

Drivers of Customer Satisfaction in a Business-to-Business Market: A Survey within the South African Stainless Steel Industry

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Abstract

The vast number of competitors and the similarity of products on offer in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market force organisations to find alternative means of competing effectively. Customer satisfaction might be one such an example. Whilst research has confirmed the positive outcomes of customer satisfaction, much less is known about the antecedents (drivers) that should act as the foundation of attempts to maximise satisfaction, particularly in a developing country. This study confirms five satisfaction drivers, reports the gap scores between importance and satisfaction ratings by the account clients of a major South African stainless steel stockist and distributor, and shows the relationship between these drivers and overall satisfaction. The analysis of 320 useable survey questionnaires shows a moderate to strong positive relationship with overall satisfaction for four of the five drivers. Reliability is the most important driver and product quality received the highest average satisfaction rating. Drivers with the largest significant gap scores include reliability, service quality and commercial aspects. Management should focus on the important drivers—those with the highest negative gap scores between satisfaction and importance, and those showing a significant relationship with overall satisfaction.

Keywords: business-to-business marketing; customer satisfaction; service quality; trust; commitment; product quality; commercial aspects; reliability



Southern African Business Review
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SABR>
Volume 23 | 2019 | #4540 | 29 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1998-8125/4540>
ISSN 1998-8125 (Online)
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Introduction

Empirical studies in a business-to-business (B2B) context have confirmed a number of significant relationships between customer satisfaction and specific outcomes, for example successful long-term customer relationships (Taylor and Hunter 2014; Yang 2015); loyalty (Čater and Čater 2009; Sánchez, Vijande, and Gutiérrez 2011; Soledad and Javier 2013); behavioural intentions (Molinari, Abratt, and Dion 2008); and business performance (Niraj et al. 2008; Zeynep and Toker 2012).

Whilst the importance of the *outcomes* of satisfaction is acknowledged, we argue that the antecedents, or *drivers* of satisfaction, are as important and should be the point of departure in attempts to maximise customer satisfaction. Only once management is aware of the satisfaction drivers, of the importance customers attach to these drivers, and how importance ratings compare with satisfaction ratings, can they attempt to close the gaps and ensure that service delivery matches expectations. Since satisfaction can be of a transactional nature (resulting from interaction with specific aspects of the organisation) and of a cumulative nature (overall satisfaction over a period) (Jayawardhena et al. 2007; Spreng, Shi, and Page 2009), the next step would be to also determine the relationship between the drivers of satisfaction and overall satisfaction. Knowledge about the drivers of satisfaction will put managers in a better position when striving for satisfaction outcomes such as loyalty, repeat purchase, price sensitivity and positive word-of-mouth.

The following reasons underlie the focus of the study. Firstly, research into satisfaction associated with B2C (business-to-consumer) markets far exceeds that of B2B markets (Molinari et al. 2008; Pleshko and Heiens 2015). This is a concern, given that B2B markets have unique characteristics such as small numbers of customers who could have a major impact on overall business profitability, intense competition (Li, Ren, and Zheng, 2015) and complex business relationships (Jayawardhena et al. 2007). These factors contribute to the need for effectively managing customer satisfaction. Secondly, whilst customer satisfaction in B2B markets has been examined with respect to construction and mining (Askariazad and Babakhani 2015); manufacturing (Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltorom, and Cervera-Taulet 2009; Guo and Wang 2015; Özkan, Akman, and Özcan 2010); ICT (Matzler et al. 2015); and business services (Madaleno, Wilson, and Palmer 2007), there is a dearth of research into the stainless steel stockist and distributor market. Organisations acting as stockists and distributors in the South African stainless steel industry are challenged by the indirect effect of the weak global and local economy and by Chinese exports that penetrate foreign markets (Creamer Media 2016). In addition to these macro environmental factors, stockist organisations also have to find ways to compete effectively and sustainably, given the high levels of rivalry among direct competitors and the similarity of their products. Delivering on the drivers of customer satisfaction might serve as a competitive advantage in these situations.

While research into customer satisfaction in business markets is not new, no research into customer satisfaction within the South African stainless steel market could be located. Consequently, the current study used earlier research into satisfaction in other business-to-business contexts as the basis for examining satisfaction drivers in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market. Instead of replicating an existing measuring instrument or combination of instruments relevant to other contexts, a variety of items deemed to measure the importance of, and satisfaction with, the identified drivers, were formulated from previous research and theory. Experts from the targeted organisation evaluated the relevancy of these items. Factor analysis confirmed their reliability. Since the research focused on one organisation only, the results cannot be generalised. However, because of the similarity of direct competitors in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market, the results provide a framework that can be used by similar organisations within the South African stainless steel context. The current research therefore adds to the knowledge of satisfaction drivers in a business-to-business context, particularly in the stainless steel industry.

Based on the need for research into the drivers, rather than the outcomes of satisfaction, as explained earlier on, the following objectives were set, namely to: identify the variables that drive customer satisfaction; assess the importance and satisfaction associated with the identified variables; and determine the relationship between the said variables and overall satisfaction in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market.

The remainder of the paper is arranged as follows. First, background literature is provided with a focus on the importance of customer satisfaction and its definition and conceptualisation. A short discussion of the likely drivers of satisfaction is followed by an exposition of the theoretical framework and hypotheses. The methodology is explained next. The results, conclusions and recommendations are presented and the limitations of the study are acknowledged. Suggestions for future research conclude the paper.

Literature

Importance of Customer Satisfaction

Research (e.g. Briggs, Landry, and Daugherty 2016; Lewin 2009; Saddiqi 2011) has shown that customer satisfaction can serve as a key competitive advantage in B2B markets and may so contribute to organisational success. Furthermore, customer satisfaction functions as one of the most important antecedents of customer loyalty in B2B markets (Čater and Čater 2009; Williams and Naumann 2011; Zakaria et al. 2016). Customer loyalty reflects the buyer's deeply held commitment to an organisation and its products, services and brands despite new situations or competitive overtures that might induce switching (Flint, Blocker, and Boutin 2010). Loyalty results in lower costs of serving existing customers (Lewin 2009), positive word-of-mouth communication by

customers (Hsu 2008), and increased market share and overall profitability (Bayraktar et al. 2012; Williams and Naumann 2011).

Definition and Conceptualisation of Satisfaction

The B2B literature does not offer a universal definition of customer satisfaction. For example, Čater and Čater (2009, 586) describe customer satisfaction as “a positive affective state resulting from the appraisal of all aspects of a firm’s working relationship with another firm.” Taleghani et al. (2011, 79) define customer satisfaction in B2B markets as an “overall evaluation of the performance of an offering.” Homburg et al. (2002) suggest that satisfaction is the outcome of the comparison between expected and perceived performance. Satisfaction results when the service or product meets the customer’s expectations; however, when expectations are higher than actual performance, dissatisfaction follows (Ghandi and Kang 2011). Deng et al. (2010, 290) argue that customer satisfaction should be viewed as the summary of the customer’s resultant psychological state when the “emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the customer’s prior feelings about the consumption experience.” The consumer’s feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction might follow a specific or single experience, that is, being transaction-specific, or be the result of cumulative experiences over a period of time (Jayawardhena et al. 2007; Spreng et al. 2009), that is, overall experience. Jones and Suh (2000) and Lam et al. (2004) note that, in terms of transaction-specific dis/satisfaction, customers are likely to focus on a specific part of the encounter, for example, the behaviour of an employee. However, when evaluating cumulative experiences, customers are more likely to focus on a combination of previous encounters or the overall performance by the organisation over a period of time (Čater and Čater 2009; Jones and Suh 2000).

Drivers of Customer Satisfaction

While it is clear that customer satisfaction leads to positive outcomes for the organisation, no consensus seems to exist about what drives customer satisfaction. A detailed explanation of all the possible drivers of satisfaction falls beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, Table 1 presents a compendium of satisfaction drivers identified from past research into the B2B market.

The common drivers highlighted by the literature and reported in Table 1, include service quality, trust, commitment, product quality, commercial aspects and reliability. Following the identification of these variables in the B2B literature, their relevance was examined and verified in personal conversations with clients and representatives of stockists and distributors in the South African stainless steel industry. The first objective of the study, namely to identify the relevant drivers of satisfaction in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market, was thus satisfied.

Table 1: Drivers of customer satisfaction identified from previous research

Authors	Driver(s) of customer satisfaction (B2B)
Askariazad and Bahakhani (2015)	Perceived quality
Carlson, O’Cass, and Ahrholdt (2015)	Product quality
Čater and Čater (2009)	Commercial aspects, reliability, supplier know-how, personal interaction
Chakraborty, Srivastava, and Marshall (2007)	Reliability, product related information, commercial aspects
Chenet, Dagger, and O’Sullivan (2010)	Trust, commitment
Chaniotakis and Lympelopoulos (2009)	Service quality
Chumpitaz and Paparoidamis (2004)	Service quality
Deng et al. (2010)	Trust, service quality
Gruber et al. (2008)	Commercial aspects
Helgesen (2007)	Commercial aspects
Homburg et al. (2002)	Perceived quality, perceived flexibility, perceived information sharing
Hsu (2008)	Perceived quality, perceived value, customer expectations, trust
Jayawardhena (2010)	Service quality, perceived value
Juga, Juntunen, and Grant (2010)	Service quality
Matzler et al. (2004)	Product quality, functionality of design, customer care, project management, commercial aspects, innovativeness
Selnes (1998)	Communication, commitment, commercial aspects
Spreng et al. (2009)	Service quality

Source: Own construction based on sources as indicated in the table

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Since no study could be located that tested a model comprising the identified six drivers of satisfaction (service quality, trust, commitment, product quality, commercial aspects, and reliability), the current study proposed such a model. Each of the variables is subsequently discussed in more detail.

Service Quality

Business buyers are said to evaluate service quality based on three defined aspects of the actual service, namely: customers’ interaction with employees, the service environment, and the outcome of the service (Chumpitaz and Paparoidamis 2004). In addition to serving as an important competitive advantage (Román and Martín 2008), service quality also contributes to customer satisfaction (Bubalo and Gaggero 2015; Lupo 2015). Previous research (e.g. Carrillat, Jaramillo, and Mulki 2009; Heskett et al. 1994; Jayawardhena 2010; Pantouvakis and Patsiouras 2016; Spreng et al. 2009) has shown that high levels of service quality positively influence customer satisfaction. The

relationship between service quality and overall satisfaction has not been tested before in the stainless steel stockist industry. It is, therefore, hypothesised that:

H₁: There is a positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Trust

The second proposed driver of customer satisfaction associated with B2B markets is trust. Doma (2013, 3) defines trust as “the ability and willingness to rely on the relationship manager’s integrity and behaviour so that the long-term expectations of the buyer will be met.” Trust is viewed as a valuable driver of customer satisfaction and has received specific attention in the field of B2B relationships (Sharif 2005). In order to gain and maintain a competitive advantage, an organisation has to be trusted (Caceres and Paparoidamis 2007), because a lack of trust is one of the most noted reasons for unwillingness to purchase from a supplier (Hsu 2008). Any perceived risk a customer might have concerning dealings with an organisation, is reduced through trust, and therefore, a customer would be more willing to engage in a long-term relationship with a trustworthy supplier (Tohidinia and Haghighi 2011).

Various researchers, for example, Doma (2013), Hsu (2008) and Selnes (1998), have found that a positive relationship exists between trust and satisfaction. Therefore, this study posits that:

H₂: There is a positive relationship between trust and customer satisfaction.

Commitment

Commitment is put forward as the third likely driver of customer satisfaction in the stainless steel industry. Commitment focuses on maintaining valued relationships between two parties (Doma 2013) and is established by the organisation’s ability to provide satisfactory outcomes to the customer (Caceres and Paparoidamis 2007). The latter could be achieved, for example, by maintaining constructive communication (Chumpitaz and Paparoidamis 2004) and the realisation that actions are needed to build committed relationships (Jonsson and Zineldin 2003). Previous studies, such as those of Selnes (1998) and Chenet et al. (2010), found that commitment has a positive influence on customer satisfaction in a B2B relationship. It is, therefore, hypothesised that:

H₃: There is a positive relationship between commitment and customer satisfaction.

Product Quality

Product quality represents the fourth driver of customer satisfaction deduced from Table 1. Product quality refers to the extent to which suppliers’ products meet customers’ specifications and serve as a key attribute used to evaluate products (Čater and Čater

2010). Srivastava and Mitra (1998) hold that customers use prior knowledge and information about a product when evaluating product quality. Previous studies (e.g. Anderson and Sullivan 1993; Askariadzad and Babakhani 2015; Matzler et al. 2004) confirm a positive relationship between product quality and customer satisfaction in a B2B context. Drawing from theory and also in line with empirical evidence on the product quality-customer satisfaction relationship, this study hypothesised that, within the context of the South African stainless steel industry:

H₄: There is a positive relationship between product quality and customer satisfaction.

Commercial Aspects

Another driver of customer satisfaction proposed for the current study is that of commercial aspects. Commercial aspects represent activities such as assistance with and preparation and handling of orders, communication and telephone services, complaint handling, credit and returns policies, and documentation accuracy and delivery within a B2B context (Gil, Berenguer, and Cervera 2008). Previous studies (e.g. Chakraborty et al. 2007; Gruber et al. 2008; Homburg and Rudolph 2001; Hsu 2008) tested a number of these commercial aspects, albeit in B2B contexts other than the stainless steel stockist and distributor market. Overall, these studies found that commercial aspects have a positive relationship with satisfaction. Drawing from past evidence, it is hypothesised that:

H₅: There is a positive relationship between commercial aspects and customer satisfaction.

Reliability

Reliability is the sixth driver of customer satisfaction identified from past research. Athanassopoulos, Gounaris, and Stathakopoulos (2001) maintain that customers are unwilling to transact with suppliers who do not perform in terms of reliability, making reliability a prerequisite for all suppliers. Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately (Chaniotakis and Lymperopoulos 2009). Reliability includes, but is not limited to, willingness to inform a customer about issues such as delivery performance, technical specifications of the product, prompt service and accurate information. Previous research (e.g. Čater and Čater 2009; Chakraborty et al. 2007) found that providing reliable services positively influences customer satisfaction within a B2B context. Given the said empirically proven relationships, the current study posits that:

H₆: There is a positive relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction.

Methodology

Design and Measurement

The study followed a descriptive design and a quantitative paradigm. Primary data were collected by means of a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising three sections. The first section was represented by a cover letter that requested respondents' cooperation, assured them of their anonymity and explained the option to withdraw from the survey at any time. It also stated the instructions for completion of the questionnaire.

The second section comprised 5-point Likert-type scale items aimed at assessing the importance that respondents attach to the items describing the drivers of satisfaction, as well as a scale assessing their satisfaction with these items. The first scale ranged from totally unimportant (1) to extremely important (5), and the second scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Clear instructions and shading of the columns containing the items for importance and satisfaction respectively, were used to prevent confusion on the part of the respondent. Respondent fatigue did not pose a serious threat to respondents' participation since this section contained only 36 items. Besides, a meta-analysis by Rolstad, Adler, and Rydén (2011) found no or little significant correlation between respondent fatigue and the length of a questionnaire.

The same items were used to assess importance of, and satisfaction with, the proposed drivers of satisfaction. For this reason, the wording of items taken from previous research had to be rephrased to better suit the current study. In a number of cases, items were researcher-generated based on the synthesis of the relevant theory. Items used to assess service quality, trust, and commitment, were based on the work of Jayawardhena (2010). Further items relevant to trust came from Doma (2013), or were researcher-generated. A few items assessing trust and commitment were based on the relevant theory. The work of Chakraborty et al. (2007) provided most of the items used in assessing product quality, commercial aspects and reliability, while additional items for product quality came from Čater and Čater (2009). Overall (cumulative) satisfaction was measured by an item from Kim and Lee (2010). Three experts from the targeted organisation evaluated the initial pool of items for their relevance to the organisation. An exploratory factor analysis confirmed the reliability of the constructs. The final section in the questionnaire collected profile information about the respondent and his/her organisation.

Sample and Procedure

The target population for the study included all the account clients of one of the major stockists and distributors in the South African stainless steel industry. Typical clients of stockists and distributors are manufacturers, production companies, small, medium and large traders, and private customers. Only account holders with a minimum of five transactions per month over the 12 months prior to data collection were included in the target population, since this status would have allowed them the opportunity of experiencing most of the aspects forming part of the organisation's offering. They could,

therefore, assess overall satisfaction as well as transaction-specific satisfaction. The complete list of account clients across all offices was divided into the different provinces from which the organisation operates. Respondents were then systematically selected from the list per province. Out of 400 questionnaires distributed via e-mail, 339 were returned of which 320 were usable. Statistica Version 10.0 was used for the data analysis.

Validity and Reliability

An exploratory factor analysis (see Table 2) was performed to identify latent factors in the data and verify the existence of the proposed drivers of satisfaction. Factorability of the data was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.940 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity showing statistical significance ($p < 0.001$). Kaiser's criterion (Pallant 2013) suggested the existence of seven factors (all with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0), while Horn's Parallel Analysis proposed four factors. Catell's scree plot (Pallant 2013) suggested five factors above the "elbow." Since these five factors explained more than 60 per cent of the total variance (Hair et al. 2010), and corresponded to the drivers identified from Table 1, they were retained. The results were further examined to identify and remove any substantive cross-loading items and those items with a loading below 0.50, reducing the original list of 36 items to 25 items.

The first factor, termed *Service quality*, comprises five items, namely, Items 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27. Items 31 to 38 were identified as Factor 2, and termed *Trust and commitment*, thus combining two of the proposed variables into one construct. The high Cronbach's alpha coefficient (0.94) confirmed the internal consistency between the items of this construct. Five items (Items 1 to 5) constitute the third factor, termed *Product quality*. The fourth factor identified is *Commercial aspects*, comprising Items 8, 9, 10 and 11. Finally, Factor 5, *Reliability*, consists of Items 16, 17 and 18. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.64 to 0.89. The variance explained by the individual factors ranged from 3.83 per cent to 44.40 per cent. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.84 to 0.94 and all exceeded the acceptable level of 0.70 (Pallant 2013). Table 2 also shows the composite reliability and the average variance extracted for each factor.

Table 2: Results of the exploratory factor analysis

Item	Factor	Loadings	CR	AVE
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	Factor 1: Service Quality		0.807	0.482		
23	The organisation provides prompt service	0.538				
24	The staff are never too busy to respond to my enquiry	0.594				
25	The staff have high levels of product knowledge	0.744				
26	The staff have good knowledge concerning stainless steel market trends	0.780				
27	The employee(s) whom I deal with at the organisation is/are able to provide adequate product related advice	0.634				
	Factor 2: Trust and Commitment		0.913	0.586		
31	I work in close cooperation with the organisation	0.776				
32	I feel secure in conducting business with the organisation	0.719				
33	The organisation has my best interest at heart	0.773				
34	The organisation handles my complaints in a satisfactory manner	0.634				
35	The organisation aims to establish a long term relationship with me based on trust	0.824				
36	The organisation is a suitable long-term business partner	0.850				
37	The organisation always tries to attend to my personal needs	0.767				
38	The organisation can be trusted	0.609				
	Factor 3: Product Quality		0.894	0.637		
1	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is reliable	0.748				
2	The quality of products supplied by the organisation meets my expected quality standards	0.916				
3	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is consistent	0.764				
4	The quality of products supplied by the organisation conforms to job specific requirements	0.804				
5	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is aesthetically acceptable	0.689				
	Factor 4: Commercial aspects		0.796	0.471		
8	Account statements are accurate	0.611				
9	Account documentation is received on time	0.697				
10	The organisation offers a good credit policy	0.777				
11	The organisation offers a good returns policy	0.618				
	Factor 5: Reliability		0.819	0.663		
16	The organisation consistently meets delivery due dates	0.633				
17	The organisation keeps promises regarding deliveries	0.927				
18	The organisation is dependable	0.730				
Factor analysis		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Eigenvalue		16.87	2.30	1.88	1.57	1.45
Variance per factor (%)		44.40	6.06	4.97	4.13	3.83
Accumulated variance (%)		44.40	50.46	55.43	59.57	63.41
Cronbach's alpha coefficient		0.89	0.94	0.90	0.84	0.86

Results and Discussion

The EFA results indicated in Table 2, point to five latent factors, namely: service quality, trust and commitment, product quality, commercial aspects, and reliability. These factors mostly correspond with those identified in Table 1, except for trust and commitment, which loaded as one factor. This might be due to the strong relationship between trust and commitment, which are often said to go hand-in-hand.

Tables 3 to 7 respectively report the importance and satisfaction item mean scores for each of the drivers of satisfaction, as well as the differences between these scores, the t-scores, the significance levels, and Cohen's d. In each case, the items are arranged from largest to smallest according to the gap in the mean scores, that is, the size of the differences in the ratings for importance and satisfaction.

Service Quality

Table 3 depicts the statistical results associated with *Service quality*. All importance and satisfaction ratings exceed 4.00 and in all cases, the ratings for importance exceed those for satisfaction. The importance of service quality in a B2B context seems to be a common problem, as was also emphasised by Chenet et al. (2010), Jayawardhena (2010) and Juga et al. (2010).

Table 3: Service quality

Item	Factor 1: Service quality	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
23	The organisation provides prompt service	4.68	0.61	4.40	0.75	0.27	6.83	0.00*	0.38
24	The organisation's staff are never too busy to respond to my enquiry	4.66	0.65	4.44	0.77	0.22	6.06	0.00*	0.28
25	The organisation's staff have high levels of product knowledge	4.68	0.61	4.50	0.69	0.18	4.83	0.00*	0.27
26	The organisation's staff have good knowledge concerning stainless steel market trends	4.55	0.69	4.38	0.77	0.17	3.83	0.00*	0.21
27	The employee(s) whom I deal with at the organisation is/are able to provide adequate product related advice	4.65	0.61	4.48	0.73	0.17	4.25	0.00*	0.24

*p<0.05

The differences in the item mean scores range from 0.27 to 0.17, and all are significant ($p < 0.05$). However, the Cohen's d-value shows a small effect size in all cases, except for Item 23. An effect size of < 0.30 is regarded as being small, that of 0.30–0.49 as moderate, and that of 0.50 and more, as large. The difference in the scores implies that customers are not satisfied with the quality of the service they receive.

Item 23 has the largest gap score (0.27), with an importance rating of 4.68 and a satisfaction rating of 4.40. Customers thus regard prompt service as very important, but do not experience the service as such. The organisation should, therefore, take actions to improve the promptness of its service delivery.

Trust and Commitment

Table 4 shows the results for Factor 2, *Trust and commitment*. The gaps in the mean scores for *Trust and commitment* range from 0.31 to 0.17 and all are significant. The Cohen's d-values indicate a small effect size for all items, except for Items 33 and 34 that show moderate effect sizes. All importance and satisfaction scores exceeded 4.00 and in all cases, the ratings for importance exceeded those of satisfaction. Item 34, "The organisation handles my complaints in a satisfactory manner" and Item 33, "The organisation has my best interest at heart" respectively, show the largest gap (0.31) between the item mean scores. The gap in the mean scores for Item 34 might imply that there is no structured system in place for complaint handling, or that the existing system is not sufficient. The smallest gap relates to Item 36 "The organisation is a suitable long-term business partner." Trust and commitment could result in better cooperation with transactional partners, enhanced relationships, and avoidance of engaging in rewarding short-term transactions in favour of guaranteed long-term benefits from existing relationships. In addition, it is believed that the partner in the trustworthy and committed relationship will not act in an opportunistic manner.

Table 4: Trust and commitment

Item	Factor 2: Trust and Commitment	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
34	The organisation handles my complaints in a satisfactory manner	4.69	0.61	4.38	0.88	0.31	6.72	0.00*	0.38
33	The organisation has my best interest at heart	4.69	0.62	4.38	0.83	0.31	6.62	0.00*	0.37
31	I work in close cooperation with the organisation	4.47	0.79	4.22	0.91	0.25	5.25	0.00*	0.29
37	The organisation always tries to attend to my personal needs	4.66	0.66	4.42	0.86	0.24	5.36	0.00*	0.30
35	The organisation aims to establish a long-term relationship with me based on trust	4.72	0.64	4.51	0.76	0.20	5.26	0.00*	0.29
32	I feel secure in conducting business with the organisation	4.70	0.57	4.51	0.77	0.19	4.61	0.00*	0.26
38	The organisation can be trusted	4.76	0.53	4.58	0.69	0.18	5.09	0.00*	0.28
36	The organisation is a suitable long-term business partner	4.73	0.62	4.56	0.78	0.17	4.61	0.00*	0.26

*p<0.05

Product Quality

Table 5 shows that the organisation's customers consider product quality an important driver of customer satisfaction. All items have importance ratings exceeding 4.60 on the 5-point scale. Three items (Items 1, 2 and 4) share the highest importance rating (4.77). However, the satisfaction mean score for Item 1 (referring to reliable product quality) and Item 2 (product quality meeting the expected standards) is lower than that of Item 4 (product quality conforming to job specific requirements). All the gap scores are significant ($p < 0.05$). However, the Cohen's d-values indicate only small to moderate effect sizes. The largest gap (0.36) between the importance and satisfaction mean scores is for Item 3, "The quality of products supplied by the organisation is consistent," which could imply that the organisation should guard against sourcing material from multiple suppliers. The latter might result in different levels of quality. Another possible cause for the perceived inconsistency in product quality could be a lack of monitoring in terms of quality standards and specifications stated on purchase orders.

Table 5: Product quality

Item	Factor 3: Product Quality	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
3	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is consistent	4.74	0.53	4.38	0.77	0.36	7.96	0.00*	0.45
1	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is reliable	4.77	0.51	4.44	0.74	0.33	7.15	0.00*	0.40
2	The quality of products supplied by the organisation meets my expected quality standards	4.77	0.51	4.48	0.73	0.29	6.80	0.00*	0.38
4	The quality of products supplied by the organisation conforms to job specific requirements	4.77	0.54	4.53	0.71	0.24	5.68	0.00*	0.32
5	The quality of products supplied by the organisation is aesthetically acceptable	4.64	0.66	4.42	0.71	0.23	4.72	0.00*	0.26

*p<0.05

Commercial Aspects

Table 6 summarises the findings describing *Commercial aspects*. As for the previous three factors, all importance and satisfaction ratings exceed 4.00, with all ratings for importance exceeding that of satisfaction. The gaps in the mean scores range from 0.37 (Item 8) to 0.26 (Item 11). As with the previous factors, all the gaps are significant ($p < 0.05$) with Cohen's d showing a small to moderate effect size. Items are again arranged from largest to smallest, based on the size of the gap in the item mean scores. Item 8, "Account statements by the organisation are accurate" has the highest importance mean score ($M=4.73$), the highest satisfaction mean score ($M=4.36$), and the largest gap (0.37) in these mean scores. This implies that customers are receiving statements that are either incomplete or include incorrect information regarding invoices, credit notes, and payment history. It is thus important to provide period-relative information in a timeous manner.

Reliability

Table 7 shows the results for the last factor, *Reliability*. Item 18 has both the highest importance ($M=4.80$) and satisfaction ($M=4.39$) ratings. Item 17, "The organisation keeps its promises regarding deliveries," shows the largest gap (0.39) in the mean scores. Staff should, therefore, guard against overpromising on delivery times. All the gap scores are significant ($p < 0.05$), with Cohen's d -values indicating a moderate effect size for Item 18, and a large effect size for Items 16 and 17. As *Reliability* is the only driver to yield practically significant gaps at a large effect size, these gaps are very important and deserve to be addressed with special attention. Emphasis could be placed on clear communication of delivery schedules before promising delivery times; resources available should be considered prior to entering into an agreement with the customer; delivery vehicles must be well maintained and serviced at regular intervals to ensure delivery is not disrupted; and customers have to be informed when problems occur with regards to a delivery.

Table 6: Commercial aspects

Item	Factor 4: Commercial Aspects	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
8	Account statements by the organisation are accurate	4.73	0.59	4.36	0.83	0.37	7.89	0.00*	0.44
9	Account documentation is received on time	4.63	0.73	4.28	0.86	0.35	7.23	0.00*	0.40
10	The organisation offers a good credit policy	4.63	0.70	4.30	0.82	0.33	6.84	0.00*	0.38
11	The organisation offers a good returns policy	4.53	0.77	4.28	0.84	0.26	5.50	0.00*	0.31

*p<0.05

Table 7: Reliability

Item	Factor 5: Reliability	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
17	The organisation keeps its promises regarding deliveries	4.80	0.53	4.39	0.79	0.39	9.07	0.00*	0.51
16	The organisation consistently meets delivery due dates	4.76	0.52	4.38	0.70	0.38	9.10	0.00*	0.51
18	The organisation is dependable	4.80	0.50	4.49	0.74	0.31	7.26	0.00*	0.41

*p<0.05

Summary and Comparison of the Factors

Table 8 depicts the average mean scores, standard deviations, the gaps in the mean scores, significance, and the results for Cohen's d for the five factors. *Reliability* has the highest average importance rating (M=4.78) and *Product quality*, the highest average satisfaction rating (M=4.45). When the importance mean scores are ranked from highest to lowest, the following order results: *Reliability*, *Product quality*, *Trust and commitment*, *Service quality*, and *Commercial aspects*. Following a similar process, the order of the drivers that respondents are most to least satisfied with is *Product quality* first, followed by *Trust and commitment*, *Service quality*, *Reliability*, and finally, *Commercial aspects*.

All the average gap scores for the factors are significant ($p < 0.05$) and the effect sizes based on the Cohen's d-values are all moderate, except for *Service quality* which shows a small effect size. The overall importance average for the five factors equals 4.69, while the overall satisfaction average is 4.40. The gap in the mean scores is only 0.30, with a moderate effect size.

The largest gap score (0.40) is for *Reliability*, with an importance rating of 4.78, and a satisfaction rating of 4.38. Customers thus view reliability as very important, but did not experience the service as such. Special attention should be given to position the organisation as "dependable" in the mind of the customer, by keeping customers informed and ensuring that promises are realistic and kept at all times.

Table 8: Summary of individual factor results

Item	Factors 1-5	Importance		Satisfaction		Gap in mean scores	t-score	Significance	Cohen's d
		M	SD	M	SD				
1	Service quality	4.64	0.63	4.44	0.74	0.33	5.16	0.00*	0.27
2	Trust and commitment	4.67	0.63	4.44	0.81	0.29	5.44	0.00*	0.30
3	Product quality	4.73	0.55	4.45	0.73	0.28	6.46	0.00*	0.36
4	Commercial aspects	4.63	0.69	4.30	0.83	0.32	6.86	0.00*	0.38
5	Reliability	4.78	0.51	4.38	0.74	0.40	8.47	0.00*	0.47
	Five Factor Average	4.69	0.60	4.40	0.77	0.30	6.47	0.00*	0.35

*p<0.05

Overall Satisfaction with the Organisation's Offering

The respondents' overall satisfaction with the organisation was measured with one item on a 10-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = extremely dissatisfied, and 10 = extremely satisfied. None of the respondents marked a 1 or 2 on the scale, while 98% of the respondents chose level 5 or higher. About a third of the respondents chose a level of 8 and almost 26 per cent opted for level 10. Customer satisfaction is the result of customers perceiving a satisfying level of fulfilment of specific requirements, desires and goals (Johnson, Sivadas, and Garbarino 2008; Taleghani et al. 2011). The high percentage of the respondents who indicated that, overall, they are satisfied with the service delivery of the organisation, points to the organisation satisfying their customers' holistic needs. Although plausible, this result should not be viewed in isolation, as the gap between the importance and satisfaction scores for each driver needs to be interrogated to ensure business efficiency and to maintain competitiveness with respect to all satisfaction drivers.

Relationship between Proposed Drivers of Satisfaction and Overall Satisfaction

This section addresses the last objective of the study, namely to “determine the relationship between the said variables and overall satisfaction in the South African stainless steel stockist and distributor market.”

A Pearson's Product Moment correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between the drivers of satisfaction and overall satisfaction. These relationships are shown in Figure 1. A moderate positive relationship ($r=0.543$) exists between *Trust and commitment* and overall satisfaction. *Commercial aspects* ($r=0.242$) has a positive, but weak relationship with overall customer satisfaction. The aforementioned is in line with past research in a B2B context, such as that of Homburg and Rudolph (2001) and Chakraborty et al. (2007), who also found a weak positive relationship ($r=0.090$ and $r=0.139$ respectively). Both these studies reported small effect sizes based on the Cohen's d-value, in contrast with the current study where the Cohen's d indicates a moderate effect size. *Product quality* ($r=0.346$) has a moderate and positive relationship with overall customer satisfaction. The effect size is also moderate. Previous studies focusing on a B2B context and reporting a positive relationship between product quality and overall satisfaction, include that of Askariazad and Babakhani (2015). The positive relationship between *Service quality* ($r=0.381$) and overall customer satisfaction found in the current study lends support to findings by Carrillat et al. (2009) and Jayawardhena (2010), who found a moderate positive relationship ($r=0.390$ and $r=0.370$ respectively) between these two variables. Finally, *Reliability* ($r=0.391$) also shows a strong, positive relationship with overall satisfaction, in line with findings by Makanyeza and Mumiriki (2016).

With all the proposed variables having a positive relationship with overall customer satisfaction, the attributes can now be labelled “drivers” of overall customer satisfaction in the South African stainless steel industry. Hypotheses 1 and 4-6 are supported.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 could not be tested, as a new construct, termed *Trust and Commitment*, emerged from the EFA.

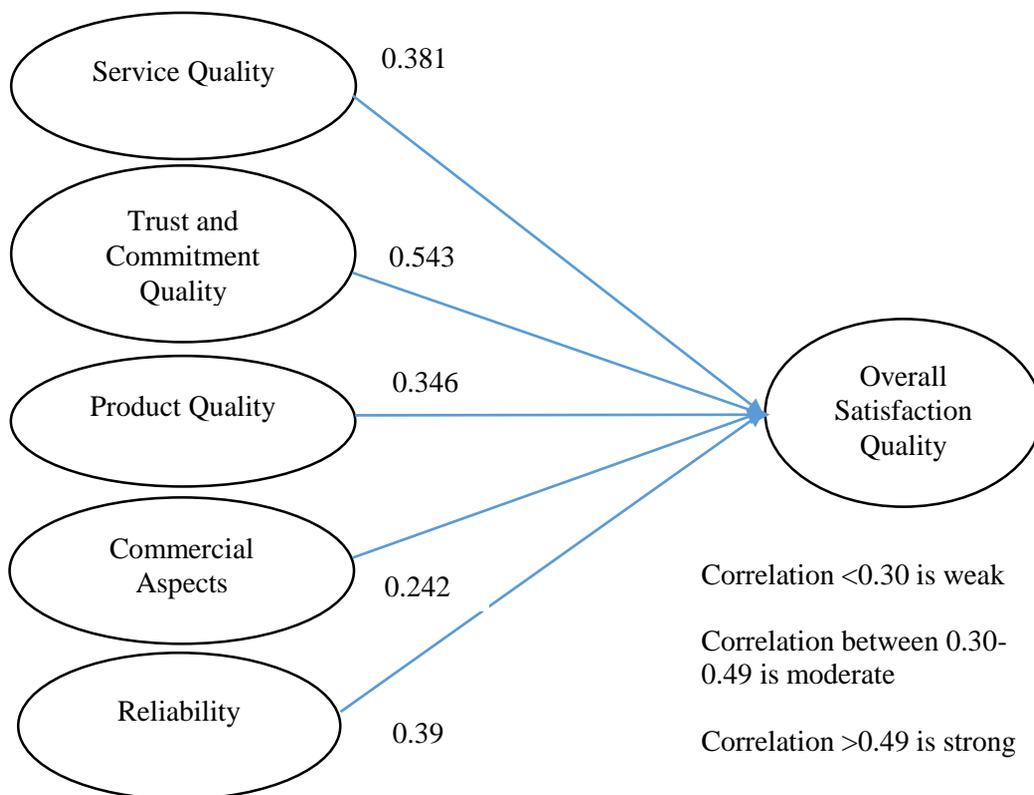


Figure 1: Correlation between drivers of satisfaction and overall satisfaction

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to Bogale, Verhees, and Van Trijp (2018), satisfaction drivers in a B2B context have not been sufficiently examined, particularly in the context of developing countries. The current research identified and confirmed five drivers of satisfaction relevant to the stainless steel stockist and distributor market in South Africa, and thus adds to the knowledge base of customer satisfaction in B2B markets in developing countries in general, and in the stainless steel industry, in particular. The findings support earlier research which established similar drivers of satisfaction in B2B markets, albeit in different empirical contexts. Examples of these drivers and earlier research are: service quality (Chenet et al. 2010; Jayawardhena 2010; Juga et al. 2010), product quality (Carlson et al. 2015), trust (Hsu 2008), commitment (Chenet et al. 2010) and commercial aspects (Čater and Čater 2009). However, the current research indicates trust and commitment as *one* construct, and not two separate ones relevant in a B2B context, as for example found by Hsu (2008) and Chenet et al. (2010).

The research also has practical implications. It is recommended that attention be paid to the above-mentioned drivers of customer satisfaction, because it is known that customer satisfaction results from the fulfilment of customers' needs, desires and goals (Chumpitaz and Papparoidamis 2004; Johnson et al. 2008; Taleghani et al. 2011). The results furthermore show that the importance ratings exceed the satisfaction ratings with respect to all drivers of satisfaction. Knowledge of the specific gaps can help focus management's attention on those aspects where delivery is unsatisfactory, while directing the application of resources away from areas where delivery exceeds importance. It is recommended that the organisation pays specific attention to: keeping promises regarding delivery; adhering to delivery due dates; being dependable; ensuring accurate account documentation; offering a good returns and credit policy; maintaining consistent and reliable product quality; conforming to job specific requirements; meeting expected standards; making the customer feel that the organisation has his/her best interest at heart; handling complaints in a satisfactory manner; and delivering prompt service. Stockists and distributors in the stainless steel industry in South Africa—and perhaps also elsewhere in the world—are advised to pay specific attention to reliability and product quality.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of the study inevitably lead to suggestions for future research. The current research confirmed five drivers of customer satisfaction, namely: *Service quality*, *Trust and commitment*, *Product quality*, *Commercial aspects*, and *Reliability*. Future research could be broadened by examining further variables such as e-service, project management and convenience, to acquire a more holistic understanding of what drives customer satisfaction in the business-to-business context in the stainless steel market. Future research should include more organisations in order to confirm the importance of the drivers of satisfaction. The combination of trust and commitment as a driver of satisfaction should also be further examined.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the financial support of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this study. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations are those of the authors. The funding institution does not accept any liability in regard thereto.

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