

Original Article (Quantified)

Investigating the effect of frontline staff competence on customer satisfaction with the moderating role of question type and perceived crowding

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Receive:

19 September 2024

Revise:

23 October 2024

Accept:

26 November 2024

Abstract

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying the effect of frontline staff competence on customer satisfaction with the moderating role of question type and perceived crowding. The research is a descriptive correlational and applicable type. The statistical population of the study consisted of all customers of Ofogh Kourosh stores across the country, and the number of sample members was determined as 384 people through the Cochran formula. Data were collected through online distribution of the Lucia-Palacios et al., (2020) standard questionnaire. Also, descriptive and inferential statistical methods and structural equations were used to analyze the data. The reliability of the entire questionnaire was obtained through Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.853. The test of the research hypotheses showed that the test statistic for all hypotheses was higher than 2.58, which indicates that the test is significant at the 5% error level. The research findings confirmed the moderating role of the variables of question type and perceived crowding in the relationship between frontline employee competence and customer satisfaction. Based on the results of testing the five research hypotheses; the variables of question type and perceived crowding become important when the frontline employees of a store have a low level of competence in performing the task and interacting and communicating with customers. Employees with high competence are an important factor in increasing the organization's customers and improving the desired utility in the organization. The sales unit's interactions affect customer satisfaction with the company, the salesperson, and the store. The more equipped employees are with customer-oriented skills, the more successful they will be in achieving customer satisfaction in the store.

Keywords:

Employee competence, interaction competence, Task competence, perceived crowding, customer satisfaction

Please cite this article as (APA): Sadeghi, F. and Bavi, D. (2024). Investigating the effect of frontline staff competence on customer satisfaction with the moderating role of question type and perceived crowding. *Journal of New Approaches in Management and Marketing*, 3(3), 70-90.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jnamm.2025.513165.1081>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Introduction

In recent years, competition in the retail industry has increased greatly. In order to achieve high success, retailers are trying to attract customers and try to improve their performance and efficiency, with the aim of achieving customer satisfaction and increasing market share (Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar, 2023). Today, one of the fundamental pillars of competition in organizations is customer orientation and customer satisfaction; because customers in commercial organizations that seek major improvements in their progress are the main drivers in this type of organization (Igdar, 2024). Customer satisfaction is the most important issue that retailers seek to differentiate their services and equip frontline employees with the appropriate qualifications compared to competitors in order to retain current customers, attract new customers, and achieve a favorable image in the eyes of customers (Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar, 2023). One important issue that affects customers during shopping and makes it possible for them to repeat the shopping process is customer satisfaction with their interactions with store operational staff (Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar, 2023). The competence of frontline employees to attract customers in stores is demonstrated by their guidance and consultation during appropriate interactions with customers (Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar, 2023). Usually, in a busy environment, customers want to make their purchases more efficiently, so in this situation, task competence is more important to improve customer satisfaction. Task competence of frontline employees helps customers to quickly fulfill their shopping goals (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). During busy times and congestion in a store, the way frontline employees respond to customer requests indicates the store's ability to provide quality service (Ahmadi saeid & Hoshiar, 2023). In addition to task competence, the interaction competence of frontline employees will play a more important role in a busy environment, because the kind treatment and sincere and pleasant communication of frontline employees with customers can help customers regulate their emotions, thus improving their experience and satisfaction (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). In interaction competence, sales employees provide an opportunity for customers by consulting and socializing. In fact, buyers expect pleasant interactions from sales staff in this type of competency (Samai & Khazaei Pool, 2024). Chain stores around the world have a history of nearly three centuries and have a special economic position. Ofogh Kourosh is one of the chain stores that started its activities in 2009 with the aim of providing basic goods to Iranian families and distributing them to all regions of the country at a reasonable price and quality. Therefore, in this study, we seek to find an answer to this question: does employee competency affect customer satisfaction with the moderating role of question type and perceived crowding?

Theoretical foundations

Frontline employee competency

Competencies exist in two broad categories: task competency and interaction competency. Task competency refers to employees' knowledge of the product and sales task, and interaction competency is related to employees' communication abilities, friendliness, and kindness (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020).

Task Competence

Application competence is crucial for frontline workers in various sectors and affects service delivery and the overall success of the organization (Al-Rawi & Zemenchik, 2023). Task competence refers to the product knowledge and ability of frontline employees to assist customers with their purchases and includes providing services tailored to customer needs (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020).

Interaction Competence

Interaction competence is related to the social and communication abilities of the frontline employee (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). Interaction competence is one of the most important issues for increasing customer satisfaction in a store, as it can lead to customers feeling more present in the shopping situation (Samai & Khazaei Pool, 2024).

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction indicates an individual's perception of the performance of a product or service compared to his or her expectations (Parsaei et al., 2023). Also, customer satisfaction is defined as a customer's satisfactory reaction to a consumption experience or part of it (Heydarzadeh K. & Radfar, 2020).

Question Type (Query)

Queries refer to requests for information or actions in an environment such as an organization, store, database, etc., especially in cases where information and data are uncertain or incomplete and individuals use it to achieve accurate results (Badia & Dobbs, 2014).

Perceived Crowding

Perceived crowding refers to an individual's experience and subjective assessment of the level of crowding or density in a given environment (Rotem & Shoval, 2024). Perceived crowding refers to the perception of the number of customers present in a given retail environment and, when it exceeds an individual's spatial needs, causes the customer to want to make their purchases faster (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020).

Research Methodology

This research is descriptive-correlational and applicable, and was conducted cross-sectionally. The statistical population of the study is all customers of Ofogh Kourosh chain stores across the country and the population is unlimited. The sample size was determined at least 384 using the Cochran formula. Content validity and factor analysis were used to determine the validity of the research tool, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability. In this study, we used structural equations to analyze the data in two parts of descriptive and inferential, as well as SPSS 27 and AMOS 26 software to test the research hypotheses. To collect the data required to measure the research variables, the online distribution of the standard questionnaire in the study of Palacios et al., (2020) was used.

Research findings

The research findings showed that employee competence with two components of task competence and interaction competence has an effect on customer satisfaction, and the moderating role of the two variables of question type and perceived crowding was also confirmed in this regard.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of identifying the effect of frontline employee competence on customer satisfaction with the moderating role of question type and perceived crowding. Highly capable and qualified employees are an important factor in increasing the number of customers in the organization and improving the desired utility in the organization. The more employees are equipped with customer-oriented skills, the more successful they will be in achieving customer satisfaction in the store. According to the results, it can be admitted that the knowledge and awareness of the line staff to guide customers when the store is crowded has an effect on customer satisfaction, but when the store is crowded, customers are not very willing to communicate and dialogue with the line staff and try to make better

and faster purchases when the store is crowded. However, the mentioned store and all stores whose survival and continuity are correlated with customer satisfaction need to have capable employees, and significant measures should be taken to increase the skills of the employees (Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar, 2023).

The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of Ahmadi Saeid & Hoshiar (2023), Samai & Khazaei Pool (2024), Khademi et al., (2018), Ebadi nia et al., (2023), Shadmehri & Mosleh (2024), Magnus (2018), Dorina et al., (2019), Wen Yuan et al., (2019), Jin Ho et al., (2021), and Lucia-Palacios et al., (2020).

According to the results of testing the research hypotheses, the following practical suggestions were presented:

- When hiring, officials can hire people who have high public relations skills and do not have problems communicating with customers. Store managers are advised to consider temporarily increasing the number of sales personnel and cashiers during busy times of the store to provide better and faster service to customers so as to achieve their satisfaction. In order to address customer questions and complaints and try to resolve them, store marketing managers can create a communication system so that customers can easily send their criticisms and problems to store managers via SMS. Store managers should pay attention to the fact that if employees are aware of public relations knowledge, customer orientation and customer communication knowledge, job descriptions, and knowledge of the products they offer; they can give advice to customers upon request or even clear up any ambiguity for them.