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Achieving Sustainable Competitive Advantage Through Service Quality: An Analysis of Pakistan's Telecom Sector

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Methodology: Cross-sectional study design was used as a methodology for the paper. A field survey was carried out with the help of questionnaire using SERVQUOL scale. 400 current users of cell phone were targeted for the purpose of data collection through convenient sampling.

Findings: The study found that telecom industry received excellent rating on tangibility, particularly equipment and customer service staffs' dress, and low ratings on empathy, particularly not knowing customers' needs and not giving individual and personal attention to customers.

Research Implications: SERVQUOL is a good starting point for assessing service quality. Service delivery system should produce moments of truth where different cues expressed by customers about quality must be assessed promptly.

Originality: The study has a practical significance for policy makers of firms in telecommunication sector of Pakistan for understanding behavioral intentions of their customers and for effectively positioning their firm's service quality.

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Achieving Sustainable Competitive Advantage Through Service Quality: An Analysis of Pakistan's Telecom Sector

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Limitation and Future Research: This study only assessed the functional dimension of the service quality to explain consumer behavior which might be misspecification of service quality and may have low predictive validity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustaining competitive advantage is the challenge faced by many businesses in today's fast paced world. Service quality is a topic frequently studied in the field of services marketing, both by academicians and practitioners. But little attention has been given towards the ability of service quality in achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage. Service organizations, without regards for size, are increasingly seeking the unique ways of differentiating their offering and service quality is one such option in this regard. Many organizations, today, have responded to the strategic and financial impact of quality, treating it as a strategic weapon (Paradise-Tornow, 1991). Along with globalization, the influence of quality on service is the most intense trend affecting management and marketing of services in today's dynamic world. Better

service delivery helps firms in differentiating their offering; obtaining more business from current customers; and attracting new customers (Mukherjee et al., 2003).

Although the relationship between service quality and profit has been considered neither to be simple nor straightforward (Greising, 1994; Zahoric and Rust, 1992), a sizeable mass of services literature has tried to ascertain the connection between service quality and different parameters of firm performance (Ittner and Larcker, 1998). It has become increasingly important for firms to choose the most appropriate measures of service quality because it indicates the level of customer satisfaction and their tendency of returning to the same service provider (Young et al., 1994). Customers that are satisfied, spread the good news quickly (Edvardsson 1998).

It has become necessary for the survival of the firms that they keep themselves ahead of the competitors by continuously differentiating their service offerings. Globalization of the world markets, technological advancements, and increased economic cooperation are compelling companies to be more sophisticated and savvy in their marketing efforts (Ueltschy and Krampf 2001). With so many changes occurring in Pakistan telecom sector, including market expansion, intensification of competition, and increasing sensitivity of consumers, the issue of service quality has gained substantial consideration.

The objective of this study is to analyze whether service quality confers a competitive advantage to firms competing in the telecom sector of Pakistan. This study compares the level of service quality of different firms as being perceived by their consumers. The study further examines the customer behavioural intentions as indicator of sustainability of the competitive advantage. The research paper is organized as follows: first, an overview of the service quality is presented followed by the competitive advantage and sustainability of the competitive advantage, then research methodology and results of the study are presented. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of managerial implication, research limitations, and directions for future research.

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II. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

It has become increasingly necessary for the survival of the firms to remain ahead of the competitors and predators by differentiating themselves. Creating and sustaining competitive advantage is one way of achieving this goal (Colgate, 1998). Success of the businesses lies in their ability to possess some advantage relative to their competitors. Achieving this competitive advantage is the objective of strategy and the superior performance will automatically result from a competitive advantage (Day, 1994; Porter, 1996). According to Reed and DeFillipi (1990), the sources of competitive advantage are as numerous as activities in the firm. Strategies through which corporations can gain competitive advantage include higher quality, innovation, lower cost, improved processes, and marketing (Rijamampianina *et al.*, 2003). Competitive advantage results either by implementing a value creating strategy not being implemented by the competitors (Barney, 1991) or through superiorly executing the same strategy as competitors (Johnson and Sirikit, 2002).

The story just does not end at achieving a competitive advantage, rather prolongs till the sustainability. Even if businesses have achieved the competitive advantage and gained higher profitability, competitors are quick to imitate their strategies or even enhance their initiatives, thus resulting in loss of competitive advantage (Reed and DeFillippi, 1990; Markides, 1997; Porter, 1996; Ghemawat, 1986). Even more, competitors are able to obtain through information on seventy percent of all new products within a year of their development (Ghemawat, 1986). The solution to such problems lies in the sustainability of the competitive advantage.

a) Sustaining a Competitive Advantage

Significant investment and efforts are required to raise barriers preventing imitation by competitors would ensure sustainability of the competitive advantage. When a firm has achieved competitive advantage and raises the barriers that prevent competitors to imitate, it thus "resists erosion by competitor behavior" and achieves sustainability of the competitive advantage. Though, preventing imitation forever is not possible. Thus, it is necessary for the firms to have the ability to delay this possibility so as to yield maximum benefit from any competitive advantage (Porter, 1996; Reed and DeFillipi, 1990; Christensen, 2001).

Competitive advantage is achieved through the way activities of a firm fit and reinforce one another (Porter, 1996; Campbell and Goold, 1995). Fit is essential for sustaining a competitive advantage (Rijamampianina *et al.*, 2003). Competitors trying to imitate a firm with an arrangement of interconnected

activities (fit) will have to reconfigure many of their activities for competing effectively, thus creating a tough imitation barrier (Porter, 1996).

Managers are increasingly facing tremendous pressures to improve service quality by every means so that not only existing customers remain loyal but also new customers become permanent customers (Yang and Chen, 2000). Fulfilling customer needs every time on time is the itinerary to achieving and sustaining competitive advantage and service quality is a tool that companies can use to comprehend this objective. While many companies recognize the need for higher service quality, unfortunately not all of them connect service quality as a tool for achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage. There is growing proof that how customers' behavioral intentions are affected by their perception of service quality. Specific consumer behavioral responses present a clear signal that they are becoming bound to the company (Johnson and Sirikit, 2002). Intentions to behave are a result of previous experience with the service or the information consumer has received about the service. A range of intended behaviors include repeat purchases, recommending to other, complimenting, complaining, switching the service provider, and opting not to use any service at all (Johnson and Sirikit, 2002). A customer having positive experience would choose to purchase repeatedly, recommending, and complimenting.

b) Service Quality

The construct of service quality has attracted the attention of academicians and practitioners alike because of its function as a guide towards achieving customer satisfaction and better organizational performance (Lewis and Mitchell 1990). Service quality has been defined as an attitude resulting from the comparison of expected levels of service with perceived performance (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Bolton and Drew, 1992; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). Most of the service quality definitions converge on a point of meeting customer needs and wants (Ueltschy and Krampf 2001). A commonly accepted definition of service quality is that it should match customer's expectations and satisfy needs and requirements of customers (Edvardsson 1998). Gronroos (1982) was the first to define service quality as "the outcome of an evaluation process where the consumer compares his expectations with the service he perceived he has received." According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1991), service quality refers to the comparison between level of service desired and the level received. Perceived service quality has been treated as valuable element by Zeithmal (1988) and he defines it as "the consumer's judgment of a product's overall excellence or superiority".

Many researchers have recommended that quality results from a comparison of perceived

performance with expected performance – based on the so-called “disconfirmation paradigm”. Based on this concept, Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, which views service quality as the gap between the level of service customers expect and the their perception of the level of service they received. Much of the research measuring service quality, to date, has focused using SERVQUOL. Consequently, research using this instrument has been commonly cited in marketing literature and its industrial use has become extremely prevalent (Brown *et al.*, 1993). Five determinants of the service quality are identified in SERVQUOL model:

- 1) Tangibility;
- 2) Reliability;
- 3) Responsiveness;
- 4) Assurance; and
- 5) Empathy;

Tangibility means the physical elements of the facility; equipment, customer service staffs and their dresses, premises, i.e. something that is easily observable by the customers. Reliability is the ability of the company to fulfill its commitments as promised. Responsiveness refers to executing services punctually and promptly, willingness and readiness to serve customers whenever they need assistance. Assurance means customer service staffs' competence and knowledge and their ability to maintain trust and confidence. Empathy refers to the service provider's ability to give individual and personal attention and providing convenience.

Although the prior work on the instrument has advanced our knowledge of measuring service quality, the instrument has also yielded some criticism. One criticism of the instrument has been the point that SERVQUOL mainly focuses on the process of service delivery (Richard and Allaway, 1993; Mangold and Babakus, 1991). But, at the same time, a lot of support in favor of the instrument is available from a variety on researchers. According to Berry *et al.* (1994), SRVQUOL has the ability to serve as an effective investigating tool that can guide management in its efforts to improve

service quality by focusing attention in the most needful areas.

c) Data Collection and Analysis

Cross sectional design was used for this study to examine the service quality perceptions and their competitive analysis in Pakistan telecom sector. Service quality ratings were obtained using SERVQUOL, which has already been discussed. The questionnaire used for this study was adapted from Johnson and Sirikit (2002), which were constructed originally in English and then translated into Urdu by an expert of the language in order to ensure that local expressions were properly stated.

Respondents for this research were selected using convenient sampling. The respondents were the current users of any of the five companies providing cell phone services in Pakistan including Mobilink (Mob), Ufone (Ufon), Warid (War), Telenor (Tel), and Zong (Zon) and were approached conveniently in shopping centers of the urban areas of Pakistan. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 338 were collected back. Some of the questionnaires were not filled properly or were having a lot of missing values so 26 questionnaires were rejected for these reasons and 312 usable questionnaires were entered in SPSS further analysis, thus ensuring 78 percent of the response rate.

Of the 320 questionnaires used for the analysis, 63 percent of the respondents were male and female respondents were just 37 percents. This study aimed to have equal response both from male and female users but this was because of cultural norms that many of the women were reluctant to respond because being there with their families. The respondents ranged altogether from 18 years till 63 years but majority of them were the young users and average of the respondents was slightly above 25 years as shown in table 1. Table 1 further explains the service providers of various respondents. The study aimed to collect equal response from the consumers of all service providers but as stated earlier respondents were selected conveniently, that's why difference in number of respondents from various service providers is seen.

Table 1 : Characteristics of the Respondents

Gender	Male	197	63%
	Female	115	37%
Average Age of the Respondents	25.29 Years		
Service provider of the Respondents	Mobilink	88	28%
	U Fone	94	30%
	Warid	32	10%
	Telenor	52	17%
	Zong	46	15%

III. RESULTS

The first matter that needed to be addressed was the answer to the question that whether SRVQUOL

can measure the service quality perceptions of cell phone users in telecom sector of Pakistan. The reliability measure of the scale, for this purpose, was assessed

using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability measures for all the categories of the scale ranged from 0.73 to 0.79, thus ensuring high reliability for all service quality measures.

The ability of service quality to be considered as a source of competitive advantage was the basic objective of this study. Parasuraman *et al* (1988) suggested that service quality can be used as a source for competitive advantage. For this purpose, behavioral intentions of the consumer of all the companies were tested in order to be able to draw comparative analysis of the users of different service providers.

Before making any comparative analysis regarding any of the service providers, it seems

important to address the service quality measures of the overall telecom industry. As shown in Table 1, tangibility is the dimension of service quality that yielded maximum score which is also supported by Johnson and Sirikit (2002), closely followed by reliability which according Zeithmal *et al*. (1990) is extremely important dimension. The dimension having the lowest rating is empathy which scored the least score. The measures of empathy are also congruent with the research results of Johnson and Sirikit (2002). The maximum scores of service quality perceptions are considered as a basis for competitive advantage (Johnson and Sirikit, 2002).

Table 2 : Service quality assessment of the industry

Service Quality Measures	Results
Tangibility	3.6436
Service provider has up-to-date equipment	3.7821
service provider's physical facilities are visually appealing	3.3910
My service provider's customer service staffs are well dressed and appear neat.	3.7885
The appearance of the physical facilities of the firm is in keeping with the type of telecom services.	3.6090
Reliability	3.5474
When my service provider promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.	3.3974
When I have problems, my service provider is concerned and supportive.	3.7885
My service provider is dependable.	3.2628
My service provider provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	3.6795
My service provider keeps its records accurately.	3.6090
Responsiveness	2.9471
My service provider does not tell exactly when services will be performed.	3.0128
I do not receive prompt service from customer service staff.	2.7821
Customer service staffs are not always willing to help customers.	2.6859
Customer service staffs are too busy to respond to customer requests quickly.	3.3077
Assurance	3.5903
I can trust customer service staff.	3.4452
I feel safe in my transactions with customer service staff.	3.5355
Customer service staffs are polite.	3.8323
Customer service staffs get adequate support from a service provider to do their job well.	3.5484
Empathy	2.8955
My service provider does not give me individual attention.	2.8387
Customer service staffs do not give me personal attention.	2.8903
Customer service staffs do not know what my needs are.	2.7613
My service provider does not have my best interests at heart.	2.9290
My service provider does not have operating hours convenient to all its customers.	3.0581

Table 3 shows the results of complete analysis of service quality measures which is a mix plate. This comparative analysis among telecom companies offers several insights on competitive advantage. Warid is having competitive advantages of reliability and responsiveness, U Fone having reliability and

assurance, Zong having tangibility, and Mobilink enjoys competitive advantage of empathy. Telenor is a company without any competitive advantage in this scenario. Companies having these competitive advantages need to strengthen these advantages so that they sustain over a longer period of time.

Table 3 : Competitive Assessment of Service Quality

Service Quality Measures	Mobilink	U Fone	Warid	Telenor	Zong
Tangibility	3.6989	3.6064	3.5781	3.5769	3.7283
Service provider has up-to-date equipment	3.7273	3.8085	3.9375	3.7308	3.7826
service provider's physical facilities are visually appealing	3.4318	3.3191	3.3750	3.2692	3.6087
My service provider's customer service staffs are well dressed and appear neat.	4.1136	3.5319	3.6875	3.7692	3.7826

The appearance of the physical facilities of the firm is in keeping with the type of telecom services.	3.5227	3.7660	3.3125	3.5385	3.7391
Reliability	3.5955	3.6766	3.6750	3.4538	3.2087
When my service provider promises to do something by a certain time, it does so.	3.5682	3.4468	3.5625	3.4615	2.7826
When I have problems, my service provider is concerned and supportive.	3.5455	4.5532	3.7500	3.4615	3.0870
My service provider is dependable.	3.5455	3.3191	3.1250	3.0385	2.9565
My service provider provides its services at the time it promises to do so.	3.6136	3.5745	4.0000	3.6538	3.8261
My service provider keeps its records accurately.	3.7045	3.4894	3.9375	3.6538	3.3913
Responsiveness	3.0455	2.8989	2.7500	3.0000	2.9348
My service provider does not tell exactly when services will be performed.	3.1364	2.8723	2.8125	3.0769	3.1304
I do not receive prompt service from customer service staff.	2.9545	2.6809	2.6250	2.8462	2.6957
Customer service staffs are not always willing to help customers.	2.7045	2.6809	2.3750	2.8077	2.7391
Customer service staffs are too busy to respond to customer requests quickly.	3.3864	3.3617	3.1875	3.2692	3.1739
Assurance	3.6105	3.6968	3.5469	3.5096	3.4565
I can trust customer service staff.	3.5349	3.5532	3.6250	3.1538	3.2609
I feel safe in my transactions with customer service staff.	3.6279	3.6809	3.4375	3.3846	3.3043
Customer service staffs are polite.	3.7209	3.9574	3.8125	3.8462	3.7826
Customer service staffs get adequate support from a service provider to do their job well.	3.5581	3.5957	3.3125	3.6538	3.4783
Empathy	3.0977	2.9532	2.6500	2.8077	2.6696
My service provider does not give me individual attention.	2.9535	2.9362	2.3750	2.6154	3.0000
Customer service staffs do not give me personal attention.	3.0930	2.8936	2.8125	3.0769	2.3478
Customer service staffs do not know what my needs are.	3.0233	2.8723	2.3750	2.7308	2.3478
My service provider does not have my best interests at heart.	3.2093	3.0213	2.8750	2.5769	2.6522
My service provider does not have operating hours convenient to all its customers.	3.2093	3.0426	2.8125	3.0385	3.0000

Customer behavior intentions, as shown in Table 4, were also assessed as antecedents of customer behavior in future. Four different dimensions of customer behavioral intention were addressed for the purpose of this study. Warid which had competitive advantages of reliability and responsiveness enjoys the customer purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth which can be extremely beneficial for not only attracting the new customers but also for retaining the

current ones. Four different dimensions of customer behavioral intention were addressed for the purpose of this study. The complaining behavior of customer as a dimension of behavioral intention must not be ignored by the managers of these telecom companies. Almost all the customers are having equal intentions for complaining in case desired service levels are not delivered.

Table 4 : Competitive Assessment of Customer Behavioural Intentions

Customer Behavioral Intentions	Mobilink	U Fone	Warid	Telenor	Mean
Word-of-mouth	3.4767	3.5532	3.8125	3.4808	3.3261
I recommend my service provider to someone who seeks my advice.	3.3023	3.6809	3.6250	3.3077	2.6522
I encourage my friends and relatives to use services of my service provider.	3.6512	3.4255	4.0000	3.6538	4.0000
Purchase Intentions	3.3953	3.2536	3.4375	3.1154	3.1014
I consider my service provider as my first choice to buy cellular services.	3.4884	3.5319	4.1875	3.3462	3.1304
I intend to have more usage of my service provider in next few months.	3.4419	3.3191	3.4375	3.2692	3.3478
I intend to have less usage of my service provider in next few months.	3.2558	2.9130	2.6875	2.7308	2.8261
Price Sensitivity	3.2946	3.0213	3.0000	3.2179	3.1594
I intend to take some of my usage to a competitor that offers better prices.	3.4884	3.4255	2.9375	3.2692	3.4783
I intend to continue using services of my service provider even if its prices increase to some extent.	3.0930	2.6596	3.1250	3.4615	3.2174
I pay higher prices than competitors charge for the benefits I currently	3.3023	2.9787	2.9375	2.9231	2.7826

receive from my service provider.					
Complaining Behaviour	3.5000	3.4628	3.0625	3.3750	3.5109
I will switch to a competitor if I experience a problem with cellular services.	3.5349	3.5745	3.1250	3.3846	3.4348
I will complain to other customers if I experience a problem with cellular services.	3.4884	3.2128	2.7500	3.3462	3.5217
I will complain to external agencies like PTA/Consumer Courts if I experience a problem with cellular services.	3.3721	3.2553	3.0000	2.9615	3.6522
I will complain to my service provider's customer service staffs if I experience a problem with telecom services.	3.6047	3.8085	3.3750	3.8077	3.4348

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Assessing service quality in sector of Pakistan telecom service setting has proved to be reliable which means that we can base service quality measurements on SERVQUOL. The five original service quality dimensions were exceptionally reliable and vigorous. Cronin and Taylor (1992) have argued on the multidimensionality of the service construct. Richard and Allaway (1993) has further argued that utilizing functional dimension of quality only to explain and predict consumers' behavior might be a misspecification of service quality and have low predictive validity. Yet, SERVQUOL seems to be a good starting point but managers must watch closely for exceptional situations requiring adaptation specific to situation. The companies need to be more caring for their customers as the results of the study revealed low measures for empathy. The industry overall received strong ratings on tangibility dimension of the service quality.

Moreover, the research has tried to relate the service quality ratings to customer behavioural intentions. SERVQUOL can be used to determine whether the service activities match customer expectation, exceed expectations or fall short. Thus, ensuring that managers can utilize SERVQUOL as a starting point of quality assessment with confidence. As was stated earlier that SERVQUOL only measures the functional dimensions of the service quality, we would accentuate that SERVQUOL seems to be better suited for process-driven service firms like telecom, health care, banking, retailing etc. (Johnson and Sirikit, 2002). Managers must always be in better condition to analyze the signals given by customers about their consumption experience and perception of service quality.

Results of this study imply that such a service delivery system should be designed that promotes customers expressing their valuable experiences that can enable managers to address deficiencies and strengthen the practices valued by customers. Personnel involved in the value delivery process must be made aware of the role they are playing through continuous reinforcement and training. Sufficient staffs should be deployed during peak hours in order to ensure optimal service delivery all the time as the results of sector show low measures for empathy.

Finally, service quality should be assessed on continuous basis. The first assessment can serve as a baseline for making further comparison and a benchmark on which companies can gauge their efforts for service improvement.

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