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THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CONSUMERS

Case study: Telecom firms in Buea, Cameroon

Thesis

CENTRIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Degree Programme: Business Administration, Business Management

August 2023



ABSTRACT

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Degree programme Business Administration, Business management		
Name of thesis THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CONSUMERS Case Study: TELECOM firms in Buea, Cameroon		
Centria supervisor Maria Timo-Huhtala	Pages 29 + 6	
<p>There exist a couple of telecommunication firms in Buea Cameroon, notably, MTN Cameroon, Orange Cameroon and NEXTELL Cameroon. These firms employ a workforce from all nationalities and expertise and they serve a varied range of customers and clients with their different brands of products and services.</p> <p>The objective of the study is to examine the importance of building and maintaining relationships through customer service quality and the organizational performance of TELECOM firms. More specifically, this research is to analyze the satisfaction level of consumers based on the quality of service provided by TELECOM firms in Buea. Second, the study is carried out to ascertain the dimensions of service quality which have caused customers to be satisfied or dissatisfied using the SERVQUAL Model. Furthermore, the aim was, to analyze the factors which may affect the quality of service provided to the customers.</p> <p>The study assessed the variables within the framework of some applicable theories, the GAP analysis and the SERVQUAL model. These theories and models serve as a baseline for understanding how important it is for companies to build and maintain relationships with customers, how their services are viewed and how impactful they are to customers.</p> <p>A descriptive cross-sectional research design was employed here. A sample survey was carried out among the clients of TELECOM firms in Buea using self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered using Webropol’. Descriptive statistics were done, and results were presented in tables and discussed.</p> <p>The results suggest that consumers have a low satisfaction rate and are inclined not to recommend TELECOM services to others, however, there is a high trust level given to TELECOM firms in terms of protecting the information and privacy of consumers. The results also showed that consumers are willing to pay more for improved services supplied by TELECOM firms. Overall, customers and staff considered the reliability and responsiveness of TELECOM firms services and assurances to be of high importance.</p>		
Keywords Buea, consumer, customer service, GAP analysis, Satisfaction, SERVQUAL model, TELECOM firms.		

ABSTRACT

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1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of every successful business is to maintain a high level of customer satisfaction by providing their clientele with value-added transactions through positive customer service interactions. In turn, the customer expects to feel important and assisted during the interactions that ultimately lead to their desired result. Customer service representatives are often trained to know the basic elements of providing excellent customer service. They are taught to listen, to be patient, tolerant and above all else helpful. Companies often monitor their employees to make sure they consistently abide and apply by all the rules and standards they want to convey as a means of executing and maintaining good customer service practices.

In the mobile telecommunication sector, customers are not that loyal to one service provider, especially when they are not receiving value for money kind of service. This is evident with some customers subscribing to more than one mobile telecommunication network. Hence, contemporary companies are forced to consider how to create a loyal customer base that will not be eroded even in the face of fierce competition. The Network and Telecommunication industry is experiencing a radical and innovative change, in relationship building and maintenance. This is expected to lead to greater marketing productivity by making it more effective and efficient, hence leading to higher satisfaction rates from clients.

Despite the increase in subscriber growth rate, heavy investment, and innovation on how to maintain clients and their worries, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the general quality of service delivery in Buea, Cameroon as is the case of the study.

Thus, this study aims to examine the importance of building and maintaining relationships through customer service quality and the organizational performance in Buea, Cameroon. Customer satisfaction is a considerable part of business, which makes it important to assess its effectiveness and efficiency properly and correctly. Considering the aim of the study, the following objectives are to be accomplished; to analyze the satisfaction level of customers based on quality service provided in Buea. Second, the aim is to ascertain the dimensions of service quality which have caused customers to be satisfied or dissatisfied using the SERVQUAL Model. Furthermore, it aims to analyze the factors which may affect the quality of service provided to the customers. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following questions are asked, What is the impact of customer satisfaction on the performance of telecommunication firms in Buea. Second, what are the dimensions of service quality which have

caused customers to be satisfied or dissatisfied using the SERVQUAL Model. And last, has customer satisfaction affected the individual staffs of telecommunication firms in Buea.

The introductory chapter expands on the context of the study. Its aims and objectives have been identified. There will be three theoretical chapters, the first will discuss the concepts involved in the studies, and the second chapter will evaluate a theory that applies to the title understudy, precisely the GAP analysis using the SERVQUAL model. These models will be evaluated and how they relate to the study will be established. The literature to be reviewed will be compiled using journal and article sites, published books and resources as well as primary data that will be collected from individuals in the survey. The study will be limited to the Buea municipality, and the research method will be limited to questionnaires.

The last theoretical chapter will critically examine relevant works and other studies that have been conducted concerning their methodologies, results, and recommendations to identify key customer satisfaction strategies and service quality aspects that influence the building and maintaining of relationships and organizational performance in the telecom industry.

The research part concerns research methodology, Saunder research onion will be applied to develop the research design. A quantitative, deductive research approach will be employed using questionnaires to gather data and findings which will be presented and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The final part is a summary of the entire study, and the conclusion and recommendations will be presented.

2 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The conceptual review throws more light on the study's various concepts, which happen to be customer, customer satisfaction and service quality. It will discuss customers, customer satisfaction, and service quality. In addition, the perspectives of quality and service-based components of quality.

2.1 Customer

A customer is a person who purchases goods or services from another buyer, patron or person who must deal with the seller (2011). Rust et.al., (2000) opined that the term “customer” is commonly used to refer to end-users of a product. A customer refers to individuals or households that purchase goods and services generated within the economy.

Hayes (1997) revealed that customer is a generic term referring to anybody who receives a service or product from some other person or group of people. Customer needs may be defined as the goods or services a customer requires to achieve specific goals. Different needs are of varying importance to the customer. Customer expectations are influenced by cultural values, advertising, marketing, and other communications, both with the supplier and with other sources.

Both customer needs and expectations may be determined through interviews, surveys, conversations, data mining or other methods of collecting information. Customers at times do not have a clear understanding of their needs. Assisting in determining needs can be a valuable service to the customer. In the process, expectations may be set or adjusted to correspond to known product capabilities or services. There are many customers in the marketplace, Hunter (2006) stated that in retail, the idea of focusing on the best current customers should be seen as an ongoing opportunity. To better understand the rationale behind this theory and to face the challenge of building customer loyalty, there is the need to break down shoppers into five main types; loyal, discount, impulse, need-based, and wandering customers. Loyal customers represent no more than 20 per cent of the customer base but make up more than 50 per cent of sales. These people are the ones who can and should influence one's buying and merchandising decisions. Nothing will make a loyal customer feel better than soliciting their input and showing them how much their views are valued.

The second category is the discount customers who shop in stores frequently, but make their decisions based on the size of markdowns. Impulse customers do not have a particular item at the top of their “To Do” list but come into the store or business premises on a whim. They will purchase what seems good at the time. Need-based customers have a specific intention to buy a particular type of item. The last group of customers is the wandering customer group who have no specific need or desire in mind when they come into the store. Rather, they want a sense of experience and/or community (Hunter, 2006).

2.2 Customer satisfaction

Berkman and Gilson (1986) stated that customer satisfaction is recognized as being of great importance to all commercial organizations because it influences repeat purchase behavior and word-of-mouth recommendations. In general terms, customer satisfaction is seen as the essential determinant of business success (Moore et al., 1998).

On the other hand, as competition has increased, customer satisfaction has been identified as a determinant of market share, return on investment and cost reduction (Burch et al., 1995). Nauman (1995) referred to several studies that had found that it costs about five times as much in time, money, and resources, to attract a new customer as it does to retain an existing customer. This creates the challenge of maintaining high levels of service, awareness of customer expectations and improvement in services and products.

Satisfaction reinforces positive attitudes toward the product/service, leading to a greater likelihood that the same product/service will be purchased again, and dissatisfaction leads to negative product/service attitudes and lessens the likelihood of using the same product/service again (Assael, 1987).

2.2.1 Satisfaction with the attribute-specific and overall performance

Satisfaction can be related to a specific attribute of a product or service (Cronin & Taylor 1992). Viewing satisfaction as attribute-specific or overall performance depends on what one is interested in. If the interest is more on achieving marketing value, then attribute-specific would provide more useful

insights to practitioners as to the extent to which a specific attribute of service meets customer expectations or desires. Conversely, if the interest is focused more on achieving academic value, then the overall performance measure would provide more academic value as it gives more useful information to academics and other stakeholders for generalizations that call for attention to further research.

2.2.2 Magnitude of satisfaction

According to Kotler & Keller (2006), customer satisfaction does not only prevent customer complaints but more importantly it is meeting and even exceeding customer's expectations. The point is that "no complaints" or "dissatisfaction" is not synonymous with "customer satisfaction". This view has its roots in the motivation theory of Herzberg Fredrick (1968). The mere fact that things do not go wrong, and customers do not complain does not mean that they are satisfied with the product or service received. Conversely, customers can be dissatisfied with some things about an organization but satisfied with the organization's product or service offerings.

Satisfaction is, therefore, holistic (Kotler & Keller 2006, p.144) and can be in different magnitudes since customers can be extremely delighted to just satisfied, and extremely dissatisfied to dissatisfied. In this study, satisfaction is defined in both negative and positive magnitudes from very satisfied to very dissatisfied.

2.3 Service quality

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) define service quality as how the whole service experience is performed. Their model of customer perceptions of quality and customer satisfaction hypothesized that satisfaction is more of an attitude and this attitude would influence perceptions of service quality, which in turn would influence purchase intentions (service quality leads to satisfaction and eventually purchase intentions). Failure to provide reliable service may result in customer dissatisfaction and possible defection. This is based on the premise that a satisfied customer will continue to maintain a relationship (Hallowell, 1996) and that relationship will lead to loyalty and longevity. Zeithaml et al., (1990) arrived at the same idea by looking at the probable behavior of the dissatisfied customer. They maintain that a dissatisfied customer is likely to switch to a competitor and may inform others of the bad experience.

Sureshchandar et al. (2002) emphasized in a study that customer satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct as in quality. Taylor and Baker (1994) also concluded that service quality and customer satisfaction are separate constructs. Whilst satisfaction indicates the state of a customer's psyche, quality refers to the state of a business's resources and efforts.

Whiteley (1991) differentiated product and service quality by defining the former as "What you get" and the latter as "How you get it". This agrees with Grönroos (1990) two-dimensional aspects of service quality (technical quality – the quality of what is delivered; and functional quality – the quality of how the service is delivered). Whereas customer satisfaction could be seen as the outcome of the difference between a customer's perception and expectation of service quality, it should not be forgotten that factors such as price, packaging, and situational factors such as the service encounter, would also influence satisfaction.

2.3.1 Perspectives of quality

The word quality means different things to people according to the context. Lovelock and Wirtz (2007, P. 418) mention that David Garvin identifies five perspectives on quality. The transaction view of quality is synonymous with innate excellence: a mark of uncompromising standards and high achievement.

This viewpoint is often applied to the performing and performing of visual arts. It is argued that people learn to recognize quality only through the experience gained from repeated exposure and managers or customers will also know quality when they see it is not very helpful. The product-based approach sees quality as a precise and measurable variable. Differences in quality, it is argued, reflect differences in the amount of an ingredient or attribute possessed by the product or service. Because this view is objective, it fails to account for differences in the tests, needs, and preferences of individual customers or even entire market segments (Lovelock and Wirtz (2007, 418).

User-based definitions start with the premise that quality lies in the eyes of the beholder. These definitions equate quality with maximum satisfaction. This subjective, demand-oriented perspective recognizes that different customers have different wants and needs. The manufacturing-based approach is supply based and is concerned primarily with engineering and manufacturing practices, quality is also

operation driven. Value-based definitions define quality in terms of value and price. By considering the trade-off between perception and price, quality comes to be defined as “affordable” David (1984).

Grönroos (1983) also describes different definitions and one of them comes from Philip Crosby (1979) who defines service quality as conformance to specifications. Services are performances and often they are performed in the presence of the customer. Services have a nature of varying from one firm to another and from one situation to another.

It is also possible to make a distinction between technical and functional service quality, technical quality is connected to what is delivered and functional quality is connected to how it is delivered. Another example is Jarmo Lehtinen who describes customer quality in terms of process quality and output quality. The process quality is evaluated during the service delivery and output quality is evaluated after the service delivery. (Parasuraman et al, 1990))

In the study described by Grönroos (1983) 10 determinants of service quality were identified. Reliability is connected to the consistency of performance and dependability. Here it is determined if the company give the service in the right way the first time and keeps to its promises. Responsiveness factor concerns to what extent the employees are prepared to provide service. This involves factors such as mailing a transaction slip immediately, calling a customer back in a short time and giving prompt service.

Competence is connected to the knowledge and skills of contact personnel, and operational support personnel (and research capability) that are needed for delivering the service. The access factor is connected to approachability which means for example if the operating hours are convenient, the location of the facilities is convenient, the waiting times are short and easy access by telephone. (David, 1984)

The courtesy factor involves politeness, respect, consideration, and friendliness of contact personnel (including receptionists, telephone operators and so on). Communication is about keeping the customer informed in a language they can understand and listen to the customer. The company may have to make some adjustments to include foreign customers. Credibility Factors such as trustworthiness, believability and honesty are included. It means to the level the company has the customer's best interest at heart. Factors that affect credibility are the company name, reputation, personal characteristics, and the degree to which the hard sell is connected to interactions with customers. (Parasuraman et al, 1990)

Security means freedom from danger, risk, or doubt. Factors included are physical safety, financial security, and confidentiality. Understanding the customer is about trying to understand the customer which involves learning about specific requirements, providing individualized attention, and also recognizing the regular customer. Tangibles include physical aspects of the service such as physical facilities, the appearance of personnel, tools or equipment that is used to provide the service, physical representations, or other customers in the service facility Parasuraman et al, 1985).

Grönroos (1983) describes that the analyses of the study resulted in four conclusions. Conclusion number one is that service quality is determined by the customer's perceptions which result from comparing expectations that the customer has before receiving the service and the experience that the customer gets from the service delivery. If the expectations are met the service quality is described as satisfactory. They can also be exceeded and then they are considered as more than satisfactory. Conclusion number two is that evaluation depends on the service process and the service outcome. As the third conclusion it is described that there exist two types of service quality: quality at the level where the regular service is delivered and the quality level where expectations or problems are handled.

2.3.2 Service based component of quality

Lovelock and Wirtz (2007, P.420) describe that researchers argue that the nature of service quality requires a distinctive approach to identify and measure service quality. The intangible, multifaceted nature of many services makes it harder to evaluate the quality of service compared to products. Because customers are often involved in service production, a distinction needs to be drawn between the process of service delivery and the actual output of the service which is called technical quality. Other researchers suggest that the perceived quality of service is the result of an evaluation process in which customers compare their perceptions of service delivery with the expected service delivery (Parasuraman et al, 1990).

3 SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION THEORIES

A theoretical review is done to access the established knowledge about the field and related concepts. It will help to create a solid foundation on which the results or findings of the research can be backed up giving them a strong standing. The models reviewed explain customer satisfaction and service quality. The total perceived Service Quality Model and GAP Analysis are going to be discussed using the SERVQUAL model. These models explain explicitly how service quality affects customer satisfaction which in turn shows how effective and efficient organizations within the telecom industry build and maintain relationships with clients.

3.1 Total perceived service quality model

This model is based on the study on service quality presented by Gronroos (2007). It compares customer expectations of the service and their experience of the service they have received before. As he emphasizes what customers are looking for and what they evaluate, the service quality is based on two dimensions. The first dimension is the technical quality, and this dimension refers to the outcome, what is delivered or what the customer gets from the service. The next dimension is functional quality which refers to the way the service is delivered or how it is delivered. Both dimensions affect the corporate image and the perception of quality in various ways. According to the total perceived service quality model, the perceived quality of service is not only affected by the experiences of the quality dimensions that the consumer used for evaluating whether the quality is perceived as good, neutral, or bad. It is also affected by the perceived quality of the given service as well as the outcome of the evaluation process. (Parasuraman et al, 1991)

3.2 The GAP model analysis

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, developed “The Gap Analysis Model”, which is a well-known model of service quality. This model shows an integrated view of the consumer-company relationship. The main idea of the model is focused on the premise that service quality is dependent on the size and direction of the five gaps that can exist in the service delivery process.

Gap 1 is the gap between customer expectations and those perceived by management to be the customer’s expectations. Gap 2 is the gap between management’s perception of consumer expectations

and the firm's service quality specifications. Gap 3 depicts the gap between service quality specifications and service delivery while Gap 4 is the service delivery, external communication gap. Gap 5 shows the perceived service quality gap, the difference between expected and perceived service (Parasuraman et al, 1990).

The first four gaps are identified as functions of how service is delivered from the service provider to the customer, while gap number five is connected to the customer and as such is the truth of service quality. Gap five is also the gap that the SERVQUAL instrument influences. Edvardsson (1996) mentioned that it is important for a service organization to define the level of quality at which to operate; he argued that it is more relevant to speak of the "right quality" than of merely high quality. Lovelock and Wirtz (2007, 420) discuss that to measure customer satisfaction with various aspects of service quality, Valarie Zeithaml and her colleagues developed a service research instrument called "SERVQUAL", this model is based on the premises by which customers can evaluate a firm's service quality through comparing their perception of its service and with their expectations. SERVQUAL is seen as a generic measurement tool that can be applied across a broad spectrum of service industries. Parasuraman et al, 1985).

There are 22 perception items and expectation items that are reflecting the five dimensions of service quality. Respondents complete a series of scales that measure their expectations of companies in a particular industry in a wide area of service characteristics. They also discuss that when perceived performance ratings are lower than expectations, it is a sign of poor quality, and the reverse indicates good quality. Parasuraman (1988) says that in the service and retail business, SERVQUAL is a multi-item scale which is developed to assess customer perceptions of service quality but originally it is developed from the GAP model. The author also argues that SERVQUAL must be reliably assessed and measured to improve service quality. He mentions that SERVQUAL is an important model to identify the gaps between customer expectations of the service and their perceptions of the actual performance of the service.

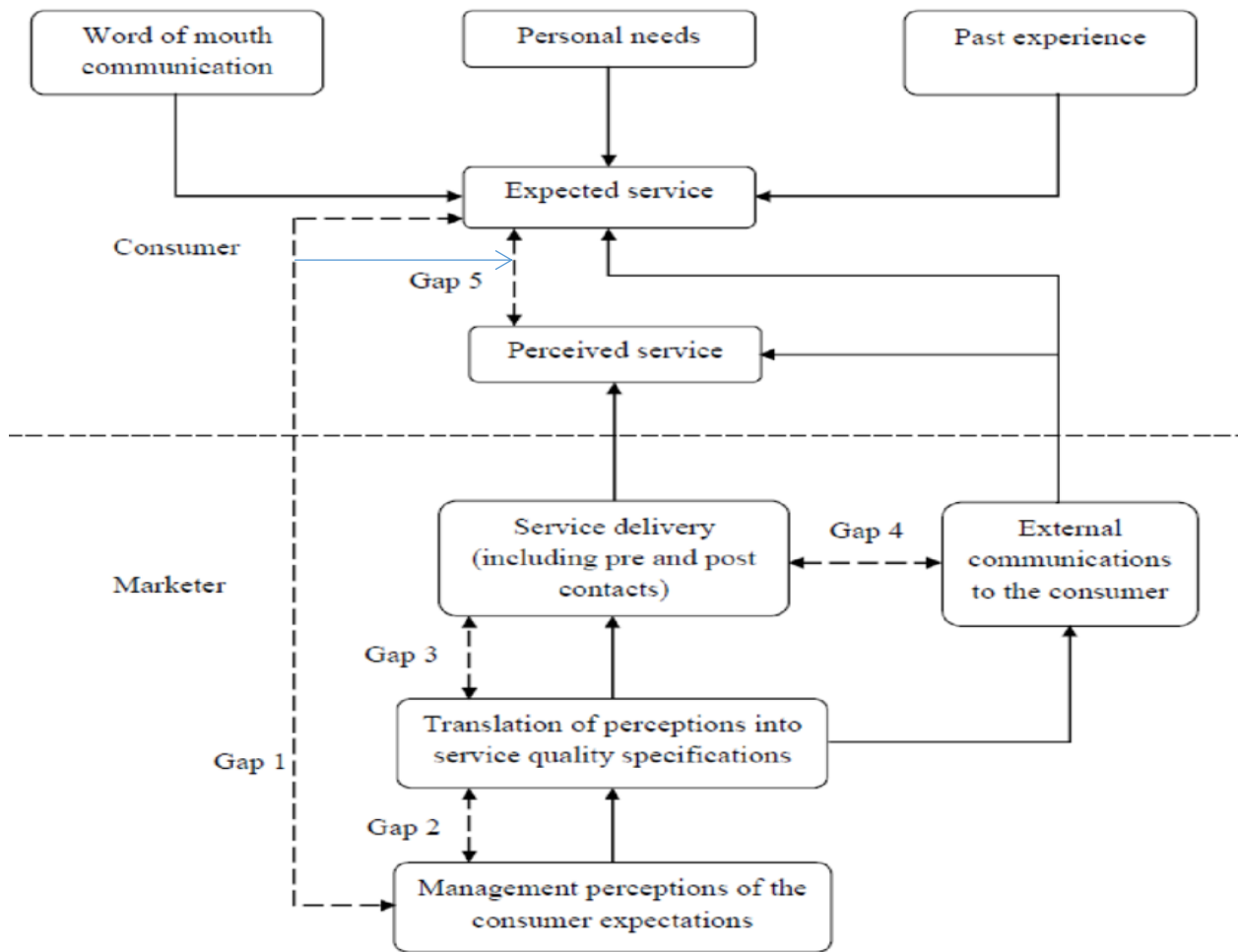


FIGURE 1: The SERQUAL scale based on the gap model by Parasuraman et al (1985)

Alexandris et al., (2002) have described SERVQUAL as a good model which helps identify practical issues of service quality in the tourism sector. The authors indicated that the gap model is the most reliable and has the most valuable contributions as shown by gap literature studies. The model emphasizes four key internal gaps relating to the managerial perception of service quality and tasks which relates to service delivery to customers.

Both the actual version of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and its modified version (Parasuraman et al., 1991) developed five dimensions of service quality tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy as seen in figure 2 below. Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1990) identified 10 criteria used by consumers in evaluating service quality. In subsequent research, they found a high degree of correlation between several of these variables and so consolidated them into five broad dimensions.

Tangibles are about the physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel and presence of users and it is also important for creating a good atmosphere. This dimension aspect of a service is one of the few dimensions that a potential service provider can know and evaluate in advance of participation. Reliability means that the service company must be able to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. It also creates an organization's promotional effort which can contribute to participant expectations. Generally, performance at the highest standard is crucial to reliability. Parasuraman et al, 1990)

Responsiveness refers to the willingness to help participants and give prompt attentiveness. The customers expect their requests to be solved quickly and perfectly. Assurance means that the customers want to rely on courteous and knowledgeable employees who convey trust and confidence. The last dimension empathy is associated with caring personnel that takes care of users. Empathy also indicates a good understanding of the customer's needs and wants Parasuraman et al, 1991).

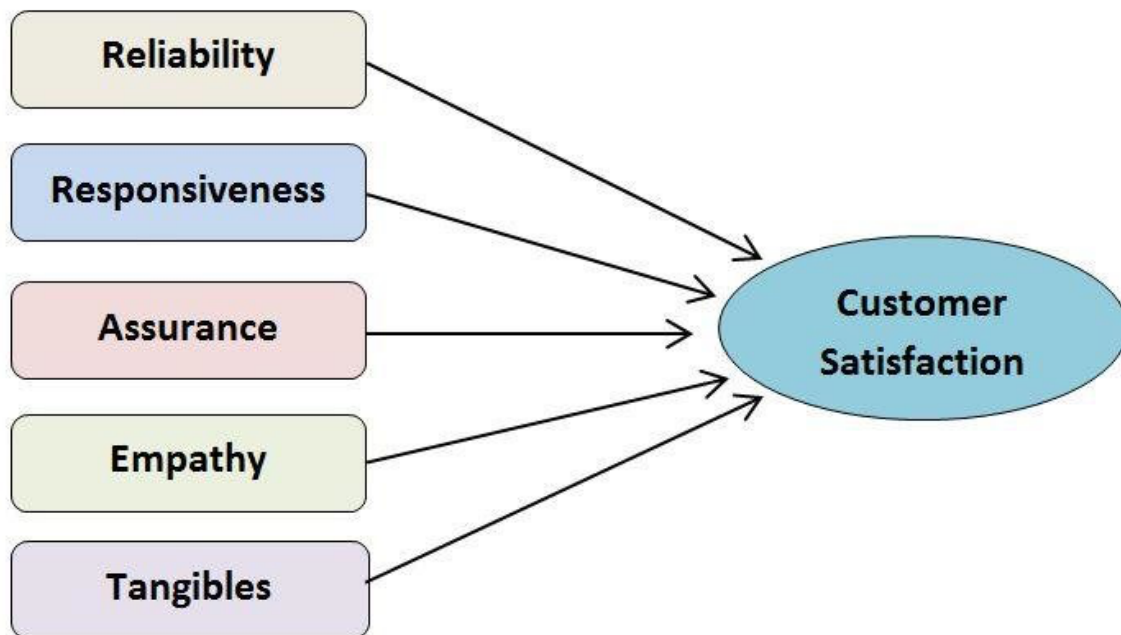


FIGURE 2: The SERQUAL scale adapted from Parasuraman et al.(1991).

4 SERVICE QUALITY STUDIES

Research conducted by Sackey, Adebayo, Oppong, Mensah, & Annor (2012) on the effects of service quality on customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention using the SERVQUAL model revealed that Barclays Bank in Ghana implements all the five service quality dimensions (Empathy, Assurance, Tangibility, Reliability, and Responsiveness), which is to say that the bank strives to be at its best when it comes to quality. This quality service has also become a major critical cause of satisfaction for the bank's customers. However, on the Empathy level, staff do not give customers their utmost attention and make decisions without considering the impact those decisions might have on their customers. The research further showed that when it comes to responsiveness, customer requests and complaints are not authorized and resolved on time enough by the staff and managers of Barclays Bank.

Also, Ojo (2010) investigated the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the telecommunication industry with a focus on Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) Nigeria. A total of 230 respondents participated in the study. Regression analysis and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient were employed in analysing the data. The study revealed a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. The researcher therefore recommended that organizations should focus more attention on service quality because of its effects on customer satisfaction. To ensure that customer satisfaction level is high, an organization must know the expectations of the customers and how they can meet such expectations. Customer satisfaction helps in customer loyalty and retention. It has been discovered that the cost of attracting new customers far exceeds the cost involved in retaining existing ones.

Kheng, Mahamad, Ramayah, & Rahim, (2010) employed the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, et al. (1988) with five dimensions to evaluate the impact of service quality on customer loyalty among bank customers in Penang, Malaysia. Customer satisfaction was used as an intermediate variable. The findings show that improvement in service quality can enhance customer loyalty. The service quality dimensions that play a significant role in the equation are reliability, empathy, and assurance. The findings indicate that the overall respondents evaluate the bank positively, but still, there is room for improvement.

Saghier and Demyana (2013), in their research on service quality dimensions and customers' satisfaction with banks in Egypt, also revealed that customer satisfaction in Egyptian banking services is significantly affected by reliability, empathy, assurance and responsiveness, while the effect of the dimension of tangibility does not any significant impact on customer's satisfaction.

5 RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter will present the research methodologies and approaches used in this study. According to Trochim and Donnelly (2001), every research is based on some assumptions and these assumptions depend on several factors such as the focus area of research (Trauth, 2011), the themes that are going to be examined (Myers, 2019) and to some extent researchers' point of view (Fielden, 2003).

5.1 Area of study

The study area is limited to Buea. Buea is the regional headquarter of the southwest region. The town shares boundaries with other major towns like Limbe to the southwest, Tiko municipality to the southeast, Muyuka municipality to the east and Idenau district to the west.

Buea municipality is found in the Fako Division of the southwest region of Cameroon, with a surface area of 870 square km. It shares boundaries with some municipalities. It is bounded to the north by the tropical rainforest on the slopes of Mount Fako, to the south by the Limbe subdivision, to the southeast by the Tiko subdivision, to the east by the Muyuka subdivision and to the west by Idenau sub-division (Baboucar, 2015 and CVUC Buea 2018).

5.2 Research choice

This chapter explains more about how many data types (qualitative or quantitative) the research will use. The research choice will be exploratory (qualitative), where case studies were carried out using surveys to gather qualitative data from respondents, which was analyzed using statistical methods/techniques (descriptive analysis).

5.3 Data collection and data analysis

This chapter describes what type of data is being used, what are the data sources, how the data will be collected, what type of sampling will be used to collect the data and the sample size, as well as how the data will be analyzed.

The data collection for this study is conducted through surveys. A semi-structured interview approach is used to guide the conversation with the participants. The interviewees are selected based on their longevity, knowledge and usage of telecommunication products and services in Buea. For the surveys, a questionnaire is developed to collect data from the targeted population in Buea. The survey is administered using Webropol.

The data collected from the surveys are analyzed using descriptive analysis and statistical techniques. Descriptive analysis will involve identifying common themes and patterns in the qualitative data collected from the interviews. Statistical techniques are used to analyze the quantitative data collected from the surveys. These techniques include descriptive statistics and analysis.

6 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the study. In it, the findings are discussed, and recommendations are made based on the findings from the analysis. More specifically, it will discuss the results on the number of respondents that partook in the study, their demographic information, as well as the impact of customer satisfaction on telecom firms in Buea.

6.1 Response rate

A total of 40 respondents answered the online questionnaire as shown on table 1, yielding a response rate of 100%. The overall response rate for the study is 100% which is higher than the recommended average rate of response of 30%, as asserted by Saunders and Lewis (2009).

TABLE 1: Response rate

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Response	40	100
No response	00	0
Total	40	100.0

6.2 Demographic information

Age distribution revealed that 10% of the respondents were below 18 years, 45.0% were between 18-30 years of age and 45% were 30 and above. This result implies that most of the respondents sampled in the study area were between 18-30 years and 30 years and above. The gender distribution of the study was examined; findings revealed that 57% of the respondents were males while 43.0% were female. This result implies that most respondents in the study sample were male.

The study investigated the occupation of the respondents. Findings revealed that 24% of the respondents were entrepreneurs, 42% were students and 10% were civil servants. However, 24% indicated other occupations which were not specified. The study also examines the educational level of the re-

spondents. Results show that 10% had ordinary level, 32% had Advanced Level and 58% of the respondents had a degree and its equivalent. This finding implies that most of the respondents were degree holders, and most have achieved a university level of education.

6.3 Impact of customer satisfaction on telecommunications performance in Buea

Based on their likelihood to continue using telecommunication services in the future, the data provided indicates the distribution of respondents across different categories. The categories are detractors, passives, and promoters, with corresponding rating scores from 0 to 10. Many respondents fall into the "detractors" category, accounting for 77.5%. These individuals are highly dissatisfied with the telecommunication services and are not likely to continue using them in the future. There are a smaller number of respondents classified as "promoters" (rating scores from 9 to 10) and "passives" (rating scores of 7 or 8). Passive make up 10.0% of the respondents, indicating lower satisfaction levels with the services provided by telecommunication firms in Buea. Promoters account for 12.5% of the respondents, representing a lower level of satisfaction. The distribution of responses across the different categories suggests that most respondents are highly dissatisfied with telecommunication services, as they fall into the "detractors" category. This indicates a negative level of customer loyalty and a likelihood of not using the service. To further enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, it is essential for telecommunication firms to actively listen to customer feedback, implement necessary improvements, and provide exceptional customer service by this telecommunication firms can continue to strengthen its customer relationships and foster a positive brand image.

In response to the likelihood of recommending Telecom firms to others in the future, the categories are detractors, passives, and promoters, with corresponding rating scores from 0 to 10. Most of the respondents fall into the "detractors" category, with a rating score of 1 or 6, accounting for 75.0% of the respondents. These individuals are not satisfied with the TELECOM services and are likely not to recommend the company to others. There are several respondents classified as "passives" (rating scores from 7 to 8) and "promoters". Passives make up 15.0% of the respondents, indicating satisfaction levels and a likelihood of recommending the company. Promoters account for 10.0% of the respondents, representing a moderate level of satisfaction. The distribution of responses across the different categories suggests that many respondents are inclined not to recommend TELECOM services to others based on their satisfaction with the company's services. This indicates negative word-of-mouth potential and a likelihood of not generating new customers. To enhance customer satisfaction and increase the number of promoters, TELECOM firms should continue to deliver excellent services and maintain

a strong focus on customer experience. Addressing any concerns raised by detractors and passives, and actively seeking feedback from all customers, can help identify areas for improvement and ensure a positive recommendation for the company.

Furthermore, with regards to trusting the Telecom firms with the protection of personal information and privacy, the data shows the distribution of respondents across different categories based on their level of trust in TELECOM firms to protect their personal information and privacy. The categories include detractors, passives, and promoters, with corresponding rating scores ranging from 0 to 10. Out of the total respondents ($n = 40$), the majority fall into the "promoters" category, with a rating score of 9 or 10, accounting for 22.5% of the respondents. These individuals express a high level of trust in the TELECOM firm's ability to protect their personal information and privacy. There is a smaller number of respondents classified as "detractors" (rating scores from 0 to 6) and "passives" (rating scores of 7 or 8). Detractors make up 70.0% of the respondents, indicating a lack of trust in TELECOM firm ability to protect their personal information. Passives account for 7.5% of the respondents, representing a moderate level of trust. The distribution of responses highlights the need for TELECOM firms to address the concerns of detractors and improve their trust in the company's privacy and data protection measures. This can be achieved through transparent communication about privacy policies, robust security measures, and proactive steps to safeguard customer information. To strengthen customer trust and increase the number of promoters, TELECOM firms should prioritize data protection and privacy as key components of their services. Implementing stringent security protocols, obtaining necessary certifications, and providing clear and accessible information about data handling practices can enhance customers' confidence in the company's ability to protect their personal information and privacy.

With regards to the willingness of paying more for improved telecom services, the respondents were divided into three categories: detractors, passives, and promoters, with corresponding rating scores ranging from 0 to 10. Among the total respondents ($n = 39$), an average fall into the "promoters" category, accounting for 30.8% of the respondents. These individuals expressed a willingness to pay more for TELECOM services if the quality were to improve. The "detractors" category, comprising 48.7% of the respondents, indicated a lower willingness to pay more for improved services. Similarly, the "passives" category, representing 20.5% of the respondents, expressed a moderate level of willingness to pay more. The data suggests that a significant portion of respondents is open to paying more for TELECOM services if the quality is enhanced. This presents an opportunity for the company to improve its service offerings and potentially increase revenue by providing higher-quality services that

meet or exceed customer expectations. To capitalize on this opportunity, TELECOM firms should focus on enhancing the quality of its services, addressing any existing issues or shortcomings, and effectively communicating the value proposition to customers. By delivering exceptional service experiences and demonstrating the value they provide, TELECOM firms can potentially increase customer satisfaction and willingness to pay more for their services.

6.4 SERVQUAL model analysis

In this chapter, the results of the SERVQUAL model analysis are discussed. Service quality dimensions will be evaluated based on data provided from the survey. In addition, service quality evaluation shall be explained as seen from the data analysed.

6.4.1 Service Quality Dimensions

This section shall discuss the results of the study based on service quality dimensions satisfaction, reliability, responsiveness, assurances, empathy, and tangibility of telecom firms.

The dimension of satisfaction of customers with telecom services in Buea, the average satisfaction rating reported by the respondents was 4.7, and the median rating was 5.0. The sum of all satisfaction ratings given by the respondents was 179.0. Based on these statistics, it can be inferred that the overall satisfaction level with the services provided by TELECOM firms is moderate, with respondents expressing a range of satisfaction levels. To improve satisfaction levels, TELECOM firms should focus on enhancing service quality and ensuring consistent and reliable service delivery. Additionally, actively seeking feedback from customers and taking necessary actions to address their needs and preferences can contribute to improved satisfaction levels over time.

Based on the reliability dimension of telecom firms in Buea, A moderate percentage of 30% respondents indicated that reliability is not important, while a lower percentage (37.5%) considered it extremely important. The average rating for this aspect is 3.0, indicating a moderate level of importance among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of importance. It is crucial for the company to recognize the significance of reliability in delivering services and to ensure that its processes and systems are designed to consistently meet customer expectations. This is presented in the table below.

TABLE 2: Reliability of TELECOM firms in Buea

	1	2	3	4	5		To- tal	Aver- age	Me- dian
Not im- portant	4	12	9	12	3	Extremely im- portant	40	3.0	3.0
	10.0%	30.0%	22.5%	30.0%	7.5%				
Total	4	12	9	12	3		40	3.0	3.0

The results suggest that, concerning the dimension of responsiveness of telecom firms in Buea, the exist varying perceptions of the importance of responsiveness, which refers to the willingness to help customers and provide prompt services. 5% and 27.5% indicated that responsiveness is not important, while 37.5% considered it extremely important. The average rating for this aspect is 3.1, indicating a moderate to slightly above moderate level of importance among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of importance. 30% of the respondents were neutral, the company needs to recognize the significance of responsiveness in meeting customer needs promptly and aid when required. By prioritizing and improving responsiveness, the company can enhance customer satisfaction and overall service quality.

TABLE 3: Responsiveness of TELECOM firms in Buea

	1	2	3	4	5		To- tal	Aver- age	Me- dian
Not im- portant	2	11	12	10	5	Extremely im- portant	40	3.1	3.0
	5.0%	27.5%	30.0%	25.0%	12.5%				
Total	2	11	12	10	5		40	3.1	3.0

The data in table 4 below indicates that there is a diverse range of opinions regarding the importance of assurance when it comes to telecom firms in Buea, which refers to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. 5% and 12.5% of the respondents indicated that assurance is not important, while a larger percentage (57.5%) considered it extremely important or important. The average rating for this aspect is 3.4, indicating a moderate to slightly above moderate level of importance among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of importance. It is worth noting that a significant portion of respondents expressed agreement or

strong agreement regarding the importance of assurance. This suggests that customers value knowledgeable and courteous employees who can inspire trust and confidence. By prioritizing employee training and development to enhance knowledge and courtesy, the company can effectively meet customer expectations and establish a strong foundation of trust and confidence.

TABLE 4: Assurance of TELECOM firms in Buea

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
Not important	2	5	15	10	8	Extremely important	40	3.4	3.0
	5.0%	12.5%	37.5%	25.0%	20.0%				
Total	2	5	15	10	8		40	3.4	3.0

The data reveals that empathy, which pertains to the caring and individualized attention provided by the firm to its customers, is considered important by most of the respondents. While 2.5% and 17.5% of the respondents indicated that empathy is not important, a significant proportion (62.5%) rated it as extremely important or important. The average rating for empathy is 3.4, indicating a moderate to slightly above moderate level of importance among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of importance. By demonstrating empathy towards customers and providing individualized support, the company can enhance customer satisfaction and foster stronger relationships. This data underscores the significance of incorporating empathy into the firm's customer service practices and training programs.

TABLE 5: Empathy of TELECOM firms in Buea

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
Not important	1	7	15	10	7	Extremely important	40	3.4	3.0
	2.5%	17.5%	37.5%	25.0%	17.5%				
Total	1	7	15	10	7		40	3.4	3.0

The data indicate that tangibles, which refer to the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials, are perceived as important by many respondents. 18% of the respondents rated tangibles as not important, with 41% being neutral. This demonstrates that the physical

aspects of a company's offerings and presentation are valued by customers. The average rating for tangibles is 3.4, indicating a moderate level of importance among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of significance. It is clear from the data that customers expect the company to have well-maintained facilities, up-to-date equipment, professional and presentable personnel, and effective communication materials.

6.4.2 Service quality evaluation

The quality of services provided by telecom firms in Buea was evaluated in terms of them meeting customers' expectations, and the likelihood of the customers recommending those services to others based on their satisfaction.

To meet customer expectations, the company should focus on enhancing the physical aspects of its offerings and ensuring that they align with the desired level of quality. By investing in tangible elements, the company can create a positive impression, instill confidence, and contribute to overall customer satisfaction.

The data suggests that the likelihood of recommending the services of TELECOM firms in Buea to others, based on satisfaction with the service quality they provide varies among respondents. A portion of respondents (40%) was neutral about the likelihood to recommend, which shows their skepticism with the service. However, some respondents indicated a lower likelihood of recommending it, with 20% rating it as a 2 or below. 15.0% and 7.5% of the respondents are extremely likely to recommend to someone else.

To enhance the likelihood of positive recommendations, TELECOM firms should focus on improving its service quality to meet or exceed customer expectations. This may involve addressing any areas of dissatisfaction identified by the respondents and consistently delivering excellent customer experiences. By providing high-quality services and ensuring customer satisfaction, TELECOM firms can increase the likelihood that customers will recommend their services to others.

TABLE 6: Likelihood of recommendation based on satisfaction of the customer.

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
Not Likely	7	8	16	6	3	Extremely likely	40	2.8	3.0
	17.5%	20.0%	40.0%	15.0%	7.5%				
Total	7	8	16	6	3		40	2.8	3.0

6.5 Customer satisfaction and effects on TELECOM companies

This section evaluates and discusses the customers satisfaction and its effects on telecom companies in the Buea municipality. Aspects as level of training of customer service providers, quality and accessibility of company communication channels were evaluated.

A significant portion of respondents (30%) strongly agree that the level of training and expertise of customer service representatives directly impacts the quality of service provided to customers. Additionally, 20% of respondents disagree with this statement, while 25% expressed a neutral stance (rating of 3 on the scale).

The average rating for this statement is 3.5, which suggests a generally positive sentiment among the respondents. The median rating of 4.0 further supports this, indicating that a substantial number of respondents perceive the level of training and expertise of customer service representatives to be highly influential in delivering quality service.

To maintain and improve service quality, the company must prioritize the training and development of their customer service representatives. By equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and expertise, they can effectively handle customer inquiries, resolve issues promptly, and provide satisfactory solutions. Continuous training programs and performance evaluations can help ensure that customer service representatives remain knowledgeable, competent, and capable of delivering high-quality service to customers. By investing in the training and expertise of their customer service representatives, the company can enhance the overall customer experience and build a positive reputation for providing excellent service.

TABLE 7: Training and expertise of TELECOM staff on the quality of service

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
	1	8	10	12	9	Strongly agree	40	3.5	4.0
	2.5%	20.0%	25.0%	30.0%	22.5%				
Total	1	8	10	12	9		40	3.5	4.0

Furthermore, regarding accessibility and quality of communication channels, 32.5% of respondents were neutral on the fact that the quality and accessibility of communication channels, such as phones, emails, and chats, directly impact the quality of service provided to customers. Additionally, 25% of respondents strongly agree with this statement while 15% agree with the statement.

On the other hand, 17.5% of respondents strongly disagree, indicating a minority who believe that communication channels do not significantly affect service quality. Meanwhile, 10% of respondents expressed a rating of 2 (disagree) To provide high-quality service, the company needs to prioritize the quality and accessibility of communication channels. This can be achieved by ensuring that communication channels are reliable, easily accessible, and responsive. Prompt response times, clear communication, and effective resolution of customer queries and concerns through these channels can significantly enhance the overall customer experience. Regular monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of communication channels are necessary to meet customer expectations and maintain high service standards. By investing in robust communication systems and providing adequate training and support to customer service representatives who utilize these channels, the company can improve service quality, increase customer satisfaction, and foster positive customer relationships.

TABLE 8: Communication Channels and service quality

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
Strongly disagree	7	4	13	10	6	Strongly agree	40	3.1	3.0
	17.5%	10.0%	32.5%	25.0%	15.0%				
Total	7	4	13	10	6		40	3.1	3.0

To add, the study suggests based on the data that there is a range of opinions regarding the company's policies and procedures for handling customer complaints and their impact on the quality of services provided. While some respondents strongly disagree or disagree (7.5%) that these policies and procedures affect service quality, a larger percentage of respondents agree or strongly agree (45%) that there is an impact as seen on table 9. The average rating for this statement is 3.2, suggesting a moderate level of agreement among the respondents. The median rating of 3.0 further supports this moderate level of agreement. The company needs to consider these opinions and feedback when evaluating and improving its customer complaint-handling processes to ensure high-quality services for its customers.

TABLE 9: Company's policies and procedures on service quality

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
Strongly disagree	3	10	10	9	8	Strongly	40	3.2	3.0
	7.5%	25.0%	25.0%	22.5%	20.0%	agree			
Total	3	10	10	9	8		40	3.2	3.0

The data shows that a significant proportion of respondents (28.2%) strongly agree that the company's willingness to listen to customer feedback and make improvements directly affects the quality of services provided to customers. Additionally, 25.6% of respondents agree with this statement. On the other hand, 20.5% of respondents indicated a neutral stance. Only a small percentage (10.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 15.4% expressed a rating of 1 (strongly disagreed). The average rating for this statement is 3.4, indicating moderate agreement among the respondents. The median rating of 4.0 further supports this, suggesting that a considerable number of respondents perceive the company's willingness to listen to customer feedback and make improvements as having a positive impact on service quality.

TABLE 10: Company's willingness to feedback and improvement on service quality

	1	2	3	4	5		Total	Average	Median
	6	4	8	11	10	Strongly agree	39	3.4	4.0
	15.4%	10.3%	20.5%	28.2%	25.6%				
Total	6	4	8	11	10		39	3.4	4.0

To provide high-quality services, it is crucial for the company to actively seek and value customer feedback. By listening to customers, understanding their needs and preferences, and implementing necessary improvements based on their feedback, the company can enhance the overall quality of its services. Creating feedback channels, such as surveys, feedback forms, or dedicated customer support channels, can facilitate open and transparent communication between the company and its customers. Regularly reviewing and analyzing customer feedback, identifying areas for improvement, and taking prompt action are essential for meeting customer expectations and continuously enhancing service quality. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to listening to customer feedback and making improvements, the company can build customer trust, loyalty, and satisfaction. It also enables the company to adapt to changing customer needs and stay ahead in a competitive market environment.

7 CONCLUSION

Maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction by providing their clientele with value-added transactions through positive customer service interactions is the mandate of most successful companies. In turn, the customer expects to feel important and assisted during the interactions that ultimately lead to their desired result. The Network and Telecommunication industry has and is experiencing a radical and innovative change, in relationship building and maintenance. This is expected to lead to greater marketing productivity by making it more effective and efficient, hence more satisfaction rates from clients.

Thus, this study aims to examine the importance of building and maintaining relationships through customer service quality and the organizational performance of TELECOM firms in Buea. Customer satisfaction is a considerable part of business, which makes it important to assess its effectiveness and efficiency properly and correctly.

Considering the aim of the study, the following objectives were accomplished; the satisfaction level of customers based on quality service provided by TELECOM firms was analysed, dimensions of service quality which caused customers satisfaction or dissatisfaction were identified as well as their levels with the aid of the SERVQUAL Model. Furthermore, factors that affect the quality of service provided to the customers were identified.

The study makes use of the GAP analysis and the SERVQUAL model. These theories and models serve as a baseline for understanding how important it is for companies to build and maintain relationships with customers, how their services are viewed and how impactful they are to customers. A quantitative, deductive research approach was employed using questionnaires to gather data.

The study's data indicate that most respondents are classified as detractors, expressing low satisfaction and the likelihood to continue using TELECOM services in the future. There is a smaller percentage of respondents classified as passives and promoters, indicating varying levels of satisfaction and loyalty.

Based on the satisfaction ratings, respondents are inclined not to recommend TELECOM services to others, which may negatively impact the company's word-of-mouth potential. The data also suggests

that TELECOM firms need to focus on building and maintaining customer relationships to positively impact their overall performance.

In terms of trust in protecting personal information and privacy, most respondents fall into the promoter's category, indicating a high level of trust in TELECOM firms. However, there are still detractors and passives who express a lack of trust, emphasizing the need for the company to address privacy concerns and strengthen data protection measures.

Regarding willingness to pay more for improved services, a significant portion of respondents are open to paying more if the quality improves. This presents an opportunity for TELECOM firms to enhance its service offerings and potentially increase revenue by delivering higher-quality services. The overall satisfaction with TELECOM services is moderate, with room for improvement to enhance customer satisfaction. TELECOM companies need to address customer concerns, improve service quality, and ensure consistent and reliable service delivery to improve satisfaction levels.

In terms of specific aspects, reliability and responsiveness are considered moderately important by respondents, while assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees) is rated slightly higher in importance. Recognizing the significance of these aspects and taking steps to meet customer expectations can enhance satisfaction and overall service quality.

To summarize, TELECOM firms in Buea should focus on addressing customer concerns, improving service quality, building customer relationships, strengthening data protection measures, and ensuring reliable and responsive services. By doing so, the companies can enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and trust, ultimately improving its overall performance.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Information

1. What is your age? Below 18[] 18-30[] 30 and above[]
2. What is your gender? Male[] Female[]
3. What is your occupation? Entrepreneur[] Student[] Civil Servant[] others []
4. What is your level of education? Elementary education [] Advance Level[] Degree and above[]

SECTION B: What is the impact of customer satisfaction on the performance of MTN Cameroon?

	Statements	SD	D	N	SA	A
1	Based on my satisfaction with TELECOM services, I will likely continue using the company's services.					
2	Based on my satisfaction with TELECOM services, I am likely to recommend the company to others in the future					
3	TELECOM firms focus on building and maintaining relationships with its customers positively impacts the company's overall performance in the telecommunications industry.					
4	I trust TELECOM firms to protect my personal information and privacy.					
5	If the quality of services provided by TELECOM firms were to improve, I would be willing to pay more for those services.					

SECTION C: What are the dimensions of service quality which have caused customers to be satisfied or dissatisfied using the SERVQUAL Model?

Service Quality Dimensions

1. How satisfied are you with the services provided by TELECOM firms in Buea? Very Satisfied[] Not satisfied[] Slightly Satisfied []
6. How important do you think each of the following service quality dimensions are when evaluating TELECOM services?
 - a. Reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately)

Not Important[] | Slightly Important[] | Moderately Important[] | Very Important | Extremely Important[]

b. Responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service)

Not Important[] | Slightly Important[] | Moderately Important[] | Very Important[] | Extremely Important[]

c. Assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence)

Not Important[] | Slightly Important[] | Moderately Important[] | Very Important[] | Extremely Important[]

d. Empathy (caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers)

Not Important[] | Slightly Important[] | Moderately Important[] | Very Important[] | Extremely Important[]

e. Tangibles (appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials)

Not Important[] | Slightly Important[] | Moderately Important[] | Very Important[] | Extremely Important[]

Service Quality Evaluation

8. How well do you think TELECOM firms meets your expectations for each of the service quality dimensions listed above?

a. Reliability

Poorly[] | Fairly[] | Moderately[] | Well[] | Very Well[]

b. Responsiveness

Poorly [] | Fairly[] | Moderately[] | Well[] | Very Well[]

c. Assurance

Poorly[] | Fairly[] | Moderately[] | Well[] | Very Well[]

d. Empathy

Poorly[] | Fairly[] | Moderately[] | Well[] | Very Well[]

e. Tangibles

Poorly[] | Fairly[] | Moderately[] | Well[] | Very Well[]

How likely are you to recommend the services of TELECOM firms to others based on your satisfaction with the service quality dimensions listed above?

Not Likely[] | Slightly Likely[] | Moderately Likely[] | Very Likely[] | Extremely Likely[]

SECTION D: Has customer satisfaction affected the individual staff of TELECOM firms in any way?

Statements	SD	D	N	SA	A
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1	The level of training and expertise of customer service representatives affects the quality of service provided to customers.					
2	The quality and accessibility of communication channels (e.g. phone, email, chat) affect the quality of service provided to customers.					
3	The company's policies and procedures for handling customer complaints affect the quality of service provided to customers.					
4	The company's culture and values impact the quality of service provided to customers.					
5	The company's willingness to listen to customer feedback and make improvements affects the quality of service provided to customers.					

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