

The Influence of Customer Experience Dimensions on Satisfaction: A Case of Car Rental Services

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Abstract

All tourism experiences involve at least one element of transport, one of which often is car rental services. By adopting the customer experience scale, this research aimed to determine the perceptions of customer experience quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in car rental operations at the East London Airport during a one-month period, namely June 2021. A snowball sampling method was used, and questionnaires were distributed to 114 respondents through an online survey. Data were analysed by means of descriptive and inferential statistics, using AMOS Version 26 for structural equation modelling. The results showed that customer experience dimensions had a significant influence on customer satisfaction. The application of the experience quality (EXQ) scale was extended in this study, which could help managers of car rentals to identify the key areas of importance when striving to provide pleasant experiences.

Keywords: car rental; customer experience; customer satisfaction; tourism

Introduction

Customer satisfaction is an important aspect of the service industry. Accordingly, service providers should continuously monitor the quality of their services as perceived by customers to ensure that they meet client needs, and make improvements where required. Achieving customer satisfaction does not come without challenges, due to the nature of these services. According to Jan (2012), services can be summarised in terms of their main characteristics such as intangibility (cannot be touched), inseparability (simultaneously produced and consumed), heterogeneity (no two services are precisely alike), and perishability (cannot be saved). These characteristics pose challenges for businesses, but they can be managed successfully by paying close attention to customer expectations (Wani et al., 2023).

Car rental services have played a significant role in the enhancement of the convenience of transportation (Gierczak-Korzeniowska, 2020). Akay (2021) claims that the success of the car rental sector, which provides support services to the growing tourism industry, is considered very important for the development of the industry. Car rental services enable customers to travel to their preferred destinations at their leisure. Hsu et al. (2019) are of the view that the service experience and thus the overall satisfaction with car rental services have an impact on inclusive travel contentment.



According to Khan and Metri (2011), a service experience arises when a business deliberately uses services as the stage and products as the means to interact with customers. Experiences lead to feelings and emotions, resulting in consumers wanting to relive positive experiences, which not only impacts the satisfaction of the customer, but also results in brand loyalty (Khan et al., 2015). Such a view suggests that the terms ‘customer satisfaction’ and ‘customer experience’ are not synonymous.

According to Ok et al. (2018), customer satisfaction is a significant element of business practice that determines the application of service performance. For Becker and Jaakkola (2020), customer experience refers to various consumer responses and reactions that vary in character and intensity. There is a scarcity of tourism research about customer perceptions of service quality in the car rental sector, particularly in South Africa. This research aimed to investigate the impact of the customer experience quality (EXQ) dimensions adapted from Khan et al. (2015) on customer satisfaction in car rental operations.

Literature review

Personal transportation options have greatly expanded in recent years, and the use of rentals in the tourism industry could be one of the most effective ways to promote tourism and new mobility (Nakamura & Abe, 2016). Car rentals represent an important component of the tourism industry as more and more travellers use rental services as their preferred choice of mobility (Ola, 2016). Car travel is the most popular mode of transportation in the world of tourism (it accounts for 77% of all journeys) because of its many benefits, like flexibility, cost, and freedom. Tourists frequently rent cars to get to their locations, which has resulted in an active gathering of car rental companies (Dinu, 2018). Furthermore, tourists prefer to roam around an area on their own rather than taking the set public transportation routes (Nakamura & Abe, 2016).

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has been at the centre of many service-related studies for a long time due to its important contribution to business success. Customer satisfaction in tourism is determined by both subjective and objective elements, such as customer requirements and emotions, as well as product and service attributes (Sánchez-Rebull et al., 2018). Pakurár et al. (2019) summarise customer satisfaction as a customer's assessment of whether the service fits his or her expectations and needs. Customer satisfaction is critical because of its influence on future consumer intentions, loyalty, and word-of-mouth marketing (Corte et al., 2015; Hermann et al., 2020). If customers are dissatisfied with a company's services, they will probably not return in the future. Furthermore, by using survey and rating data on customer satisfaction, a business can decide how to improve or change its products and services (Abdullah et al., 2022).

Previous studies have determined that customer satisfaction is an outcome of customer experience in different contexts (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019; Deshwal & Krishna, 2016; Khan et al., 2015; Ko, 2020; Roy, 2018; Worimegbe et al., 2020). It is important to constantly think about ongoing evaluation and improvement of services and experiences of customers in the service sector. As noted by Ko (2020), customer satisfaction and customer experience are distinct constructs and have a contributory relationship with each other. In the hotel industry, for example, Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019) found that offering distinct experiences through employees and the physical environment, coupled with psychological, symbolic, and cognitive benefits, would lead to satisfied customers. For the purpose of this study, customer satisfaction is determined as a customer's feedback following the use of services, in the form of an evaluation of the service provided and the outcome of the experience, as compared to the customer's expectations.



Customer experience

Tourism services are widely recognised as a significant experience-based industry. According to Sellier et al. (2021:230), “the particularity of the customer experience is that it integrates several points of contact during the customer’s service experience, and thus specific interactions between the customer and the service provider are involved”. De Wet et al. (2021) maintain that for customer experience to be optimised, a business should ensure that they understand the ideal customer journey. The evaluation of the customer's overall perception of the service is often used as a benchmark to measure experience quality.

Lemke et al. (2011) conceptualise customer experience as the customer’s subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm, and customer experience quality as a subjective assessment of the customer experience in relation to a preconceived expectation. Poor customer experience quality often results in dissatisfaction, which leads to a loss of business for companies. Furthermore, customer experience quality is “customers’ cognitive and emotional assessment of direct and indirect contacts with the service organisation, physical environment, and social environment, coupled with the psychological, symbolic and cognitive outcomes accorded to the customer from specific encounters” (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019). Elements of different dimensions such as service quality, service operation, employee performance, information technology, and customer expectations may affect the quality of consumer service experience both directly and indirectly (Hsieh & Chuang, 2015). Customer experience is said to have a direct relationship with customer behavioural outcomes and satisfaction (Choo et al., 2018; Roy, 2018).

Klaus and Maklan (2012) developed a multiple-item scale for measuring the customer service experience. According to Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021), the experience quality (EXQ) scale was designed to the customer experience and journey through all three phases, namely the brand experience, service (provider) experience, and post-purchase experience. Klaus and Maklan (2012) are of the opinion that customers' perceptions of service experience are based on four dimensions: product experience, outcome focus, moments of truth, and peace of mind. These dimensions act as a reflection of a customer’s perception of the service experience (Roy, 2018).

Product experience – This dimension emphasises the importance of a customer’s perception of whether or not they can choose and compare different offerings (Deshwal & Krishna, 2016; Khan et al., 2015) at the chosen service provider (Roy, 2018). The product experience refers to the experience associated with what the service or product offers, such as its attributes, diversity, functionality, and the capacity of the product to meet needs other than the service offered (Worimegbe et al., 2020). This implies that to gain a competitive advantage over other competitors, firms need to find new ways to delight customers (Kashif et al., 2016). Based on this literature, we hypothesise that:

H1: Product experience positively influences customer satisfaction.

Outcome focus – This dimension is linked to lower transaction costs for customers, such as finding and qualifying new providers (Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Outcome focus reflects the significance of objective-orientated customer experiences such as searching for and qualifying a service provider that would cater for their needs (Roy, 2018). The outcome focus can also be viewed as perceived value-added delivery by firms based on experience, which leads to the customer showing positive behaviour and experiencing memorable feelings (Worimegbe et al., 2020). Based on this literature, we hypothesise that:

H2: Outcome focus positively influences customer satisfaction.

Moments of truth – According to De Jong and De Ruyter (cited in Klaus & Maklan, 2012), this dimension explains the impact of a service provider's actions on the customer's current and future decisions in the event of a mishap. During these moments of truth the customer forms an opinion that is long-lasting and influences the customer's buying decisions (Ko, 2020). Moments of truth stress the significance of the service provider's flexibility, pro-activeness, and service recovery in the case of failure (Roy, 2018). Based on this literature, we hypothesise that:

H3: Moments of truth positively influence customer satisfaction.

Peace of mind – This dimension shows the emotional benefits to customers of the service provider's perceived knowledge (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). According to Deshwal and Krishna (2016), this parameter depicts a consumer's evaluation of all their contacts with the service provider before, during and after the service. Various types of emotions can be elicited, and these customer emotions convey important information on how the customer will ultimately assess the service encounter, and, subsequently, the overall relationship of service experience quality (Choo et al., 2018). Based on this literature, we hypothesise that:

H4: Peace of mind positively influences customer satisfaction.

The research model based on the study of theory and the development of hypotheses can be seen in Figure 1 below. The relationships refer to the hypotheses that were tested in this study.

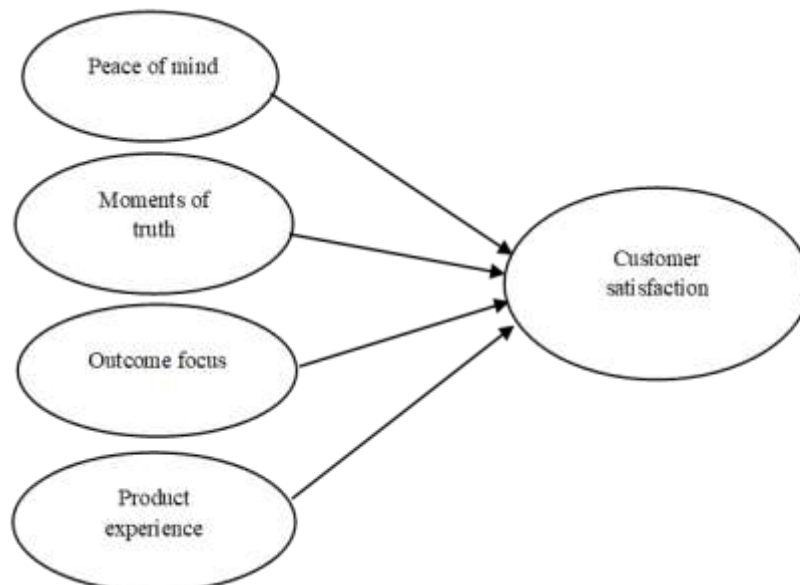


Figure 1: Conceptual model linking EXQ factors and customer satisfaction

Khan et al. (2015) extended the applicability of the customer experience quality scale (EXQ) to hotel operations. Their study looked at EXQ in the hotel business to address the issue of generalisation and to assess EXQ's influence on important consumer behavioural outcomes such as word of mouth, consumer happiness, and brand loyalty (Khan et al., 2015). Their research found that all four customer EXQ factors had a favourable and significant effect on consumer behaviour (Khan et al., 2015). Deshwal and Krishna (2016) conducted another study in which they investigated the effect of customer service quality factors on customer satisfaction by conducting an empirical study on retail establishments in India. Their findings



also showed that customer satisfaction is influenced by all four characteristics of customer experience quality. It was therefore decided to utilise the customer experience quality (EXQ) scale used by Khan et al. (2015) in this research study for assessing the quality of experiences of both international and domestic travellers who use car rental services in South Africa.

Methodology

Previous studies have shown that the customer experience is a very important factor in predicting customer satisfaction (Bravo et al., 2019; Deshwal & Krishna, 2016; Khan et al., 2015). The study followed a confirmatory quantitative research approach using a survey research design. A structured questionnaire based on the EXQ model of Klaus and Maklan (2012) was utilised. The customer experience dimensions were linked with satisfaction through the use of the customer experience scale. This research aimed to determine the perceptions of customer experience, quality dimensions and customer satisfaction in car rental operations. This helped to test the hypothesis that customer experience dimensions are positively correlated with customer satisfaction.

The survey instrument was adapted and pretested prior to distribution in order to ensure face validity. All seven car rental companies at the East London Airport (now King Phalo Airport) were targeted for inclusion in the study. Five of the seven companies gave permission for this research in the form of signed consent letters. The researcher had sent the car rental managers a request for permission by email and later met them in person for original signatures on the consent forms.

For the purposes of this study, it was not possible to determine an exact population size due to the Airports Company of South Africa not having such data. For that reason, the largest possible sample was sought. Once data collection had been completed, the data were cleaned and subsequently, a reliability test was performed on the data by means of a Cronbach's alpha test. The test revealed that all variables scored above 0.70, which, according to Ursachi et al. (2015), reveals reliable data and therefore a suitable sample size.

Data were collected in June and July 2021 from travellers using car rental services at the East London Airport. Car rental agents at the airport were informed of the study and requested to promote the study to their clients. Clients who were willing to participate in the study were provided with an information leaflet and requested to provide their email addresses. Thus, a non-random, convenience sampling approach was used. The survey link was then shared with the target population via email and WhatsApp platforms. In addition, snowball sampling was used because it was difficult to access the target population, as proposed by Saunders and Lewis (2017), due to limitations placed on the industry as a result of COVID-19 regulations. A total of 200 questionnaires were circulated to the target audience through an online survey tool (Survey Monkey), and 114 completed questionnaires were returned and used in the data analysis.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A tested the various constructs related to customer service experience on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented strongly disagree, 2 represented disagree, 3 represented neutral, 4 represented agree, and 5 represented strongly agree. Six variables made up the peace of mind construct, five variables made up the moments of truth construct, four variables made up the product experience construct, and four variables made up the outcome focus construct. For measuring customer satisfaction, five items were taken from the study of Khan et al. (2015). Section B addressed the demographics and contained trip characteristic questions.

Data were captured using Microsoft Excel Worksheet and then analysed by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. Internal consistency to establish the reliability of the constructs was measured through Cronbach's alpha. Confirmatory Factor



Analysis (CFA) was performed to verify the factor structure and to test the four hypotheses that were formulated in this study. The Path analysis results explain the causal relationships between variables. Data was analysed through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using statistical techniques.

Results and discussion

Demographic findings

In terms of the demographic profile of respondents, one-third were females while two-thirds were males. A total of 29.8% of respondents possessed bachelor's degrees; 22.8% were certificate holders; 18.4% were national diploma holders; 16.7% had postgraduate diplomas; 45.3% had master's degrees; and only 4.4% had doctoral qualifications. Most respondents (41.2%) were travelling for holidays; 28.9% were travelling for business, and 19.3% were travelling to visit friends and family. Domestic travel accounted for 93% of respondents.

Confirmatory factor analysis

According to Khine (2013), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models are frequently used to investigate patterns of interrelationships between different components. To validate the measurement model, a CFA was done on the five constructs to ensure that the variables that made up each factor were connected. The convergent and discriminant validity of the scales was tested using CFA. As seen in Table 1 below, each construct had a Cronbach's alpha value larger than the theoretical threshold of 60% (Ursachi et al., 2015), thereby indicating adequate internal consistency (reliability).

The minimum acceptable value of composite reliability is 0.60 (Hamid et al., 2017). *Peace of mind*, *moments of truth*, *product experience*, and *customer satisfaction* recorded composite reliability values that were above 0.60, indicating a good level of internal consistency; however, the *outcome focus* scale had a low composite reliability of 0.50, as shown in Table 1 below. The low composite reliability demonstrated by the outcome focus scale is largely attributed to the low loading factors, especially "Service experience has influenced which my preferred car rental company is", which had a low loading factor of 0.41. In this case, it can be interpreted that outcome focus is the least significant independent variable for predicting customer satisfaction.

Discriminant validity is defined as the degree to which assessments of various attributes are uncorrelated (Zait, 2011). Discriminant validity was tested using average variance derived in this study (AVE). A minimum value of 0.50 is acceptable (Zait, 2011). All the constructs recorded a high AVE of at least 0.85. In particular, *customer satisfaction* recorded a high AVE score of 0.90.

Convergent validity was measured in this study using loading factors of each measurement item to their respective latent factor constructs. *Moments of truth*, *product experience*, and *customer satisfaction* measurement items had loading factors that were above the 0.50 cut-off, signifying validity. However, the items "Previous dealings influenced my choice of a car rental company", and "Service experience has influenced which my preferred car rental company" loaded poorly in the *peace of mind* and *outcome focus* factors with low loading factors of 0.42 and 0.41, showing them to be less significant.

Factor 1: Peace of mind. Concerning whether car rentals provided peace of mind, the respondents indicated a high level of agreement with the overall mean value of 3.9. This factor included the following variables: "The car rental company's customer service expertise gives confidence"; "The car renting process was easy"; "The car rental company will always look after my needs as a customer"; "Previous dealings influence my choice of a car rental company"; "Previous dealings ensure ease of interaction with the car rental company"; and



“The company staff gives valuable advice”. The research conducted by Worimegbe et al. (2020) highlighted that the creation of new services is a significant driver of customers' experience, which is a driver of customers' satisfaction. They indicate that “these new services will bring about peace of mind for the customers”. This finding aligns with the study of (Khan et al., 2015) that demonstrates the influence of peace of mind on customer satisfaction.

Table 1: Factor analysis: Customer experience

Measured items	Factor loading	Mean	CR	AVE	Cronbach Alpha %
Peace of mind		3.90	0.60	0.88	78.1
The car rental company's customer service expertise gives confidence.	0.547				
The car renting process was easy.	0.770				
The car rental company will always look after my needs as a customer.	0.870				
Previous dealings influence my choice of a car rental company.	0.420				
Previous dealings ensure ease of interaction with the car rental company.	0.690				
The company staff gives valuable advice.	0.930				
Moments of truth		3.80	0.61	0.89	78.8
The car rental company looked out for my needs.	0.710				
The car rental company keeps a customer up to date with new offerings.	0.880				
This is a reputable car rental company.	0.880				
The staff at the company has good customer service skills.	0.730				
The company deals with a customer professionally when things go (went) wrong.	0.689				
Outcome focus		3.80	0.50	0.79	78.4
Renting from this car rental company makes the process much easier.	0.700				
The car rental company looks after my needs as a customer swiftly.	0.860				
Service experience has influenced which my preferred car rental company is.	0.410				
The car rental company staff understands my personal preferences.	0.770				
Product experience		3.90	0.71	0.88	79.4
There is a diverse range of vehicle options to choose from.	0.841				
There is a diverse range of pricing options to choose from.	0.896				
There are different rental options to compare from the company.	0.793				
You get one designated contact in the company.	0.460				
Customer satisfaction		3.90	0.66	0.90	92.2
My feelings towards the car rental company are very positive.	0.790				
The car rental company has all the offerings that one would look for.	0.770				
Overall, you get satisfied with the company and the service they provide.	0.840				
The company produces the best results that can be achieved for the customer.	0.810				
The extent to which the car rental company has produced the best possible outcome for me is satisfying.	0.835				

Factor 2: Moments of truth. Overall, perceptions about moments of truth were positive and this was justified by a high mean score of 3.8. This factor included the following variables: “The car rental company looked out for my needs”; “The car rental company keeps a customer up to date with new offerings”; “This is a reputable car rental company”; “The staff at the company has good customer service skills”; and “The company deals with a customer professionally when things go (went) wrong”. This is supported by the work of Kashif et al. (2016), which revealed moments of truth as highly valued by customers. Deshwal and Krishna's (2016) research came to the same conclusion and showed that moments of truth affect customer satisfaction.

Factor 3: Outcome focus. Overall perceptions about outcome focus were positive and this was supported by a high mean score of 3.8. This factor included the following variables: “Renting from this car rental company makes the process much easier”; “The car rental company looks after my needs as a customer swiftly”; “Service experience has an influence on which my preferred car rental company is”, and “The car rental company staff understands my personal preferences”. The findings are consistent with those of Roy (2018) and highlight the importance of outcome focus in shaping customers' perceptions of service experience; thereby suggesting its influence on customer satisfaction.



Factor 4: Product experience. Overall perceptions about product experience were favourable and this was supported by a high mean score of 3.9. This factor included the following variables: “There is a diverse range of vehicle options to choose from”; “There is a diverse range of pricing options to choose from”; “There are different rental options to compare from the company”; and “You get one designated contact in the company”. These results are in accordance with the research by Ko (2020), which confirms product experience as a significant construct in customer experience evaluation, which then influences customer satisfaction.

Factor 5: Customer satisfaction. Overall perceptions about customer satisfaction were positive and this was supported by a high mean score of 3.9. This factor included the following variables: “My feelings towards the car rental company are very positive”; “The car rental company has all the offerings that one would look for”; “Overall, you get satisfied with the company and the service they provide”; “The company produces the best results that can be achieved for the customer”; and “The extent to which the car rental company has produced the best possible outcome for me is satisfying”. This is supported by prior research in the context of retail stores (Deshwal & Krishna, 2016) and the hotel industry (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2019), where results show that experience dimensions contribute to customer satisfaction.

Model measurement for the goodness of fit

The study employed a structural equation approach through Amos (26) in the SPSS software application. The results in Table 2 indicate that the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and incremental fit index (IFI) fall within acceptable limits, as shown. This indicates that the goodness of fit of the model was satisfactory.

Table 2: Measurement of a good fit of the model

Index	Good fit range	Very good fit range	Value obtained	Comment
Chi-Square			686.785	
Degree of freedom (df)			413.000	
Chi-Square/df		Less than 2 (<2)	1.66	Very good fit
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.06 to 0.08	Less than 0.06 (<0.06)	0.077	Good fit
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.85 to 0.90	Greater than 0.90 (> 0.90)	0.897	Good fit
IFI	0.85 to 0.90	Greater than 0.90 (> 0.90)	0.882	Good fit
Tucker Lewis index (TLI)	0.85 to 0.90	Greater than 0.90 (> 0.90)	0.853	Good fit

Figure 2 below shows the results of the hypothesised relationships. Path analysis was used to show correlations between variables as well as casual relationships between the constructs of the study. The research path estimates indicate that EXQ had a favourable and significant impact on satisfaction.

As hypothesised in H1-H4, the results provide support for the relationship between customer experience dimensions and customer satisfaction. *Peace of mind* has a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.57$; $p < 0.01$). H₂ is acknowledged, and it can be concluded that *moments of truth* significantly influence customer satisfaction, given the positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.90$; $p < 0.01$). H₃ is acknowledged, and it can be concluded that *outcome focus* significantly predicts customer satisfaction, given the positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.32$; $p < 0.05$). H₄ is acknowledged, and it can be concluded that *product experience*

significantly influences customer satisfaction, given the positive path coefficient ($\beta = 0.21$; $p < 0.05$).

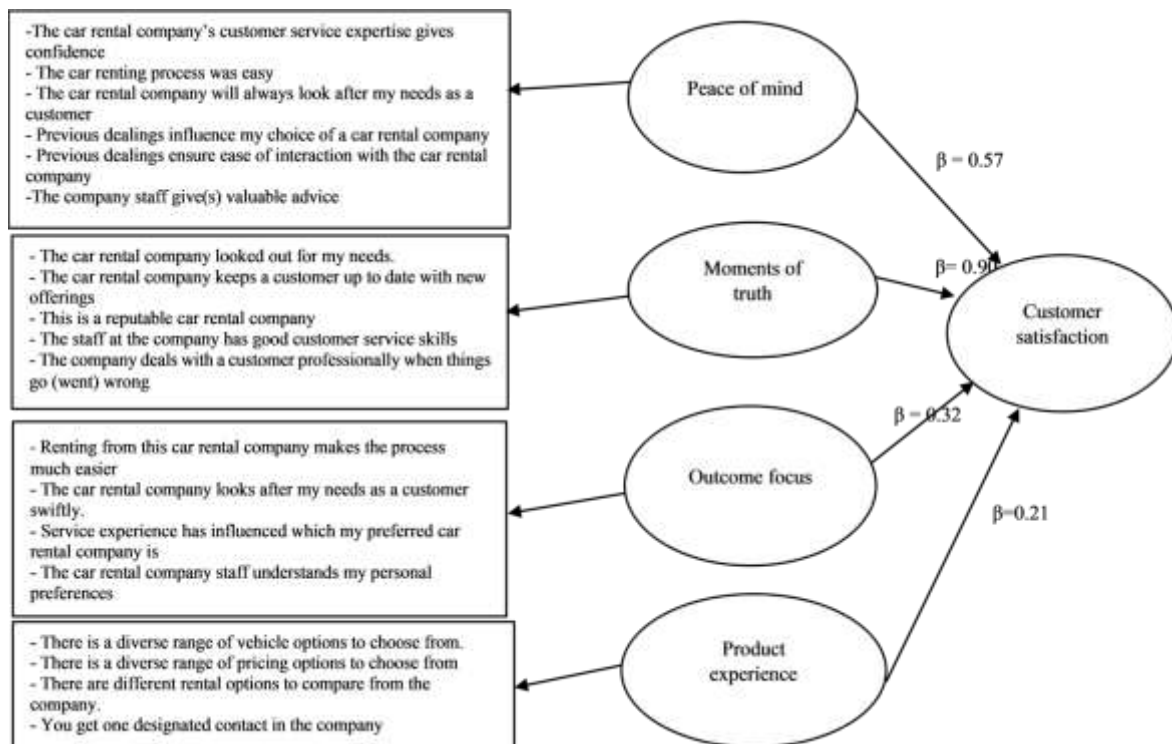


Figure 2: Structural equation model results

Conclusion

Customer experience is regarded as an important component of building relationships between companies and customers. For this reason, research in this field is increasing. The main goal of this study was to research customer service experiences in car rental operations at East London Airport in South Africa. This study measured the effect of the EXQ model of Klaus and Maklan (2012), confirming that customer experience quality influences customers' satisfaction in a car rental context. The findings of this study clearly show that customer experience, as proposed by Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown (2019), is not merely dependent on the service encounters, but rather is the customer's entire evaluation of direct and indirect interactions with the service organisation in terms of cognitive and emotional factors. As a result, this research contributes to creating discourse and an enhanced understanding of the concept of service experiences in car rental services. This examination of the customer experience quality dimension's effect on customer satisfaction shows that peace of mind, moments of truth, outcome focus, and product experience have almost equal significance. Our findings show that all four customer experience quality attributes have a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction. Most noticeably, the hypothesis resulted in moments of truth having a path coefficient of 0.90, indicating the highest impact on customer satisfaction and its criticality in satisfying customer needs. Car rental companies need to understand market-driven choices that would be beneficial to them and impact customers positively. They should provide flexible processes that would motivate their customers to return. Car rental company staff should be trained to provide excellent services that instil confidence in their customers.



Subsequently, customer experience management would result in those key events being memorable to customers. However, further investigation concerning service quality in the car rental sector is required in order to further learning and academic discourse in the field and ultimately enhance the sector's financial sustainability. The EXQ model can capture the aspects of the customer's journey with a particular company. This study further validates the EXQ constructs in assessing the influence of the customer's experience on customer satisfaction.

Limitations

The researcher's original plan was to do this study at several airports in South Africa. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, that was never possible. Regarding the empirical study sample, it is important to note that the researcher was in a situation where it was hard to get to the sample, which is why the snowball sampling method was used. The ability of the researcher to reach the target population was restricted, hence the snowball sampling method was used. Even with these limitations, efforts were made to make sure that they did not get in the way of coming to a factual conclusion.

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