

Perceptions of service quality dimensions and patronage of street food vendors in South African townships

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ABSTRACT

Street food vendors are common in South Africa's townships and are typically patronised by individuals in lower-income brackets. The extent to which service quality considerations play a role in the patronage of such informal, survivalist food businesses remains largely unexplored as service quality studies tend to focus more on well-established businesses. In response to this shortcoming, this empirical study investigates whether customers' perceptions of service quality – based on the dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – are related to repeat patronage of street food vendors. The researchers assumed a positivist philosophical disposition and relied on data collected from a purposive sample of patrons to investigate the possible existence of relationships between service quality dimensions and repeat patronage. Results revealed favourable perception scores for tangibles, assurance and reliability but not for responsiveness and empathy. The service quality perceptions of first-time customers were also shown to be statistically different from those of repeat patrons. Interestingly, while findings point to the existence of statistically significant relationships between service quality dimensions and repeat patronage, the weak and moderate strengths of the identified relationships highlight that patronage considerations for the studied population possibly lie outside the five dimensions of service quality.

Keywords: customer perceptions; street vending; food; service quality; patronage; townships

INTRODUCTION

Rising demand for food in the population has led to an increase in food service outlets which in turn, has heightened the level of competition in the industry. According to Nwokah & Adiele (2018:1), this increasing demand for food is because of changes in consumption patterns, composition of households, income levels and time-pressures that are evident in modern society. While there are studies conducted on service quality, the area of customers' service quality perceptions and repeat patronage of informal street food vendors in South African townships remains largely unexplored. This is partly because studies on street food vending, according to Stutter (2017:2), have focused primarily on issues of health, hygiene and safety related to the foods being sold.

As a type of business, street vending involves, among others, the sale of food and the provision of hairdressing services or even car repairs that take place on pavements, kiosks, busy public areas, bus stations and open spaces in towns and cities (Mukhola, 2015:309). In essence, street vending entails the offering of products/services to the public using temporary, static or mobile stalls. Street food comprises ready-to-eat meals and beverages usually sold

in streets and other similar places (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2009). Over time, street food vending has been recognised as a fast-growing area of business and is becoming a worldwide phenomenon, because street food is an important source of daily meals for many people living in urban areas (Rheinlander, 2006:6) – particularly for low-income earners. This may be the case within South African townships where a significant portion of the resident population falls below subsistence levels and remains impoverished (World Bank, 2014). According to Thulo (2015), this is because, in South Africa, approximately 60% of unemployed people reside in the townships and informal settlements.

Townships in South Africa, according to Cant (2017), are typically underdeveloped urban residential areas which were earmarked for Indians, Coloureds and Africans, owing to the racial segregation policy of the government during the apartheid era. Bvuma & Marnewick (2020) assert that the apartheid government prohibited black people from owning businesses and threatened them with prosecution for engaging in business activities. While the apartheid-era laws no longer exist in the post-1994 democratic South Africa, Marnewick (2014) argues that townships still bear incontrovertible evidence of past abandonment as they lack infrastructure and resources that are required to support businesses and decent living in general. It is against this background that Cant & Rabie (2018) declare that many challenges confront small businesses in South Africa's townships – to which even the government is privy.

Nonetheless, Brown & Rammidi (2014:79) opine that small businesses in the informal sector contribute substantially to economic growth in developing countries. In essence, since township-based businesses, like those owned by street food vendors, are typically informal in nature, their value to the South African economy cannot be disregarded. In spite of this, research specifically focused on the township small-business context, in South Africa, is generally lacking (Bvuma & Marnewick, 2020). Cognisant of the importance of street food vending, and the paucity of research on service quality concerning such businesses in developing countries, this empirical study is driven by the intention to enrich extant literature in this regard, especially from a South African context. In doing so, the study concurrently seeks to highlight some practical lessons for street food vendors and other stakeholders in the industry. Consequently, the objectives of the study are to:

- ascertain customers' perceptions of the performance of street food vendors as it pertains to service quality dimensions;
- determine if statistical differences exist in the perceptions of the service quality dimensions between repeat patrons and first-time customers of street food vendors; and
- establish if there are any relationships between customers' perceptions of service quality dimensions and repeat patronage of street food vendors in South African townships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Street food vending

Besides servicing the need for food, street food vendors play an important role in showcasing local culture and traditions through various types of cuisines often sold on the street from non-permanent structures (Choi, Lee & Ok, 2013:223). In South Africa, a common street food sold by vendors is the Sowetan kota, which is a quarter-loaf of white bread often stuffed with a mix of processed meat and fried potato chips (Steyn, Labadarios & Nel, 2011:6). Generally, street food vendors fall within the category of survivalist businesses, described by Bvuma & Marnewick (2020) as businesses that exist primarily as a means of subsistence for their owners and dependants. Street food vendors mostly operate from non-permanent stalls, typically without superfluties, that barely meet the functional requirements of their businesses. This notwithstanding, street food vending businesses have become popular among customers, largely because of their lower prices relative to formal fast-food outlets, and this has made them an attractive option mostly for people in lower-income groups (Steyn et al., 2011:1).

Service quality and repeat patronage

Service quality is an abstract and contextual concept (Izogo, 2017:22; Zietsman Mostert & Svensson, 2019:3) that is worthy of attention in an increasingly competitive business environment. Eresia-Eke, Stephanou & Swanepoel (2018:1) aver that in a contemporary business environment, the consistent delivery of good quality service could be what distinguishes a struggling business from a thriving one. In consonance with this opinion, Hossain, Hossain & Chowdhury (2018:148) maintain that service quality is, undoubtedly, a critical element of success for any business.

According to Tegambwage (2017:76), service quality is essentially based on a comparison of the customers' expectation (before using the service) and their experience (after using the service). Therefore, service quality pivots around efforts to meet the expectations of customers (Van Truong, Pham & Vo, 2016:122). These positions clearly signal that service quality is a concept determined on the basis of customer perceptions, which businesses can ill-afford to take for granted. The need for businesses to pay ample attention to service quality is emphasised as the rendering of high-quality service catalyses business success because, across diverse industries, service quality contributes to customer satisfaction (Teeroovengadum, 2020). In support of this stance, Izogo & Ogba (2015:254) argue that service quality substantially contributes to customer loyalty, while Santhi & Ganesh (2015:243) assert that in the services sector, service quality can engender business profitability. These opinions imply that favourable customer perceptions of a food vendor's service quality, relative to those of competitors, would engender improved business performance.

Among street food vendors, improved business performance, in terms of sales revenue, may be attributed to repeat patronage, which is evidenced by repurchases made by customers. Research shows that for restaurants, service quality is an essential factor in customers' repeat patronage intentions (Kim, Ng & Kim, 2009:11). The more favourably customers rate the service quality offering of a business, the higher their patronage intentions of that particular business are likely to become (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss, 2002:135). Understanding patronage intentions enables businesses to serve customers better (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006:229); therefore, this may prove critical for street food vendors. This is to be expected, as customers that are satisfied with the service-quality of a business would repeatedly make use of the service (Teeroovengadum, 2020). For the measurement of service quality, the current study adopts the Parasuraman, Zeithami & Berry (1988) SERVQUAL model, which comprises five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Instructively, each of these dimensions can be quantified by measuring customers' perceptions of the performance levels of the service attributes relevant to each dimension (Hansen, 2014:119).

Tangibles, as a service quality dimension, refer to the physical evidence of a service, such as the facilities, equipment and the employees that render the service (Baloglu, Busser, Kincaid & Mao, 2010:210; Saliba & Zoran, 2018:163). Customers generally pay attention to tangibles when evaluating the service quality of a business (Esmailpour, Mohamadi & Rajabi, 2016; Priporas, Stylos & Vedanthachari, 2017; Wang & Nicolau, 2017; Ju, Back, Choi & Lee, 2019). However, a contrary opinion is peddled by Gagic, Tesanovic & Jovicic (2013:172) who insist that tangibles do not play a significant role in influencing the service quality perceptions of customers. According to Malhotra, Ulgado, Agarwal, Shainesh & Wu (2005:266), in developing countries, unlike in developed countries, customers tend to be satisfied with just the acceptable performance of the core service since they utilise highly functional criteria for making choices; they are, therefore, usually not interested in extended features or benefits. This observation is debatable as the decision to patronise a store, with regard to tangibles, is likely to be determined by the degree of sensitivity of the customer to physical stimuli. This position is supported by Dabestani, Shahi, Saljoughian & Shirouyehzad (2016:172) who assert that in the hotel industry, for instance, tangibles are critical to the creation of positive perceptions of service quality and the courting of patronage. Mindful of the discordance in opinions, this study elects to hypothesise that with respect to street food vendors in South African townships:

H1: A significant relationship exists between customer perceptions of the service quality dimension of tangibles and repeat patronage

Reliability, as a service quality dimension, refers to the capacity to consistently perform the required service accurately and dependably (Kwok, Jusoh & Khalifah, 2016a). This implies that the dimension of reliability is concerned with a service provider's ability to deliver or perform the promised service consistently and accurately (Fida, Ahmed, Al-Balushi & Singh, 2020). According to Yousapronpaiboon (2014:1093), reliability is about businesses providing services as promised. This is likely to elicit customer satisfaction rather than complaints. In many cases, reliability has proven to be a critical service dimension because whenever the main service is not delivered as expected, customers switch to another service provider (Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017:6). In agreement with this, the study of Du Plooy, Van Zyl & De Jager (2012), which was conducted on the informal grocery retail sector in South Africa, revealed that reliability

was an important factor for customers' purchase decisions. Encouraged by this position, the study hypothesises that in the context of street food vendors in South African townships:

H2: A significant relationship exists between customer perceptions of the service quality dimension of reliability and repeat patronage

Yarimoglu (2014:83) suggests that responsiveness, as a service quality dimension, is concerned with the readiness or willingness to be of assistance to customers while rendering the service. This could be of critical importance among street food vendors, especially as competitors offering similar products are located close by, which could make switching to a different vendor, quite easy. Alhkami & Alarussi (2016:119) assert that the responsiveness dimension of service quality is important because customers often feel more valued if they sense that the business takes their expectations seriously and adequately responds to their needs. To further this argument, Wu, Huang & Chou (2014:175) posit that responsiveness is indeed the most critical service quality dimension considered by patrons of people-based businesses (as opposed to machine-based or automated businesses). These arguments encourage the projection that in street food vending businesses, favourable perceptions of responsiveness by customers may coincide with repeat patronage of a specific vendor. Consequently, the study hypothesises that among street food vendors in South African townships:

H3: A significant relationship exists between customer perceptions of the service quality dimension of responsiveness and repeat patronage

Assurance, as a dimension of service quality, relates to the utilisation of knowledge/skills to create and nurture confidence in customers that the desired service would be delivered as required. In a study of Malaysian Islamic banks, Kashif, Wan Shukran, Rehman & Sarifuddin (2015) found that assurance has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Granted that this is the case, it would be tenable to expect that satisfied customers would embody a higher propensity to remain with the bank, and this amounts to repeat patronage. Moghavvemi, Lee & Lee (2018) found that bank customers in Malaysia – in an online banking context – considered assurance as the most important service quality dimension that contributes to customer satisfaction. To the contrary, Tucci & Talaga's (2000) study of customers' perceptions of service quality in restaurants found that assurance does not play a significant role in the customer satisfaction equation, as customers do not perceive the knowledge (or lack thereof) of a service provider as a critical factor for determining service quality.

The arguments related to assurance as a service quality dimension, reveal a lack of consensus in opinions and findings in extant literature. To some extent, the existence of these different opinions indicates that perceptions of service quality dimensions differ across contexts (Teeroovengadam, 2020). The implication of this is that previous findings – generated from studies in different contexts – may not provide a premise to make accurate inferences about the perceptions of assurance (as a service quality dimension) among customers of street food vendors in South African townships. Nonetheless, persuaded by the argument of Fida et al. (2020) that satisfactory business performance along the dimension of assurance will lessen anxieties among customers about the service being provided, the study projects that favourable perceptions of assurance may encourage repeat purchases from particular street food vendors in South African townships. Therefore, this study, while acknowledging the lack of consensus in the extant literature, opts to hypothesise that for street food vendors operating in South African townships:

H4: A significant relationship exists between customer perceptions of the service quality dimension of assurance and repeat patronage

Empathy refers to the care and personal attention given to customers in the course of rendering the service. According to Nell & Cant (2014), empathy relates to the attention and care that the business accords its customers so that their needs are met. In order for street food vendors to do this, they would have to understand the customer. While it would seem important to understand all aspects of the customer's life, in developing countries it is more important for

businesses to understand how the customer uses and benefits from a service (Malhotra et al., 2005:262). The study of Lee, Kim, Ko & Sagas (2011) on high-profile golf club businesses found that empathy scored the highest relative to other service quality dimensions and is, therefore, an important antecedent of customer satisfaction. Similarly, Bougoure & Neu (2010) found in their study of Malaysian fast-food restaurants that failure to provide empathetic services to consumers led to customer dissatisfaction.

In another study conducted by Kwok et al. (2016b), empathy was adjudged to be critical to customers' perceived quality of service. Against this background, it is plausible that in cases where customers feel that they have not received desired individualised attention, stemming from a business' low empathetic disposition, it could result in a dissatisfied customer and, ultimately, the possible loss of patronage. Conversely, if the customers feel that they have received desired individualised attention from a street food vendor in a South African township, it is likely to result in repeat patronage. Based on this view, it is hypothesised that in the context of street food vendors in South African townships:

H5: A significant relationship exists between the service quality dimension of empathy and repeat patronage

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This empirical quantitative study was conducted from the philosophical standpoint of positivism. The target population for this study consists of individuals who purchased food from street food vendors in the South African townships of Mamelodi, Palm Springs and Thaba Nchu. As the study focuses on the perceptions of service quality linked to street food vendors in townships, the units of observation were the individual customers.

The study employs a non-probability, purposive sampling method since there was no accurate or suitable sampling frame available from which to draw a probability sample. Without a sampling frame, it cannot be guaranteed that every member of the population has an equal chance of being included in the study (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin & Zikmund, 2015:180), and this would make random sampling problematic. An effort, however, was made to ensure that the study sample is demographically diverse and reflects the composition of the target population.

Data for the study was collected by intercepting the customers of street food vendors after they had purchased their desired meals. Though over 300 individuals were physically approached to participate in the study, not all of them accepted the request. This was for various reasons including lack of interest and time constraints. Nonetheless, the study realised 200 completed questionnaires. The measuring instrument was predominantly based on Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) 22-item SERVQUAL scale which is used for the measurement of perceived service quality. The SERVQUAL scale comprised statements to which customers of street food vendors responded by selecting one of seven options on a 7-point Likert-style scale. Options ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The instrument also contained questions about patronage and the demographics of the respondents. With the use of the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 programme, descriptive and inferential statistical tools were subsequently employed for the purpose of data analysis.

Although the SERVQUAL instrument was previously utilised and validated in other studies (see Husin, Romle, Udin, Shahuri & Yusoff, 2016; Datta & Vardhan, 2017; Tegambwage, 2017), it was still analysed in this study to ascertain its reliability. The results are shown in Table 1.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficients – for all the service quality dimensions – are above the generally recommended

TABLE 1
RESULTS OF RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Service quality dimensions	Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy
Number of scale items	4	5	4	4	5
Cronbach's alpha	0.829	0.848	0.742	0.748	0.837

threshold of 0.7. Item-total statistics were considered, especially Cronbach's alpha coefficients that could be realised if a specific item is deleted. It was observed that no meaningful improvement would be achieved. Moreover, since the SERVQUAL instrument was previously validated and utilised in various studies, the scales and measurement items were not altered and were considered to be reliable enough for the data that were collected through them to be analysed.

Ethical considerations

The ethical requirements for undertaking academic research were complied with. Part of this meant that each respondent was required to read and sign an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire. The form explained the purpose of the study and emphasised that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that the respondent could withdraw at any time. It also assured anonymity and confidentiality. Consequently, respondents' names and other identifying information were not required and were, therefore, not included in the data set. All results were calculated and reported at an aggregate level and not at the level of individual respondents.

Presentation of Findings

As presented in Table 2, the demographic profile of the respondent population for the study shows that it was made up of 125 males (62.5%), 72 females (36%) and 3 individuals (1.5%) who chose not to indicate their gender. Concerning the ages of respondents, four age-group categories of 18-25 years, 26-35 years, 36-45 years and over-45 years were created. Responses show that the highest number (74 or 37%) of individuals that took part in the study was in the 26-35 years' bracket. Conversely, the least represented age category was the 36-45 years bracket which had 28 respondents (14%).

Table 3 presents the values of the means and standard deviations associated with the service quality dimensions

**TABLE 2:
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS (N=200)**

		N	Valid Percent (%)
Gender	Male	125	62.5
	Female	72	36
	Missing	3	1.5
	Total	200	100
Age	18-25	48	24
	26-35	74	37
	36-45	28	14
	45+	47	23.5
	Missing	3	1.5
	Total	200	100

that were measured. The highest and lowest mean values, based on the 7-point Likert scale that was utilised, were associated with the dimensions of assurance (5.60) and empathy (3.09), respectively. Compared to the mid-point score of 3.5 on a 7-point scale, the mean scores obtained for the dimensions of assurance, tangibles and reliability are indicative of favourable customer perceptions. In contrast, the mean scores for the dimensions of empathy and responsiveness signal that customers have a poor perception of the performance of the street food vendors with respect to those dimensions.

TABLE 3
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (N=200)

Constructs	Mean	Standard deviation
Tangibles	5.48	1.30
Reliability	5.40	1.30
Responsiveness	3.19	1.41
Assurance	5.60	1.15
Empathy	3.09	1.45

The study sought to determine if statistically significant differences exist between the perceptions of service quality dimensions of repeat patrons and those of first-time customers of street food vendors. Before this could be done, it was necessary to examine associated data for normality and linearity in order to determine whether to utilise a parametric or non-parametric statistical tool for the intended analysis. The study employed a Shapiro-Wilk test and a visual analysis of distributions, displayed in histograms and Q-Q probability plots, to evaluate the normality and linearity of the data distribution related to perceptions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The Shapiro-Wilk test results are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4:
RESULTS OF THE SHAPIRO WILK TEST OF NORMALITY

		Shapiro Wilk	
		Statistic	p-value
Tangibles	Repeat Patrons	.845	.000
	First-time Customers	.961	.526
Reliability	Repeat Patrons	.890	.000
	First-time Customers	.975	.833
Responsiveness	Repeat Patrons	.952	.000
	First-time Customers	.959	.494
Assurance	Repeat Patrons	.902	.000
	First-time Customers	.940	.222
Empathy	Repeat Patrons	.924	.000
	First-time Customers	.960	.513

For all the service quality dimensions, the p-value for repeat patrons is less than 0.05. This is an indication that the data linked to the repeat patrons sub-group are not normally distributed. Conversely, for all the service quality dimensions, the p-value for first-time customers is greater than 0.05, indicating that the data associated with this sub-group of respondents has a normal distribution. However, before deciding to use either the parametric independent samples t-test or its non-parametric alternative, the Mann-Whitney U test, it was imperative to examine the distributions graphically. Interestingly, a visual inspection of the normal Q-Q plots revealed the existence of acceptably linear relationships for all the service quality dimensions – for both the repeat patrons and first-time customers. In effect, the visual inspection of the data distribution showed that the assumption of linearity was not violated. Consequently, the conclusion was that the deviation from normality of the repeat patrons' sub-group was not substantial; an independent samples t-test was, therefore, utilised for further analysis of the data.

The independent samples t-test was conducted to simultaneously evaluate the second assumption of equality of variances and determine if there are statistically significant differences between the perceptions of repeat patrons and those of first-time customers, as it pertains to the five dimensions of service quality. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
RESULTS OF THE INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	p-value	t	df ^a	p-value (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Tangibles	Equal variances assumed	.676	.412	5.844	194	.000	1.62397	.27789
	Equal variances not assumed			5.439	24.173	.000	1.62397	.29859
Reliability	Equal variances assumed	.309	.579	7.003	194	.000	1.87314	.26746
	Equal variances not assumed			6.845	24.750	.000	1.87314	.27365
Responsiveness	Equal variances assumed	.001	.972	2.440	194	.016	.78413	.194
	Equal variances not assumed			2.407	24.867	.024	.78413	24.867
Assurance	Equal variances assumed	.016	.900	8.619	194	.000	1.94000	.22508
	Equal variances not assumed			8.209	24.435	.000	1.94000	.23634
Empathy	Equal variances assumed	.886	.348	3.813	194	.000	1.22324	.32078
	Equal variances not assumed			4.210	26.576	.000	1.22324	.29053

The p-values obtained with the Levene's test for equality of variances for the service quality dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were 0.412, 0.579, 0.972, 0.900 and 0.348, respectively. Given that all these values are greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis of equal variances could not be rejected, which meant that the t-test assuming equal variances had to be interpreted. Accordingly, the p-values obtained with the t-test for Equality of Means, with equal variances assumed, are 0.000 for all the service quality dimensions, except for the dimension of responsiveness where the p-value obtained is 0.016. At a 95% confidence level, these p-values provide statistical support for the position that there are, indeed, statistically significant differences in the perceptions of repeat patrons and first-time customers as far as the dimensions of service quality are concerned.

Since the dependent variable of the study was measured on a dichotomous, ordinal scale, the study's hypotheses were tested with the use of the point-biserial correlation analysis. The aim of undertaking the point-biserial correlation analysis was to establish whether there was a statistically significant relationship between each service quality dimension (independent variables) and the study's dependent variable of repeat patronage. Table 6 shows the results obtained for each service quality dimension.

The fact that all the p-values presented in Table 6 are less than 0.05 is evidence that statistically significant relationships exist between the independent variables of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and the dependent variable of repeat patronage at a 95% confidence level. Against this background, the study

TABLE 6
RESULTS OF POINT-BISERIAL CORRELATION TESTS (N=196)

		Repeat patronage
Tangibles	Pearson Correlation	-.387**
	p-value	.000
Reliability	Pearson Correlation	-.449**
	p-value	.000
Responsiveness	Pearson Correlation	-.173'
	p-value	.016
Assurance	Pearson Correlation	-.526**
	p-value	.000
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	-.264**
	p-value	.000

** Correlation is significant

concludes that there is statistical support for its five hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5) that suggest the existence of significant relationships between each of the service quality dimensions and repeat patronage of street food vendors. The values of the Pearson correlation coefficients imply that inverse relationships exist between the five service quality dimensions and repeat patronage. According to Dancey & Reidy (2007), correlation coefficients in the 0.010 to 0.39, 0.40 to 0.69 and 0.70 to 0.90 ranges represent weak, moderate and strong relationships, respectively. Consequently, the results in Table 6 indicate that the relationships between repeat patronage and each of the service quality dimensions of tangibles, responsiveness and empathy (as expressed in H1, H3, and H5) are weak. Furthermore, the relationships between repeat patronage and the service quality dimensions of reliability and assurance (as expressed in H2 and H4) are moderate.

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the study found that all service quality dimensions are statistically related to repeat patronage, it also provided evidence that customer perceptions of the performance of street food vendors, specifically concerning the service quality dimensions of responsiveness and empathy, lag behind the other three dimensions. Nevertheless, in the spirit of continuous improvement, it is necessary for street food vendors to repeatedly examine their entire service offering to establish specific areas where improvements can be made – while being guided by the framework of the five service quality dimensions.

Firstly, regarding the dimension of tangibles, while it is understandable that street food vendors typically operate from non-permanent structures, they must ensure that their outlets are always clean and well-kept. This not only improves the aesthetic appeal of their outlets, but it also has important safety and hygiene implications. Secondly, as it pertains to the reliability dimension, street food vendors have to devise quicker ways of food preparation and service. It may be worthwhile for street food vendors to have some components of the food mixed and ready, akin to semi-finished goods in a manufacturing process. Upon receipt of a customer's order, the food can then be finalised in accordance with the customer's requirements. Thirdly, with respect to the dimension of responsiveness, street food vendors should actively source customer opinions and improvement suggestions, as these could enable the vendors to identify important areas where adjustments can easily be made to meet customers' expectations. Fourthly, for the dimension of assurance, street food vendors may need to enrol in short-apprenticeship food-vending courses and conspicuously display approvals to operate, issued by local municipalities, as these may help to build trust and confidence in customers. Lastly, regarding the empathy dimension of service quality, street food vendors may need to engage more, even if informally, with customers. Such engagements could improve their knowledge of customers, foster stronger relationships and improve their ability to provide individualised attention to patrons.

The identified weak and moderate correlations between service quality dimensions and repeat patronage are instructive. The results could mean that the overbearing consideration for study respondents, vis-à-vis their patronage of street food vendors may be linked to a kaleidoscope of other considerations not limited to quantity, convenience and cost, among others. Street food vendors typically sell quickly-prepared food to customers; this characteristic of street food vendors could mean that what drives patronage goes beyond the strict dimensions of tangibility, assurance, empathy, reliability and responsiveness, which are typically applied to more established service organisations. This is understandably so, given that street food vendors are located in the townships and their target market generally comprises low-income earners. This is the case, as South Africa is faced with high levels of poverty and unemployment (Ohonba, Ngepah & Simo-Kengne, 2019:33) and a proportion of this cohort of people reside in townships. It is therefore plausible that the individuals from the townships who participated in the current study fall within the low-income bracket or are unemployed; therefore, issues of cost, for instance, rather than quality were paramount to them.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any other research endeavour, this study, along with its results, has some limitations. Since the relationships between the five service quality dimensions and repeat patronage were found to be either weak or moderate for the

respondent study population, future studies could sample other South African townships to test the veracity of these findings. Additionally, a qualitative methodological approach could be utilised for investigating the nexus between customers' perceptions of service quality dimensions and repeat patronage. The use of a non-probability sampling technique means that the results of the study cannot be generalised to a larger population. As the study focused on customers in selected South African townships, the results cannot be presumed to be true for every other location where street food vendors operate in South Africa. Future research could, therefore, be based on data obtained from randomly selected respondents. Further, the fact that repeat patronage was measured on a dichotomous, ordinal scale limited the statistical analysis options for the study's data; this can be avoided with the use of interval or ratio scales. In addition, future studies could further investigate the curious finding of an inverse relationship between service quality dimensions and repeat patronage – particularly among low-income earners – as this could validate or disprove the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

The study was driven by the intention to realise three objectives. Firstly, the study sought to ascertain customers' perceptions of the performance of street food vendors as it pertains to service quality dimensions. Findings showed that customers had favourable perceptions of street food vendors' performance with respect to the service quality dimensions of tangibles, responsiveness and assurance, but this was not quite the case for empathy and reliability. Secondly, the study sought to determine if statistical differences exist between the perceptions of service quality dimensions of repeat patrons and those of first-time customers of street food vendors. The results of an independent samples t-test indicated that statistically significant differences exist between repeat patrons' and first-time customers' perceptions of street food vendors' performance, for the five dimensions of service quality. Finally, the third study objective was to establish if there are any relationships between customers' perceptions of service quality dimensions and repeat patronage of street food vendors in South African townships. Results of the point-biserial correlation analysis showed that all the service quality dimensions – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – had statistically significant relationships with repeat patronage.

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