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The Effect of Distributors' Service Quality on Retailers' Satisfaction: Case of G3-Biz Ltd, Limbe

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Abstract: This study examines the effect of distributors' service quality on retailer satisfaction in the brewery distribution sector, using G3-Biz Ltd in Limbe, Cameroon, as a case study. Drawing on the SERVQUAL framework, the study evaluates how the key dimensions of service quality including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility affect retailer satisfaction in a business-to-business context. A quantitative research design was adopted, and primary data were collected from retailers through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The data were analysed using regression techniques to determine the extent to which each service quality dimension affects satisfaction. The findings reveal that service quality is a significant predictor of retailer satisfaction, with reliability and responsiveness emerging as the most influential dimensions. Assurance and empathy also demonstrate significant positive effects, highlighting the importance of trust, professionalism, and personalised service in distributor-retailer relationships. Tangibility, although positively related to satisfaction, exhibits a relatively weaker influence. These results suggest that operational efficiency and timely service delivery are more critical determinants of satisfaction than physical service attributes in distribution systems. The study contributes to the literature by extending the application of service quality models to the distribution-retail context in a developing economy. It further provides practical insights for distributors seeking to enhance customer satisfaction through improved service delivery. The findings underscore the need for distribution firms to prioritise reliability and responsiveness while strengthening relational aspects of service quality to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Keyword: Service Quality, Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness, Tangibility, Empathy and Customer Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary business environments characterised by intense competition, rapid market evolution, and increasing customer sophistication, service quality has emerged as a central determinant of firm performance and customer retention. Firms operating in service-oriented and distribution-driven sectors are increasingly compelled to move beyond product availability and deliver superior service experiences that meet or exceed customer expectations. This shift reflects a broader transition from transactional to relational business models, in which long-term customer satisfaction and loyalty are essential to sustaining competitive advantage. The empirical and theoretical literature consistently

emphasises that service quality is a critical driver of customer satisfaction, which, in turn, influences repeat patronage, brand loyalty, and overall firm profitability (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Grönroos, 2007; Zeithaml et al., 2017).

Within the distribution sector, particularly in business-to-business (B2B) relationships, the importance of service quality is even more pronounced. Distributors act as vital intermediaries between manufacturers and retailers, and their ability to deliver products efficiently, reliably, and responsively directly shapes the operational performance of downstream businesses. Retailers depend heavily on distributors for timely product availability, accurate order fulfilment, and consistent service interactions, making service quality a fundamental determinant of retailer satisfaction and business continuity. As noted in the literature, deficiencies in service delivery, such as delays, inaccuracies, or poor communication, can disrupt retail operations, erode trust, and lead to supplier switching behaviour (Sundjo et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019; Ahmed et al., 2021) .

The multidimensional nature of service quality further underscores its complexity and importance in shaping customer perceptions. The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), provides a widely accepted framework for understanding service quality through five key dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. Reliability reflects the ability to deliver promised services accurately and consistently, while responsiveness captures the willingness to assist customers and provide prompt service. Assurance relates to the competence and professionalism of service personnel, empathy reflects the degree of personalised attention given to customers, and tangibility encompasses the physical aspects of service delivery, including infrastructure and equipment. These dimensions collectively influence how customers evaluate service experiences and form satisfaction judgments (Ladhari, 2009; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016) .

In the context of brewery product distribution, these service quality dimensions take on added significance given the industry's operational nature. Distributors are required to maintain efficient logistics systems, ensure product availability, manage inventory effectively, and deliver products to retailers in highly competitive markets in a timely manner. Retailers, including bars, restaurants, supermarkets, and wholesalers, rely on distributors not only for product supply but also for operational stability and business continuity. Consequently, any disruption in service delivery, whether through delayed shipments, stock shortages, or inadequate customer support, can have immediate, adverse effects on retailer performance and customer satisfaction. As highlighted in prior studies, reliability and responsiveness often emerge as critical determinants of satisfaction in such contexts, while assurance and empathy strengthen long-term business relationships (Ngambi & Abamukong, 2020; Zygiaris et al., 2022; Isoh et al., 2020) .

Despite the acknowledged importance of service quality, distribution firms in developing economies face significant challenges in maintaining consistent service standards. In Cameroon, particularly in Limbe, the distribution sector operates in a dynamic, often constrained environment characterised by logistical inefficiencies, infrastructural limitations, increasing competition, and evolving customer expectations. Firms such as G3-Biz Ltd, which operate in the brewery distribution sector, must navigate these challenges while striving to meet the service expectations of a diverse retailer base. Evidence from the case context indicates that issues such as delivery delays, inconsistent order fulfilment, inadequate customer responsiveness, and stock management inefficiencies have

contributed to varying levels of retailer dissatisfaction. These challenges highlight a potential gap between expected and perceived service quality, which warrants systematic investigation.

Furthermore, while the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been extensively studied across sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and hospitality, there remains a notable scarcity of empirical research on distribution-retail relationships, particularly in the brewery sector in Cameroon. Existing studies often adopt a consumer-oriented perspective, neglecting the unique dynamics of B2B interactions where service quality influences not only satisfaction but also operational efficiency and business sustainability. This gap is particularly significant given the critical role distributors play in supply chain performance and retailers' high dependence on consistent, reliable service delivery.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the effect of distributors' service quality on retailer satisfaction, using G3-Biz Ltd in Limbe as a case study. Specifically, the study investigates how the key dimensions of service quality—reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility affect retailers' perceptions and satisfaction levels. By providing empirical evidence from a developing-economy context and focusing on a relatively underexplored sector, the study contributes to both the academic literature and business practice. It offers insights into how distribution firms can enhance service delivery, strengthen retailer relationships, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in increasingly demanding markets.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework

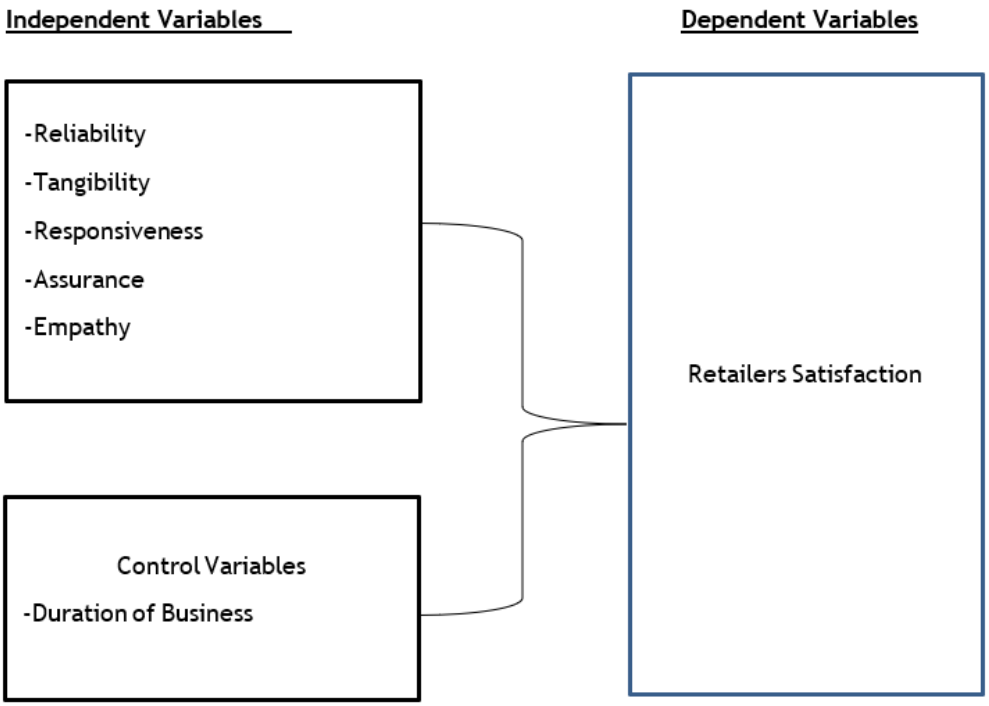


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2025)

Understanding the relationship between service quality and retailer satisfaction requires a structured conceptual framework that links the key service quality dimensions to retailer perceptions, loyalty, and business outcomes. The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), provides a theoretical foundation for this relationship. In the context of brewery distribution, this framework explains how distributors' ability to deliver reliable, responsive, and customer-centric services affects retailers' satisfaction levels, ultimately influencing their long-term engagement and loyalty to the distributor.

At the core of the conceptual framework is the idea that service quality is a key determinant of retailer satisfaction, and this satisfaction, in turn, influences business continuity, purchase frequency, and brand advocacy. The framework establishes a direct cause-and-effect relationship, where improvements in service quality enhance retailer satisfaction, while deficiencies in service quality led to dissatisfaction, reduced sales, and retailer attrition.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is built on the integration of Expectation-Confirmation Theory, the SERVQUAL model, the Kano Model, and Disconfirmation Theory, each of which provides a complementary perspective on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Expectation-Confirmation Theory, developed by Oliver (1980), provides a fundamental explanation of how customer satisfaction is formed. The theory posits that customers develop expectations before experiencing a service and subsequently compare them with actual performance. Satisfaction occurs when perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, while dissatisfaction arises when performance falls short. In the context of distributor-retailer relationships, retailers form expectations regarding timely delivery, accurate order fulfilment, and effective communication. When distributors such as G3-Biz Ltd meet these expectations, retailers experience satisfaction; however, any deviation from expected service standards results in dissatisfaction.

Closely related to this is Disconfirmation Theory, which further explains that satisfaction is determined by the gap between expected and perceived service performance (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982). Positive disconfirmation occurs when service performance exceeds expectations, leading to high satisfaction, whereas negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction. In the brewery distribution sector, this theory is particularly relevant, as retailers continuously evaluate distributor performance based on delivery reliability, service responsiveness, and overall service experience. The ability of distributors to minimise negative disconfirmation is therefore critical in maintaining strong business relationships.

The SERVQUAL model complements these theories by providing a structured framework for measuring service quality. By categorising service quality into five key dimensions, which include reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility, the model enables a systematic assessment of how service delivery influences customer perceptions. In this study, SERVQUAL serves as the primary analytical framework, linking specific service quality attributes to retailer satisfaction. The model’s emphasis on the gap between expectations and perceptions aligns closely with both Expectation-Confirmation

and Disconfirmation theories, reinforcing its relevance for explaining satisfaction outcomes in distribution contexts. In addition, the Kano Model (Kano, 1984) provides further insight into how different service attributes influence satisfaction. The model distinguishes between basic, performance, and excitement needs, suggesting that not all service quality dimensions contribute equally to satisfaction. Basic needs, such as reliable delivery and product availability, must be fulfilled to avoid dissatisfaction, while performance needs, such as responsiveness and assurance, directly influence satisfaction levels. Excitement needs, such as personalised service and proactive engagement, can exceed expectations and create competitive differentiation. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding how distributors can prioritise service improvements to maximise retailer satisfaction.

The integration of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between service quality and retailer satisfaction. Expectation-Confirmation and Disconfirmation theories explain how satisfaction is formed through the comparison of expectations and actual performance, while the SERVQUAL model identifies the specific dimensions through which service quality is delivered. The Kano Model further refines this understanding by categorising service attributes based on their impact on satisfaction.

Together, these theories suggest that retailer satisfaction is not merely a function of service delivery but a result of how well distributors align their service performance with retailer expectations across multiple dimensions. This integrated theoretical perspective provides a robust foundation for analysing service quality in the brewery distribution sector and offers valuable insights for improving service delivery and strengthening distributor-retailer relationships.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been extensively examined in both theoretical and empirical literature, particularly within service-oriented industries. However, in distribution-driven sectors such as brewery product distribution, this relationship takes on a more operational and relational dimension, where service quality not only influences satisfaction but also affects business continuity and performance. In this context, the present study develops hypotheses linking the dimensions of service quality, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility, to retailer satisfaction.

Reliability is widely regarded as the most fundamental dimension of service quality, particularly in distribution systems where timely and accurate delivery is essential for retailer operations. Empirical studies consistently show that reliability has a strong and direct impact on customer satisfaction, as it reflects service providers' ability to fulfil promises consistently and accurately (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Ladhari, 2009). In distribution contexts, unreliable delivery schedules, incorrect orders, or stock inconsistencies can disrupt retailer activities and lead to dissatisfaction. Evidence from related studies indicates that firms that maintain high levels of reliability tend to achieve higher customer satisfaction and stronger business relationships (Ngambi & Abamukong, 2020; Zygiaris et al., 2022). Based on this evidence, reliability is expected to significantly influence retailer satisfaction.

- **H1: Reliability has a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.**

Responsiveness reflects distributors' willingness and ability to provide prompt service and efficiently address customer needs. In highly competitive environments, the speed of service delivery and the ability to respond to customer inquiries or complaints play a critical role in shaping customer perceptions. Empirical literature indicates that responsiveness is a key determinant of customer satisfaction, as it enhances the overall service experience and reduces uncertainty in service delivery (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2021). In distribution systems, delays in responding to orders or resolving issues can negatively affect retailer operations and satisfaction levels. Studies reviewed in this work further confirm that responsiveness significantly improves customer satisfaction by fostering trust and enhancing service interactions (Sundjo et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019). Therefore, responsiveness is expected to have a significant impact on retailer satisfaction.

- **H2: Responsiveness has a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.**

Assurance relates to the knowledge, competence, and professionalism of service personnel, as well as their ability to inspire trust and confidence among customers. In B2B relationships, trust is a critical component of long-term business interactions, and assurance plays a key role in building this trust. Empirical studies indicate that customers are more satisfied when they perceive service providers as competent, reliable, and trustworthy (Grönroos, 2007; Zeithaml et al., 2017). In the distribution sector, assurance is reflected in staff's ability to provide accurate information, handle transactions professionally, and maintain credibility in service delivery. Evidence from prior studies suggests that assurance significantly enhances customer satisfaction by strengthening confidence in the service provider (Isoh et al., 2020; Zygiaris et al., 2022) . Consequently, assurance is expected to positively influence retailer satisfaction.

- **H3: Assurance has a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.**

Empathy refers to the degree to which service providers offer personalised attention and understand their customers' specific needs. In distribution relationships, empathy is reflected in distributors' ability to adapt their services to meet the unique requirements of different retailers. Empirical studies show that customers value personalised service interactions, which enhance satisfaction by creating a sense of importance and recognition (Ladhari, 2009; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016). In the context of SME retailers, who often operate under varying constraints, empathetic service delivery can significantly improve satisfaction by addressing specific operational challenges. Studies reviewed in this work indicate that empathy plays a crucial role in strengthening customer relationships and improving satisfaction outcomes (Ngambi & Abamukong, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2021) . Therefore, empathy is expected to have a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.

- **H4: Empathy has a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.**

Tangibility refers to the physical aspects of service delivery, including infrastructure, equipment, packaging, and personnel appearance. Although tangibility is often considered less critical than other service quality dimensions in B2B contexts, it still plays an important role in shaping customer perceptions of service quality. Empirical evidence suggests that tangible elements enhance customer satisfaction by elevating service providers' professionalism and credibility (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2017). In distribution systems, factors such as well-maintained delivery vehicles, proper packaging,

and organised service environments can positively influence retailer perceptions. Studies reviewed in this work indicate that tangibility has a measurable impact on customer satisfaction, particularly when combined with other service quality dimensions (Sundjo et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2019) . Accordingly, tangibility is expected to significantly influence retailer satisfaction.

- **H5: Tangibility has a significant effect on retailer satisfaction.**

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey to examine the effect of distributors' service quality on retailer satisfaction in the brewery distribution sector in Limbe, Cameroon. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to retailers who are directly engaged with the distributor, G3-Biz Ltd. The sample comprised retailers such as bars, supermarkets, wholesalers, and restaurants whose operations depend on timely, efficient product delivery. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to capture respondents' perceptions of service quality and satisfaction. Service quality was operationalised using the SERVQUAL dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility, while retailer satisfaction was measured based on overall evaluation of service performance and relationship experience. The collected data were coded and analysed using statistical software to ensure the consistency and reliability of the results. The model is specified as follows:

$$CS=\beta_0+\beta_1REL+\beta_2TAN+\beta_3RES+\beta_4ASS+\beta_5EMP+\epsilon$$

Where:

- CS = Customer Satisfaction (dependent variable)
- REL = Reliability
- TAN = Tangibility
- RES = Responsiveness
- ASS = Assurance
- EMP = Empathy
- β_0 = Intercept
- $\beta_1,\beta_2,\beta_3,\beta_4,\beta_5$ = Coefficients representing the impact of each service quality dimension on customer satisfaction.

To examine the relationships between the variables, the study employed multiple regression analysis, which is appropriate for assessing the effect of multiple variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 below shows the summary of the descriptive statistics for the variables included in our model. We observed from the table that the mean value of customers loyalty is 4.248 with a standard deviation of 0.681128 with minimum and maximum values of 1 and 5 respectively. The result shows that there is a low deviation of customers loyalty from the

mean as the standard deviation is not far from the mean. Furthermore, the mean value of customers satisfaction stands at 3.755 with a standard deviation of .7444916 and with minimum and maximum values of 1 and 5 respectively and this also indicates a low deviation of satisfaction from the mean. Again, the mean value of reliability stands at 3.5575 with a standard deviation of .779129 and with minimum and maximum values of 1 and 5 respectively and this also indicates a low deviation of reliability from the mean. The mean value of responsiveness stands at 3.585 with a standard deviation of .8544447and with minimum and maximum values of 1 and 5 respectively and this also indicates a low deviation of responsiveness from the mean. In the same light, Empathy was found to have a low deviation from the mean as the standard deviation stood at .7858867 and a mean of 3.818333.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
LOYALTY	100	4.248	.681128	1	5
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	100	3.755	.7444916	1	5
RELIABILITY	100	3.5575	.779192	1	5
RESPONSIVE~S	100	3.585	.8544447	1	5
ASSURANCE	100	4.0825	1.666309	1	5
EMPATHY	100	3.818333	.7858867	1	5
age1	99	.0909091	.2889428	0	1
age2	99	.3535354	.4805	0	1
age3	99	.3232323	.4700908	0	1
age4	99	.1616162	.3699716	0	1
age5	99	.0707071	.2576394	0	1
frequencyo~2	100	.82	.3861229	0	1
frequencyo~3	100	.09	.2876235	0	1
frequencyo~4	100	.01	.1	0	1

Source: Author's computation (2025)

In sum, the summary statistics affirm that G3-Biz Ltd performs strongly across the key service quality dimensions, with particularly high marks in loyalty and assurance. The relatively low standard deviations reflect consistent customer experiences, while slightly lower averages in reliability and responsiveness point to areas where further enhancement could yield even stronger satisfaction and retention outcomes.

Overall, the ordered regression estimates on table 2 indicate that service quality is a significant predictor of retailer satisfaction, thereby confirming the study's central premise. However, the strength and significance of individual dimensions differ, suggesting that not all aspects of service quality contribute equally to satisfaction outcomes.

Reliability is among the strongest determinants of retailer satisfaction. The results indicate that the distributor's ability to deliver products accurately and consistently plays a critical role in shaping retailer perceptions. Retailers place high value on timely delivery, correct order fulfilment, and product availability, as these directly affect their day-to-day operations. The significance of reliability in this study underscores the importance of consistent service delivery in maintaining retailer confidence and satisfaction. In contrast,

any inconsistency in delivery schedules or product availability is likely to result in dissatisfaction and operational disruptions.

Table 2: Ordered Logistics Regression results- The Effect of Distributors service quality on customers satisfaction

Iteration 0: log likelihood	=	-683.77475	
Iteration 1: log likelihood	=	-568.85406	
Iteration 2: log likelihood	=	-525.18704	
Iteration 3: log likelihood	=	-512.31201	
Iteration 4: log likelihood	=	-502.28381	
Iteration 5: log likelihood	=	-502.18128	
Iteration 6: log likelihood	=	-502.1812	
Iteration 7: log likelihood	=	-502.1812	
Ordered logistic regression		Number of obs	=298
		LR chi2(14)	363.19
		Prob > chi2	0.0000
Log likelihood = -502.1812		Pseudo R2	=0.2656

CUTOMER SATISFACTION	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P>z	[95% conf.	interval]
RELIABILITY	1.516857	.4558481	5.82	0.000	1.034112	2.590303
TANGIBILITY	1.268679	.4573907	4.77	0.000	.7722099	1.165148
RESPONSIVEN~S	.7226156	.3653005	3.98	0.000	.40000397	1.438591
ASSURANCE	-.145116	.1389931	-1.04	0.296	-.4175374	.1273054
EMPATHY	1.184275	.3541396	3.34	0.001	.4901741	1.878376
age2	-.1453087	.7640498	-0.19	0.849	-1.642819	1.352201
age3	-.2659392	.71965	-0.37	0.712	-1.676427	1.144549
age4	.2980473	.7855623	0.38	0.704	-1.241626	1.837721
age5	-.554369	1.24958	-0.44	0.657	3.003501	1.894763
typeofcusto~2	-1.829258	2.11416	-0.87	0.387	- 5.972935	2.314418
typeofcusto~3	1.948828	2.689865	-0.72	0.469	-7.220866	3.323211
typeofcusto~1	- 1.925712	2.078817	-0.93	0.354	-6.000119	2.148695
frequencyof~1	.5048846	2.802888	0.18	0.857	-4.988675	5.998444
frequencyof~2	1.228734	2.717077	0.45	0.651	-4.09664	6.554107
frequencyof~3	1.285678	2.769426	0.46	0.642	-4.142298	6.713653
/cut1	5.565731	3.380405			-1.05974	12.1912
/cut2	9.826558	3.575603			2.818505	16.83461
/cut3	11.51023	3.659428			4.337886	18.68258
/cut4	12.89619	3.685845			5.672064	20.12031
/cut5	14.40214	3.72989			7.09169	21.71259
/cut6	15.03454	3.751423			7.681888	22.3872
/cut7	16.2727	3.79294			8.838677	23.70673
/cut8	16.98916	3.81289			9.516037	24.46229
/cut9	19.0335	3.878408			11.43196	26.63504
/cut10	19.90562	3.913768			12.23478	27.57646
/cut11	20.85686	3.966437			13.08279	28.63093

Source: Author's computation (2025)

Responsiveness also demonstrates a positive and statistically significant effect on retailer satisfaction. The findings indicate that retailers are highly sensitive to the speed and efficiency with which distributors respond to their needs, including order processing, complaint resolution, and general communication. Prompt service delivery and effective issue resolution enhance the overall service experience and strengthen the relationship between distributors and retailers. This result highlights the importance of responsiveness in reducing uncertainty and improving the perceived quality of service interactions.

Assurance is found to significantly influence retailer satisfaction, underscoring the importance of trust and confidence in distributor-retailer relationships. The competence and professionalism of service personnel, along with their ability to provide accurate information and handle transactions effectively, contribute to positive retailer perceptions. The significance of assurance suggests that retailers value not only the technical aspects of service delivery but also the credibility and reliability of the individuals providing the service.

Empathy also significantly affects retailer satisfaction, though its impact is relatively moderate compared to reliability and responsiveness. The findings indicate that personalised attention and distributors' ability to understand and respond to retailers' specific needs enhance satisfaction levels. Retailers appreciate service providers who demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to adapt to their unique operational requirements. This suggests that relational aspects of service delivery play an important role in strengthening business partnerships.

Tangibility, while positively related to retailer satisfaction, exhibits a comparatively weaker effect. The results suggest that physical aspects of service delivery, such as infrastructure, packaging, and personnel appearance, contribute to overall service perception but are less critical than operational dimensions, such as reliability and responsiveness. This indicates that while tangible elements enhance the distributor's professionalism, they are not the primary drivers of satisfaction in the distribution context.

Taken together, the results indicate that operational efficiency and relational responsiveness are the most important determinants of retailer satisfaction in the brewery distribution sector. The findings confirm that while all dimensions of service quality contribute to satisfaction, reliability and responsiveness play a more dominant role, followed by assurance and empathy, with tangibility having the least influence. These results provide empirical support for the study's hypotheses and reinforce the importance of prioritising key service quality dimensions to enhance retailer satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the argument that service quality is a critical determinant of retailer satisfaction within distribution systems. However, the results also reveal that the influence of service quality is not uniform across its dimensions, thereby highlighting the need to prioritise specific aspects of service delivery to effectively enhance customer satisfaction. The overall significance of service quality in this study aligns with existing empirical evidence, which consistently shows that improvements in service delivery lead to higher customer satisfaction and stronger business relationships (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 2017; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016).

The strong and significant effect of reliability on retailer satisfaction underscores its central role in distribution-based service systems. This finding is consistent with empirical studies, which identify reliability as the most important dimension of service quality, particularly in contexts where timely and accurate service delivery is essential for operational continuity (Ladhari, 2009; Ngambi & Abamukong, 2020; Zygiaris et al., 2022). In the case of G3-Biz Ltd, retailers depend heavily on consistent product availability and accurate order fulfilment to sustain their daily operations. The results, therefore, suggest that reliability is not merely a component of service quality but a foundational requirement for maintaining retailer satisfaction and trust. Any disruption in delivery schedules or inconsistencies in service provision directly affect retailer performance, thereby reinforcing the critical importance of reliability in the distribution sector.

The positive, significant relationship between responsiveness and retailer satisfaction further underscores the importance of timely, efficient service interactions. This finding aligns with studies showing that responsiveness enhances customer satisfaction by reducing uncertainty and improving service experiences (Ahmed et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2019; Sundjo et al., 2020). In highly competitive environments, retailers expect distributors to respond quickly to orders, inquiries, and complaints. The findings suggest that responsiveness not only improves operational efficiency but also strengthens the relational aspect of distributor-retailer interactions. This reinforces the argument that service quality is not solely about delivering products but also about managing interactions effectively.

Assurance was also found to have a significant effect on retailer satisfaction, reflecting the importance of trust and confidence in business relationships. This finding supports empirical evidence indicating that customers are more satisfied when they perceive service providers as competent, reliable, and credible (Grönroos, 2007; Isoh et al., 2020; Zeithaml et al., 2017). In the distribution context, assurance is reflected in staff professionalism, the accuracy of information, and the consistency of service delivery. The results suggest that retailers value distributors who demonstrate expertise and reliability, as this reduces uncertainty and enhances confidence in the business relationship.

The findings on empathy indicate that personalised service delivery positively contributes to retailer satisfaction, though its effect is less pronounced than that of reliability and responsiveness. This result is consistent with studies that emphasise that customers value service providers who understand their specific needs and provide tailored solutions (Ladhari, 2009; Ahmed et al., 2021). In the context of SME retailers, who often operate under varying constraints, empathetic service delivery can enhance satisfaction by addressing unique operational challenges. However, the relatively moderate effect observed in this study suggests that while empathy enhances satisfaction, it is secondary to operational efficiency in distribution systems.

Tangibility, although positively related to retailer satisfaction, was found to have the weakest effect among the service quality dimensions. This finding aligns with empirical studies suggesting that tangible elements, while important in shaping initial perceptions, are less critical in determining satisfaction in B2B service contexts (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Sundjo et al., 2020). In distribution systems, retailers are more concerned with operational outcomes, such as timely delivery and accurate order fulfilment, than with the physical aspects of service delivery. The results, therefore, indicate that while tangibility

contributes to the overall perception of professionalism, it is not a primary driver of satisfaction.

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the multidimensional nature of service quality and its varying impact on retailer satisfaction. The dominance of reliability and responsiveness suggests that operational efficiency and timely service delivery are the most critical factors in the brewery distribution sector. At the same time, the significance of assurance and empathy highlights the importance of relational elements in strengthening long-term business partnerships. These findings are particularly relevant in Cameroon, where distribution systems operate under logistical and infrastructural constraints. In such environments, distributors' ability to deliver reliable, responsive services becomes a key competitive advantage.

The study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature by extending the application of service quality models to the distribution-retail context and by providing empirical evidence from a developing economy. It demonstrates that, while the SERVQUAL dimensions remain relevant, their relative importance varies across operational contexts. This highlights the need for firms to prioritise specific service quality dimensions based on their business and customers' expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how the quality of services delivered by distributors shapes retailer satisfaction within the brewery distribution sector, using G3-Biz Ltd in Limbe as a case context. The results make one point unmistakably clear: service quality is not a peripheral concern in distribution systems, it is the core through which operational efficiency and relational stability are sustained.

Among the service quality dimensions examined, reliability and responsiveness emerge as the most decisive factors influencing retailer satisfaction. This suggests that retailers prioritise consistency in product delivery and speed of service above all else, as these directly affect their ability to operate effectively in competitive markets. Assurance and empathy, while slightly less dominant, remain significant, indicating that trust, professionalism, and personalised interaction still matter in maintaining long-term business relationships. Tangibility, although relevant, plays a more supportive role, reinforcing the idea that in business-to-business distribution contexts, functional performance outweighs physical appearance.

Taken together, the findings suggest that retailer satisfaction is shaped by a combination of operational efficiency and relational quality, with greater weight placed on the former. The study therefore contributes to the literature by demonstrating that, while the SERVQUAL dimensions remain applicable, their relative importance is context-dependent. In distribution systems, particularly within developing economies such as Cameroon, service quality must be understood primarily as a function of reliability and responsiveness, supported by trust-building and relational engagement. This provides a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of how service quality drives satisfaction in real-world business environments.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have practical implications for distributors, SME operators, and policymakers seeking to improve supply chain performance and business sustainability.

First, distribution firms should prioritise reliability as a core operational objective. This involves strengthening logistics systems, improving inventory management, and ensuring consistent product availability. Investments in delivery planning, route optimisation, and stock control mechanisms can significantly reduce service disruptions and enhance retailer confidence. In contexts where supply chain inefficiencies are common, reliability becomes a key source of competitive advantage.

Second, responsiveness should be enhanced through improved communication and service systems. Distributors need to establish efficient channels for receiving orders, addressing complaints, and providing timely feedback to retailers. The use of digital tools such as mobile ordering platforms, real-time tracking systems, and customer service interfaces can greatly improve responsiveness and reduce service delivery delays. Faster response times not only improve operational efficiency but also strengthen trust and satisfaction among retailers.

Third, there is a need to strengthen human capacity within distribution firms. Training staff in customer relationship management, communication skills, and service professionalism can improve assurance and empathy in service delivery. Retailers are more likely to remain loyal to distributors who demonstrate competence, reliability, and a clear understanding of their needs. Building these relational capabilities is therefore essential for sustaining long-term business partnerships.

Fourth, policymakers and business support institutions should recognise the importance of service quality in SME performance and supply chain development. Support programs aimed at improving SME competitiveness should incorporate components that enhance logistics management, service delivery systems, and customer relationship practices. Facilitating access to infrastructure, transportation systems, and digital technologies can also help distribution firms improve their service quality.

Finally, there is a need for context-specific interventions to address the structural challenges distribution firms face in Cameroon. Issues such as poor road networks, inconsistent supply chains, and limited technological adoption continue to affect service delivery. Addressing these constraints at the policy level will not only improve distributor performance but also enhance the overall efficiency of the retail sector.

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