on the association linking perceived quality as well as customer satisfaction. Ultimately, firm characteristics and perceived quality are expected to jointly influence customer satisfaction. Perceived quality indicators are responsiveness, tangibility, reliability, empathy and assurance. Firm characteristics indicators are: size, age, ownership, and culture while indicators of customer satisfaction are repeat purchase, customer complaint behavior and overall level of satisfaction.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



### Hypothesis of the Study

The hypotheses were deduced from the reviewed literature and the conceptual model as illustrated:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a statistically significant association between perceived quality and customer satisfaction

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Firm characteristics has statistically moderating influence on the relationship between perceived quality and customer satisfaction

**H<sub>3</sub>:** The combined effect of perceived quality and firm characteristics on customer satisfaction is statistically significant.

## 4. SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

The section described literature review of perceived quality, firm characteristics and customer satisfaction. Additionally, subsequent sections outlined empirical evidence on the relationships between perceived quality and consumer satisfaction together with the joint influence of perceived quality and firm characteristics on consumer satisfaction and the hypotheses of the study.

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