

DETERMINANTS OF PARENTAL SATISFACTION IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL EXPLORATORY FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This exploratory case study examines the contributing factors of parental satisfaction within private school in a metropolitan city of, Pakistan, a context where intensifying competition and amplified parental expectations have made satisfaction a critical indicator of institutional success. Despite the escalating role of the private education sector in Pakistan, limited pragmatic research exists on how parents' express satisfaction and what factors figure their perceptions. Guided by the a priori framework of service quality, product quality, and price, this study employed a qualitative case-based methodology involving in-depth interviews with school administrators and focus group consultations with parents. Using iterative cycles of data collection and analysis, the research identified both universal and context-specific dimensions affecting satisfaction.

Findings reveal that while the five SERVQUAL dimensions—reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles—remain applicable, parents also feature satisfaction to product-related elements such as academic and non-academic activities, teaching methodology, assessment systems, disciplinary practices, and character-building programs. Additional determinants, including fee fairness and broader indicators of all-inclusive development, further enrich the model. Importantly, several items fall under “credence qualities,” reflecting outcomes (e.g., moral development) that parents cannot unswervingly confirm but strongly value.

The study adds a contextually grounded conceptual framework for understanding parental satisfaction in Pakistani private schools and highpoints dimensions that can guide school improvement ingenuities, measurement scale development, and future empirical research. By giving voice to parents in an under-researched perspective, this work provides foundational insights for educational management, service quality improvement, and policy considerations in developing realms.

Key words: Parental Satisfaction Private Schooling, Service Quality, SERVQUAL Model, Educational Management, Credence Qualities, Holistic Child Development, Parental expectations

INTRODUCTION

The state of education anywhere in the world requires continuous management and monitoring of environment both in micro perspective and macro perspectives respectively. The macro perspective as the name signifies takes stock or monitors the outside forces that particularly shape that industry whereas the micro perspective addresses the managerial concerns arising within an organization. The micro perspective which is the main concern of this study will be initiated in the problem statement section. But even before that the very need of linking parent satisfaction with the success of organization may be looked into.

The question arises as to why parent satisfaction, service quality or loyalty or other related concepts are crucial for success of organization and are thereby important requisites for management of schools. In Pakistan, private schools are not only facing intense competition with one another but the increasing awareness and demand from customers both parents and children have given a large impetus to the existence of quality education in both primary and secondary schools. Even for the university level education Arambewella and Hall (2009) have pointed out that student satisfaction is the major source of competitive advantage for the institution. Not only this, but student satisfaction ultimately has led towards student retention and positive word of mouth, which are again important objectives of an organization. Customer

satisfaction has been defined by Oliver (1997) as consumer's fulfilment response. It is a pleasurable or contented feeling that follows a service or product consumption experience.

The present study has been carried out in the back-drop of Pakistani culture. The proportion of the size of service sector is increasing both in developing and developed nations. In Pakistan the estimated size of service sector as a percentage of GDP is 53.7% (Lovelock, Wirtz & Chatterjee, 2007). In Pakistan, provision of quality education has become a hallmark of private sector schools of both primary and secondary levels; since the students and parents- the customers of education seem to be no less contented than receiving superior levels of quality education.

Problem Statement of the present research

Parents are interested to equip their children with competitive knowledge attributes, good mannerism etc. in order to make them adequately and superiorly compete with other children. Ambitious parents have even more expectations from their children. They want their children to excel and perform superiorly over the rest of the children so that they get admission into good colleges and universities and ultimately excel in the practical field. In order to meet such manifold expectations of parents and students, elementary and secondary schools devise unique strategies, rigorous physical and academic routines etc. to keep students satisfied with the school so that they do not go elsewhere currently and come again for further admission in future. Thus gauging parent satisfaction is of paramount importance from the perspective of customers—both parents and students and also from the perspective of school management. Parents' school satisfaction comprises of many dimensions including both academic and non-academic dimensions (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). Various studies witness multiple dimensions of parent satisfaction. Here in Pakistan very little published research has been done on both academic and non-academic dimensions and factors of education that could contribute to the things valued by parents—thus ultimately contributing to parents' satisfaction. Thus in our present research we resort to answer the following question.

What are the different factors or determinants of parent satisfaction specific to the city of Lahore the heart of Pakistan?

A priori approach (Eisenhardt, 1989) has been adopted in the formation of research question or research objective by incorporating the themes of service quality, product quality and price. The objectives of the present study are thereby

- To investigate the probable determinants of parent satisfaction and sort them out into meaningful and relevant dimensions keeping in view the theoretical categories of service quality, product quality and price.

Significance of the Research

This research is basically an investigation of factors contributing to parental satisfaction. Customer perspective was unravelled through qualitative techniques. Very little research has been done in Pakistan on these topics for schools. We can witness the importance of this research from various angles or rather from the point of view of various stakeholders. Since the importance of primary and secondary education cannot be denied, therefore it will offer as guidance for factors of parent satisfaction for education and society in general. Not only this but customer satisfaction will further aid in future researches which could help guide the school management in improving the standard of education since the aim of service providers is to improve the level of service being provided according to the dictates of their customers. This research has also given voice to parents in general since they invest in their children and always want to have maximum utility derived out of these future assets i.e. their

children. Sincere endeavour has been made to unleash relevant dimensions that could improve the quality of education thereby benefitting the society in general.

Literature Review

Customer Satisfaction and Educational Sector Researches

Customer satisfaction has been defined as a discrepancy between expectations and performance (Parasuraman, Zeithamal and Berry, 1994). Customer satisfaction has been defined by Oliver (1997) as consumer's fulfilment response. It is a pleasurable or contented feeling that follows a service or product consumption experience. Since, very little or no published research has been conducted on the topic of parental satisfaction in Pakistani schools, thus researches done in this field both, for university level education and school education for different countries have been resorted to since they belong to educational sector.

Service Quality (SQ) Researches

Parasuraman, Zeithamal and Berry (1985) proposed a model of perceived service quality in their research conducted on four service categories: retail banking, credit card, securities brokerage and products repair and maintenance. Focus group interviews with consumers were conducted while in-depth interviews were carried out with executives. Finally, a perceptual model of perceived service quality was established. In-depth interviews revealed the existence of five gaps. GAP1- The Knowledge Gap is a gap between consumer expectations and management perceptions. GAP2- The Standards Gap is a gap between management perception and service quality standards. Once the management becomes well versed with the expectations of their customers, they may fail to specify the service standards which may help in fulfilling those expectations. GAP3- the Delivery Gap is a gap between service quality standards and their delivery. The school may come to know about the precise expectations their customers, may have designed effective curriculum, rigorous educational routines, latest audio-visual aids, effective teaching methodology, adoption of relevant and interesting extracurricular activities for fulfilling the two previous gaps but may have failed in their implementation. Implementations of these strategies require hiring of people with right and suitable qualifications, training, developing and retaining them. GAP4- The communication Gap aims at adequately educating the customers so that he or she does not remain unaware and no over and under promises is done with him. The fifth gap results from the difference between consumer's expected service and his or her perceived or experienced service quality. Thus gap5 is a function of first four gaps. Focus groups revealed ten determinants of service quality that were found to be affecting the perceived service quality. They were reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding of customs and tangibles. This is a unique, comprehensive and well conducted research which served as a foundation stone for services marketing literature.

Product Quality (PQ)

Rathrnell (1966) utilised a concept of goods to services continuum with pure services at one end while pure goods at the other and the rest falling between the two. In the categorisation of products done by Shostack's (1977), salt falls on one extreme of the continuum which represents the fact that tangible elements dominate whereas fast food shop lies in the middle of the continuum signifying that tangible and intangible elements are balanced; nursing and teaching lies at the farthest end of the continuum signifying that intangible elements dominate.

Price (P)

Price acts as an important determinant of customer satisfaction since whenever customers judge or evaluate a service they also think of price (Anderson, Fornell and Lehmann, 1994).

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Parasuraman et al (1994) proposed a generic model for gauging customer satisfaction in service sector industries. They proposed transaction specific model that takes Product quality, price and service quality to be affecting Customer Satisfaction for service sector industries in general. These variables have already been discussed in the literature review. The specifications for service quality by the name of five RATER dimensions are: Reliability or the capability to perform the promised service accurately and consistently; Responsiveness which represents the willingness of employees to provide prompt service; Assurance which refers to the skills and knowledge and courtesy of employees which could inculcate trust and confidence in the customers; Empathy which refers to providing individualized attention to the customers and Tangibles which refer to the state of physical surroundings and equipment and personnel experience. These dimensions for service quality have been kept in this study but the items for each dimension were explored in greater detail so that new contextual factors and individual factors or past experience as specified by Parasuraman et al (1994) could surface in the research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is an exploratory study for unravelling the dynamics of the problem. Thus the focus of this section is specifying the research methodology of exploratory study.

Exploratory Study: Exploratory research is necessary to be carried out when not much is known about the situation or it is done to understand the dynamics of the situation so that a preliminary research model could be developed for further research. In short exploratory studies are carried out to better understand the nature of the problem since very little research has been done on that particular issue (Bougie and Sekaran, 2005).

Purpose of the study: Previously, very little research has been done and published on the topic under discussion in Pakistan, thereby necessitating the need for exploratory research to be done to understand the nature of the problem and establishing a compatible research design. Private schools often conduct researches on their own to improve their operations but there is a dearth of published work in this sector. The objective of the current study is to explore the factors leading to parent satisfaction and how do parents and students define satisfaction with regards to the educational experience that their children get at schools or derive educational utility by virtue of admitting their children to school.

Research Strategy: The strategy employed for carrying out this exploratory study is case study. According to (Yin,2002) “what” questions for case studies can be catered for in a situation when some type of “what” research questions are exploratory in nature and where the goal is to develop a proposition for further inquiry. Here we are in need to formulate appropriate propositions and thus have a rationale for following case study research. Thus the rationale for selecting case study method was to unleash relevant items and dimensions pertaining to the topic of parent satisfaction. Three schools or cases were chosen because the primary source of income of these schools depend upon the satisfaction level of their customers i.e. parents primarily and students. In order to explore the topic of parent satisfaction and to give this vague topic some concrete dimensions and to unravel context specific factors case study method was chosen.

Population and Sampling: The school chosen has been in the educational service sector for over thirty years and is also considered to be one the most renowned schools. It has its branches

in over ten cities of Pakistan. Another factor for their selection was the fact that they were instrumentally useful in exploring the topic at hand. Such schools due to their success of operations regarding the amount of time that they had served educational service sector of Pakistan have bases to provide our study with practical features of value to the study.

Data Collection Methods: To meet the purpose of this exploratory study interviews and focus groups were conducted. This exploratory research was carried out in phases. The repetition of interviews and focus groups in third stage was done because exploratory research goes through iterative cycles of data collection, analysis and interpretation and again data collection.

Sampling Techniques: The school with its two branches was taken to do in-depth interviews and focus group research. For In-depth interviews six people from principals, vice principals and coordinators and senior faculty members were chosen to answer such questions. For focus groups research six students' parents comprising of all ages and both genders were selected from the schools. For in-depth interviews and focus groups in this exploratory research, purposive judgemental sampling technique was incorporated.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES- EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

The procedures for interviews and focus groups were followed using procedures mentioned in Yin (2011) and Kolb (2008). After asking first descriptive question 'How do you define parent satisfaction? In your opinion which elements contribute towards it?', probing questions were inquired followed by a formal closing. Probing questions were causal in nature asking why they refer to perform certain activities; consequential questions were asked stressing on the consequences of the various steps, routines, procedures that they follow. They were also asked to narrate the benefits of their routines, regimes, steps, programs etc. For focus groups (Kolb, 2008) placards with topics written down on them like parent satisfaction were shown in the first phase of research. They were then asked to write down as many words, phrases or ideas that first came to their minds when they saw the placard of parent satisfaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The consolidated results of all phases of research are narrated in this section along with their interpretation.

The consolidated results show that five RATER generic and universal dimensions proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1994) for service quality have been retained with same conceptual meanings but with a change of items in wording and number. Thus one items for reliability, one item for responsiveness, one item for tangibles, one item for assurance, two items for empathy were discovered during the research. Since no dimensions existed for product quality items in services marketing literature, an attempt has been made to suggest some dimensions relevant to school level education. The findings thereby revealed six dimensions for product quality namely: academic and non-academic activities; teaching methodology; assessment systems; disciplinary rules; personality grooming/character building. One item for price were extracted without specification of any dimensions. Here participants of focus groups and interviews did not identify any dimensions. Some items however remained in isolation and neither the researchers nor the participants were able to attribute them to aforesaid categories or dimensions. They were extracted more out of focus group discussions and less from interview discussions. In focus group discussions and interview sessions these items were further discussed and participants agreed that they related to overall parental satisfaction rather than to any broad category or dimension. Thus a totally new aspect was discovered during the research.

The consolidated results are narrated in the following pages. Following Table with question items, category and dimensions are presented in the tables.

Service Quality, Product Quality, Price (P), Overall Parental Satisfaction Dimensions and Relevance with Previous Researches

As to the interpretation of the meaning of Service Quality dimensions, these dimensions expressed the same concepts as claimed by the original SQ dimensions- The five dimensions of SERVQUAL are Reliability; Responsiveness; Assurance; Empathy and Tangibles. However, there is difference in the number and wording of these items.

Operationalizing product quality was a challenging task and help was taken from both services marketing and educational literature, but the final confirmation in our present study came from the parents whose satisfaction was being gauged. Since very little or partial research was done in this scenario and the market was full of schools operationalizing the concept of product quality on daily basis, one found it imperative to conduct exploratory research in this scenario. The broad category of price had two items related to it and no dimensions were ascribed to it.

Findings Table Framework for Parental satisfaction: Service Quality, Product Quality, Price

Sr.no	Question Items	Category	Dimension
1.	Admission system has been fair	Service Quality	Reliability
2.	Teachers are easily accessible	Service Quality	Responsiveness
3.	School facilities are well maintained and clean.	Service Quality	Tangibles
4.	Teachers provide a healthy and friendly relationship to children.	Service Quality	Empathy
5.	Teachers understand my academic difficulties.	Service Quality	Empathy
6.	Top management is wholly committed.	Service Quality	Assurance
7.	I am quite confident that course content meets future students' needs.	Product Quality	Academic and Non-academic activities offered
8.	The environment provided by the school is safe and secure, thereby giving us an assurance that our child is in safe hands.	Product Quality	Academic and Non-academic activities offered
9.	Students are not overloaded with	Product Quality	Academic and Non-academic activities offered



	activities or assignments.		
10.	All lecture material like worksheets, notes etc. accompanying lessons enable my child to learn effectively.	Product Quality	Teaching Methodology
11.	Teaching style of teachers enables my child to understand the concepts and learn effectively.	Product Quality	Teaching Methodology
12.	The number of tests taken thru out the year do not overload my child.	Product Quality	Assessment Scheme
13.	Disciplinary rules are practiced without favoritism.	Product Quality	Disciplinary rules
14.	Lessons in morality and ethics given at school have made my child a better human being.	Product Quality	Personality grooming/Character building
15.	Personality grooming classes have helped my child to become a better human being.	Product Quality	Personality grooming/Character building
16.	The awards given are often sought by students.	Product Quality	Award and achievement recognition system.
17.	Fees charged are commensurate with the level of education provided.	Price	Price
18.	I am satisfied that my child has learnt to develop concepts.	Overall Parental satisfaction	academic
19.	I am satisfied that my child has learnt to practically implement those concepts.	Overall Parental satisfaction	academic

20.	I would recommend the school to others.	Overall Parental satisfaction	academic
21.	Generally the results of matric and o/levels are satisfying and would help my child in securing further admissions in good colleges and schools.	Overall Parental satisfaction	academic
22.	I feel that development of my child's innate potentials and sensitive periods have been achieved.	Overall Parental satisfaction	Non-academic
23.	I feel that my child has acquired self-knowledge about himself/herself i.e. he knows his opportunities and limitations based on reality.	Overall Parental satisfaction	Non-academic

Overall Relevance of Extracted Dimensions with Previous Researches

All items were categorized under four broad categories: service quality (SQ), product quality (PQ), Price (P) and overall satisfaction. Five dimensions of service quality that have already been discovered were kept as it is. In their work Parasuraman et al (1991) claimed that five SERVQUAL dimension are universal and generic across a multitude of service contexts. However due to the need of context specific elements peculiar to education sector and specific to school education new items were discovered. Parasuraman et al (1991) agreed to the need of context specific items to supplement SERVQUAL but the same time beckons that the new items should bear some similarity in wording to the original SERVQUAL items. In the work done by Carman (1990) the wording of some SERVQUAL items was modified according to the nature of service setting. More so, the reliability of SERVQUAL dimensions is quite exemplary but the evidence generated in his article suggested that the PZB dimensions could not be generalized to all industries. Here in the present study, the explored dimensions of service quality are similar to original SERVQUAL dimensions. However, the number and wordings of the items have come out to be different. Many studies have modified SERVQUAL for example Carman (1990) used 40 items in his study of hospital services; Bouman and Van Der Wiele (1992) used 48 items in car services research; Saleh and Rayan (1992) used 33 items in their hospitality services research.

For interpretation of the discovered dimensions, we may take help from Zeithamal and Bitner (2002) state that there are three types of product properties: search qualities, experience qualities and credence qualities. Search qualities are tangible product features assessed by the customer before purchasing the product by using his sight, touch or smell. Experience qualities are characteristics which can only be assessed after purchase or during consumption like fast food. Credence qualities are characteristics that customers find hard to evaluate even after purchase or consumption. Consulting firms and teaching services come under this category. They further contend that since for experience quality and credence quality intangibility dimension dominate more, thereby the evaluation process for them becomes even more difficult. While interpreting SQ dimensions, PQ dimensions, price and overall satisfaction dimensions we would use this three pronged properties classification system to derive meaning out of the extracted dimensions and items. Only one determinant from Service quality i.e. tangibles belong to search properties category. The dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, academic and non-academic activities offered, teaching methodology, assessment systems, disciplinary rules belong to experience properties. Personality grooming and character building items and items of overall satisfaction from seem to be having credence properties.

Following is the evidence that has been found out from previous researches for the items discovered in this present research. The items found in this current study were further researched upon as to their existence in already researched work and also in renowned works done practically in the field of education by experienced educationists and psychologists. Thus many items of this current research were found to have some resemblance, similarity and congruence with the factors or dimensions and individual items of previous researches and important areas that have already been discovered, practiced successfully and propagated emphatically by experienced educationists. The following discussion and interpretation narrates the dimensions, items and coding system for each of the four separate dimensions.

Operationalizing product quality was a challenging task and help was taken from both services marketing and educational literature, but the final confirmation in our present study came from the parents whose satisfaction was being gauged. Since very little or partial research was done in this scenario and the market was full of schools operationalizing the concept of product quality on daily basis, one found it imperative to conduct exploratory research in this scenario. Thus the findings of the present study discovered six context specific dimensions. These dimensions and items particularly focused on the activities, routines and programmes which evolved as result of the services extended by the school management or as a result of the designing of activities by the school management. Participants in focus group discussions and interview sessions regarded product quality as “Besides service quality there is an important aspect which focuses upon all academic and non-academic activities and programs, tests, disciplinary rules, teaching methodologies, recognition systems and character building initiatives incorporated by the school or designed by the school to achieve holistic education of the child thereby deriving parental satisfaction”. In retrieving similar references for items in this section we will take help from a renowned and successful educationist whose works and thoughts have become the basis of so many activities, procedures practiced in today’s schools. Popli (2005) in recommendations section emphasizes upon “personality and overall character development rather than just academic excellence.”

This category discovered during the iterative phase of exploratory research specified seventeen items. According to generic model for services proposed by Parasuraman et al (1994) Service



Quality, Product Quality and Price have a bearing on overall satisfaction. The concept of overall satisfaction has been taped by many studies. This category discovered during the iterative phase of exploratory research specified several items under two categories. According to generic model for services proposed by Parasuraman et al (1994) Service Quality, Product Quality and Price have a bearing on overall satisfaction. The concept of overall satisfaction has been taped by many studies.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

The limitations of this research is that it belongs to only one city of Pakistan and thus results could be only be generalized to schools of that city or other parts of Pakistan following same kind of syllabi, offering nearly same level of activities at nearly same kind of price. Secondly, many items belonging to credence category like Character building and overall satisfaction in this current study has been discussed conceptually with the help of renowned educationists and psychologists and no substantial evidence for their existence was found from previous empirical studies in services marketing literature.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should be directed at devising an appropriate rating scale for parental satisfaction by further refining the dimensions by collecting data from actual customers i.e. parents and from at least two more schools. Then cumulative qualitative results could be further refined and consolidated into a scale incorporating appropriate statistical methods. Through gathering more qualitative data from other schools and employing statistical methods it is predicted that more precise and concise scale with condensed items and dimensions would probably evolve thereby giving the research more comprehensive look. The scale should be tested for its reliability and validity. A modified version of questionnaire is intended to be produced with the help of appropriate statistical analysis which will investigate the probable determinants or factors of student satisfaction. A multitude of variables or items unleashed through quantitative research keeping in view the three broad categories namely product quality, price and service quality is intended to be grouped into factors while using appropriate statistical techniques.

Secondly, this research can be taken as an inventory of dimensions and items out of which various schools can pick up their own dimensions and items if case study approach is to be followed. Thus a particular school can pick up their relevant items and group them in dimensions specific to their specific curricula and services extended. Such schools can then conduct research on yearly basis in order to improve their operations.

Thirdly next research may test theorized relationships between extracted dimensions in order to check its causal relationships being service quality, product quality and price as independent variables while overall parental satisfaction as dependent variable.

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