

Excellent Service in Consumers Perspective: A Qualitative Study on Purchase Decisions in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how service excellence influences consumer purchasing decisions in the digital era. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research involved in-depth interviews with consumers who have transacted through digital platforms such as marketplaces and social media. The findings indicate that consumers perceive service excellence as an important factor in their purchasing decisions. Fast, responsive, and informative services create a positive experience that encourages loyalty and repeat purchases. Furthermore, in today's digital age, good service interactions not only enhance customer satisfaction but also influence brand perception and reputation on social media. This study concludes that service excellence impacts not only the initial purchasing decision but also the long-term relationship between consumers and companies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As business competition becomes increasingly intense, service excellence has emerged as a crucial differentiating factor influencing consumers' purchasing decisions (Slamet & Ulil Albab, 2023). It is no longer sufficient for companies to merely offer good products; they are now expected to deliver superior and memorable service experiences to their customers. This phenomenon is especially evident in today's digital era, where consumers have broad access to information and can quickly compare services among providers or products through social media, online reviews, and other digital platforms (Diana & Aliami, 2024).

Service excellence is no longer just about friendly staff or the speed of service; it now encompasses the entire customer experience, including empathy, accuracy of information, convenience, and trust in the brand. In both the retail and service industries, consumers are increasingly inclined to choose brands that can deliver added value through exceptional service even when the prices offered are relatively higher than those of competitors (Egala et al., 2021). Many companies are beginning to adjust their service strategies, ranging from improved employee training to the utilization of technologies such as chatbots and AI-based customer service (Mulya & Halim, 2023).

Based on this phenomenon, this research aims to explore in depth how consumers perceive and define service excellence and how that perception influences their decisions to purchase a product or service (Alfatiha & Budiarmo, 2020). Consumer behavior has shifted significantly in the digital era, marked by rising expectations regarding service quality. Consumers not only want products that meet their needs but also desire a pleasant and satisfying experience throughout the purchasing process from information search and communication with service providers to after-sales

service. This condition drives companies to be more proactive in understanding consumers' perceptions and expectations of the services they provide (Siregar et al., 2020).

The ease of access to information via the internet and social media has made consumers more critical in evaluating service quality. Testimonials, customer reviews, and ratings have become essential references in decision-making (Ernawati, 2021). As a result, one bad experience shared on social media can damage a brand's reputation, while outstanding service can enhance customer loyalty and attract new customers through digital word of mouth. This underscores that service excellence is now a strategically influential factor in shaping a company's image and supporting consumers' purchasing decisions.

Furthermore, the increasingly tight competition among businesses both large corporations and MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) has made service quality a key success factor in retaining and expanding market share (Hanafi, 2024). Many companies are striving to develop superior service standards, yet not all understand what consumers truly perceive as "service excellence." In this context, a qualitative approach becomes relevant, as it can uncover the deeper meaning, perceptions, and experiences of consumers elements that are not always quantifiable.

"Service excellence" can be translated into Indonesian as *pelayanan prima*, which literally means the best or most excellent service. It is considered excellent or the best because it meets the service standards set by the service provider. (Wijaya & Zaenal, 2018). According to Freddy, service excellence is the best service that meets customers' expectations and needs. In other words, premium service is one that adheres to established quality standards (Rangkuti Freddy, 2017).

Every business aims for "Service Excellence" as a motivating goal. The term "service excellence" refers to providers regarded as outstanding in the market (both by professionals and customers) and capable of delivering superior services that exceed client expectations. When the goal of service excellence is achieved, customers are happy, loyal, and the business becomes sustainably profitable (Hermanto, 2021).

According to Parasuraman et al. (2018), the concept of service quality is closely linked to customer satisfaction, which is determined by five aspects commonly known as the "RATER" dimensions: Responsiveness, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Reliability.

These indicators reflect various aspects of service activities that satisfy the recipient, such as responsiveness in addressing needs, assurance in delivering confidence, tangible evidence aligned with empathy, and reliability in performing duties and responsibilities in a trustworthy manner to satisfy the service recipient (Sulle, 2022).

According to (Iriani & Indriyani, 2019) The purchasing decision is a process in which consumers recognize their problem, seek information about certain products or brands, and evaluate how well each of the alternatives can solve their problem, which then leads to the purchasing decision. According to Kotler & Armstrong (2018) in the journal (Puspita et al., 2022) The purchase decision is the stage in the buying decision process where consumers actually make the purchase. According to (Damayanti et al., 2022) The purchasing decision is the stages that consumers go through in buying goods or services. Meanwhile, according to Pride and Ferrel (2016) in the journal (Saragi, 2017) The purchase decision is the decision-making process and purchasing activities of individuals who buy products for personal or household use and not for business purposes. Based on several definitions presented by experts, the author can conclude that the purchase decision is a process in which consumers go through several stages in making a decision to buy a product or service. Kotler & Armstrong (2018) on (Atma & Nio, 2019) stated that the purchase decision has several dimensions, namely product choice, brand choice, distributor choice, purchase timing, purchase quantity, and payment method.

Based on the research (Djafar et al., 2023), it is stated that high-quality excellent service can influence purchasing decisions. This statement is supported by (Patmala & Fatihah, 2021) whose research findings prove that excellent service has a significant impact on purchasing decisions.

Focusing on the subjective experiences of consumers, this research aims to understand how they evaluate a service as 'excellent' and how that perception influences their decisions in purchasing specific products or services. The results of this research are expected to serve as a reference for business practitioners in designing service strategies that are more oriented towards the needs and expectations of customers, especially in the dynamic and competitive digital era.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with the aim of providing an in-depth description of consumers' perceptions and experiences regarding service excellence and how these influence their purchasing decisions. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is considered the most appropriate for exploring social phenomena of a subjective nature, particularly those related to personal meaning and consumer experiences. This type of research is descriptive qualitative research, which seeks to systematically and factually describe how consumers interpret service excellence and its connection to purchasing decisions. The study does not focus on quantitative or statistical measurements but rather on gaining deep understanding through the narratives of the research subjects. Data analysis is carried out using thematic analysis techniques, which involve identifying, categorizing, and interpreting the main themes that emerge from interview and observation results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study examines the role of excellent service in influencing consumer purchase decisions within the dynamic and competitive digital marketplace. Through qualitative methods—including in-depth interviews, observation of digital platforms, and literature analysis—this research reveals several crucial insights that collectively reinforce the strategic importance of service excellence from a consumer perspective.

The Shift from Transactional to Experiential Buying

Consumers today do not merely buy products they buy experiences. In the digital era, where product information, pricing, and availability are increasingly standardized across platforms, the service experience becomes a primary differentiator.

Interview data consistently shows that consumers interpret fast, friendly, and solution-oriented service as a sign of professionalism and credibility. For example, multiple informants expressed a strong preference for sellers who respond quickly, provide detailed information, and exhibit a customer-focused attitude. This preference illustrates how digital consumers are not passive recipients but active evaluators of service quality at every stage of the purchasing journey. Moreover, the customer journey no longer begins and ends with a single purchase; it involves pre-purchase inquiries, post-purchase support, and in many cases, social sharing of experiences. Thus, service must be understood as a continuous interaction rather than a one-time touchpoint.

Service as a Psychological Reassurance in a Trust-Deficient Space

Digital transactions inherently involve risk. Unlike offline purchases, consumers cannot physically inspect products or engage in face-to-face interactions. In such a setting, excellent service functions as psychological reassurance. Prompt responses, polite interactions, and transparent communication help mitigate perceived risk and uncertainty.

For example, one informant reported that they often abandoned their cart or left a platform if a seller seemed indifferent or curt in replies. This supports the notion that service functions as a trust-building mechanism in environments where trust is not inherent. Literature supports this claim. Kotler and Keller (2016) emphasize that emotional and relational factors often outweigh product-centric considerations in consumer decision-making, particularly when competition is high and product parity exists.

The Rise of "Digital Etiquette" as a Component of Service Excellence

Another emerging theme is the importance of what can be termed as digital etiquette the set of unwritten norms governing respectful, responsive, and empathetic online communication. Consumers today expect not just speed but also tone and manner. They notice whether a seller uses proper greetings, says "thank you," offers solutions rather than excuses, and follows up proactively. This was evident in the experience of informant D (28 years old), who became a loyal customer because the store admin demonstrated good manners and attentiveness. This supports previous findings that emotional resonance feeling seen, heard, and valued has a direct correlation with repurchase intention and customer loyalty. This dimension is underrepresented in older models of

service quality, which often focus on tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness but do not capture emotional or behavioral cues in digital service interactions.

User-Generated Reviews as Amplifiers of Service Impact

Service excellence is no longer a private matter it is now public and searchable. Observations on platforms such as Tokopedia, Shopee, and Google Reviews reveal that consumers frequently mention service quality in their reviews, sometimes more prominently than product details.

Reviews such as “admin sangat ramah,” “pengiriman cepat,” or “respon sangat informatif” appear repeatedly in 5-star ratings. Conversely, low ratings often cite lack of communication, slow replies, or impolite responses as the reason for dissatisfaction even when the product itself was acceptable. This illustrates that the perception of service excellence extends beyond the individual transaction and feeds into a brand's digital reputation. In turn, these reviews influence the purchasing behavior of other potential consumers, creating a feedback loop where service performance directly affects future sales.

Emotional Drivers in Rational Decisions

While much of the digital shopping journey appears rational comparing prices, reading specifications, choosing the best deal the findings indicate that emotional factors play a surprisingly central role. Consumers are more likely to buy from sellers who make them feel comfortable, appreciated, and supported.

These findings challenge traditional economic models of decision-making and align with behavioral economics, which recognizes that emotions significantly affect judgment, especially in high-choice environments like digital marketplaces. In this sense, excellent service does not only function as a “rational incentive” but also as an “emotional trigger.” The absence of physical interaction in digital settings places greater weight on verbal and written cues, making every service encounter a potential moment of emotional engagement.

Strategic Implications for Digital Businesses

The findings of this study offer important strategic implications for digital businesses seeking to sustain competitiveness and foster lasting customer relationships in the digital economy. As product differentiation becomes increasingly difficult in a saturated market, service excellence emerges as a critical differentiator. Companies can no longer rely solely on product features and pricing to attract and retain consumers. Instead, service must be positioned as a core element of the value proposition, integrated deeply into the brand identity and business strategy. Consumers now expect not only functional efficiency but also emotional engagement and responsiveness in their service experiences.

To meet these expectations, businesses must invest in their human capital, particularly in training customer-facing personnel to handle digital interactions with both professionalism and empathy. This includes not only product knowledge but also soft skills such as active listening, digital communication etiquette, and problem-solving. In the realm of digital customer service such as e-commerce chat support or social media admin roles these interpersonal skills are crucial, as every interaction contributes to the formation of brand perception and digital reputation.

Moreover, businesses must leverage technology not just for automation, but for enhancing personalization and responsiveness. Tools such as AI chatbots, CRM systems, and customer data analytics can support faster response times and more tailored service. However, it is essential that automation is balanced with a human touch, especially in complex or emotionally charged situations that require sensitivity and trust. Customers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that can blend the speed of digital platforms with a sense of genuine care and attentiveness.

The study also highlights how customer feedback, particularly in the form of online reviews and ratings, plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception. Positive experiences related to fast, polite, and solution-oriented service frequently surface in user-generated content, which influences other potential buyers. As such, digital businesses must adopt proactive reputation management strategies, including monitoring online reviews, engaging with customer feedback constructively, and

responding transparently to complaints. These actions demonstrate accountability and reinforce consumer trust.

Beyond functional satisfaction, the emotional aspect of service experiences is shown to have a profound impact on customer loyalty. Many informants emphasized how feelings of being heard, respected, and understood shaped their decision to purchase and even recommend the brand to others. Therefore, digital businesses should focus on creating emotionally engaging touchpoints such as personalized thank-you messages, loyalty incentives, and follow-up communications that enhance the customer journey and strengthen relational bonds.

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the digital landscape demands agility. As consumer expectations evolve alongside technological developments and shifting digital cultures, what constitutes "excellent service" today may not be sufficient tomorrow. Continuous improvement, driven by regular customer feedback and internal performance evaluation, is essential. Businesses that are agile and responsive to these shifts are more likely to sustain relevance and build long-term customer value.

Ultimately, service excellence must not be relegated to the customer service department alone but should be embedded across all business functions. A holistic, cross-functional approach ensures that the organization operates with a unified commitment to customer satisfaction, from strategic planning and marketing to operations and after-sales service. By treating service as a strategic pillar, digital businesses can create a sustainable competitive advantage that aligns closely with evolving consumer expectations in the digital age.

Theoretical Contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands the discourse on service quality models in digital environments. While SERVQUAL and related frameworks have long been used to measure service quality, they may require adaptation to digital contexts that emphasize speed, tone, and responsiveness over traditional tangibles. The findings also support the application of the expectation-confirmation theory, which posits that satisfaction occurs when service performance meets or exceeds expectations. In this study, when expectations regarding speed and friendliness were met or exceeded, satisfaction and loyalty followed; when they were not, disappointment led to purchase abandonment or brand switching.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that service excellence functions not merely as a supporting factor in digital transactions but serves as a critical determinant of consumer purchasing decisions. In today's consumer perspective, high-quality service shapes initial brand perceptions, influences emotional experiences throughout the purchasing process, and fosters long-term loyalty. Purchasing decisions are no longer solely based on rational factors such as price and product specifications; they are also heavily shaped by emotional experiences arising from service interactions. This aligns with the concept proposed by Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2018), who emphasize that service quality directly impacts perceived value and behavioral intentions, including repeat purchases and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Moreover, Kotler and Keller (2016) underscore that in highly competitive markets, companies that offer superior service experiences are more likely to gain customer preference even when product offerings are relatively similar. This study supports that view by demonstrating how consumers are willing to switch providers or remain loyal based on their service interactions alone. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) also argue that service excellence encompasses five key dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, all of which contribute to customer satisfaction and decision-making processes. The present findings reaffirm that at least three of these dimensions—responsiveness, empathy, and assurance—are especially critical in digital consumer behavior.

Therefore, in the digital era, service excellence has shifted from being a purely operational function to becoming a strategic pillar that shapes a company's value proposition and competitive advantage. Digital businesses must not only focus on technological efficiency but also prioritize human-centric service strategies that address both rational and emotional consumer needs. Delivering consistently excellent service marked by speed, clarity, empathy, and professionalism can

significantly enhance consumer trust and influence purchasing behavior. As a result, companies that succeed in embedding service excellence as a core strategic value are better positioned to attract, convert, and retain digital consumers in an increasingly experience-driven market.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the growing importance of service excellence as a key factor influencing consumer purchasing decisions in the digital age. Based on observations, interviews, and literature analysis, it is evident that consumers no longer evaluate purchases solely on the basis of price or product quality. Instead, they place significant value on the overall service experience particularly responsiveness, empathy, and professionalism in digital interactions. Positive service encounters not only encourage immediate purchases but also foster emotional satisfaction, trust, and long-term loyalty. In increasingly saturated and competitive digital markets, service excellence serves as a strategic differentiator that shapes brand perception and consumer behavior. As supported by previous research and reinforced through the voices of informants in this study, the quality of service especially in terms of speed, attentiveness, and clarity—can influence a consumer's decision to buy, recommend, or return. Businesses that embed service excellence into their core operations and digital strategy are more likely to succeed in building strong customer relationships and maintaining a competitive edge. Therefore, in the context of digital commerce, delivering exceptional service is no longer optional it is a strategic imperative. Companies must balance technological efficiency with human-centered service approaches to meet the evolving expectations of digitally savvy consumers. By doing so, they can not only drive sales but also create meaningful, lasting value in the eyes of their customers.

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