

**DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

**PERCEPTIONS OF RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY AT  
SUPERMARKETS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**BUSISIWE ANETIA DIAMOND**

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**PERCEPTIONS OF RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY AT  
SUPERMARKETS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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**BUSISIWE ANETIA DIAMOND**

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Supervisor:

Date: 12/04/2023

Dr. K.M. Corbishley

D Phil Mngt Sc (Mktg); MTech: Mktg; BTech: Mktg; B.Comm

## DECLARATION

I, Busisiwe Anetia Diamond, hereby declare that this thesis is my own work. All citations, references and ideas used that belong to other authors have been acknowledged. This thesis is submitted to the department of Retail and Marketing, Faculty of Management Sciences for a Master of Management Sciences specializing in Marketing. None of the thesis or any other work that form part of it was previously submitted before in any form to Durban University of Technology or any other institution whatsoever.

12/04/2023

**Student**

Busisiwe Anetia Diamond

BTech: Retail Business Management

Date

## DEDICATION

This Master's degree is dedicated to my lovely mother, Eunice Ntomboxolo Diamond and my two brothers, Aviwe Diamond and Alizwa Bathembu. Your tremendous love, support and constant prayers made this possible. I couldn't have done this without you.

*Thank you for always believing in me.*

*I can do all things all things through Christ who strengthens (Philippians 4: 13)*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail sector is growing rapidly, and competition has become intense as new supermarkets enter the retail marketplace. It is important for retailers to align themselves with the constant fluctuations of customer demands and their expectations of service quality (SQ) in order to stay ahead of the competition. SQ plays a vital role in the retail industry as it assists retailers to increase value for their customers, to retain customers, and maintain their competitive advantage. Recently, the world has been subjected to enormous environmental changes, due to the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). Associated with this has been a dramatic economic downturn which has been strongly felt in South Africa. As a result, shopping patterns have been impacted as customers have felt insecure and searched for safer methods (for example, patronising smaller retailers and shopping online) to secure their daily needs.

Customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty are all important attributes that retailers desire from their customers. This study aimed to evaluate how customer perceptions of retail service quality (RSQ) dimensions might affect customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty in supermarkets, considering the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

To accomplish this, a quantitative study was conducted by means of an online questionnaire that was distributed via social media platforms. The researcher incorporated the five dimensions of the retail service quality scale (RSQS), namely physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem-solving and policy, to assess customers' perceptions of RSQ, with hygiene incorporated as an additional dimension to this scale. Respondents were selected by means of a convenience method which is a non-probability sampling method. The snowball technique was selected due to the difficulty of approaching people individually during the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the prohibitive cost of using a commercial database. Data was analysed by means of the latest SPSS software (version 25).

The findings of this study shows that the RSQS is a suitable and reliable tool to measure RSQ under the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, this

study reveals that excellent RSQ has a positive contribution towards customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of this study reveal that five dimensions of RSQS (hygiene, physical aspects, reliability, problem solving and personal interaction) had a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction and trust, but the policy dimension was not found to be significant.

This study should assist supermarket managers to understand customers' perceptions of RSQ since the advent of the Covid-19 crisis, and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. This will enable retailers to make better strategic decisions regarding the quality of the services that they offer going forward, thereby becoming more attractive to customers. It will also contribute towards ongoing academic research on RSQ.

**KEY WORDS:** Retail Service Quality, Supermarkets, Retail Service Quality Scale, Customer Satisfaction, Trust and Customer Loyalty

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
SQ	Service Quality
RSQ	Retail Service Quality
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease
WHO	World Health Organization
SARS-Cov-2	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2



# CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) retail sector is growing rapidly, and competition has become intense as new supermarkets enter the retail marketplace (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020: 11). According to Goddard (2020) it is important for retailers to align themselves with the constant fluctuations of customer demands and their beliefs as to what service quality (SQ) standards should be in an attempt to stay ahead of the competition. SQ is one of the tools used by businesses to increase value for their customers, to retain customers and maintain their competitive advantage (Sivathaasan, Ushantha and Achchuthan 2014: 382).

Recently, the world has been subjected to enormous environmental changes with the impact of a global coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). Associated with this has been a dramatic economic downturn which has been strongly felt in South Africa (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020: 3). As a result, shopping patterns have been impacted as customers have felt insecure and are searching for safer methods (for example, patronising smaller retailers and shopping online) to secure their daily need.

Customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty are all important attributes that retailers desire from their customers. This study aimed to evaluate how customer perceptions of retail SQ during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa have affected customer trust, satisfaction and loyalty in supermarkets. Measurements of SQ perceptions would be as per the retail service quality scale (RSQS). To accomplish this, a quantitative study took place by means of an online questionnaire. The researcher incorporated the five dimensions of the RSQS, i.e., physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem-solving and policy, along with an additional dimension of hygiene to assess customers' perceptions of Retail service quality (RSQ) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study will assist supermarket managers to understand customers' perceptions of SQ since the advent of the Covid-19 crisis, and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. This will enable retailers to make better strategic decisions regarding the quality of the services that they offer going forward, thereby becoming more attractive to customers. It will also contribute towards ongoing academic research on RSQ.

Chapter 1 introduces this study by presenting the background that forms the basis for this study. It introduces the ideas of SQ, expanding this to RSQ and finally the RSQS. The scenario within which the study is set (that of the supermarket retail format and the Covid-19 pandemic) is outlined. Furthermore, the dependent variables which are represented by the concepts of customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty are introduced.

Finally, the problem is explained, and the objective and sub-objectives are detailed. A brief introduction to the methodology that was used in this study was also included in this chapter. Explanations are put forward as to how reliability and validity will be ensured.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY**

FMCG retailers face the constant challenge of maintaining a competitive advantage in the context of ongoing innovations and an increase in competition. In particular, this applies to the supermarket industry, where differentiation is particularly difficult. According to Suresh, Mahadevan and Abhishek (2019: 1475) a supermarket is a self-service store that offers many forms of food and household products, organised into categories. In the last few years most, supermarkets have extended their offerings to online in order to meet the needs of their customers (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020: 11). Hartono (2019: 187) notes that increased globalisation has caused customers to become more sophisticated and educated about their needs and the options available to them when shopping. Yalcin (2018) defines globalisation as "an extensive network of economic, cultural and political interconnections and processes which goes beyond boundaries". In South Africa, heightened competition has been

created through technological innovations which have enabled online retail (Beneke *et al.* 2010: 210).

Consequently, excellent SQ is essential in sustaining a competitive advantage and maintaining the retailers' image and profitability (Kajenthiran 2018: 20; Gowerk and McGoldrick 2015: 251). In previous years, retailers focussed on maximising their profits but due to changes in the retail landscape, retailers have become more customer-centric (Chung and Lee 2017: 530). Therefore, it is imperative for supermarket managers to take the significance of SQ into consideration.

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic arrived on the shores of South Africa at the beginning of March 2020 (National Institute for Communicable Diseases 2020). As a result, South Africa has experienced economic, social and political challenges that have created volatility in the marketplace (Bantu *et al.* 2020: 1). A further consequence was a 'knock on' effect on consumer buying behaviour, particularly in the purchasing of food products which are essentials. Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020: 3) noted that Covid-19 has resulted in consumers losing confidence in carrying out their day-to-day activities. Their normal trust in items that underlie perceptions of safety such as health, employment and financial security have all resulted in a diminishment of shopping activities and hence, expenditure.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in customers seeking safe shopping environments in order to protect themselves. A consequence of this is that in order to maintain customer perceptions of safety and security, retailers have needed to implement safety and hygiene measures that can be observed by customers in their stores (Accenture 2020). In a time, such as this, customers' expectations of store safety are very high and retailers that fail to meet these expectations risk a loss of confidence from their customer base (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for supermarkets to develop excellent RSQ strategies so that they are able to meet their customers' needs effectively and efficiently. During an event such as a pandemic, studies have shown that RSQ has played a significant role in the development of customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty (Syafuridin 2021; Alzaydi 2021: 2279). Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Cuong and Khoi (2019) mentioned that in this competitive retail industry, RSQ plays a significant and positive role in maintaining

customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi (2021) concur by stating that a good SQ offering plays a role in assisting retailers to surpass customer expectations.

### **1.3 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

This study is about how RSQ has been perceived by customers in supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. Customers' perceptions of SQ offered by supermarkets has drastically changed as competition amongst retailers has increased (Hasan 2018: 3). Most retail supermarkets aim to position themselves and satisfy their customers by providing better services than their competitors (Nager 2016: 14). Omar (2008: 157) added that SQ is a significant factor that is used by businesses to attract more customers and to maintain their competitive advantage.

As already mentioned, the inception the Covid-19 pandemic instigated a number of disruptions, including in the retail environment (Goddard 2020:159). According to Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020), most retailers battled to adapt to the changes caused by Covid-19 and the ensuing fluctuations in customers' needs. In this present time, it is important for supermarket management to understand customers perceptions of the current state SQ in stores over this period of time.

#### **1.3.1 PAST RESEARCH**

Shpëtim (2012: 16) investigated RSQ and how it relates to customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty in Albania. The author found that there were positive relationships between all the variables, but more importantly found that this information filled a diagnostic role for retailers. Adams, Tengeh and Cupido (2018) conducted research in South Africa with respect to the youth market, finding that the quality of service was perceived as superior to price, hence confirming its importance in the retail offering. Jelčić and Mabić (2020: 1) highlighted that rapid advance in technology, the increasing demands from customers, intense competition and the decline in economic growth has resulted in retailers searching for ways in which to create the difference that results in them

becoming the retailer of choice. However, Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak (2020), explained that the traditional way in which supermarkets attempt to increase with large volumes of customers shoppers becomes contradictory in these uncertain times of social distancing and mistrust. SQ has been identified as a key strategy to maintain customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty which plays a vital role in a retailer's competitive advantage. It is more important than ever, therefore, that retailers understand their customers' perceptions of RSQ in order for them to improve their offering, considering the crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT, AIM, OBJECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has created a number of disruptions in the South African retail environment. Consumer behaviour has changed dramatically, particularly with respect to the retailing of food and necessities (Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak 2020; Accenture 2020). Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020: 3) note that supermarkets have been facing a difficult time offering the required services while also allaying the fear customers may have of being infected by the disease. In addition, the pandemic has contributed towards an alarming deterioration in the state of the economy in South Africa, creating a contraction in spending (Baicu *et al.* 2020: 536).

Studies in China (Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak 2020: 577), and Germany (Dannenberg *et al.* 2020: 543), all pointed towards changes in customer choice of retail format and allegiance as customers sought retailers where they could place their trust and feel safer (Goddard 2020). Although a fair amount of research has been conducted regarding SQ in various industries, at present there seems to be little or no evidence of studies on RSQ within the South African supermarket sector since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although Heyns and Kilbourn (2022) conducted a study on online shopping behaviour and service quality perceptions in South Africa, it was only directed at the younger target market, and also did not include supermarkets. The problem is therefore one of a lack of information on customer perceptions of RSQ during the pandemic and how this might affect their trust, satisfaction and loyalty towards supermarkets. It becomes evident that there is a research gap with respect to RSQ in South Africa since the inception of the Covid-19

pandemic, and how any changes might affect satisfaction, trust and loyalty during the environmental changes that have taken place. This study is an attempt to fill that gap.

It is proposed that any study that examines supermarkets and consumer perceptions of RSQ since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic can add to the body of knowledge that exists regarding RSQ in supermarkets during a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects that it might have.

#### **1.4.1 AIM OF THIS STUDY**

The aim of this study was to determine customer perceptions of RSQ and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

#### **1.4.2 OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY**

**The main objective of this study is therefore:**

- To evaluate overall customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

Sub-objectives are:

- To analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets lead to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets lead to trust since the outbreak of Covid-19.
- To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets lead to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19.

### 1.4.3 CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 1.1 illustrates the proposed relationships which was tested in this study. The six dimensions of the RSQS are illustrated in the diagram as independent variables and customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty are the dependent variables. This diagram depicts the potential relationship between RSQS dimensions and customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty.

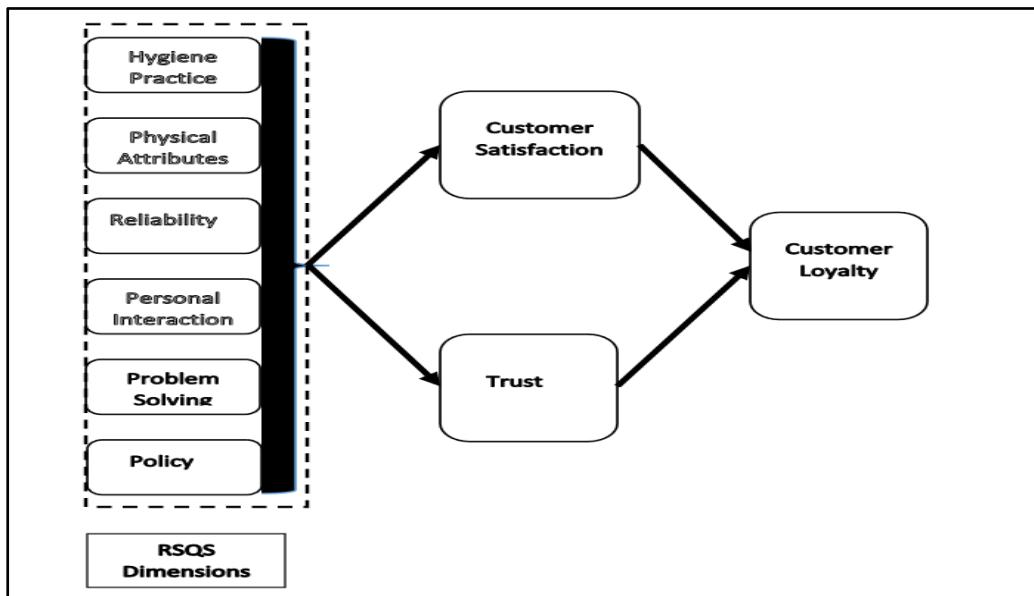


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework

## **1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The selection of research method is the main aim of research design, as the selection of an incorrect method will result in the research objectives not being achieved.

### **1.5.1 Research design**

Das and Kumar (2010: 667) describe a research design as being a blueprint that specifies the techniques that are used by the researcher to gather and analyse data. This study is classified as descriptive research as it identifies the general nature of the problems and related variables, namely perceptions of RSQ and satisfaction, trust and loyalty. This study was quantitative, involving a large sample and requiring methods that could be accomplished in a short period of time at a low budget (Hair, Bush and Ortinau 2009). Quantitative research is also warranted when one wishes to establish a cause-and-effect relationship (Sekaran and Bougie 2013: 107). The questionnaire used in this study is based on previously validated questions, which are all quantitative in nature. The study was cross-sectional meaning that the data was gathered from different people within a specific period in time. This research tool is less time consuming and more convenient. The study setting of this research was implemented through non-contrived settings (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005: 231).

### **1.5.2 Population**

A population is defined as the entire group of people that will be investigated for the study (Chung and Lee 2017: 534). For the purpose of this study the population was described as adults (i.e., over 18 years of age), male or female, who visit supermarkets to conduct household shopping. According to Internet World Stats (2020), the population of South Africa is approximately 59 million, with about 32 million of this number having some form of internet access. Twenty-one million individuals in South Africa are estimated to subscribe to Facebook, one of the most popular social media sites. About 50% of the South African population is online, therefore giving excellent access to a broad range of the population. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has made it difficult to access respondents on a physical basis.



### **1.5.3 Sampling method**

This study was conducted through a non-probability sampling method, namely a convenience method, which is justified owing to restrictions on both time and money. A snowball approach (which is a form of convenience sampling) was used to access the sample. Respondents were requested to pass on the link to the questionnaire with acquaintances who met the requirements (over 18 years of age/ shopping in store). This snowball method was selected due to the difficulty of approaching people individually during the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the prohibitive cost of using a commercial database. Tenzek (2020: 3) confirms that snowball is justified when researchers experience difficulty in accessing the required number of respondents. Therefore, respondents were chosen based on their availability and their willingness to complete the questionnaire.

### **1.5.4 Sample size**

Sekaran and Bougie (2013: 268) suggest that once a population exceeds 1 million, a sample of 384 is enough for the researcher to arrive at the required inferences and obtain accurate findings. Therefore, a sample size of 400 participants was utilised, allowing a few extra to accommodate spoiled and incomplete questionnaires.

### **1.5.5 Measuring system**

Previously validated questions were adapted to create a questionnaire designed to conduct the research and achieve the objectives of the study from a number of past studies (Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz 1996, Yang 2021, Beneke *et al.* 2012; Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2017; Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017, Beneke *et al.* 2012).

### **1.5.6 Data collection**

The data was collected using a survey research strategy. This is a system that is used to collect information from people to explain their views, behaviour, or knowledge (Maree, K. *et al.* 2021: 196).). The completed questionnaire was made available to respondents via a link on the internet. Respondents were notified via social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. The method of data collection became necessary due to the restrictions that were in place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **1.5.7 Potential limitations**

Owing to the method of collection, respondents that do not subscribe to social media were unable to participate in the study.

### **1.5.8 Data analysis**

The fundamental features of the data were described by means of descriptive and inferential statistics. The latest version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 25) was employed for data analysis. Data was captured and coded on EXCEL spreadsheets prior to analysis and tables and graphs were used to present results.

### **1.5.9 Validity**

Saunders and Thornhill (2019: 214) define validity as the accuracy of a research instrument to accurately measure what it is supposed to. Previously validated questions were used to formulate the questionnaire; however, an exploratory factor analysis was also conducted to check whether the validity of the questions still remained. Any questions that did not conform were deleted. In addition, pilot study took place with a small group of respondents to check on both content and face validity. A pilot study is conducted to find out how respondents will respond to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to 20 participants to ensure efficiency and

effectiveness and to make sure that participants are able to complete the questions accurately. Any issues that crop up can be dealt with at this stage (Quinlan 2011: 341).

### **1.5.10 Reliability**

Wilson (2014: 35) define reliability as the accuracy of the data collection instrument. Although most of the questions used had already been tested for reliability according to Cronbach's alpha (CA) in previous studies, the test was run again, as new statements were added. A value of 0.8 is usually considered to be good. However, according to Wiid and Diggines (2013: 238) 0.6 to 0.8 is acceptable. In the case of this study, the CA for all variables exceeded 0.7, confirming their reliability.

## **1.6 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS**

The study is divided into six chapters that are chronologically arranged from the introductory chapter to the concluding chapter.

### **Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview of the Study**

Chapter 1 introduces and provides an overview of the topic. The research problem was presented in this chapter, as well as a justification for the study. Aims and objectives were outlined. The background of this study was presented.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to theoretical concepts that are relevant to the subject matter. This chapter began with the literature on SQ and the different tools that have been used to measure SQ in supermarkets. The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on supermarkets is also discussed. Finally, literature on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty is presented.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Design**

This chapter presents and discusses the research design, research questions and choice of methods. It includes a discussion on the choice of population and samples as well as the methods used for data collection and analysis.

### **Chapter 4: Data analysis and interpretation**

Data collected from the questionnaire answered by participants is presented, analysed and interpreted.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings**

This chapter revisits the study, including the problem statement and the methods used in the investigation of the problem. This chapter summarises and discusses the objectives and sub-objectives in relation to the findings and underlying theory.

### **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations**

This chapter presents a final summary of the research and the findings. The conclusions relative to the research objectives and implications of RSQ in supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are presented. Recommendations and further research opportunities are proposed for interested parties to consider.

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented the background and context of this study. The chapter further discussed the problem statement, the rationale for this study, a brief outline of the research methodology undertaken in this study and a summary of the chapters. The next chapter provides a review of the literature that is available with respect to the topics that are contained in the objectives.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The retail industry is diverse with different subsegments, each flaunting its own characteristics. Throughout the world, supermarkets constitute one of the largest retail business sectors, accounting for a large proportion of the global marketplace (Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018). The competition amongst retailers has become more intense because retailers are trying to be excellent in every facet of their operations (Karakitsiou and Mavrommati 2018: 139). In supermarkets, consumers do not only buy goods, but also the complementary benefits which are associated with the supermarkets' products and services (Levy, Weitz and Grewal 2014: 90). Due to their rapid growth, along with intense competitiveness in the retail industry, supermarkets need to offer excellent SQ, so that customers' buying experiences are maximised.

The prosperity of individual retailers is determined to a large extent by consumer perceptions of the service quality (SQ) offered by that retailer (Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018). The authors further argue that high SQ has been established as a crucial retailing strategy. SQ has been recognised as a significant tool to enhance customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty (Sivapalan and Jebarajikithy 2017, Kajenthiran 2018: 19, Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018). With the rapid growth of supermarkets in South Africa, the need to differentiate ones offering in order to be competitive has become necessary (Zondo 2020: 1). The constantly changing retail environment necessitates a need to manage supermarkets efficiently and effectively (Mahlangu and Makhitha 2019: 11). Furthermore, positive perceptions of SQ in supermarkets enhances the supermarket's ability to maintain their competitive advantage and profitability in the long run.

Goddard (2020: 16) stated that before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic, the preferred method of obtaining groceries involved a physical visit to the retailer. However, the pandemic caused a number of unexpected changes for retailers. The Covid-19 crisis has had a significant and unexpected impact on the food retailing sector in South Africa and the rest of the world. Zondo (2020: 1) maintains that the

spread of Covid-19 in South Africa was rapid and dramatic, with the effect of the crisis impacting tremendously on the economy of the country. The effects on the economy were exacerbated by several emergency defence strategies (for example, the lockdown) that were implemented by the government. To adapt to the sudden changes caused by the rules and regulations made by the authorities, consumers developed new habits regarding what to consume, where and when (Sheth 2020: 280). Furthermore, the fear of being infected by this disease has caused customers to explore different ways of shopping that will improve their health and safety concerns. During the period of the pandemic, SQ was regarded as a critical store attribute and a key driver of customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty (Goddard 2020: 16).

Consequently, failure to recognise customers' needs and expectations may have a detrimental impact on retailers' ability to offer excellent SQ and in return to maintain customer satisfaction. Several studies commented on and interrogated the challenges faced by the retail industry during the Covid-19 times (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020; Hesham, Riyadh and Sihem 2021: 1; Sirimongkol 2022: 2). It has always been difficult for supermarkets to differentiate themselves, and Covid-19 only heightened this situation, making it even more difficult for them to obtain competitive advantage.

Chapter 1 discussed the reasons for the study, aim and objectives of the study. This chapter provides a review of the literature on topics pertinent to this study. It begins with an analysis of supermarkets in South Africa. It also seeks to uncover the current knowledge of customer perceptions of SQ and the impact of retail service quality scale (RSQS) dimensions at supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. An analysis and comparison of the various SQ and RSQ scales is presented in order to identify the most suitable scale for this study. Additionally, this chapter discusses the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa and its impact on supermarkets.

## 2.2 UNDERLYING THEORY – SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality (SQ) is acknowledged as an important component of retailers' efforts to gain competitive advantage (Peitzika, Chatzi and Kissa 2020: 89). Nager (2016:14) points out that customers' supermarket preferences are associated with the quality of services that they receive from retailers. Furthermore, the consistency in delivering excellent SQ is a significant element in customers' choice of a supermarket. Slack and Singh (2020: 544) concur, stating that supermarkets are becoming more cognisant of the fact that excellent service quality is superseding past methods used to differentiate oneself from competitors, satisfy customers and obtain customer loyalty.

The SQ model has become useful due to its strong relationship with customer satisfaction (Shenoy, Sequeira and Devaraj 2012: 12). Cuong and Khoi (2019: 327) and Farooq *et al.* (2018: 170) explain that SQ as the difference between what customers expect and what they believe they received in terms of service. In contrast, seminal authors Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) defined SQ as a theory where the quality of a product or service was assessed according to an assessment of its offerings based on both logical and emotional judgements. Other seminal authors, namely Grönroos (1984: 36) and Parasuraman and Berry (1990: 2), defined SQ as the meeting of customers' needs and demands and how well the rendered services reach customers' expectations. It is imperative that retailers understand customers' perceptions of SQ so that they can maintain or exceed customers' expectations. According to Terblanche *et al.* (2016: 30), advances in technology, online shopping and the arrival of new competitors in the marketplace, have all contributed to increased demands with respect to SQ. Nager (2016: 20) stated that SQ can provide a strategic advantage, as superior services can be important to customers and difficult for competitors to duplicate. This can motivate customers to keep returning to the supermarket, passing on positive word-of-mouth to others and in so doing, drawing new customers to the store. Poor SQ can result in a loss of sales because of the rapid flow of negative information (Goworek and McGoldrik 2015: 253).

Hanaysha and Kumar (2012: 166) added that in order to increase a store's market share, the services delivered must exceed customer expectations. Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy (2017: 846) argue that enhancing SQ is an important marketing strategy

for gaining customer satisfaction, enabling retailers to generate a loyal customer base. The effects of dissatisfaction can rapidly multiply if customers' needs are not met efficiently. Most FMCG retailers are facing the challenge of differentiating themselves from their competitors as customers become more expectant, particularly those who have experienced greater attention elsewhere when conducting their shopping. However, constant enhancement in SQ allows retailers to meet their customers' needs far better than their competitors. Therefore, the measurement of customer perceptions of SQ is considered to be a necessary means of evaluation in order to improve SQ by a retail business (Peitzika, Chatzi and Kissa 2020: 90). A variety of scholars and researchers concur that SQ reflects the performance standard of both employees and the business and delivering an excellent SQ is imperative for share expansion and enhanced profitability (Farooq *et al.* 2018: 170; Duggal and Verma 2014: 19).

### **2.2.1 Characteristics of services**

According to Levy, Weitz and Grewal (2014: 516), it is difficult for competitors to duplicate excellent SQ, meaning that it can create a sustainable competitive advantage for retailers. Services are totally different from consumer goods, and they possess inherent characteristics that differentiate them from consumer goods (Naik, Gantasala and Prabhakar 2010: 239). For this reason, it is necessary for FMCG retailers to know and understand these characteristics so that they can effectively meet and exceed their customers' expectations. Beneke *et al.* (2012: 4) highlight that these characteristics are intangibility, perishability, variability, and inseparability.

#### **2.2.1.1 Intangibility**

Services are intangible, meaning that they cannot be seen, heard, tasted, or even touched, unlike goods that are tangible. For example, supermarkets such as Shoprite have instore ATMs making it easier and more convenient for their customers to withdraw money effortlessly. Goworek and McGoldrick (2015: 248) explain how many service-related experiences require the presence of the customer, either psychologically or physically in order to experience the retailer's service offering. Physical facilities and shelves should also be well maintained to attract customers. To



overcome this characteristic, retailers need to ensure that they emphasise the advantages of the service, and they must ensure that their customers are fully informed about the service (Nguyen 2020).

#### **2.2.1.2 Perishability**

Perishability of a service means that a service cannot be preserved, stored or revisited (Goworek and McGoldrick 2015: 248). This characteristic means that a particular service opportunity for an individual shopper can only be offered once; services do not have a shelf life (Kumar *et al.* 2010: 26). Once a service has taken place, that moment is lost. Therefore, it is crucial for supermarket managers to ensure that they constantly offer superior services at the right time to maintain customer satisfaction. Retailers need to match demand with supply when it comes to services so that they can minimise the risk of inventory loss and overcome the problem of perishability.

#### **2.2.1.3 Inseparability**

This characteristic of inseparability represents the production and consumption of services (Beneke *et al.* 2012: 4). This means that a service cannot be separated from the person/business that is offering it. Armstrong and Kotler (2006: 224) added that the outcome of a service has an impact on both the provider and the customer because the customer is always present when receiving the service. The authors further noted that to overcome inseparability, retailers must always ensure that they maximise their performance and exceed the expectations of their customers.

#### **2.2.1.4 Variability**

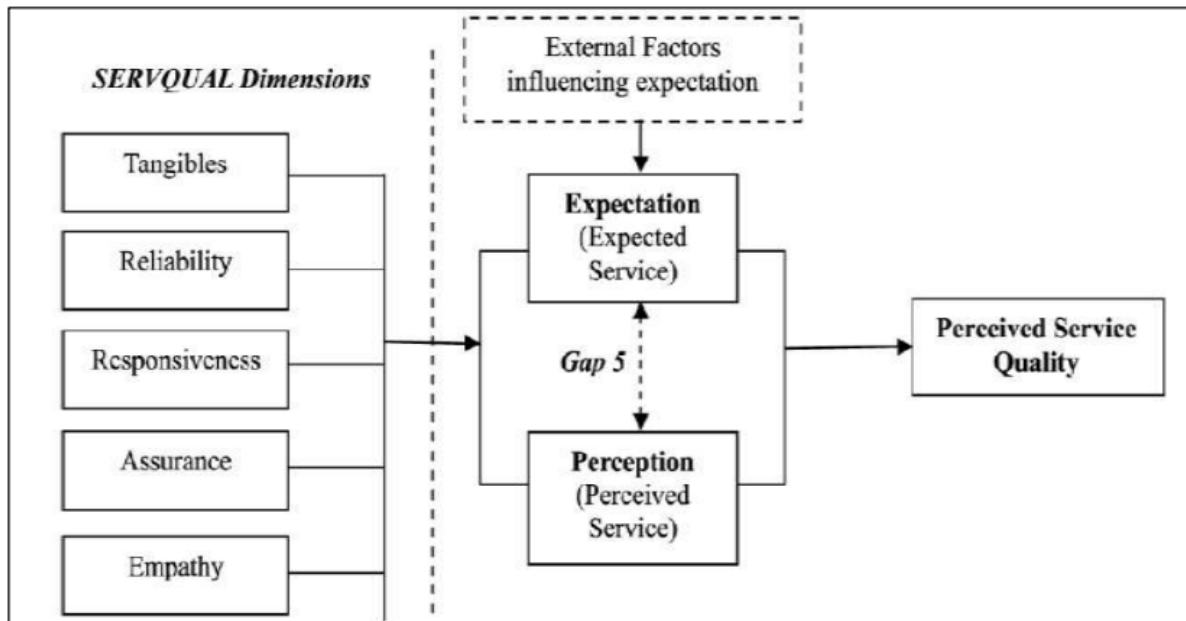
Services vary depending on the person/business that is providing them. According to Goworek and McGoldrick (2015: 248), the delivery of a required level of service depends on the individual providing them as well as the time and place where they are provided. This characteristic has a huge impact on the image of the supermarket as customers perceive the service of the supermarket based on the first impression

that they receive. It is important for supermarkets to train their staff well so that they can deliver excellent services that will enhance the image of the store.

### **2.2.2 SERVQUAL model**

Many studies have been conducted to measure SQ (Martinelli and Balboni 2012; Nager 2016; Cuong and Khoi 2019). Most authors identify the unique characteristics of a service as intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. These characteristics contribute towards a difficult environment in which to measure SQ.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) formulated the original SERVQUAL model to measure the discrepancy between customer expectations and customer perceptions of the service performance (see Figure 2.1). Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) developed the SERVQUAL model to measure and to define SQ. The first model comprised 10 dimensions namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding and access. Due to advancements in SQ, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) later reduced the model to five dimensions, namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. This model is regarded as the mostly used and famous model to measure SQ (Dopeykar *et al.* 2017: 431). Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) later suggested that customers perceive SQ after comparing their expectations of the delivered service with what was delivered by the organisation. Customer expectations are impelled by a supermarket's external factors such as advertising, word-of-mouth, individual needs and past experience (Toili 2017: 13). Kitapci *et al.* (2013) articulate that SERVQUAL is the most extensively and successfully used SQ model in the service context. Karakitsiou and Mavrommati (2018: 130) concur that this model has been accepted and is successfully used as a tool that captures the multidimensionality of SQ across a broad range of service categories.



**Figure 2.1: SERVQUAL model**  
 Source: Mmutle and Shonhe (2012: 10)

According to Cuong and Khoi (2019: 327), the SERVQUAL model is the most recognised tool for measuring SQ across a wide range of services. The SERVQUAL model has been used by various authors in numerous sectors, including banking, tourism, health care, higher education and various retail stores. For example, Muhammad and Raza (2017) utilised this model to measure SQ perception and customer satisfaction in Islamic banks in Pakistan. Their study revealed that the SERVQUAL model is a sound model for measuring SQ, playing a better role in the determination of SQ deficiencies than any other service measuring model had done before. Dopeykar *et al.* (2017) used the SERVQUAL model to assess the quality of dental services in Iran, finding that this model performed well in terms of validity and reliability. Slack and Singh (2020: 547) used the same model to assess the effects of SQ on customer satisfaction and loyalty in supermarkets in Fiji; revealing that supermarkets' SQ in Fiji was perceived to be unsatisfactory, affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty. As per Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), this model was made up of five dimensions, namely: tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness and empathy.

### **2.2.2.1 Tangibles**

Due to the intangibility of services, customers often look for tangible clues to evaluate the quality of a service (Kajenthiran 2018: 20). According to Karakitsiou and Mavrommati (2018: 130) tangibles include the appearance of physical facilities, personal and written materials, equipment as well as anything that encompasses the physical setting of an organisation. This dimension is utilised to measure customers' expectations and the supermarket's performance in offering excellent quality services. Nagar (2016: 13) concurs that tangibles are facilities, appearance of physical facilities and communication materials that are used to evaluate services. Kajenthiran (2018: 20) further argues that the physical appearance of employees, the tidiness in the store and the store layout can enhance the shopping experience of customers. The physical appearance of a supermarket is imperative in attracting customers to the supermarket.

### **2.2.2.2 Reliability**

This dimension measures the supermarket's ability to deliver the services that have been promised to customers effectively and efficiently (Narteh 2018: 25). Failing to attend to customers' needs may lead to customer dissatisfaction (Islam, Khadem and Sayem 2012: 20). Therefore, the delivery of services efficiently and effectively leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Nguyen 2020). According to Mmutle and Shonhe (2017: 5), if SQ is performed in an appropriate manner, it will enhance perceived quality for the customer. It is essential for supermarket managers to deliver their promised services on time in order to avoid customer complaints and thereby enhance the image of their store. These promises may include pricing, quick response to customer complaints, and service provision.

### **2.2.2.3 Assurance**

Hanaysha and Kumar (2012: 120), describe this dimension as including the staff's performance and attitude when rendering a service to their customers. Moreover, assurance includes the supermarket's concern for the customers and their ability to inspire trust and confidence in their customers. Karakitsiou and Mavrommati (2018:

131) state that assurance is the employees' competence regarding skills and knowledge required for the service that is needed by customers. The way in which staff members treat customers is of great importance in maintaining the relationship between customers and employees. Tidiness of the store, product availability, wide range of goods and the ability to respond quickly to customer complaints are very important when evaluating this dimension (Budianto 2019: 301).

#### **2.2.2.4 Responsiveness**

Naik, Gantasala and Prabhakar (2010: 241) define responsiveness as how willing a supermarket is to assist customers with information, quality offerings and speed of services. Employees need to be knowledgeable and to understand their products and services so that they can interact easily with their customers (Karakitsiou and Mavrommati 2018: 131). For example, supermarkets have many aisles with a wide assortment of products so a customer may need some assistance, especially older people. This technique maintains and improves customer loyalty. Responsiveness is about attending rapidly to customers' complaints, requests and queries (Paul, Mittan and Srivastav 2016: 609). Moreover, this dimension plays an important role in how customers perceive the store and their services. Mmutle and Shonhe (2017: 5) highlight that retailers should have the capacity to attend to customers' complaints on time and effectively. In this way, SQ will be optimised, and customer satisfaction will be enhanced.

#### **2.2.2.5 Empathy**

Kotler and Keller (2013: 116) explain that empathy can be described as how helpful and personalised the attention is that is offered to customers. It is important for employees to treat customers with respect and to demonstrate to them that they are important shareholders of the business. Karakitsiou and Mavrommati (2018: 131) articulate that this dimension relates to how well retailers hear and interpret customer requirements, translating them to care, individual attention, and customisation. Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy (2017: 844) note that patience and attention are imperative when dealing with customers. Customers' needs and expectations vary.

Therefore, it is crucial for the retailers to understand their customers and to attend to their complaints individually.

### **2.3 MEASURING RETAIL SERVICE QUALITY**

Although the SERVQUAL instrument has been proven to be both valid and reliable in the service context, the conceptual framework and the accuracy of this model in measuring retail service quality has been criticised over the years. With respect to the SERVQUAL model's operationalisation, empirical findings have ascertained a lack of convergent and discriminant validity among SERVQUAL dimensions (Peitzika, Chatzi and Kissa 2020: 92).

Dabholkar Thorpe and Rentz (1996) highlighted the unique nature of retail service, showing that any interpretation and improvement of offerings needs to be approached in a similar fashion. Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996: 14) suggested that the SERVQUAL model was only useful in environments that offered 'pure' services. Finn and Lamb (1991) acknowledged that without modifications, the SERVQUAL model should not be used as a valid and reliable measurement of service quality in retail stores.

As a result, Dabholkar Thorpe and Rentz (1996) developed the empirical and validated RSQS comprising five dimensions (physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem solving and policy) to measure SQ in the retail industry. Najib and Sosianika (2019: 428) state that in retail services the quality of both services and goods need to be considered and measured. Martinelli and Balboni (2012: 2235) highlight that the RSQS enables retailers to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the service offerings so that they can remain competitive in the long run. This scale has been applied by many researchers and has been found to be more accurate in measuring SQ in the retail industry (Kajenthiran 2018: 19; Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018: 243).

### 2.3.1 Retail service quality scale (RSQS)

As stated, the RSQS scale has five dimensions: physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem-solving and policy. Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah (2011) suggested that perceptions measured for this purpose were a better fit than those of an expectations-perceptions gap measure. Jain and Aggarwal (2016) concurred, stating that the RSQS has proven to be both reliable and valid. Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah (2011) concluded that SQ is one of the most important indicators of how well a retailer is doing and so a reliable instrument is required to apply, in order to be able to diagnose where any faults might lie and in so doing resolve them. To measure SQ in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Yang et al. (2021) adopted Berry et al.'s (1988) gap model and proposed five SQ dimensions, namely, hygiene practice, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and reliability.

The RSQS has been utilised extensively to measure SQ in the retail industry (Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2017: 844, Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah 2011). RSQ has become a key tool for retail managers because of its accurate interpretation of business performance, profitability, lower costs, customer retention and increased market share (Tlapana 2017: 75). Most authors suggest that RSQS is the most suitable and reliable scale for measuring RSQ and that it can also be used as a basic retailing strategy to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Yu and Ramanathan 2012: 487; Sivathaasan, Chanaka and Achchuthan 2014; Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018).

Yang *et al.* (2021) added that hygiene practice has had a significant influence on consumer perception during Covid-19 suggesting that industries should be implementing strict hygiene guidelines. This is supported by the findings of Sirimongkol (2022) that found hygiene to be a significant criterion in the cleanliness factor, leading to positive perceptions of SQ whenever present. These findings resulted in a decision to include hygiene practice as an additional RSQS dimension in this study so that RSQ was more accurately interpreted during the environment created by the Covid-19 pandemic in supermarkets in South Africa. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, RSQS used to measure SQ in supermarkets in South Africa was

adjusted with the addition of a hygiene component to assist in accommodating accommodate the Covid-19 scenario.

### **2.3.2 Retail Service Quality Scale dimensions**

Specific RSQS dimensions were of interest for this study. Table 2.1 refers to the reliability of some of the past research that has been conducted with respect to RSQS and its criteria.

- Hygiene practice – Hygiene included the cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces, personal hygiene measures such as the washing of hands, and the use of gloves when working with food to protect customers and employees from infection.
- Physical aspects - include functional elements such as store layout, comfort and privacy, and aesthetic elements such as the architecture, colour, materials and style of the store.
- Reliability – performing consistently and as promised
- Personal interaction – the service personnel being courteous and helpful, resulting in consumer trust.
- Problem solving – the handling of returns and exchanges as well as customer complaints.
- Policy – a set of strategies, procedures and guiding principles which the store operates. For example, quality of merchandise, operating hours, parking availability and payment options.



**Table 2.1: Previous research on the RSQS**

Authors	Year	Type of store and Location	Key findings
Das, Kumar and Saha	2010	Department stores, discount stores, and supermarkets in Almaty city, Kazakhstan.	RSQS was appropriate for measuring RSQ in the case of all Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) countries having similar department stores, discount stores, and supermarkets in Almaty city, Kazakhstan
Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah	2011	Apparel speciality stores.	RSQS is highly suitable for measuring service quality in retail clothing stores and all the five dimensions are associated with customers' consumption behaviour.
Arun, Manjunath and Shivashanka	2012	Discount stores in India.	All the dimensions of RSQS were positively related to customer satisfaction. Scales were reliable for measuring RSQ.
Martinelli and Balboni	2012	Grocery stores in Italy.	RSQS was found to be a reliable measure of RSQ in grocery stores in Italy.
Sivathaasan, Chanaka and Achchuthan	2014	Supermarkets in Sri Lanka.	RSQS found to be a valid and reliable measurement of retail service quality.
Adam, Tengeh and Cupido	2018	Large food retailers in South Africa.	All the determinants of RSQS were suitable and reliable for measuring SQ in large food retailers.
Kajenthiran	2020	Supermarkets in Jaffna District, Sri Lanka.	RSQ contributed positively and significantly to customer loyalty. RSQS is an appropriate scale for measuring service quality in supermarkets.

Source: Adapted from Tlapana 2017: 76

### 2.3.3 Customer perceptions of service quality

Customers' perceptions of SQ can determine the prosperity of a business. However, they can vary according to the nature of the service received. According to Naik and Srinivasan (2015: 31), customer perceptions contribute towards a customer's overall impression and satisfaction with respect to the relative inadequacies and/or dominance of an organisation and its services. Customers view the service given to them based on their experience with the retailers' service offerings. Mmutle and Shonhe (2017: 4) explain that customers' perceptions of service are mostly formed by their understanding of the quality of service they receive in contrast to their expectations. Satisfaction is an outcome of these perceptions. Customers in supermarkets perceive the services rendered to them by the store by comparing the actual service with their expectations. Customers' perception can be different

depending on their needs and desires (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988). According to Mmutle and Shonhe (2017: 5), should customer's perceived service exceed expected service, then customers will continue using that retailers' services and perhaps enhance the stores' reputation by word-of-mouth.

According to Armstrong and Kotler (2006: 139), a customer may not recall every detail of previous experience but if the customer is left with a positive feeling together with other experiences, then the customer's perception will surely be retained. Customers' perceptions about SQ are based on long term, cognitive evaluations of a retailers' SQ delivery. Nair and Nair (2013-56) indicated that some of the factors such as personal interaction, physical aspects have a significant impact on customer perceptions and that positive customer perceptions enhance the chance of customers supporting the retailer and developing loyalty behaviour. Adam, Tengeh and Cupido (2018: 249) argue that in large retail stores, physical attributes are the most significant determinants of SQ. It is important for retailers to clearly identify and understand customers perceptions of SQ in order to be able to develop marketing strategies to improve or maintain the quality of services that they offer their customers (Mmutle and Shonhe 2017: 6).

According to Naik and Srinivasan (2015: 31) customer perceptions are influenced by the constant changes in customers' lifestyles, availability of choices and new technological modifications. Retailers need to know how customers perceive their SQ because that will help them have an idea of what kind of reputation they have in the public eye. Appannan, Doraisamy and Hui (2017: 461) articulate that identifying customer perceptions of SQ of retailers is crucial for the retailers to ascertain the effects of their service on their image as a retailer and to measure and draw conclusion about their reputation.

## **2.4 SUPERMARKETS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Supermarkets are food stores that offer a number of products such as groceries, meat and fresh produce, as well as non-food items such as health and beauty aids and general merchandise, and usually operates on a self-service basis (Sivathaasan,

Ushanthaand and Achchuthan 2014: 382; Levy, Weitz and Grewal 2014: 42; Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi 2021). One of the advantages of a supermarket is the one-stop shopping experience that is available to their customers. They serve society in different ways; creating jobs, satisfying the needs of customers (both utilitarian and hedonic needs), and consequently contributing to the economy of nations (Elmelegy, Ponnaryyan and Alnajem 2017: 37). Levy, Weitz and Grewal (2014: 92) define utilitarian needs as customers' needs to accomplish a shopping task, and hedonic needs as customers' needs for entertainment, emotional and recreational experiences. Supermarkets are now operating in an increasingly globalised and integrated environment, so they are constantly evolving to meet their customers' needs and preferences. Supermarkets are expanding their product assortment through mass customisation, developing private label lines, embracing the internet and focusing on customer loyalty programmes as well as enhancing SQ to position themselves. Kajenthiran (2018: 18) highlighted that the industry is changing rapidly, and customers have shifted most of their focus towards product and SQ. SQ is now considered to be a store attribute that is perceived to be a motivational factor for choosing a specific retailer. Intense competition, changing technologies and continuous shifts in the supermarket marketplace have led to increasing customer sophistication and awareness, and as a result, customer demands for higher levels of service.

Das Nair (2018: 316) regards this intense competition between supermarket chains as benefiting customers through increased convenience, lower prices, enhanced quality and choices. With heightened competitiveness as the market becomes saturated through mergers and acquisitions, supermarkets are continually expected to improve their offerings and access new revenue streams worldwide for them to remain sustainable and profitable in the long run.

South Africa has lead the way in Africa with regards to growth in supermarkets (Das Nair 2018: 316), with the number of supermarkets increasing rapidly over the last few years. The Oxford Business Group (2016) states that the South African supermarket industry is growing rapidly and currently resembles a first world retail sector in this developing market. The South African chains such as Shoprite Holdings, Pick n Pay Stores, the SPAR Group and Woolworths Holdings have been the main instigators in

Africa with regards to internationalisation (Das Nair 2018: 320). Due to this, customers now have a wide range of retailers to choose from and therefore differentiation becomes imperative in order to compete (Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018: 242). This tremendous growth in competition has necessitated that supermarkets make drastic changes in their daily operations in order to maintain customer satisfaction (Govender 2017: 13). The effects emanating from the rapid increase in the number of supermarkets have been explored by several studies (Ellickson 2006; Das Nair 2018; Das Nair 2019; Mahlangu and Makhitha 2019). The ensuing proliferation of choices between supermarkets has resulted in customers becoming increasingly sophisticated about their needs and preferences when shopping (Hartono 2019: 187). This competition amongst retailers has intensified with the success of supermarkets depending largely on their ability to create and maintain customer loyalty and trust (Min 2010: 57).

According to Adam, Tengeh and Cupido (2018: 241), these changes have propelled retailers to improve not only the ranges of products which they offer, but the quality of their service as well. Consequently, most studies describe SQ as being a basic strategy for sustaining excellent performance in the retail market (Martineli and Balboni 2012: 2233; Izogo and Ogba 2015: 250). Syafarudin (2021: 74) note that customers' expectations and demands are increasing along with the rapid changes in the retail environment, leading to the difficulty of maintaining customer satisfaction.

Moreover, the rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa has led to significant changes in consumer buying behaviour, product demand and expectations (Hand 2020; Alaimo, Fiore and Galati 2020: 1). Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefanik (2020: 574) concur that the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically affected customers' shopping behaviour. Due to the lockdown regulations in South Africa, several customers have also begun to use online channels to buy their groceries (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). Therefore, South African supermarkets need to be alert to changes in customer demands created by the Covid-19 pandemic for them to remain sustainable in the long run (Khan and Siddiquei 2020).

## 2.5 THE ADVENT OF COVID-19

In 2020, the phenomenon of Covid-19 was first noted in Wuhan, China, spreading rapidly through the rest of the world and culminating in being declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Cucinotta and Vanelli 2020). According to Bakar and Rosbi (2020: 189), Covid-19 is an infectious disease which spreads mainly through contact. Infection may lead to severe illness (Bakar and Rosbi 2020: 189) Symptoms may include fever, cough, congestion or runny nose, shortness of breath and loss of taste or smell, arising between 2-14 days of initial contact. The virus has caused alarm and fear on a global scale.

In South Africa, the initial Covid-19 case was confirmed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2021, Worldometers (2021) reported that South Africa had 1 973 972 cases of Covid-19, 60,647 deaths and 1 748 443 people that had recovered from this virus. Several emergency strategies were implemented in an attempt to prevent the spread of this pandemic (Li *et al.* 2023: 1). For example, the South African government imposed strict social distancing measures and a national lockdown, while also encouraging citizens to undergo quarantine measures whenever necessary (Zondo 2020: 1). When the initial lockdown was imposed in South Africa on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, the Minister of COGTA (2020) stated that retail stores and shopping malls would be closed, excluding the stores that sold essential goods and on condition that social distancing regulations would be always maintained for both staff and customers. Furthermore, stores selling essential goods were prohibited from selling any other goods.

During level 5 of the lockdown in South Africa, strict rules only allowed the public to leave the confines of their homes to perform essential grocery shopping and/or medical reasons. Furthermore, a total ban on the sale of alcohol and cigarettes was imposed (Stiegler and Bouchard 2020: 695). Table 2.2 explains the different lockdown levels that were implemented by the government to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa in the year 2020. The different levels of the lockdown were implemented according to the number of infections in South Africa and the rate of transmission, the capacity of health facilities, the extent of the implementation of public

health interventions and the economic and social impact of continued restrictions (McIntosh *et al.* 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the South African retail economy on a national scale. However, it should be noted that prior to the advent of Covid-19, the South African economy was already in decline. According to Szymkowiak *et al.* (2020) the lockdown that was imposed by the government only increased a pre-existing state of unemployment, poverty and hunger in South Africa. As a result of the lockdown, most businesses had to retrench some of their employees due to a decline in finances. This pandemic has had consequences at all economic and social levels worldwide.

It should also be noted that the unprecedented outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in rapid and unexpected changes for the entire world, with retailers amongst those impacted. The need to be responsive towards customers' needs, and expectations was heightened (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). When the government announced the first lockdown (level 5), there was a massive wave of panic buying, resulting in depletion of stocks of essential goods in supermarkets.

Table 2.2: Levels of Covid-19 lock-down in 2020 in South Africa

Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
26th March – 30th April 2020	1st – 31st May 2020	1st June – 17th August 2020	18th August – 20th September 2020	21st September 2020 onwards
<b>Essential travel only</b>	Some workplaces reopen	All workplaces and schools reopen	Small gatherings of less than 50 people permitted	Minimal restrictions
<b>Businesses closed</b>	Outdoor exercise permitted	Public transport restarts Physical distancing	Leisure and social activities permitted	All activities to be physically distanced and mask-wearing
<b>Schools closed</b>		Alcohol ban lifted temporarily until 12th July	Alcohol ban lifted	

Source: McIntosh *et al.* (2021)

### **2.5.1 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on supermarkets**

During this crisis of Covid-19, South African supermarkets have tried to find ways to sustain their relationships with their customers. Hesham, Riadh and Sihem (2021: 1) found that since the advent of the pandemic, consumers' visits to shops, restaurants and markets were reduced. One of the main contributors to this would be consumers' perceptions of health and safety risks when shopping which had a negative effect on the buying intentions of customers. Szymkowiak *et al.* (2020) and Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020: 3) concurred that the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown created an atmosphere of fear when shopping, disrupting the normal routines of consumers, and resulting in a cautious approach towards supermarket shopping, with some even curtailing their normal shopping patterns. As a result, during the pandemic restrictions or conditions, supermarkets had to handle customers' judgements on whether supermarkets were safe for them, and as a result had to concentrate on safety and hygiene protocols as part of their offering (Sirimongkol 2022: 2). Creating a superior in-store shopping experience became even more important as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, to inhibit the spread of Covid-19, most retailers were obliged to implement social distancing measures to ensure that queueing was safer and more comfortable for customers when checking out, along with hand sanitisers at store entrances and sanitising of items such as trolleys and cashier desks (Sabatini, Surachman and Rahayu 2021: 141).

The pandemic imposed a sequence of challenges on supermarkets, making it difficult for them to position themselves. It has therefore become important for supermarkets to predict how their customers might behave under threatening environments such as the one we have been experiencing and then redesign their offerings in order to appeal to their new needs such as health and safety concerns. According to Kusumadewi and Karyono (2019: 366) one of the ways that retailers are trying to reposition themselves and satisfy their customers during this crisis is by providing better SQ than that of their competitors.

The precautionary and corrective measures that were undertaken by different countries around the world to decrease the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus such as quarantine, closing shopping centres schools, airports, restaurants and movement

restrictions (Mouloudj, Bouarar and Fechit 2020: 168) impacted retailers negatively as some experienced a reduction in demand and hence business performance (Meshram 2020: 2).

### **2.5.2 Changes in consumer behaviour as a result of Covid-19**

Stats SA (2020) reported that since the advent of Covid-19 at least half a million people lost their jobs, with the wholesale and retail trades reporting an annual decrease in the number of employees of 0.8%. This has resulted in a change in customer buying behaviour with many customers experiencing diminished earnings, along with the fears that have accompanied the pandemic. Brandtner *et al.* (2021: 18) reiterated that the Covid-19 crisis has changed consumers' needs, shopping patterns and purchasing behaviour, making it difficult for supermarket managers to keep up with these sudden and unexpected changes. Li *et al.* (2023: 3) confirmed that changes in consumer behaviour had become apparent on a global scale as a result of Covid-19. Some of the most cited changes in shopping behaviour were those of panic buying, stockpiling and a move towards online shopping along with a shift towards acquiring value and essentials (Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak 2020). Russel (2020: 2) highlighted that customer behaviour has never shifted as quickly and drastically as it has during the Covid -19 pandemic. Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020) added that since the Covid-19 pandemic, retailers have experienced challenges with dealing with the sudden change in consumers' behaviour (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). In a similar fashion, in 2002, a deadly infectious disease known as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), was detected in the Chinese province of Guangdong. According to Siu and Chow (2004: 62), this unprecedented disease had a similar negative impact on the Chinese economy, accompanied by a decline in consumer spending and consumption activities.

Tan and Enderwick (2003: 519) suggested that proficiency in responding to resulting fluctuations in demand is important for businesses to obviate threats that are caused by pandemics. As with SARS, the Covid-19 attack has systematically generated one of the greatest disruptions to consumer behaviour on a global scale, with South Africa



being one of the countries that have been severely affected by this unanticipated event.

In short, the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) created a knock-on effect to the retail environment, causing major setbacks to the South African economy. Levy, Weitz and Grewal (2014: 12) highlight the importance of consumer spending in the economy of the country; with retailers being one of the largest employers in South Africa. Therefore, the change in customer behaviour had a detrimental impact in the economy of South Africa. Eger *et al.* (2021) argue that consumers took note of their shopping habits and realised that certain services provided benefits that they may not have previously taken advantage of. Examples included online shopping, selecting home delivery, store pick-up and remote payment. A number of customers that had previously avoided online retailing due to anxiety or lack of knowledge began to experiment and take advantage of what was available to them.

The Covid-19 outbreak has caused more retail businesses to adopt digital applications for remote work, thus alleviating some risk in their daily operations. Pantano *et al.* (2020: 210) noted that consumers might have also switched from the retailers they usually used to other competitors, because of spatial vicinity reasons or because of assortment unavailability during the Covid-19 crises. During the Covid-19 period, consumers searched for favourable buying conditions that they perceived as safe for them and their families. In addition, a number of changes in consumer behaviour were noted, including panic buying and stockpiling, and a shift towards more essential products,

### **2.5.3 Panic buying and stockpiling in supermarkets**

According to Prentice, Chen and Stantic (2020: 5), the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the regulations taken to curb the spread of this disease led to consumers in many countries participating in panic buying and stock-piling of durable consumer goods such as staple foods and toilet paper. This phenomenon is described as a situation when consumers purchase goods to an extent that exceeds the levels observed in normal times.

Prentice, Chen and Stantic (2020: 3) define panic buying as an act of securing extraordinarily large number of products due to the projection of supply disruption caused by a severe disaster or crisis. This placed supermarkets under extreme pressure. The crisis of panic-buying began in early March 2020 and rapidly increased as the lockdown was extended. This resulted in a shortage of staple products and the unavailability of certain foods (Zheng, Shou and Yang 2021: 2). Moreover, affordability, access, and delivery injustices, as well as the uneven food security challenges faced by lower-income communities came to the fore during the pandemic.

Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak (2020) concurred that during the embryonic stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the supply and demand of food was unbalanced because of the panic buying behaviour. Moreover, the act of panic buying and stockpiling also led to a negative impact on supply chain performance (Ivanov 2020). According to Prentice, Chen and Stantic (2020: 6), supermarkets and other retailers tried to minimise panic buying by increasing their prices and imposing limits on purchase quantity items. The rapid change in customers buying behaviour also propelled most supermarkets to diversify their offerings.

#### **2.5.4 Shift essential products**

Sheth (2020: 281) stated that the needs of customers have shifted dramatically towards essentials such as food and health products, cutting back on discretionary categories. Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020) also found that consumers prioritised their spending on essentials as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. The lockdown and social distancing measures designed to diminish the Covid-19 pandemic created significant disruptions on the shopping patterns of consumers. In addition, the purchasing of face masks, sanitisers and medicine were added to the list of essentials that consumers acquired to protect themselves from the Covid-19 pandemic (Prentice, Chen and Stantic 2020).

### 2.5.5 The move towards online channels

Khandpur *et al.* (2020: 1) highlighted that the outbreak of the pandemic accelerated the growth of online shopping and propelled the need for retailers to invest in their online retail infrastructure and services. Alam and Noor (2020: 20) noted that during this time of the pandemic, most retailers identified the issue of customer retention as a crucial issue that they needed to face, especially in developed countries. As a result of this sudden shift towards online stores, supermarkets have been facing challenges with respect to meeting their customers' demands and expectations on time while trying to protect their employees and customers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak (2020: 577) reported on how shopping behaviours had changed in China due to the Covid-19 outbreak; prior to this period, up to 54% of respondents purchased their daily household requirements from supermarkets. Post the inception of the virus, the number of customers selecting supermarkets as their primary source of groceries decreased to 35%. A study that was conducted in South Korea by Jo, Shun and Kim (2020: 1) showed that during the crisis most consumers chose to order food online, using mobile applications, and selecting the option for direct delivery to their doors. Furthermore, the confidence customers had in the ability of supermarkets to maintain a safe shopping environment has decreased substantially owing to the presence of the Covid-19 crises. Table 2.3 outlines the issues associated with the pandemic that supermarkets have experienced, both short and long term.

To flatten the curve of this pandemic, many people shifted their focus from supermarkets towards online channels. Subsequently, most retailers are moving their focus to digital platforms because of the changes that have taken place in customers' buying behaviour. According to News24 (2021) the shift to online channels for groceries has been upheld despite lockdown restrictions being lifted because this option is one of the most convenient options for customers during this pandemic. An interesting observation by Szymkowiak *et al.* (2020: 50) is that customers' preferences and food attributes have changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors added that the decline in local consumer spending emanated from fears that the disease had spread to the community at large. However, Ratten (2021:91) argues that detrimental shifts due to Covid-19 impacts create opportunities for entrepreneurial

adjustments to achieve competitiveness and growth. In order to continue to achieve loyalty, SQ needs to remain at a high standard, incorporating the requirements of health and safety as per Covid-19 statutes (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020)

**Table 2.3: Issues experienced in supermarkets associated with Covid-19**

Supermarkets	Customers
<b>Short-term</b>	
Shortage of frontline employees	The increased need for cooking-at-home.
Broken international supply chain leading to stocking issues and price inflation on popular items such as PPEs and paper products.	Fewer grocery choices due to risk of customer imported fresh produce (Change in customer buying behaviour).
Temporarily losing consumers to competitors.	Inflated grocery prices across the country to reflect increased supermarkets operational costs.
	Inflated price on PPE supplies.
	Risk of interpersonal interaction.
	Temporarily switching to another supermarket for convenience and security.
<b>Long-term</b>	
Improve supermarkets' safety standards, including food safety monitoring.	Automated workplace leads to the employment challenge which may affect store sales.
Store layout change to ensure sanitation and safety.	Expecting mobile-based self-checkout systems; and self-shopping experience.
Providing a safer working environment.	Higher expectations of SQ.
Employee behaviour and expectation change	More chances to work-from-home.
Online grocery business as threat and an opportunity to increase sales.	Growing reliance on online grocery shopping.

Source: Wang *et al.* (2020)

## **2.6 SERVICE QUALITY IN SUPERMARKETS DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK**

Due to the detrimental impact of Covid-19 pandemic, most supermarkets have altered their offerings to minimise health risks that are exacerbated by this crisis. During these turbulent times consumers have become more price sensitive and at the same time cautious about product quality (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). According to Yang *et al.* (2021: 84), most retailers followed the rules and regulations set by the government and implemented safety precautionary measures such as requiring

employees and customers to wear face masks along with various other ways to serve customers in a safer environment.

Throughout the Covid-19 crises, consumers have expected retailers to provide an in-store service experience that allays their health and safety fears, Yang *et al.* (2021: 86) noted that SQ has been redefined according to whether retailers deliver services that encompass empathy, care and concern towards their customers. Supermarkets should therefore be aware of their customers' needs and perceptions in order to maintain excellent SQ strategies that will sustain the customer base (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). Martinelli and Balboni (2012: 2234) articulate that by increasing the level of SQ performance as well as customers' perceptions of it, supermarkets may be able to satisfy customers better and be rewarded with customer loyalty and trust. Furthermore, excellent SQ is a strategic tool that helps retailers to develop their core competence and business performance.

The unexpected changes that have been caused by the Covid-19 outbreak have propelled supermarkets to become more responsive to the needs of their customers (Yang *et al.* 2021: 87). A number of SQ factors have become significant over this period. One such need that became more obvious was for consumers to receive their desired food/groceries on time (food availability) in the safest possible way. Following the hygiene guidelines and safety measures that were recommended by the government has been of great importance during this time.

According to Cuong and Khoi (2019: 328) customers' expectations of safety and protection have increased and only those supermarkets who observed safety measures have been able to meet their customer's needs. Li *et al.* (2023: 11) found that physical facilities played a role in customers perceptions of safety, with parking becoming an area of concern. As a result, most customers resorted to supermarkets that adhered to the rules and regulations of the lockdown so that they could protect themselves from being infected by the virus (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020). Customers expressed a fear of accidents and contracting the virus from contaminated staff. The presence of adequate hygiene measures served to allay these fears (Li *et al.* 2023: 11). Responsiveness also became essential during this period, solving customers issues on the turn, thereby improving SQ. The aforementioned authors also

commented on the importance of finding out what is required in a scenario such as this, making commitments and keeping them. This speaks to the 'reliability' factor. They noted the importance of having the required essential items in stock, rather than a diverse assortment. This would assist to alleviate the panic buying which was a feature of this period. Moreover, delivery also becomes a desirable feature in this scenario (Li *et al.* 2023: 12).

Finally, policy is also closely connected with the pandemic, as a number of policies were put into place to maintain health and safety matters. For example, social distancing', safety awareness, delivery as an option and extended shopping hours (Li *et al.* 2023: 13). Some customers turned to small retailers such as spaza shops to purchase their necessities in order to avoid crowded places. During these turbulent times of the Covid-19 pandemic, customer experiences are reshaped by how effectively and efficiently businesses deliver SQ through showing empathy, care, and concern towards customers' needs and expectations. Farooq *et al.* (2018: 170) stated that excellent SQ was essential for the improvement of a business's performance as well as differentiation in the face of a competitive environment. Under the strict regulations that were implemented by the government, retailers' service-oriented actions would be expected to play a vital role, shaping consumer behaviour (Yang *et al.* 2021: 90). Therefore, to ensure both customers and employees' safety while remaining competitive and profitable, it is necessary for retailers to improve the quality of their services. The theory and the literature on past research led to the first sub-objective which is to analyse customers' perceptions of RSQS dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. At this present time, it is imperative for supermarkets to better understand customers perceived service quality to enhance customer satisfaction and trust. Building a quality relationship that enables good understanding of the market and its needs requires the supermarket managers to be mindfully customer oriented, competent at service and effective in communicating with customers (Jelčić and Mabić 2019). Meshram (2020: 2) confirmed that the high cost of attracting new customers is problematic for retailers in this Covid-19 crisis. Hence, the retention of existing customers should be an important component of retailers' business strategies and buyer-supplier relationship. Martinelli and Balboni (2012: 2234) mention that SQ leads to an increase in customer satisfaction, maximised revenues, high cross selling, customer retention, repeat

purchases and increased market share. SQ plays an important role in determining customer satisfaction through creation of convenience. Therefore, during this pandemic it is significant for retailers to maintain SQ in order to keep their present customers satisfied. However, Li *et al.* (2023: 3) noted that there have been very few studies that have addressed the possible changes in SQ in the retail industry, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **2.7 THE DEPENDENT VARIABLES**

This study has proposed three dependent variables namely, customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. According to Cuong and Khoi (2019) RSQ has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. The literature on these variables is presented below.

### **2.7.1 Customer satisfaction**

Customer satisfaction can be defined as a customer's response to perceptions of their shopping experience in contrast to their expectations (Narteh 2017: 72; Dimiyati and Subagio 2016: 76). Amorim and Saghezchi (2014) highlighted that the effect of SQ on customer satisfaction and loyalty has been well documented. Nager (2016: 13) also alluded to a strong link between SQ and customer satisfaction. Moreover, Mahmoud, Hinson and Adika (2018: 261) postulated that customer satisfaction is very significant in creating long term relationships with customers. Tlapana (2017: 101) added that customer satisfaction has a positive impact on retail sales, more frequent shopping visits, a larger share of the customer's wallet, loyalty, profitability, word of mouth communication, and positive image creation. Furthermore, customer satisfaction is one of the most important factors for retailers' survival in an intense retail market (Corbishley 2017:119). The contentment of a customer is essential for a business because it maintains customer-employee relationships. According to Corbishley (2017: 10), the most effective way to increase market share is to increase customer satisfaction levels. Tlapana (2017: 102) highlighted that satisfied customers are less price-sensitive, tend to buy additional products and are less influenced by competitors, and they remain loyal to their retailers. Many support the notion that customer

satisfaction is influenced by the level of SQ that is offered by retailers (Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi 2021; Syafarudin 2021). Nager (2016: 13) concurs that there is a positive link between SQ and customer satisfaction.

Therefore, SQ needs to be considered on an ongoing basis. Corbishley (2017: 119) adds that excellent RSQ not only leads to customer satisfaction, but also loyalty. It became apparent during the uncertain times of the Covid-19 pandemic that retailers needed to continue to maximise their SQ offerings in order to maintain and increase customer satisfaction. Li *et al.* (2023: 2) concurred that for retailers to maintain their competitiveness in the marketplace (particularly a turbulent one in a time of crisis), excellent SQ is essential, and can contribute towards increased satisfaction and loyalty.

As the retail environment has become more turbulent due to the advent of the pandemic, Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020) stated how important it was for retailers to understand their customers' changing needs and preferences for them to satisfy their customers.

In order to do so, supermarket managers must understand their customers' needs and expectations better than their competitors do (Yang *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, Alzaydi (2021: 2279) concurred that customer satisfaction played a vital role with respect to customers' intentions to revisit the store. Customers are very selective when it comes to choosing the appropriate store for their needs (which might have changed), making it important for retailers to constantly evaluate the quality of their services. Bradtner *et al.* (2021) stated that product availability, store layout, shopping material, payment methods and waiting time in stores all had a great impact on customer satisfaction. They revealed that physical aspects of the store such as store layout and store facilities were the most significant factors that shaped customer sentiment during the pandemic. However, Pratam, Sari and Hidayat (2021: 155) found that the dimension of assurance is the most important key for customer satisfaction during the Covid-19 pandemic. These authors indicated the security assurance that customers feel when they are shopping in supermarkets has become the main reason to continue their long-term relationships with their retailers. Queuing and crowds would therefore be a negative factor for customers in supermarkets since the advent of the pandemic. The



new grocery shopping preferences are challenging for retailers to maintain customer satisfaction and to sustain their competitiveness as businesses. Most retailers have also shortened their stores' working hours to prevent the spread of this virus (Yang *et al.* 2021).

According to Bradtner *et al.* (2021), past strategies such as promotions, product range and quality have ceased to have the same impact on customer satisfaction as they did prior to Covid-19 as consumers are more obsessed with health and safety requirements which are related to SQ. Wang *et al.* (2020) concurred that customers now exhibit higher expectations for instore safety, and have reduced their store patronage, travel and instore time. Moreover, Goigoi (2021: 3) reveals that stores that managed to provide prompt deliveries of goods and services conveniently to their customers have also managed to sustain their relationships with their customers during the pandemic.

Mahfooz (2014: 12) states that employees play a very significant role in the offering of services which is why it is crucial for them to receive proper training in accordance with customer satisfaction. There is an argument that facemasks have had a significant impact on service interactions and therefore customer satisfaction (Alzaydi 2021: 2279; Kosasi *et al.* 2021: 1423). Interestingly, Wu, Liang and Gursoy (2021: 4) note that masks affect personal judgements of individuals, translating to an assessment of SQ and hence customer satisfaction. Therefore, to improve customer satisfaction, retailers must constantly ensure that their employees follow the Covid-19 regulations and that they are always neat and attractive (Wu, Liang and Gursoy 2021: 4).

Da Silva *et al.* (2022: 10) highlighted the added importance of responsiveness during the pandemic for customer satisfaction, noting that service, configuration, and location all contributed towards this. Customers want to feel safe, and to not waste any time when shopping. Therefore, the faster and more efficiently they can achieve what they set out to do, the safer and hence more satisfied they will feel.

Customer satisfaction results in customer loyalty because customers rapidly gain interest when the store responds quickly to their needs and complaints (Kosasi *et al.*

2021). Empirical studies have shown that customer satisfaction can be a significant variable for influencing customer loyalty (Shokhsanam and Ahn 2021; Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi 2021). Furthermore, Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi (2021) added that highly satisfied customers show higher loyalty in their respectable supermarkets. These findings indicate that there is an opportunity to conduct a RSQ study due to the dramatic environmental changes that have taken place. The past theory and research described in the literature leads us to the second sub-objective, namely, 'to establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets leads to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **2.7.2 Trust**

Trust is a crucial factor when retailers aim to establish long term relationships with their customers. Sallam (2016: 27) defines customer trust as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". Setiawan et al. (2020: 1095) postulate that trust is built on a daily basis through continued interactions between the retailer and the customer. Kundu and Datta (2015: 28) note that for retailers to gain customer loyalty they must first gain their customers' trust. Trust is also known as an antecedent of a strong, stable and collaborative relationship. Goddard (2020: 160) noted the decline in consumers' trust in food retailers during the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in many changing to competitors that offer online shopping in order to feel safer (Khandpur et al. 2020: 1). Nguyen (2020) state that retailers can gain relative advantage over their competitors through their loyal customer base.

Many scholars have researched the significance of customer trust in the retail environment (R. Setiawan *et al.* 2020; Kundu and Datta 2015 and Goddard 2020). According to Islam, Khadem and Sayem (2021) customer trust is a more precise indication of the SQ that is provided by a store, including after-sale and customer care. Cuong and Khoi (2019: 328) defined trust as "the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". Consequently, customer trust is the customers' confidence in the stores' integrity, consistency and reliability.

Najib and Sosianika (2019: 428) indicated that trust is the core foundation of a successful business and establishing trust in a supermarket is significant. According to Cuong and Khoi (2019: 328) and Sharma (2020: 36), trust is a crucial element of consumer perceptions of SQ and the store in general. Athar, Basuki and Santoso (2020) illustrated that trust has a positive and a significant impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Their study showed that during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the higher the SQ offered by the store, the higher the trust and hence customer loyalty. Furthermore, loyalty to supermarkets increases when customers have confidence in their preferred supermarkets. Customers must believe that their preferred stores will fulfil their promises on time and will always prioritise their safety especially during these turbulent times of the Covid -19.

To maintain loyalty, supermarkets cannot only depend on customer satisfaction but more than that, trust and commitment as key factors in building customer loyalty (Najib and Sosiaka 2019: 428). It has been proven by multiple scholars that trust plays a significant role in long-term purchases, customer loyalty and customer satisfaction especially during uncertain times (Athar, Basuki and Santoso 2020; Goddard 2020; Commerce 2020). Furthermore, trust is an important tool in preserving customer commitment during difficult and uncertain times. This literature contributes towards in the third sub-objective, namely, 'to establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets lead to trust since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic'.

### **2.7.3 Customer loyalty**

Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy (2017: 846) define customer loyalty as the number of times a consumer repeats positive buying behaviour towards the same product or service in a specific category when compared to the number of purchases that the same customer has made in that category. Shokhsanam and Ahn (2021: 4) define customer loyalty as a customer who repeatedly shows a high commitment to buying particular brands or products and services. Various studies show that if customers are satisfied with the SQ that is offered by the retailer and are committed to the relationship exchange, they will not consider using other providers (Hikmawati, Alamsayah and Setiadi 2021; Sivadas and Baker-Prewitt 2000: 74; Shokhsanami and Ahn 2021: 4).

Loyal customers are therefore a significant asset for supermarkets, contributing towards the profitability of the company (Budianto 2019: 299). Furthermore, customer loyalty acts as an impediment to customer switching behaviour. According to Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy (2017: 846), a long-term relationship with a retailer develops once a customer deems the retailers SQ to be of a favourable standard. The exodus by customers to alternative means of shopping for groceries during the Covid-19 pandemic was noted by both Li, Hallsworth and Coca-Stefaniak (2020: 577) and Dannenberg *et al.* (2020: 543), causing concern for many major supermarkets.

According to Alam and Noor (2020: 3) and Beneke *et al.* (2012: 31), the customer loyalty base is an important asset for retailers because customers who show loyalty have the tendency to spread positive word-of-mouth, exhibit increased repurchase intentions and a decrease in price sensitivity. Consequently, a loyal customer base enhances referrals and improves the retailers' store image. One of the benefits of maintaining customer loyalty is that loyal customers are less expensive to work with as they know and understand the products and services of the store (Dimiyati and Subagio 2016: 76). Hence, the cost of marketing and set up can be remunerated over the period of their relationship with the store.

SQ, brand reputation, customer satisfaction and good management are all considered to be key variables for the development of customer loyalty (Setó-Pamies 2012). Furthermore, having loyal customers is the goal for every supermarket owner to ensure the survival of the store. Najib and Sosianika (2019: 428) concur that customer loyalty is a crucial factor for the success of retail and market share and that supermarkets lose customer loyalty when they stop providing excellent SQ and positive purchasing experiences.

Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020) reported that due to the Covid-19 outbreak, most consumers are now looking for retailers that are convenient, reliable and that have the products or services that they are looking for and those that meet their needs with empathy, care and concern. The author also added that convenience and product availability are some of the crucial factors that are driving customer loyalty during this pandemic. The degree of true loyalty begins with a very satisfying experience that

customers receive from their retailer (Cuong and Khoi 2019). Meaning that, customers who have great experiences with retailers will continue to purchase from that retailer even during changing situations that lead to the shifting of customers' loyalty (Hikmawati, Alamsyah and Setiadi 2021).

According to Fida *et al.* (2020: 3) customer satisfaction is the mediator between SQ and customer loyalty. These authors suggest that retailers should increase their customer satisfaction levels in order to sustain customer loyalty during this crisis of Covid-19. Price is one of the elements of the marketing mix. Gowerek and McGoldrick (2015: 333) defined the marketing mix as a structured combination of the four traditional factors that are commonly identified in marketing, namely price, product, place and promotion. It is necessary to manage these effectively so that customers are satisfied. However, Pratama, Sari and Hidayat (2021: 155) argue that during the pandemic, price has not been one of the main factors in retaining and increasing customer loyalty. However, the only exception was when prices matched quality expectations of products, that customers became satisfied, leading to customer loyalty. Therefore, lower prices are not viewed as significant contributors towards customer loyalty related to supermarkets (Yun and Hanson 2020).

Sustaining customer loyalty is crucial in order to ensure long-term business continuity. Slack and Singh (2020: 543) revealed that in Fiji customers perceived the services that were offered by supermarkets as being unsatisfactory and therefore not contributing towards customer loyalty, as customer satisfaction is considered to be a significant antecedent of customer loyalty. According to Tlapana (2017: 101) dissatisfaction is one of the main reasons why consumers shift their loyalty from supermarkets. Therefore, understanding customer demands, the new norm of customers buying behaviour and what drives customer loyalty during uncertain times will help supermarket managers design better marketing strategies because currently, generic strategies don't seem to work efficiently for retailers (Goigoi 2021: 3).

Najib and Sosianika (2019: 428) stated that in order to maintain loyalty, retailers cannot only depend on customer satisfaction but also trust and commitment as the most important elements in building customer loyalty. These authors further added that customer loyalty increases when customers have a perception of confidence in

their preferred supermarkets. Jain and Aggarwal (2016) found that RSQ had strong affiliations with consumer behaviour, particularly with actions associated with loyalty, namely intention to buy and the use of positive word-of-mouth. These findings justify research into RSQ and its effect on customer behaviour since the advent of the Covid-19 virus in order to establish how customer perceptions of SQ might have changed as well as the effect that this might have had on customer behaviour. Thus, the literature leads us to the final sub-objective, namely, to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets leads to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19.

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

It has been concluded by multiple authors that SQ plays a significant role in sustaining customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and trust during the Covid-19 pandemic (Alvarez and Marsal Holdings 2020; Yang 2020: 84; Meshram 2020: 1). Goddard (2020) found that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada caused a lot of disruptions and challenges for retailers as some of them lost their customers at the beginning of the outbreak. Szymkowiak *et al.* (2020) and Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020: 3) concurred that the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown created an atmosphere of fear about shopping, disrupting the normal routines of consumers, and resulting in a cautious approach towards supermarket shopping, with some even curtailing their normal shopping patterns.

The above literature review shows that before the pandemic, consumers expressed positive sentiments across the major supermarket retailers in South Africa, however, during the pandemic, overall negative sentiment was expressed by the consumers as shown by their rapid shift to online stores and local retailers. Creating an excellent in-store shopping experience has become even more crucial for supermarket owners in South Africa as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This present time of the Covid-19 pandemic requires incessant measurement to monitor and identify areas that need improvement so that the expectations of the customers may be met or exceeded.

The rapid spread of this virus has caused retailers to be more cautious of their SQ as has been communicated by many authors that during these uncertain times, SQ is the

most prominent key in maintaining the stores' competitive advantage and maximising the store's market share and profitability. Consumer grocery shopping patterns have shifted drastically during Covid-19. Therefore, in order to keep up with customers new habits and for them to improve their offering, in particular during a crisis such as that created by the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be motivated that it is necessary for supermarket managers to understand their customers' perceptions of RSQ, customer satisfaction, loyalty and trust.

This chapter provided insight into RSQ and the different scales that are used to measure SQ. Literature on the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on supermarkets was discussed in this chapter. The chapter, amongst other elements, reviewed literature on the impact of RSQ on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty, culminating in the main objective of this study which is to evaluate overall customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The following chapter deals with the research methodology employed in this study.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The research methodology describes how this study was undertaken and discusses the theoretical background of the research design, the research method, data analysis and validity and reliability of the study. According to Kumar (2014: 20), research methodology is the science of studying how research is to be carried out. It describes the general principles behind research which includes methods, strategies and techniques (Hall and Hall 2010: 29). Tlapana (2017: 112), highlights the importance of a good methodology, stating that an inappropriate methodology produces unreliable outcomes, thereby resulting in the results of the study having no value. This chapter is significant to the research study because it provides the overall framework of the study which must be chosen accurately because it affects the reliability of research outcomes and any fault in the process may undermine the whole study.

This chapter describes the research design that was used in this study with the aim of evaluating customer perceptions of RSQ and the impact on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. It explains in depth what methods were used to gather and analyse data, explaining the methods that were utilised to achieve the three objectives of the study.

## 3.2 Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ and their impact on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.



### **3.2.1 The main objective of this study**

To evaluate overall customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

### **3.2.2 Sub-objectives**

- To analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets lead to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets lead to trust since the outbreak of Covid-19.
- To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets lead to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19.

## **3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design can be described as a plan that specifies the techniques that are used by the researcher to gather and analyse data (Das and Kumar 2010: 667; Manfooz 2014: 18). Sekaran and Bougie (2016: 95) add that a research design enables researchers to answer questions in a way that is as valid, objective and accurate as possible. Myers, Well and Lorch (2013: 14) further articulates that a research design is used to fulfil the objectives of a study and to answer the research problem of the study.

According to Saunders and Thornhill (2019: 175), there are three methodological choices for a research design that a researcher can choose from, namely, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodology research.

### **3.3.1 Quantitative research**

Maree *et al.* (2021: 3) articulate that quantitative research is survey research that involves a number of structured questions with measurable responses gathered from many participants. Creswell (2014: 05) defined quantitative research as an approach that tests objective theories by exploring the relationships among variables and is presented in numbers. Creswell and Clark (2017:40) concurs that quantitative research generates data by means of extensive survey research, making use of tools such as structured interviews or questionnaires. This type of research design enables the researcher to reach a larger sample in a shorter period of time compared to that of a qualitative research approach.

This method is constructed on measurements of quantity with regards to responses received from questionnaires, thereby providing data that is quantifiable. Bryman (2012: 170) added that this method is advantageous because it has merits for validity, reliability, replication and generalisation.

### **3.3.2 Qualitative research**

This approach offers both contextualisation and interpretation of the data collected by the researcher. According to Misha and Alok (2017), qualitative research gathers in-depth information on non-numerical data. Saunders and Thornhill (2019: 179) stated that this approach consists of coming to an understanding by interpreting the meanings that underlie words and images. Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston (2013:200) state that this research method does not employ any numerical measurements, focusing instead on the discovery of subjective opinions and experiences of the participants in order to reveal new insights.

This method encourages researchers to gain a deeper understanding of a matter. Data is gathered by means of semi-structured and in-depth interviews. Implementing this method can be complex and time-consuming (Hilal and Alabri 2013: 181). Table 3.1 provides a comparison between the quantitative and qualitative methods.

**Table 3.1: Quantitative research vs qualitative research**

Factor	Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research
Data collected	Hard data	Soft data
Data collection technique	Passive interaction through questionnaire and/or experiment design	Active interaction with sample population
Sample population	Large population	Small population
Research variables	Small number	Large number
Data collection	Before and after training or experiment	On-going observation and interview
Relationship	Distance and short term	Intense and long term with subjects
Research context	Controlled	Uncontrolled
Data analysis	Statistical analysis	Contextual/interpretive
Research findings	Deductive through inferences from data	Inductive through creativity and criteria reflection
Research instruments	Questionnaires	Researcher as an instrument
Tools	Computer, calculator	Interview guide, tape recorder, transcriber, computer, typewriter, etc
Interpretation of information/results	Objective interpretivism Positivism	Subjective nature of enquiry
Research tradition	Descriptive, correlational, experimental, casual comparative, etc.	Ethnography, hermeneutics phenomenological, case studies, etc.

Source: Ntobaki (2018: 61)

### 3.3.3 Choice of Research Design

The most appropriate and accurate research design for this study to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ and their impact on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the inception of the pandemic in South Africa, was a quantitative research method which is descriptive in nature. According to Creswell (2009: 11), the purpose of a descriptive study is to gather data related to the topic of interest. According to Burns and Bush (2014: 103) a descriptive study is one that obtains parameters with which a researcher can generalise the results of a study to a larger population. This would be done by using the data collected from the selected sample, within the population. Collins and Hussey (2014: 4) concur that a descriptive study observes and describes the behaviour of a targeted population and establishes characteristics accordingly. This study identifies the general nature of the research problems and related variables.

The time horizon of this study will be cross-sectional because the data will be gathered at one point in time because of cost constraints (Burns and Bush 2014: 103). A cross sectional time horizon is less time consuming and more convenient (Sekaran and Bougie 2016: 20). The study setting of this research will be implemented through non-contrived settings as it a natural environment (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005: 231).

### **3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING**

To achieve the objectives of a study and obtain accurate results, the population of the study must be chosen carefully. Saunders and Thornhill (2019: 292) explain that selecting a population and a sample of a study is necessary, as it is almost always not possible to include all possible cases in a study. However, if data is not collected from the correct individuals or scenarios where the answers that are required to solve the problem are to be found, the entire study will be wasted. This process of choosing who should be involved is known as sampling (Sekaran and Bougie 2010: 262).

#### **3.4.1 Population**

A population is an entire group of people or objects that a researcher intends to investigate and from which the author wishes to draw the sample (Burns and Bush 2014: 238). Chaudhury (2010: 60) added that a target population is an entire group about which some information is required to be corroborated in a research study. For the purpose of this study, the population is adults (i.e., over 18 years of age), male or female, who visit supermarkets to conduct household shopping in South Africa. According to Internet World Stats (2020), the population of South Africa is approximately 59 million, with about 32 million of this number having some form of internet access.

Twenty-one million individuals are estimated to subscribe to Facebook, one of the most popular social media sites and 15 million individuals are estimated to be also active on WhatsApp (BusinessTech 2013). The percentage of the population that is online is about 50% of the entire population, therefore giving excellent access to a

broad range of the population. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has made it difficult to access respondents physically. Due to the large size of the population, time and financial costs and the Covid-19 pandemic rules and regulations, the researcher was not able to conduct research among all individuals within the population. This aspect of the research involves the analysis of data from the target population consisting of supermarket customers in South Africa.

### **3.4.2 Sampling method**

Sampling is a technique that is used to select groups from a wider population, because it is impractical to approach an entire population when conducting research (Maree *et al.* 2021: 214). Sampling methods are mainly categorised under the terms; probability and non-probability (Armstrong and Kotler 2013:144). The selection of an appropriate sampling method is important to minimise sampling errors, bias and ensure generalisation of findings (Kumar 2011). This method allows researchers to estimate outsized target populations by conducting a survey on a lesser division of elements.

#### **3.4.2.1 Non-probability sampling**

Best (2012: 240) defined this sampling method as one where everyone in the target population has an equal chance of being selected into the research sample. According to Babbie (2013: 199), non-probability sampling is not random, and for that reason, conclusions are less reliable.

However, Sekaran and Bougie (2016: 20) recommended that researchers utilise a non-probability sampling method when they have budget constraints or limited time in which to conduct their research. Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie (2017: 1) added that “factors such as lack of human resources, lack of precision, high expenses, inadequate equipment and population dispersion prevent researchers from studying the entire population”. There are four different types of non-probability sampling namely, availability sampling, purposive/judgemental sampling, snowball sampling and quota sampling (Babbie 2013: 199).

- Availability/convenience sampling- This is a sampling technique where respondents are chosen from the population who are expediently available or easily accessible. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2012: 20) the subjects in availability/convenience sampling are chosen because they are convenient for the researcher, because they are nearby or easily accessible.
- Judgemental/purposive sampling- This is a sampling technique where the sample is chosen based on the researcher's knowledge. Meaning, the researcher knows and understands the characteristics of the target population and selects the individuals based on the characteristics that they portray (Reddy 2018: 85).
- Snowball sampling- This sampling technique assists researchers in finding a sample when individuals are difficult to locate. Researchers begin with a few suitable subjects, requesting that they forward the questionnaire to additional individuals in order to establish a sizeable sample. The researcher basically asks the participants to identify additional participants that can be added to participate in a survey or study (Babbie 2013: 199).
- Quota sampling- According to Dommermuth (2011: 19) this is a sampling method that involves dividing the population into categories based on characteristics which may affect the value of the parameter being investigated. In addition to accessibility, the researcher makes use of selected characteristics, such as gender or race, depending on the characteristics that are useful to the researcher.

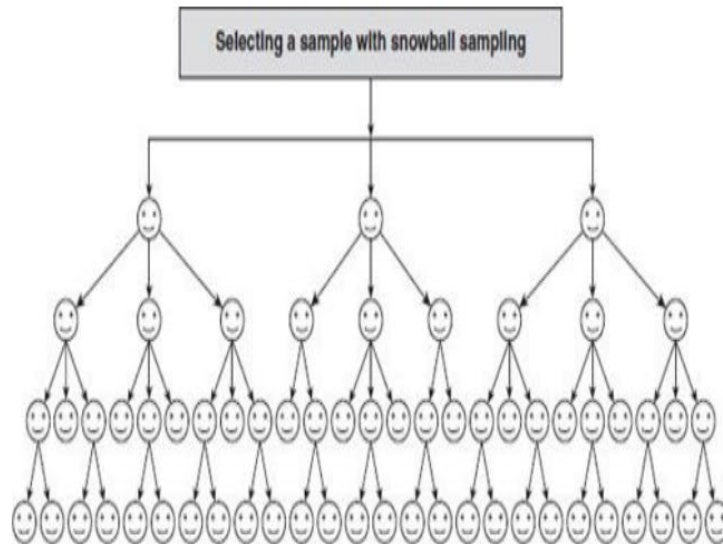
#### **3.4.2.2 Probability sampling**

This is a process whereby a researcher randomly selects samples from a population where each member of the population is equally able to be selected to participate in the study (Leedy and Ormrod 2010: 204). "Equal implies that the probability of selection of each element in the population is the same; that is, the choice of an element in the sample is not influenced by other considerations such as personal preference" (Kumar 2011). (Babbie 2013: 209) write that there are several probability sampling techniques namely, simple random sampling, cluster sampling and systematic sampling.

- Simple random sampling: This is a sampling technique where every component in the target population stands a chance of being selected in the sample. According to Babbie (2013: 209) this technique is utilised in the statistical computations of social research.
- Cluster sampling: In this sampling technique the researcher sub-divides the entire population into clusters. Then the researcher selects participants from the identified clusters. Kumar (2011) maintains that “cluster sampling is based on the ability of the researcher to divide the sampling population into groups (based upon visible or easily identifiable characteristics), called clusters, and then to select elements within each cluster”. All the selected elements from the selected clusters are utilised for the sample.
- Systematic sampling: The researcher acknowledges sub-groups (strata) from the population, such that each unit of the population is assigned into a sub-group (strata). Then, the researcher must choose units from each of the sub-groups (strata).

### **3.4.2.3 Selection of the sample**

This study will be conducted through a non-probability sampling method, using a convenience method, which is justified owing to restrictions on both time and money. A snowball approach (which is a form of convenience sampling), will be used to access the sample. Respondents will be requested to share the request with additional candidates online (Hair, Bush and Ortinau 2009: 323). This snowball method (see Figure 3.1) has been selected due to the difficulty of approaching people individually during the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the prohibitive cost of using a commercial database. The respondents in this study will therefore be chosen based on their availability and their willingness to answer the questions.



**Figure 3.1: Snowball sampling**  
Source: Kumar (2011)

### 3.4.2.1 Sample size

Sample size is the number of participants to be included in a study. Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005) mentioned that determining sample size involves issues related to time, accuracy and investment of available resources to collect, examine and conduct data analysis. Kumar (2011: 49) cited that the common rule in quantitative study is that the greater the sample size, the greater the accuracy of the findings of the study. Sekaran and Bougie (2013: 268) suggest that for a population exceeding 1 million, a sample size of 384 is adequate for appropriate inferences to be drawn and therefore to obtain accurate findings. To achieve the objectives of this study, a sample size of 400 participants was utilised, allowing a few extra to accommodate spoiled and incomplete questionnaires.



### **3.5 MEASURING INSTRUMENT**

Measuring instruments can be defined as the different methods that are used by a researcher to obtain data from respondents (Hanaysha and Kumar 2012: 120). According to McKenzie (2015: 7), a questionnaire is the most frequently used instrument for gathering information from the participants in a quantitative study. Bell (2010: 10) mentions that data collected from the administration of closed ended questions is easier to analyse than data obtained from open-ended questions. Kumar (2011: 145) maintains that a questionnaire affords excellent anonymity as there is no personal interaction between the participants and the researcher and the chances of collecting accurate results when sensitive questions are asked are better with this measuring instrument. Therefore, a closed-ended questionnaire will be used by the researcher in this study.

#### **3.5.1 Advantages of a questionnaire**

Malhontra (2010: 10) highlighted these three advantages of a questionnaire,

- Respondents are free to demonstrate their perspectives without the fear of identification.
- Collection of data with a broad range of topics can be gathered within a limited period.
- The respondents voluntarily answer the questionnaire which in turn saves the researcher's time.

This instrument is advantageous because the anonymity of customers can be respected, and the instrument is very quick and convenient. This instrument is very useful for collecting facts, opinions and attitudes. The chance of gathering accurate data when subtle questions are asked are better with this instrument (Chen 2015: 110; Beneke *et al.* 2012: 34).

### 3.5.2 Derivation of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was initially and provisionally outlined in the proposal. However, this was only the beginning as the final questionnaire evolved considerably as various groups of reliable statements were compared and recommended from previous literature. These questions were selected from past articles and studies on SQ, along with those from studies based on the use of questionnaires making use of the RSQ (Dabolkhar 1996; Yang *et al.* 2021; Beneke *et al.* 2012; Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy2017, Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017). A table was created which outlined the questions that were considered from past studies (see Table C1 in appendices). The questionnaire requested that respondents selected one of four dominant supermarkets in South Africa from which to base their answers. These were identified as Shoprite, Pick n Pay, Spar, Checkers and Woolworths according to Businessstech (2022). However, there was an option to choose “other” if the respondent’s preferred supermarket was not mentioned in this study.

As this procedure evolved, sets of questions / statements were eliminated as they were established to be duplicates of other statements, or when they lacked reliability. Preference was given to complete sets of statements from one researcher that had already passed previous reliability tests (according to Cronbach’s alpha measurements that were over 0.6).

Isizulu is spoken by the majority of black South Africans over any other languages. Therefore, to accommodate the participants that do not understand English, the questionnaire was translated into Isizulu by the author, assisted by a few first language IsiZulu speakers. It was pilot tested by asking several Zulu speakers to read it and see if they were able to answer the questions. However, in the end, no-one requested the Zulu questionnaire, resulting in it not being used.

### 3.5.3 Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire is aimed at evaluating the overall customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa from the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the questionnaire was specifically formulated to the specific themes of this study.

According to Babbie (2013: 257), the structure and the items on the questionnaire should be easy to comprehend so that the participants can understand what the researcher is requiring. The questionnaire consisted of questions developed from previously validated questionnaires including those adopted from the RSQ scale developed by Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996). Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the researcher added hygiene practice to the RSQ dimensions to further understand the impact of SQ in supermarkets in South Africa in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hygiene practice was adapted from a study conducted by Yang *et al.* (2021). The findings of Yang *et al.* (2021) show that hygiene practice is a very important factor in supermarkets in these turbulent times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the hygiene dimension was added to RSQS as it was seen as vital during the pandemic. Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization (2020), frequent hygiene practice is one of the most effective ways of preventing the spread of Covid-19.

The questionnaire of this study consisted of the following sections:

- Section A: Demographic profile of the respondent
- Section B: Customer's choice of supermarket
- Section C: Statements indicating customer's perceptions of the service provided by the chosen supermarket.
- Section D: Statements indicating customers feelings of trust, satisfaction and loyalty towards the supermarket.

In this study, the respondents were asked to choose their preferable supermarket to rate and respond to the questions based on their store visit experiences. Section C and D of the questionnaire was structured using a five-point Likert scale to measure

all constructs, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). This scale is designed to allow degrees of opinions from the respondents, and even no opinion at all with a neutral option. The questionnaire was kept short ensuring that it was straight forward for the respondents as well as making it easy for data coding and analysis.

### **3.5.4 The pilot study**

Zikmund and Babin (2010: 61) maintain that pilot studies are very important for research in order to reduce of sending out a questionnaire that is defective. A pilot study is a mini study that is carried out prior to the main study, in order to ascertain that all is well with the questionnaire a new research tool. According to Saunders and Thornhill (2019: 540), a pilot study eliminates errors or problems when analysing data, ensuring that respondents do not experience any difficulty with interpreting and answering the questions.

To ensure that the questionnaires (the English and Zulu questionnaire) of this study were well structured and easily understood, the researcher requested a few knowledgeable researchers in the field within the academic environment to review them. Feedback enabled the researcher to correct any errors or inconsistencies to establish the validity and reliability of the instrument. Twenty questionnaires were also shared with lay people that could conceivably have been involved in the study, to make sure that they understood the questions and were able to answer them. Any ambiguities and/or grammatical errors could also be picked up at this stage. A pilot study such as this ensures face and content validity when the final questionnaire reaches the intended audience (Struwig and Stead 2020: 146).

The questionnaire was also studied by a qualified statistician to receive feedback on whether it would achieve its objectives. All comments from the various areas were studied and a suggested list of corrections / changes were made prior to it going out to the public. Table C2 (in the appendices) shows the respondents' comments, researcher's response and the statistician's comments.

### 3.6 DATA COLLECTION

The selection of a data collection method is a significant factor in conducting research. According to Ponto (2015:168), the purpose of collecting data in any study is to gather information to address the research questions. According to Mouton (2010: 7), data can be collected through primary data collection and secondary data collection. Primary data collection is information that is obtained from sources that have been approached for the first time by the researcher (Sekaran and Bougie 2013: 113). This method of data collection is formulated using experiments, surveys or observations. Secondary data collection is data that is already available and analysed. The data in this method can be collected using magazines, newspapers, books, journals or articles (Mouton 2010: 7). Both primary and secondary data collection methods will be utilised for the purpose of this study.

The primary data was collected using an online survey research strategy. Survey research is a system that is used to collect information from people to explain their views, behaviour, or knowledge (Zikmund and Babin 2013:280) (Kombo and Tromp 2011:89) stated that a survey questionnaire is one of the most accurate methods for primary data collection and is appropriate for gathering information from a large number of respondents. This study was quantitative in nature because the data was gathered through structured questionnaires. In a quantitative study, all aspects of the study are carefully designed before the collection of the data. The questions in the questionnaire were closed-ended, allowing respondents to select an answer from several alternatives offered by the researcher.

The questionnaires were made available to respondents via a link on the internet. This method was employed due to the Covid-19 pandemic which was circulating at the time. A number of lockdowns took place during this period, effectively preventing the researcher from engaging in any face-to-face interactions. Respondents were notified via social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Four hundred questionnaires were sent to participants all over South Africa in order to extract detailed information on the topic and clarify complex questions. Participants were asked to share the link with their acquaintances to save time.

A detailed letter of information and consent was provided to participants about the study to ensure they could make an informed, rational and voluntary decision on whether to participate. Respondents were also assured of confidentiality. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter which explained the anonymity clause. Participants were required to click on the consent form should they agree to participate. Only after that were they directed to the actual questionnaire.

### **3.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analysis is the interpretation of the data that was collected by the researcher. Data analysis is a technique of creating order, shape and sense to the data collected (Ponto 2015:169), explains that the data analysis process involves creating management amounts of data, by applying statistical techniques and presenting information in understandable formats (Govender (2017: 99). According to Ali and Bhaskar (2016:665) the purpose of data analysis is to obtain the validity and the reliability of all information gathered.

The data from the returned questionnaires was cleaned, coded and captured in Excel. The services of a statistician were used to assist in the analysis of the statistical information. The statistical computer software suite (SPSS 25) was used by the researcher to compute and interpret the relevant statistical tests of this study. The software generated tables, column graphs and pie charts, hence the data is presented in numerical and graphical formations. In this research study, the fundamental features of the data were described using descriptive and inferential statistics (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005: 231).

#### **3.7.1 Descriptive statistics**

Descriptive statistics summarise the sample and the measures of the study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2007). This involves a description of the study in terms of frequencies, mean and medium, proportions and standard deviation. According to Hussain (2012: 741), descriptive analysis involves statistically merging and presenting the concepts of interest or relations amongst these concepts. Descriptive statistical

test results from this study are presented in frequency tables, percentages, charts, and graphs.

### **3.7.2 Inferential statistics**

This analysis uses arithmetical measures to make conclusions about the links between variables. In this study, the conclusions about the populations formulated on customers were reached by means of inferential statistics. Statistical analysis was conducted on the basis of the RSQ dimension scores and the demographic variables. Inferential statistics allow researchers to make predictions and conclusions about the population based on information attained from a sample that is representative of that population (Giuliano and Polanowicz, 2008: 212).

## **3.8 CONCLUSION**

This chapter provided a theoretical background on the research design and methodology implemented in this study. The research design and methodology were formulated in accordance with the aim and objectives of the study. The researcher chose to adopt the quantitative research method. A survey design was adopted to collect data from a sample of the population through the use of questionnaires that were shared online via social media platforms. The questionnaire consisted of closed ended questions and was descriptive in nature. With the use of convenience sampling, the questionnaires were administered to supermarket consumers in South Africa that have access to social media and internet. The quantitative data derived from the questionnaire was analysed using the SPSS 25. The analysis of the results is presented in Chapter 4 of this study.

# CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 presented the research methodology of this study. This incorporated the research design, research objectives, target population and the techniques that were used to determine the sample size. Following from that, this chapter presents the findings accumulated by means of the data gathering process. The principal research instrument (questionnaire) was used to collect data and was distributed to 400 respondents in South Africa that have shopped at supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. After removing incomplete responses, 395 responses were used for analysis, giving a 98.75% response rate. The data collected from responses was analysed with SPSS 25.

The findings of this study will be reported in various forms such as graphs and cross-tabulations once the appropriate statistical techniques have been applied. Inferential approaches used consisted of correlations and chi square test values. Significance will be demonstrated according to p-values.

- In order to summarise results in this chapter, agree and strongly agree responses were combined, with the same applying to disagree and strongly disagree. Findings were reflected in the same order as the four sections of the questionnaire: Section A comprised the demographic factors of the respondents.
- Section B identified customers' supermarket of choice and their typical buying behaviour.
- Section C consisted of the statements indicating how respondents perceived the SQ provided by their chosen supermarket with respect to RSQ dimensions, namely, hygiene practice, physical aspects, reliability, problem solving, personal interaction and policies.



- Section D of the questionnaire indicated customers' feelings of trust, satisfaction and loyalty towards the supermarket.

Results presented in this section were analysed in order to establish customer perceptions of RSQ and their causal relationship with satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty with respect to selected supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Results were tabulated and analysed in accordance with the following aim and objectives.

## **4.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY**

The aim of this study was to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

### **4.2.1 Main objective**

The main objective of this study was to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

### **4.2.2 Sub-objectives**

The sub-objectives were as follows:

- To analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contribute to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contribute to trust since the outbreak of Covid-19.
- To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed towards customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19.

### 4.3 TESTS USED IN THE ANALYSIS OF THIS STUDY

A number of tests were used for the analysis of this study. These are briefly listed and explained below:

- **Descriptive statistics:** for the purpose of this study, descriptive statistical tests were carried out. These included means and standard deviations, where required. Frequencies are represented in the form of tables and/or graphs.
- **Regression analysis:** Regression analysis is used to understand how certain independent variables affect the values of selected dependent variables (Saunders and Thornhill 2019: 618). In this study, linear regression was used to determine how RSQ dimensions related to the dependent variables of customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty.
- **One sample t-test:** Tests whether a mean score is significantly different from a scalar value (Dancey and Reidy 2011: 170).
- **Factor analysis:** determines latent factors / groupings of items. According to Knekta, Runyon and Eddy (2019), factor analysis is a form of analytical procedure often carried out using a combination of factor extractions and factor rotations. In this study, factor analysis was used to identify the underlying constructs and patterns of relationships among the items constituting the questionnaire. Additionally, the most important goal of factor analysis is data reduction.
- **Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity:** These are both tests of sampling adequacy and are used to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis (Statistics How To 2022). According to Statistics How To (2022), a KMO measure of less than 0.6 is considered to be inadequate, with the ideal range between 0.8 and 1. A Bartlett's test should be significant.
- **Cronbach's alpha (CA):** This is a measure of reliability of a composite scale. A reliability coefficient with a CA ( $\alpha$ ) that exceeds or is equal to is considered to be "acceptable" for newly developed constructs. For this study, the researcher sought the assistance of CA to measure the reliability of the questionnaire. The CA is one of the reliability coefficients which illustrates how well the constructs in a set are correlated to each other. Sekaran and Bougie (2010: 324)

articulated that CA is computed in terms of the average number of inter-correlations found in the items that measure the concept. The calculated CA or  $\alpha$  coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of the research instrument.

#### **4.4 DESCRIPTIVE DATA**

Descriptive research employs the use of statistics or numbers to achieve objectives and in so doing answer research questions. These include items such as attitudes, opinions, intentions, buying behaviour and demographics. Results will be discussed in the same order as the questionnaire is structured, therefore beginning with demographics.

##### **4.4.1 Section A – Demographic profile of respondents**

Demographic outline of respondents is presented in Table 4.1. This indicates that 45.6% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 25 while 44.3% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 44. A further 8.4% of the respondents were between the ages of 45 and 64, followed by 5% of the respondents who were over 65 years old. Therefore, the majority (45.6%) of the respondents were between 18-25 years (young aged). Moreover, Table 4.1 shows that more respondents were female (61%) followed by males with 38.2%.

**Table 4.1: Demographic breakdown of the sample**

Demographic Variable	Details	Frequency	Percentage
		395	100
Age	18- 25	185	45.6
	26- 44	175	44.3
	45- 64	33	8.4
	65+	2	.5
Gender	Female	244	61.8
	Male	151	38.2

#### 4.4.2 Section B – Supermarket of choice and buying behaviour

The responses to this question indicated that the majority of the respondents shopped at ShopRite (n = 119; 30.1%), followed by Pick n Pay (n = 89; 21.0%), Checkers (n = 78; 19.7%) and then Woolworths (n = 42; 10.6%). A final category of ‘other’ had 7 respondents (n = 7; 1.8%) (Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2: Supermarket of choice and customer buying behaviour**

Favoured Store	No of respondents	Percentage
Shoprite	119	30.1%
Pick n Pay	89	21%
Checkers	78	19.7%
Woolworths	42	10.6%
Other	7	1.8%
Frequency of shopping	No of respondents	Percentage
Daily	26	6.6%
At least once a week	148	37.5%
At least once every two weeks	125	31.6%
At least once a month	92	23.3%
Less than once a month	4	1.0%

When asked how often respondents conducted their supermarket shopping, 37.5 % replied that they shopped at least once a week, while 31.6% shopped at least once every two weeks, followed by 23.3% who shopped at least once a month. A further 6.6% shopped daily, while a mere 1.0% shopped less than once a month. The results of this study indicated that most customers visited supermarkets at least once a week

even since the advent of the pandemic. The findings of this study revealed that most respondents purchased their groceries at Shoprite.

#### **4.4.3 Section C – Customer perceptions of RSQ**

This section presents the results with respect to the statements indicating customers' perceptions of the service provided by their chosen supermarket. RSQS dimensions were used to measure RSQ as indicated in chapter 2. Respondents were asked to show how they perceived each of the selected RSQS dimensions as offered by their preferred store. The Likert scales from which they were requested to select from were rated from 1, indicating strongly disagree through to 7, which indicated strongly agree. Positive statements (strongly agree and agree) were interpreted as agreement while negative statements (disagree and strongly disagree) were interpreted as disagreement. Each statement was separately analysed. Mean scores were tested against a neutral/central score of '4' using a one-sample t-test. This indicated if there was any significant agreement (mean > 4) or disagreement (mean < 4) with the statement.

##### **4.4.3.1 Customer perceptions of hygiene practices**

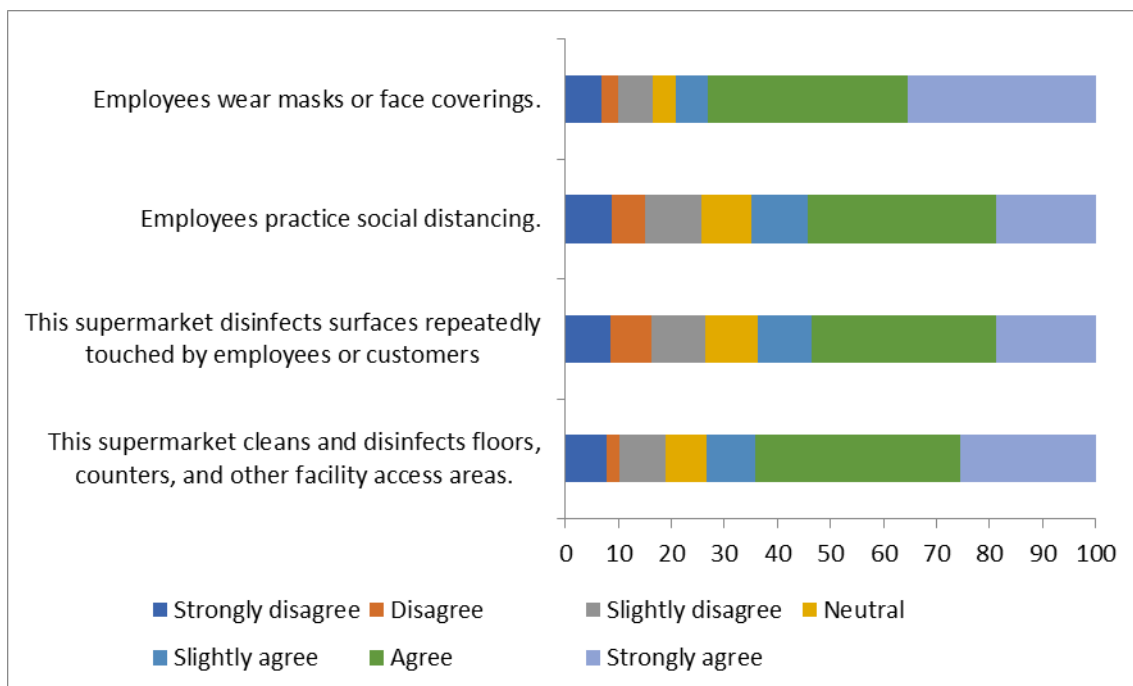
Table 4.3 shows the significance of perceptions regarding the quality of hygiene practice offered by supermarkets in SA during the outbreak of Covid-19. Most respondents (64%) agreed that their preferred supermarkets cleaned and disinfected floors, counters and other facility access areas, with a mean value of 05.26. The remainder of the results indicate that 54% agreed that their supermarkets disinfected surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers (mean value 4.85); 54% agreed with the statement that employees practised social distancing (mean value 4.88); and 73% agreed that the employees wore masks or face coverings (mean value 5.55).

**Table 4.3: Hygiene practice**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-value
This supermarket cleans and disinfects floors, counters, and other facility access areas.	395	5.26 (1.800)	13.948	394	< 0.001*
This supermarket disinfects surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers	395	4.85 (1.911)	8.849	394	< 0.001*
Employees practice social distancing	395	4.88 (1.894)	9.274	394	< 0.001*
Employees wear masks or face coverings.	395	5.55 (1.783)	17.247	394	< 0.001*

\* Indicates significance at the 95% level

To summarise, there is significant agreement that supermarkets are cleaned, surfaces are disinfected; social distancing is practised by employees; and employees wear face masks ( $p < 0.001$  in all cases). Figure 4.1 provides a visual representation of these statistics.



**Figure 4.1: Hygiene practice**

#### 4.4.3.2 Customer perceptions of physical aspects in supermarkets

Table 4.4 depicts respondent perceptions of the physical aspects in supermarkets in South Africa since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. With a mean value of 5.62, 75% of respondents agreed that the supermarket’s layout allowed them to easily find the products they needed. Other results indicate that: 72% agreed that their supermarkets have modern-looking equipment and fixtures (mean value 5.5); 72% agreed that the physical facilities of the supermarket were visually appealing (mean value 5.5); 74% of agreed that the supermarkets have clean, attractive and convenient areas with a mean value of 5.62; and, 78% agreed that the layout of the supermarkets makes it easy for them to move around in the stores (mean value 5.73).

**Table 4.4: Physical aspects**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
The layout allows me to easily find the products I need	395	5.62 (1.666)	19.334	394	< 0.001
This supermarket has modern-looking equipment and fixtures	395	5.50 (1.671)	17.881	394	< 0.001
The physical facilities of this supermarket are visually appealing	395	5.50 (1.682)	17.738	394	< 0.001
This supermarket has clean, attractive and convenient areas	395	5.62 (1.689)	19.010	394	< 0.001
The layout of the supermarket makes it easy to move around in the store	395	5.73 (1.696)	20.290	394	< 0.001

Overall, it can be noted that most responses with respect to physical aspects in the selected supermarkets were positive. As shown in Table 4.4 there is significant agreement that the layout allows respondents to easily find the products they need; the supermarket has modern-looking equipment and fixtures; the physical facilities of the supermarket are visually appealing; the supermarket has clean, attractive and convenient areas and that the layout allowed for ease of movement in the store concerned. In all cases  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that the mean is significantly different to the neutral value of ‘4’.

#### 4.4.3.3 Customer perceptions of reliability in supermarkets

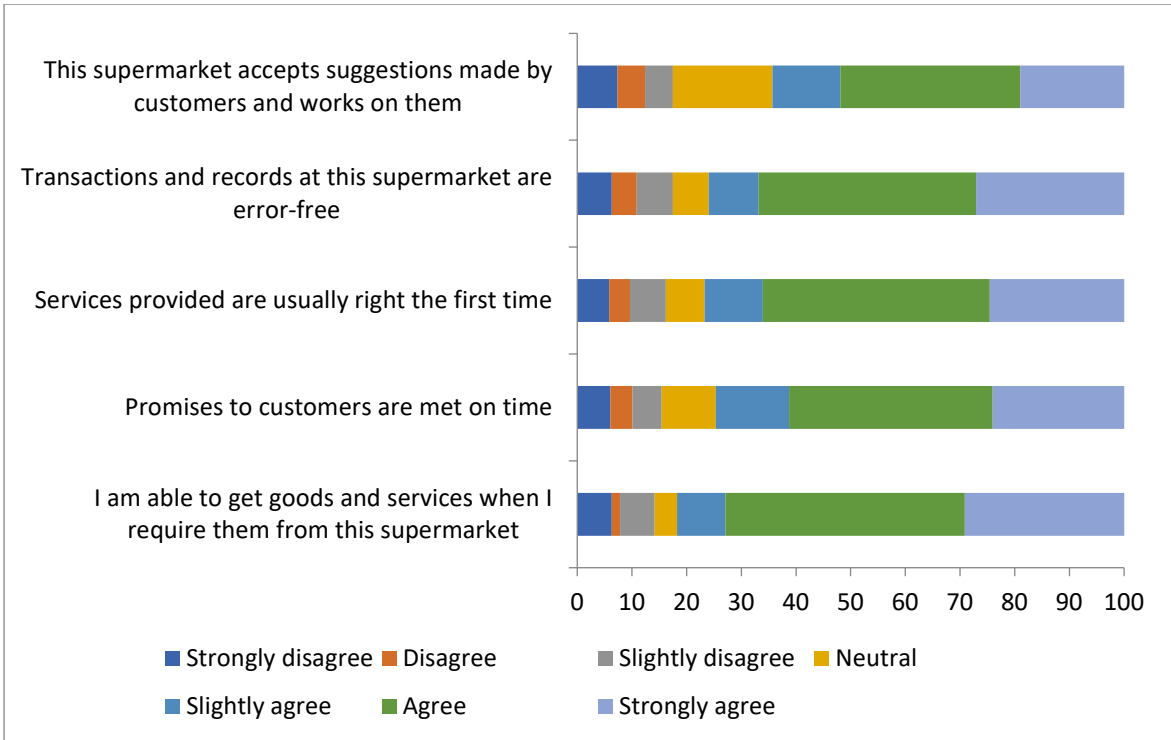
Table 4.5 summarises respondent perceptions with regards to the reliability component of RSQ in supermarkets in South Africa, since the advent of Covid-19. The findings of this study depict the following: 72.9% of the respondents agreed that they receive goods and services when they require them from their preferred supermarkets (mean value 5.55); 61% agreed that promises made are met on time by these supermarkets (mean value 5.25); 66% agreed that services that are provided are usually right the first time (mean value 5.36); 66.8% agreed that the transactions and records of the supermarket they patronised are error free (mean value 5.35); and 51.9% agreed that the supermarkets accept the suggestions made by customers (mean value 4.98). Jelčić (2017: 584) postulated that it is important for retailers to offer an optimal product range that is consistent with customers' requirements. In summary, customers agreed that the supermarkets they patronised are reliable during these chaotic times of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Table 4.5: Reliability**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
I am able to get goods and services when I require them from this supermarket	395	5.55 (1.657)	18.646	394	< 0.001
Promises to customers are met on time	395	5.28 (1.706)	14.956	394	< 0.001
Services provided are usually right the first time	395	5.36 (1.699)	15.878	394	< 0.001
Transactions and records at this supermarket are error-free	395	5.35 (1.765)	15.219	394	< 0.001
This supermarket accepts suggestions made by customers and works on them	395	4.98 (1.764)	11.039	394	< 0.001

In summary, the results show that there is significant agreement that the respondents are able to get goods and services when required from their supermarkets; promises are met on time; the services offered by the supermarkets are usually right the first time; the transactions and records at these supermarkets are error free; and the supermarkets accepts suggestions offered by customers and works on them. In all cases  $p < 0.001$ . Figure 4.2 provides a visual representation of these statistics.





**Figure 4.2: Reliability**

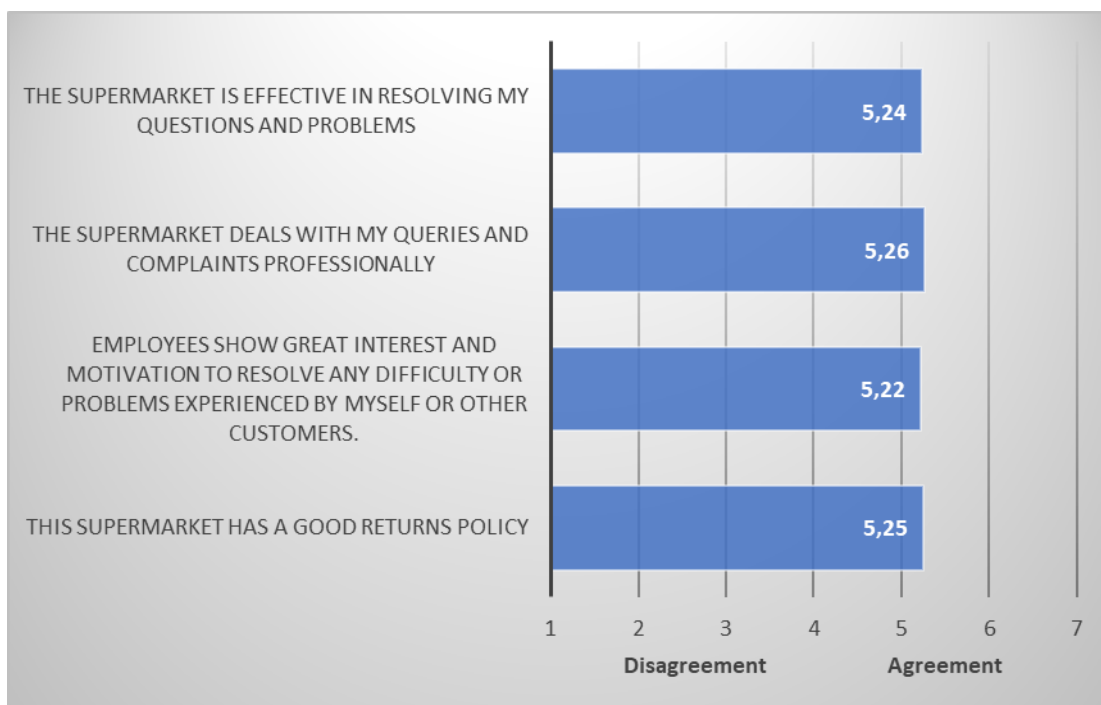
**4.4.3.4 Customer perceptions of problem solving in supermarkets**

Table 4.6 shows respondents’ perceptions of the problem-solving dimension in supermarkets, as follows: 61.7% of the respondents agreed that the supermarkets have good returns policy (mean value 5.25); 62.1% agreed that employees showed great interest and motivation to resolve any difficulty or problems experienced by themselves or other customers (mean value 5.22); 63.8% agreed that supermarkets dealt with their queries and complaints professionally (mean value 5.26); and 63.8% agreed that the supermarkets were effective in resolving their questions and problems (mean value 5.24).

**Table 4.6: Problem solving**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
This supermarket has a good returns policy	395	5.25 (1.730)	18.646	394	< 0.001
Employees show great interest and motivation to resolve any difficulty or problems experienced by myself or other customers.	395	5.22 (1.766)	13.676	394	< 0.001
The supermarket deals with my queries and complaints professionally	395	5.26 (1.758)	14.250	394	< 0.001
The supermarket is effective in resolving my questions and Problems	395	5.24 (1.748)	14.103	394	< 0.001

Most of the responses with respect to perceptions of the problem-solving dimension in supermarkets were positive as reflected in Table 4.6. There is significant agreement that the supermarkets have a good returns policy, that employees show great interest and motivation to resolve any difficulty or problems experienced by customers. Furthermore, there is significant agreement that supermarkets deal with customers' queries and complaints professionally and are effective in resolving customer questions and problems. Table 4.6 indicated that the statements are all significant at the  $p < 0.001$ . Figure 4.3 provides the visual presentation of customer's perceptions of problem solving.



**Figure 4.3: Problem solving**

#### 4.4.3.5 Customer perceptions of personal interaction in supermarkets

Table 4.7 illustrates the respondents' perspectives of the personal interaction dimension. Personal interactions have the highest alpha co-efficient among all the dimensions. These results correspond with findings from Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah (2011) where personal interaction also had the highest alpha co-efficient among all the RSQ dimensions. Kajenthiran (2018: 19) found that problem solving, personal interaction and policies significantly contributed towards customer loyalty. The results illustrated in Table 4.7 indicate the following: 65% of respondents agreed that supermarkets offer high quality goods/products (mean value 5.33); 64.8% agreed that employees are always willing to assist (mean value 5.27); 63.5% agreed that employees are always available and willing to respond to queries (mean value 5.28); 56.5% of agreed that the staff at the supermarkets give them individual attention (mean value 5.04); 60.3% agreed that staff are friendly and polite (mean value 5.17); and 60.5% agreed that the staff give them prompt service (mean value 5.20).

**Table 4.7: Personal interaction**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
Employees make information easily available to the customers	395	5.33 (1.697)	15.535	394	< 0.001
Employees are always willing to assist	395	5.27 (1.728)	14.620	394	< 0.001
Employees are always available and willing to respond to my queries	395	5.28 (1.740)	14.812	394	< 0.001
The staff at this supermarket give me individual attention	395	5.07 (1.740)	12.202	394	< 0.001
The staff are friendly and polite	395	5.17 (1.751)	13.278	394	< 0.001
Employees give prompt service to me/ other customers	395	5.20 (1.715)	13.904	394	< 0.001

In summary, Table 4.7 shows that there is significant agreement that the employees in supermarkets make information easily available to the customers; they are always willing to assist; they are always available and willing to respond to customers' queries; the staff do give individual attention to their customers; they are friendly and polite towards customers; and, they give prompt services to the customers. In all cases  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that the means are significantly different to the neutral value of '4'.

#### 4.4.3.6 Customer perceptions of policies in supermarkets

Table 4.8 shows the respondents' perspectives on the policies dimension. Table 4.7 depicts the following: that a high percentage (79.2%) of respondents agreed that the supermarket offers high quality goods and services with (mean value 5.98); a high percentage (83.5%) agreed that the supermarkets' operating hours are convenient (mean value 6.09); a high percentage (80%) agreed that the supermarkets accept most major credit cards (mean value 5.95); 76.9% agreed that the supermarkets provide safe and convenient parking for its customers (mean value 5.86); and 77.7% agreed that the supermarket offers rewards to loyal customers (mean value 5.91).

**Table 4.8: Policies**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
This supermarket offers high quality goods/products	395	5.98 (1.132)	34.717	394	< 0.001
This supermarket has operating hours convenient to all their customers	395	6.09 (1.157)	35.846	394	< 0.001
This supermarket accepts most major credit cards	395	5.95 (1.261)	30.774	394	< 0.001
This supermarket provides safe and convenient parking for its customers	395	5.86 (1.303)	28.374	394	< 0.001
This supermarket offers rewards to loyal customers	395	5.91 (1.298)	29.265	394	< 0.001

In summary, Table 4.8 shows that there is significant agreement that the supermarkets offer high quality products. There is also significant agreement that supermarkets' operating hours were appropriate for customer needs; that they accepted most major credit cards; provided safe and convenient parking for their customers; and, they offered rewards to loyal customers. The results in Table 4.8 show a high level of agreement with all the mentioned items under this dimension. Table 4.8 indicated that the statements are all significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.5 FACTOR LOADINGS OF THE RSQ ITEMS

Factor analysis with ProMax rotation was applied to the 30 items measuring the RSQ constructs according to customer perceptions. This was based on the six main critical themes identified for this study, namely: hygiene practice in supermarkets, physical aspects of supermarkets; reliability of SQ within supermarkets; customers' personal interactions; problem-solving ability within supermarkets and policies at supermarkets. Item R3.14 was dropped because it cross-loaded. Six factors accounted for 80.58% of the variance in the data. Rotation converged in 6 iterations. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) of .969 and a significant Bartlett's test indicates that the data was more than adequate. Hauben, Hung and Hsieh (2016:8) stated that the purpose of KMO is to assess whether there is a significant relationship between variables in order to enable factor analysis to be conducted.

The groupings of the items and their factor loadings are displayed in Table 4.9, showing the inter-correlations between variables. The labelling, reliability and contribution of each factor are summarised in Table 4.10.

**Table 4.9: Factor Loadings of the RSQS Items**

	Factor					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
PI3.20 Employees are always willing to assist	.924					
PI3.22 The staff at this supermarket give me individual attention	.924					
PI3.23 The staff are friendly and polite	.901					
PI3.24 Employees give prompt service to me/ other customers	.898					
PI3.21 Employees are always available and willing to respond to my queries	.873					
PI3.19 Employees make information easily available to the customers	.842					
PA3.9 The layout of the supermarket makes it easy to move around in the store		.905				
PA3.7 The physical facilities of this supermarket are visually appealing		.862				
PA3.6 This supermarket has modern-looking equipment and fixtures		.817				
PA3.8 This supermarket has clean, attractive and convenient areas		.816				
PA3.5 The layout allows me to easily find the products I need		.814				
HP3.1 This supermarket disinfects surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers			.889			
HP3.4 Employees practice social distancing.			.809			
HP3.2 This supermarket cleans and disinfects floors, counters, and other facility access areas.			.745			
HP3.3 Employees wear masks or face coverings.			.560			
P3.26 This supermarket has operating hours convenient to all their customers				.820		
P3.27 This supermarket accepts most major credit cards				.782		
P3.28 This supermarket provides safe and convenient parking for its customers				.742		
P3.29 This supermarket offers rewards to loyal customers				.740		
P3.25 This supermarket offers high quality goods/products				.712		
PS3.18 The supermarket is effective in resolving my questions and Problems					.812	
PS3.17 The supermarket deals with my queries and complaints professionally					.791	
PS3.15 This supermarket has a good returns policy					.673	
PS3.16 Employees show great interest and motivation to resolve any difficulty or problems experienced by myself or other customers.					.653	
R3.10 I am able to get goods and services when I require them from this supermarket						.579
R3.12 Services provided are usually right the first time						.475
R3.11 Promises to customers are met on time						.436
R3.13 Transactions and records at this supermarket are error-free						.425

Table 4.10 addresses the reliability of the constructs, reflecting the Cronbach's alpha scores for all the RSQS dimensions that constituted the questionnaire.

**Table 4.10: Reliability results of the RSQS**

Factor	Construct	Items included	Variance extracted	Cronbach's alpha
1	Personal interaction (PI)	19 – 24	61.48	.979
2	Physical aspects (PA)	5 – 9	9.16	.971
3	Hygiene practices (HP)	1 – 4	3.82	.922
4	Policies (P)	25 – 29	2.89	.870
5	Problem solving (PS)	15 – 18	2.02	.962
6	Reliability (R)	10 – 13	1.21	.953

The reliability of these composite variable groupings is confirmed by the values of Cronbach's alpha which all exceed 0.7, the accepted minimum value for reliability. Therefore, all these constructs are reliable, and this indicates good internal consistency between the items. Table 4.10 shows that personal interaction (.979) had the highest alpha co-efficient while policies had the lowest alpha co-efficient (.870). The highest score for the dimension, personal interaction shows that the participants appreciated the employee's willingness to assist them and that the information in these supermarkets is easily accessible. The dimensions were statistically significant, which shows that all the dimensions influenced the participants overall perceptions of RSQ. Composite variables are formed by calculating the average of the agreement scores for all items included in a variable.

#### **4.6 THE DEPENDENT VARIABLES (TRUST, LOYALTY AND SATISFACTION)**

In this section, statements for the three dependent variables of trust, satisfaction and loyalty were analysed. Frequency tables were generated, and the mean values were tested against the neutral value of '4'. Finally, factor analysis was applied.

#### 4.6.1 Customer perceptions of satisfaction in supermarkets

Respondents were requested to rate their satisfaction with regards to the SQ offered by their supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 4.11 shows the following: the majority of participants (75.7%) agreed that they were satisfied with their preferred supermarkets (mean value 5.59); 71.2% agreed that the supermarkets come very close to offering perfect service levels (mean value 5.47); 69.2% agreed that the supermarket they patronised offers superior service in relation to other supermarkets (mean value 5.47); 71.44% agreed that their expectations are always met when they shop at their supermarkets (mean value 5.47); and, 74.4% agreed that they made the right choice by shopping at these supermarkets. The importance of working towards high levels of customer satisfaction and in turn, achieving complete customer trust cannot be over-emphasised. (Setó-Pamies 2012). As can be seen from Table 4.11 there is significant agreement ( $p < 0.001$ ) for each item indicating that respondents were satisfied with the SQ offered by supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. It is noteworthy that 71.44% of respondents indicated that their expectations were always met.

**Table 4.11: Customer satisfaction**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
Overall, I am satisfied with this supermarket.	395	5.59 (1.681)	18.827	394	< 0.001
This supermarket comes very close to offering perfect service levels	395	5.47 (17.246)	14.620	394	< 0.001
This supermarket offers superior service in relation to other supermarkets.	395	5.39 (1.744)	15.814	394	< 0.001
My expectations are always met when I shop at this supermarket.	395	5.47 (1.710)	17.064	394	< 0.001
I believe that I have made the right choice to shop at this supermarket	395	5.59 (1.666)	18.998	394	< 0.001



#### 4.6.2 Customer perceptions of loyalty in supermarkets

Respondents were requested to rate their loyalty to their preferred supermarkets with regards to the SQ that is offered by their supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 4.12 shows the following: 73.2% of the participants agreed that they say positive things to other people about their supermarkets (mean value 5.55); 70.9% agreed that they consider themselves loyal patrons of their preferred supermarkets (mean value 5.49); 74.2% agreed that they would refer the supermarket of their choice when requested to (mean value 5.58); 74.4% agreed that their preferred supermarket is their first choice when shopping for groceries (mean value 5.58); 72.5% agreed that they suggest to their friends and family that they also shop at the same retailer (mean value 5.50); and, 75% agreed that they intend to continue shopping at this supermarket in the next few years (mean value 5.61). These results indicate that there is significant agreement that respondents have remained loyal to their supermarkets regardless of the rapid changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Setó-Pamies (2012) affirmed that committed customers are not likely to seek another provider when they are satisfied.

**Table 4.12: Customer loyalty**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
I say positive things to other people about this supermarket	395	5.55 (1.704)	18.043	394	< 0.001
I consider myself a loyal patron of this supermarket	395	5.49 (1.746)	17.005	394	< 0.001
I would recommend this supermarket to someone who seeks my advice	395	5.58 (1.709)	18.376	394	< 0.001
This retailer is my first choice when shopping for groceries	395	5.58 (1.785)	17.642	394	< 0.001
I encourage friends and relatives to do business with this supermarket	395	5.50 (1.762)	16.880	394	< 0.001
I intend to continue shopping at this supermarket in the next few years	395	5.61 (1.732)	18.414	394	< 0.001

### 4.6.3 Customer perceptions of trust in supermarkets

Respondents were requested to rate their trust on their preferred supermarkets with regards to the SQ that is offered by their supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 4.13 shows the following results: 74.2% of the participants agreed that they trust their preferred supermarkets (mean value 5.52); 70.6% agreed that they think that their supermarkets act in their best interest (mean value 5.44); 68.8% agreed that the supermarkets are honest (mean value 5.44); 63.6% agreed that supermarkets are just as concerned with the customers' welfare as they are with making a profit ( mean value 5.24); 72.7% agreed that they have confidence in their supermarkets (mean value 5.52); and, 67.8% agreed that the supermarkets usually keep their promises.

**Table 4.13: Trust**

Item	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p-Value
I trust this supermarket	395	5.52 (1.703)	17.728	394	<0.001
I think that this supermarket acts in my best interests.	395	5.44 (1.711)	16.733	394	<0.001
This supermarket is honest.	395	5.44 (1.711)	16.762	394	<0.001
This supermarket is just as concerned with my welfare as it is with making a profit	395	5.24 (1.757)	14.059	394	<0.001
I have confidence in this supermarket	395	5.52 (1.701)	17.743	394	<0.001
Whenever this supermarket advises me of any issue, I know that they are making use of their best judgement.	395	5.35 (1.721)	15.645	394	<0.001
This supermarket usually keeps its promises.	395	5.39 (1.709)	15.645	394	<0.001

### 4.6.4 Factor analysis for trust, satisfaction and loyalty

Factor analysis with ProMax rotation was applied to the 18 items measuring trust, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. 90.69% of the variance in the data was accounted for by three factors. A KMO of .977 and a significant Bartlett's test indicated that the data was more than adequate Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

**Table 4.14: Factor loadings for trust, satisfaction and loyalty**

	Factor		
	1	2	3
TRU3.46 Whenever this supermarket advises me of any issue, I know that they are making use of their best judgement.	.883		
TRU3.44 This supermarket is just as concerned with my welfare as it is with making a profit	.828		
TRU3.47 This supermarket usually keeps its promises.	.821		
TRU3.43 This supermarket is honest.	.806		
TRU3.42 I think that this supermarket acts in my best interests.	.784		
TRU3.41 I trust this supermarket	.667		
TRU3.45 I have confidence in this supermarket.	.642		
LOY3.40 I intend to continue shopping at this supermarket in the next few years		.829	
LOY3.38 This retailer is my first choice when shopping for groceries		.814	
LOY3.37 I would recommend this supermarket to someone who seeks my advice		.783	
LOY3.36 I consider myself a loyal patron of this supermarket		.779	
LOY3.35 I say positive things to other people about this supermarket		.736	
LOY3.39 I encourage friends and relatives to do business with this supermarket		.728	
SAT3.31 This supermarket comes very close to offering 'perfect' service levels			.738
SAT3.33 My expectations are always met when I shop at this supermarket.			.712
SAT3.30 Overall, I am satisfied with this supermarket.			.704
SAT3.34 I believe that I have made the right choice to shop at this supermarket.			.704
SAT3.32 This supermarket offers superior service in relation to other supermarkets.			.658

The KMO value of .983 is the highest value and shows that the sample size is suitable for reliable extraction of factors. This is indicated in Table 4.15. The reliability of these composite variable groupings is confirmed by the values of Cronbach's alpha which all exceed 0.7, the accepted minimum value for reliability. Composite variables are formed by calculating the average of the agreement scores for all items included in a variable. The reliability test supports the strength of the items composing the survey instrument and thus the applicability of the survey to be used in the context of improving RSQ in supermarkets in South Africa in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Table 4.15: Reliability test for trust, loyalty and satisfaction**

Factor	Construct	Items included	Variance extracted	Cronbach's alpha
1	Trust (T)	41 - 47	86.65	.985
2	Loyalty (LOY)	35 - 40	3.17	.983
3	Satisfaction (SAT)	30 - 34	1.87	.979

## 4.7 ADDRESSING THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY (2 – 4)

In order to establish the causal relationships, regression was applied after undertaking all the necessary checks for successful analysis to take place.

### 4.7.1 Perceptions of RSQ and customer satisfaction

Linear regression was first used to determine the causal relationships between the RSQ dimensions and customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Independent variables consisted of the six RSQS dimensions, while the dependent variable in this case was customer satisfaction.

**Table 4.16: Regression analysis with customer satisfaction as the dependent variable**

IV	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df1; df2	p-value	B (regression coefficient)	t	p-value
PI	.848	361.543	6; 388	<.001	.252	6.583	< 0.001
PA					.225	4.950	< 0.001
					.120	3.744	< 0.001
P					.063	1.851	0.065
PS					.145	3.376	0.001
R					.251	5.138	< 0.001

As reflected in Table 4.16, the six independent variables accounted for 84.8% of the variance in the data,  $F(6, 388) = 361.543$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . RSQS dimensions that have a significant effect on customer satisfaction are personal interaction (PI),  $\beta = .252$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; physical aspects (PA),  $\beta = .225$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; hygiene practices (HP),  $\beta = .120$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; problem solving (PS),  $\beta = .145$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ; and reliability (R),  $\beta = .251$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Policies (P) marginally affects customer satisfaction,  $\beta = .063$ ,  $p = 0.065$ .

#### 4.7.2 4.5.2 Perceptions of RSQ and trust

Linear regression was next used to determine the causal relationships between the RSQS dimensions and trust since the inception of Covid-19. Independent variables consisted of the six RSQS dimensions, while the dependent variable in this case was trust.

**Table 4.17: Regression analysis with trust as the dependent variable**

IV	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df1; df2	p-value	B (regression coefficient)	t	p-value
PI	.778	226.346	6; 388	<.001	.234	5.013	< 0.001
PA					.246	4.422	< 0.001
HP					.124	3.176	0.002
P					.024	0.565	0.572
PS					.220	4.207	< 0.001
R					.142	2.387	0.017

As shown in Table 4.17, the six independent variables accounted for 77.8% of the variance in the data,  $F(6, 388) = 226.346, p < 0.001$ . RSQS dimensions that have a significant effect on customer satisfaction are personal interaction (PI),  $\beta = .234, p < 0.001$ ; physical aspects (PA),  $\beta = .246, p < 0.001$ ; hygiene practices (HP),  $\beta = .124, p < 0.001$ ; problem solving (PS),  $\beta = .220, p < 0.001$ ; and reliability (R),  $\beta = .142, p < 0.001$ . The result of this study indicates that policies (P) are not a significant predictor of trust,  $\beta = .024, p = 0.572$ .

#### 4.7.3 Customer satisfaction and trust and loyalty

Finally, linear regression was used to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed towards customer loyalty since Covid-19 began. In this case the independent variables would be satisfaction and trust with a dependent variable of loyalty.

**Table 4.17: Regression analysis with loyalty as the dependent variable**

IV	R <sup>2</sup>	F	df1; df2	p-value	B (regression coefficient)	t	p-value
Trust	.855	1151.723	2; 392	<.001	.383	8.278	<0.001
Satisfaction					.581	12.433	<0.001

Table 4.18 shows two independent variables accounted for 85.5% of the variance in the data,  $F(2, 392) = 1151.723, p < 0.001$ . Trust and customer satisfaction have a significant effect on loyalty: trust,  $\beta = .383, p < 0.001$  and customer satisfaction  $\beta = .581, p < 0.001$ . Both are significant predictors of loyalty. The findings of this study show that satisfaction has a larger effect than trust, but both variables are important.

#### 4.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented all the data collected from the quantitative data. This chapter began by revisiting the objectives and sub-objectives of the study. The tests used in this section of the study were then listed and described. Customer perceptions of RSQ and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa were evaluated in this chapter.

In order to achieve the objectives, the chapter began with a number of descriptive details, starting with the demographic profiles of the respondents and followed by store preferences. It then proceeded to examine customer perceptions of RSQ using the RSQS dimensions. Each statement was separately analysed, and the mean scores were tested against a neutral/central score of '4' using a one-sample t-test. Factor analysis with ProMax rotation was applied to the 30 items measuring the RSQ constructs. To confirm the reliability of the composite variable groupings, CA was utilised.

The independent variables (satisfaction, trust and loyalty) were then examined in the same manner. Frequency tables were generated, and the mean values were tested against the neutral value of '4' using a one-sample t-test. Factor analysis with promax rotation was applied to the 18 items measuring these variables. Reliability was

established by means of CA. The objectives of the study were finally addressed by means of regression analysis. The following chapter will focus on a discussion of the research findings, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the statistical results of the study based on the analysis and interpretation of data. This chapter discusses any past research related to the sub-objectives and contrasts it with the results of the empirical study in relation to the objectives of this study.

## 5.2 BACKGROUND TO THIS RESEARCH

As mentioned in the first chapter of this study, FMCG retailers are facing substantial challenges in maintaining a competitive advantage due to the increase in the volume of competition, as well as keeping up with ongoing technological innovations. According to Alvarez and Marsal Holdings (2020), most supermarkets are now operating in an omni-channel environment which makes it even more complex. Additionally, RSQ has been highlighted as one of the most significant tools that are utilised by supermarkets to measure their customers' perceptions of SQ. According to Karakitsiou and Mavrommati (2018: 130), being aware of RSQ factors and continually analysing and improving them, when necessary, can become a competitive strategy to increase profits, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and trust, and consequently, a differential advantage.

The rapid outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic made it even more difficult for most supermarkets to remain competitive and to meet their customers' expectations. Covid-19 mitigation strategies (including social distancing and lockdowns) have had a major impact on the retail industry, in particular with FMCG retailers as customers' expectations of store safety escalated. Retailers that failed to meet these expectations, risked a loss of confidence from their customer base. Yang *et al.* (2021) mentioned that due to the inimical impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had globally, consumer behaviour has responded with a number of noteworthy changes. Although a fair amount of research has been conducted regarding SQ in various industries, at present



there seems to be little or no evidence of studies on RSQ within the South African supermarket sector since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The problem is therefore one of a lack of information on customer perceptions of RSQ experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic and how this might have affected their trust, satisfaction and loyalty towards supermarkets.

In response to the problem statement, a general research question was outlined as such: What have customer perceptions been of RSQ experienced in supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Any study that examines supermarkets and consumer perceptions of RSQ since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic can add to the body of knowledge that exists regarding RSQ in supermarkets during a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the affect that it might have had. According to Pan and Ha (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic has made it necessary for marketers to understand what type of SQ dimensions are critical in the context of new regulations and requirements that impact customer behaviour. As any changes in SQ can have repercussions for customer satisfaction, this becomes even more significant. The findings of this study will help to improve our understanding of the ways that supermarkets can manage SQ, and thereby engender satisfaction, trust and loyalty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study aimed to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. In order to achieve this aim, a number of objectives and sub-objectives were generated. A discussion with respect to these findings will be presented in this chapter.

### **5.3 OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY**

The objective of this study serves as the lifeblood of this study. The achievement or the findings of the objectives will be briefly explained below. The conclusions for this research are categorised and summarised according to the four sub-objectives of the study.

#### **5.3.1 The main objective of this study**

To evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

##### **5.3.1.1 Sub-objectives**

Sub-objectives are itemised as follows:

- To analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contribute to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets build trust since the outbreak of Covid-19.
- To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributes to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19

### **5.4 SUB-OBJECTIVE 1**

The first sub-objective sought to analyse customers' perceptions of RSQS dimensions delivered by supermarkets since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As discussed in Chapter 2, RSQS was used to measure SQ. This model has five dimensions: physical aspects, reliability, personal interaction, problem-solving and policy. Yang *et al.* (2021) found that hygiene practice also had had a positive and significant influence during this unprecedented situation and that the outbreak of Covid-19 has forced all

industries to cope with hygiene guidelines. This is supported by the findings of Sirimongkol (2022) indicating that hygiene was a significant criterion in the cleanliness factor, leading to positive perceptions of SQ when present. As a result of these observations, hygiene practice was added as an additional RSQS dimension in this study in order to expand the interpretation of RSQ during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in supermarkets in South Africa.

#### **5.4.1 Past research related to sub-objective 1**

RSQ has become an important measurement tool in marketing literature during the last decade and improving this has been viewed as one of the best devices in improving customer loyalty (Sivapalan *et al.* 2022: 446). Past research also highlighted RSQS as the most suitable and reliable model to measure SQ in a retail format (Yang *et al.* 2020, Kajenthiran 2018: 19, Adam, Tengeh and Cupido 2018: 243). Yeap Ai Leen and Ramayah (2011: 16) revealed that the five dimensions of RSQS are highly suitable for measuring RSQ in retail stores and that excellent RSQ plays a significant role in customers' intention to visit, purchase and recommend the stores to others. Kajenthiran (2018) concurred that RSQ contributes significantly and positively to customer loyalty and that RSQS is an appropriate scale for measuring SQ in supermarkets. Kajenthiran (2018) also emphasised that personal interaction was the strongest factor to predict customer loyalty, therein noting the importance of staff performance in supermarkets, along with paying personal attention to customers.

Martinelli and Balboni (2012) argued that physical aspects and reliability were the first order dimensions of RSQS, concurring with Mehta *et al.* (2000) who mentioned that the nature of supermarkets lies mainly in the merchandise offering with customers also valuing the quality of the store's physical appearance including that of cleanliness. Beneke *et al.* (2012) agreed, stating that the physical aspects dimension was the most important predictor of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

However, Sivapalan *et al.* (2022: 448) found something different during the pandemic, noting that the main determinant of both trust and customer loyalty towards retail stores during the Covid-19 Pandemic was policy. The authors further suggested that

adopting a retailing policy of operating during the hours that suit customers, providing adequate parking, accepting credit cards, and issuing loyalty cards, all allowed for customer loyalty to be sustained. Li *et al.* (2023: 13) also noted the importance of policy during the pandemic, in particular with respect to health and safety matters, including aspects such as social distancing, safety awareness, delivery as an option and extended shopping hours. Li *et al.* (2023: 11) added that physical facilities played a role in customers perceptions of safety during the pandemic, with parking becoming an area of concern. Desara *et al.* (2021) mentioned that in terms of RSQ, several elements such as cleanliness and comfort experienced when shopping, as well as the physical environment had a significant impact on customers perceptions, due to a greater concern for their health than in previous times. Li *et al.* (2023: 11) concurred, stating that customers feared contracting the virus from staff members, highlighting the need for adequate hygiene measures.

Responsiveness also became essential during this period, where any customer queries and concerns are speedily resolved. Reliability was also mentioned in terms of keeping to promises made to customers. The availability of sought-after products when required is important, alleviating panic buying. Reliable delivery also became more important (Li *et al.* 2023: 12).

#### **5.4.2 Discussions on current findings with respect to sub-objective 1**

This study's assessment of RSQ revealed that the majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of services offered by supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was ascribed to a number of dimensions, including those of hygiene practices, reliability of services, ability to solve problems, personal interaction with customers, physical aspects of the supermarkets and the policies that they offer. All these dimensions were statistically significant, showing that they all influenced the participants' overall perceptions of RSQ.

Results indicate that supermarket managers should focus on all six dimensions of RSQ, with special attention to personal interaction. This study is in accordance with that of Kajenthiran (2018), which showed that the personal interaction dimension is

plays a strong role in improving perceptions of RSQ. The current study concurred that personal interaction played an important role in positive attitudes towards RSQ. Within this category, it was revealed that participants most appreciated the employee's willingness to assist them and the provision of easy accessibility of information (see Table 4.9).

## **5.5 SUB-OBJECTIVE 2**

Sub-objective 2 of this study sought to determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contributed to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19.

### **5.5.1 Past research on sub-objective 2**

Islam, Khadem and Sayem (2012: 217) stated that "in a retail sector, customer satisfaction can be defined as a post-consumption evaluation of how well a store or product meets or exceeds customer expectations". Cuong and Khoi (2019: 332) highlighted that RSQ has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction, confirming that retailers should ensure that they offer excellent SQ in order to maintain customer satisfaction. Sharma (2020: 30) observed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, customers expected to feel protected and safe and therefore those retailers who were seen to be offering the appropriate safety measures were able to maintain customer satisfaction. Their study also highlighted that the Covid-19 pandemic affected SQ, thus reducing customer satisfaction in supermarkets. Brandtner *et al.* (2021: 1) noted that there had been a decline in consumer satisfaction with retailers since the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, observing that both needs and shopping behaviour had altered, along with a rise in cognitive dissonance.

Physical aspects of the store such as store layout and store facilities have also been identified as significant factors that have affect how customers feel in these times (Brandtner *et al.* 2021: 1). As production falters, production availability has decreased, resulting in extended waiting times. Furthermore, transportation facilities also floundered, resulting in a deterioration in physical distribution systems. This fed

customer dissatisfaction and dissonance, resulting in fickle customers, as they searched for improved offerings Rukuni and Maziriri (2020: 1) found that better hygiene measures such as tangible evidence of positive effect on customer satisfaction. Moreover, Sharma (2020:36) indicated that factors that had less impact on consumer satisfaction during Covid-19 than before the pandemic included those of accessibility, promotions, and discounts, store environment, product varieties, and product quality.

Da Silva *et al.* (2022: 10) found that responsiveness became more important for satisfaction during the pandemic, highlighting service, configuration, and location as significant factors. Customers are seeking a shopping experience where their health is not compromised, therefore factors that improve the ease and speed with which customers can move through the store become more noteworthy. Prior to the pandemic these might not have been as important to customers.

### **5.5.2 Discussions on the findings of sub-objective 2**

Linear regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between the RSQS dimensions and customer satisfaction. Results revealed that personal interaction, physical aspects, hygiene practice, problem solving, and reliability all had a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction, with personal interaction (relating to issues such as employee's willingness to assist the customers and employees making information easily available to customers) being the highest critical factor influencing customer satisfaction during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is interesting to report that during the Covid19 pandemic, most customers were not focusing on policy items such as convenient parking lots, high quality goods/products or the supermarket's operating hours, resulting in the policy dimension not even being significant.

These findings concurred with those of Beneke *et al.* (2012) whose study was outside the Covid-19 period, agreeing that the policy dimension did not make a major contribution to customer satisfaction. This study also concurs with the findings of other studies conducted prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, such as Dimyati and Subagio (2016:74) and Cuong and Khoi (2019), who highlighted that RSQ had a significant and

positive effect on customer satisfaction, noting that excellent SQ will increase customer satisfaction. The findings of this study also showed that all the RSQ dimensions that were used were both positive and significant towards customer satisfaction in supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

To conclude, this study shows that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, RSQ has both a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction. The findings of this study show that in order to maintain customer satisfaction, supermarket managers must continue to focus on enhancing RSQ.

## **5.6 SUB-OBJECTIVE 3**

This sub objective sought to establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets builds trust since the outbreak of Covid-19.

### **5.6.1 Past research on Sub-objective 3**

The results of a study conducted by Cuong and Khoi (2019: 332) indicated that RSQ has a significant and positive effect towards customer trust. Alzaydi (2021: 2281) highlighted that during the Covid-19 pandemic, a customer's perception of a store's security contributes towards the building of trust, thereby diminishing perceptions of risk when conducting transactions. Alzaydi (2021) claimed that trust is gained through the provision of excellent SQ and that diminished RSQ contributes towards a lack of trust and less customer satisfaction. This resonates with a study by Setó-Pamies (2012) which indicated that trust may indeed be a significant aspect in the preservation of customer commitment during a difficult time.

Sirimongkol (2022: 1) found that restaurant service quality levels impacted on whether customers were prepared to visit again under pandemic conditions, concurring that good RSQ had both a significant and positive effect on customer trust. Sirimongkol (2022: 1) also found that due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, most customers were worried about becoming infected with the virus which led to fear and anxiety. Sharma (2021) argued that although trust is built up over a lengthy period of

time, an event such as the Covid-19 pandemic can result in the development of distrust as people's ability to think rationally is diminished.

### **5.6.2 Discussions of findings on sub-objective 3**

Linear regression analysis was used in this study to determine the relationship between RSQ dimensions and trust. The findings revealed that personal interaction, physical aspects, hygiene practice, problem solving, and reliability all had a significant and positive effect on trust, with personal interaction (relating to issues such as employee's willingness to assist the customers and employees making information easily available to customers) being the most important factor influencing trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of this study concur with the findings of Cuong and Khoi (2019) and Alzaydi (2021) which both found that RSQ had a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty.

In summary, this study shows that RSQ revealed a significant and positive effect on trust amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating that the most influential RSQ dimension in trust is that of personal interaction. Sharma (2020: 36) stated that it has been very challenging to maintain customer trust during an unprecedented period such as the pandemic. Interestingly, the findings of this study reveal that the participants still trust their supermarkets regardless of the changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in the retail industry. Consequently, the findings of this study show that in order to maintain or gain customer trust during these a period such as this, supermarket managers must focus on maintaining or improving the standard of their SQ.



## **5.7 SUB-OBJECTIVE 4**

This sub-objective sought to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19.

### **5.7.1 Past research on Sub-objective 4**

According to Setó-Pamies (2012) customer loyalty depends on the customer's degree of satisfaction and trust. Corbishley (2017: 255) found that both customer satisfaction and trust were prerequisites for customer loyalty (Corbishley 2017: 255). Beneke *et al.* (2012) concurred with these findings by confirming that customer satisfaction had a direct effect on customer loyalty within the supermarket sector and that if customers had a negative experience and become dissatisfied with the services offered by the supermarket, they might switch to a new supermarket.

Dimiyati and Subagio (2016: 76) mentioned that customer loyalty is reflected by repurchasing and recommendations to others, with Corbishley (2017: 118) revealing that customer satisfaction resulted in increased repurchase intentions and recommendations in stores. Cuong and Khoi (2019: 332) also indicated that trust had a significant effect on customer loyalty, confirming that customer satisfaction has an influence on both customer loyalty and trust. Slack and Singh (2020: 543) indicated that customer satisfaction is a significant antecedent of customer loyalty, stating that when customers perceive the services offered by supermarkets as being unsatisfactory, lower customer loyalty ensues.

### **5.7.2 Discussions of findings of sub-objective 4**

Regression analysis was used in this study to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19. The findings of this study showed that both customer satisfaction and trust are significant predictors of customer loyalty. However, customer satisfaction has a greater effect on customer loyalty than trust does (see Table 4.18). The findings of this

study are in line with that of Cuong and Khoi (2019: 332) who noted that although trust has a significant effect on customer loyalty it was not that strong.

To conclude, the findings of this study shows that both customer satisfaction and trust still had a significant effect on customer loyalty, during the Covid-19 pandemic, with customer satisfaction being the most important factor. The findings of this study shows that the majority of the participants were loyal patrons to their choice of supermarkets, and they intend to continue to shop at their supermarkets in the forthcoming years.

## **5.8 CONCLUSION**

This chapter discussed the analysis of the research that has been conducted and contrasts it with past research, in order to address the objectives and provide possible explanations and conclusions as to the findings of the study. This chapter was structured according to the sub-objectives of this study. Possible explanations for the results were presented. The next and final chapter will conclude this study by presenting overall conclusions, implications of the study, limitations and recommendations for further study.

# CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this study was to evaluate customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction and customer loyalty. It is proposed that any study that examined supermarkets and consumer perceptions of RSQ since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic can add to the body of knowledge that exists regarding RSQ in supermarkets during a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects that it might have.

The main objective of this study was broken down into four sub-objectives which were used to formulate this study. The first sub-objective was to analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The second sub-objective was to determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contributed towards customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The third sub-objective was to establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets builds trust since the outbreak of Covid-19. Finally, the fourth sub-objective of this study was to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributes to customer loyalty since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusions about the sub-objectives of this study are highlighted in this chapter. Thereafter, the limitations of this study, a synopsis of the study findings, and key recommendations for improving RQS in supermarkets in South Africa, are presented. Finally, the conclusion to this research study is presented. This chapter proposes areas for future research as a contribution to the body of literature that exists regarding RSQ in supermarkets during a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects that it might have.

## 6.2 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions for this research are categorised and summarised according to the four sub-objectives as presented below.

### **6.2.1 Sub-objective 1: To analyse customers' perceptions of RSQ dimensions delivered by supermarkets, since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic**

Factor analysis found that the six RSQ dimensions were suitable and reliable to measure SQ in supermarkets since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of this study then revealed that all six dimensions of RSQ were viewed in a positive light by respondents, i.e., positively influenced the participants' overall perceptions of RSQ. All measurements were also found to be significant.

### **6.2.2 Sub-objective 2: To determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contributed to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic**

An analysis to determine the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets contributed to customer satisfaction since the outbreak of the Covid-19 was carried out. The findings of the results showed that since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, five RSQ dimensions (personal interaction, physical aspects, hygiene practice, problem solving and reliability) had a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction. However, the policy dimension (relating to issues such as parking facilities, hours of operation and the offering of rewards) was not found to be significant during the Covid-19 period. A possible contributor towards this could have been the lockdown regulations which were implemented to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. This included limited operating hours for most retailers. Another possible explanation could be that customers were far more concerned about dimensions that had an impact on their health and safety, which this dimension did not cover. This is supported by past literature which stated that cleanliness, comfort and the physical environment had a positive influence on customers' perceptions of RSQ during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **6.2.3 Sub-objective 3: To establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets build trust since the outbreak of Covid-19**

Analysis to establish the extent to which customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets-built trust since the outbreak of Covid-19, revealed that RSQ had a significant and positive effect on trust amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the findings of this study revealed that the policy dimension had no affect at all on trust in supermarkets during the Covid-19 era. Nevertheless, the findings of the study showed that in general, participants trusted their selected supermarket even during this unprecedented situation of Covid-19.

### **6.2.4 Sub-objective 4: To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed to customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19**

Finally, an analysis to establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in supermarkets contributed towards customer loyalty since the outbreak of Covid-19 was carried out. Findings revealed that both customer satisfaction and trust had a significant and positive effect on customer loyalty during the pandemic. However, this study showed that customer satisfaction was more influential towards customer loyalty than trust was with regards to supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, in order to maintain customer loyalty, it is crucial for supermarket managers to ensure that their customers are satisfied with the quality of services that they offer. This study shows the importance of maximising customer satisfaction levels in order to sustain customer loyalty during this crisis of Covid-19. Ratten (2021) noted that during this crisis, customer behaviour has changed rapidly and drastically, with an escalation in customer expectations. Past literature revealed that since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, retailers have identified the issue of customer retention and loyalty as important issues that they are currently facing. Competition amongst retailers has increased rapidly and maintaining competitive advantage has also been noted to be crucial during this present time (Alvaraz and Marsal Holdings 2021). Therefore, understanding customers' needs and expectations during the Covid-19 period should

assist retailers in maintaining RSQ in order to preserve customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty.

### **6.2.5 Overall aim and overall purpose of the study**

The overall objectives and aims of the study have been achieved. This study showed that RSQ had a positive effect on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study reveals that excellent RSQ played a positive and a significant role in customer perceptions amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **6.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study has highlighted some significant implications for a number of organisations as well as contributing to the body of knowledge with regard to RSQ in supermarkets in South Africa.

### **6.3.1 Implications for academics**

Although customer perceptions of RSQ have come under the spotlight in recent years, they have not been covered to the same context as in this piece of work. Additionally, there is little information on customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa during a pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Therefore, the findings of this study are useful because they contribute towards the ongoing academic research on customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets during the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction and loyalty. This research also contributes towards the body of research conducted to evaluate six RSQ dimensions. The findings of this study can offer future researchers' greater scope when conducting further studies on customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets during an unprecedented health event such as the Covid-19 pandemic and how these dimensions might impact on trust, satisfaction and loyalty. The findings of this study could also provide some new ideas for researchers elsewhere in the world.

### **6.3.2 Implications for supermarkets**

This study provides significant information on RSQ in relation to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This information could assist supermarket managers in providing excellent RSQ in order to maintain customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty in their stores. The findings of this study shows that satisfied customers tend to recommend their choice of supermarket to their families and close friends. The literature reveals that excellent SQ is essential in sustaining a competitive advantage and maintaining the retailers' image and profitability. The findings of this study will assist supermarket managers in understanding their customers' needs and expectations during a major health related event. Furthermore, the findings of this study will assist supermarket managers in providing excellent SQ to their customers in future health events similar to Covid-19 pandemic.

## **6.4 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

As with all empirical studies, the present research also has certain limitations. Most of these were directly connected with the Covid-19 pandemic. These are summarised below.

### **6.4.1 Sampling**

This study made use of a convenience sampling method, namely, snowball sampling. This snowball method was selected due to the difficulty of approaching people physically during the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the prohibitive cost of using a commercial database. The questionnaire was shared with people on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown also limited the data for this study because the data was collected only via social media platforms and excluded members of the public that did not have access to social media. Moreover, the researcher does not own a Twitter account. Hence, twitter was not used to share the questionnaire. Therefore, the sampling technique may not represent the groupings of the items and their factor loadings are displayed in Table 4.14; and the labelling, reliability and contribution of each factor are summarised in Table 4.15.

the entire population of South Africa and the findings of this study were limited to those participants willing to complete the questionnaires and provide input. This can affect the generalisability of this study.

#### **6.4.2 Literature**

Owing to the novel nature of the pandemic, very little literature was available on RSQ in relation to supermarkets since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, limiting the literature available for review for this study. However, this was balanced by access to considerable literature on SQ prior to the pandemic.

### **6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having discussed the findings with subsequent conclusions drawn by the researcher, the following recommendations arise therefrom.

#### **6.5.1 Recommendations for future research**

- ❖ The research study used a quantitative and non-probability sampling for convenience. A recommendation is that additional research is conducted, making use of a mixed methodology, thereby generating additional data, which could be richer and add to the literature on customer perceptions of RSQ in supermarkets in South Africa and their contribution to customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty.
- ❖ As the Covid-19 pandemic fades away, a study could be conducted, to establish whether any of the changes have become a permanent feature of the retail environment, or whether they have returned to those experienced prior to the pandemic.
- ❖ As the findings of this study were obtained specifically in South Africa, this study could be duplicated in alternative situations within the international community. Furthermore, similar research could also be conducted in different retail formats such as convenience stores, speciality stores or discount stores.



### **6.5.2 Recommendations for supermarket managers**

- ❖ The findings for this study show that RSQ plays a positive and significant role in maintaining customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, supermarket managers are advised to ensure that they offer excellent SQ in order to meet or exceed their customer's expectations. This highlights that the need for excellent SQ retained its importance during this period.
- ❖ The literature of this study shows that excellent RSQ played a strategic and significant role in today's competitive market, and that it had significant positive effects on customers' store choices, trust and customer satisfaction during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the findings of this study can be utilised by supermarket manager to maintain their competitive advantage, to attract new customers and to satisfy their existing customers.
- ❖ The findings of this study showed that most participants were more likely to be affected by the personal interaction dimension. Therefore, it is advised that in order for supermarket managers to maintain customer satisfaction, they should ensure that their employees make information easily available to their customers, and that they provide prompt services and are always willing to assist customers. Supermarkets are advised to continuously analyse and improve this dimension both during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic and into the future, as competitiveness continues to grow in magnitude.
- ❖ Finally, retailers are advised to prioritise their focus on hygiene practice, physical aspects, reliability, problem solving and personal interaction as they were found to have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty both during the pandemic and into the future.

## **6.6 CONCLUSION**

The literature of this study shows that it has been difficult for most retailers to maintain their competitive advantage since the rapid outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing regulations to prevent that accompanied it. Differentiation has also been

more difficult than ever before. This study was therefore aimed to evaluate overall customer perceptions of RSQ towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty. To achieve the objectives of this study, this study was carried out through a non-probability sampling method, namely a convenience method. A snowball approach was used to access the sample and the questionnaire was shared to the participants via social media platforms.

Current literature on SQ in supermarkets and its contribution to customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic was reviewed thoroughly in Chapter 2. The RSQ dimensions (physical aspects, personal interaction, reliability, problem-solving and policy) with hygiene practice added were used in this study to measure SQ in supermarkets in South Africa. Data collected from the respondents were analysed using the latest versions of statistical tools. The aim for this study was achieved. The empirical findings of this study show that during the Covid-19 pandemic, customers' expectations for excellent SQ have increased and in order for supermarket managers to maintain their competitive advantage, they should enhance SQ. Subsequently, the findings of this study revealed that all six dimensions RSQ were statistically significant, and positively influenced participants' overall perceptions of RSQ. However, the study revealed that policy was not a significant factor on customer satisfaction and trust during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, higher levels of perceptions of RSQ dimensions had a positive effect on customer satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty.

Conclusions to this study were outlined at the beginning of this chapter. This was followed by the implications of this study for both supermarket owner / managers as well as academics. Potential limitations of this study were then spelt out and finally recommendations for further study were suggested. This study has also highlighted a few recommendations that will enable supermarkets in South Africa to enhance their SQ strategies which will eventually result in customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty, a stronger customer base and higher profitability.

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# LIST OF APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

### APPENDIX A 1 – ENGLISH QUESTIONNAIRE



#### Questionnaire

**Research instrument: Questionnaires Title:** Perceptions of Retail service quality at supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

**The main objective of this study is therefore:**

To evaluate overall customer perceptions of service quality in supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

**Sub-objectives are:**

- To analyse customers' perceptions of service quality delivered by supermarkets since the outbreak of the current Covid-19 pandemic.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of service quality dimensions in supermarkets leads to customer satisfaction.
- To establish whether customer perceptions of service quality dimensions in supermarkets leads to trust.
- To establish whether customer satisfaction and trust in selected supermarkets lead to customer loyalty.

**Instructions**

- Please read through each statement carefully before giving your opinion.
- Kindly rate the service that you expect from your supermarket by **TICKING ONLY ONE NUMBER FOR EACH STATEMENT.**
- Please do not discuss statements with anyone.
- Please return questionnaire after completion

## A: Demographic Profile

### 1.1 Age

18- 25	1
26- 44	2
45-64	3
65 years and over	4

### 1.2 Gender

Female	1
Male	2
Other	3

## Section B: Preferable supermarket and buying behaviour

**2.1 Please select your supermarket of choice. Any questions that follow will be answered with that store in mind.**

Shoprite	1
PnP	2
Spar	3
Woolworths	4
Others(Please specify)	5

**2.2 How often do you shop at the above-mentioned store?**

Once a week	1
Several times a week	2
Once per month	3
Several times a month	4

### 2.3 What describes best service to you

➤ Choose by ticking all the boxes that describes the best service to you.

Wide assortment offered by the store	1
Store operating hours (extended hours)	2
Helpfulness of the employees	3
Complementary services offered by the store (Packing, ATM, Money market etc)	4
Store layout	5
convenience of store location	6
Store appearance (Neatness, Availability of shopping trolleys)	7
Product availability	8

### Section C: Customer's perceptions of the service provided by the chosen supermarket.

#### Guideline

	Rating
1	Strongly disagree
2	Disagree
3	Neutral
4	Agree
5	Strongly Agree



#### 4. Customer's perceptions of the services rendered by the supermarket.

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
4.1	<b>Physical aspects</b> The store is always clean and attractive	1	2	3	4	5
4.2	The stores' facilities, equipment and facilities are modern and attractive	1	2	3	4	5
4.3	Store layout enables customers to easily find the products they need.	1	2	3	4	5
4.4	Materials associated with this store's service (such as shopping bags, catalogues, or statements) are visually appealing	1	2	3	4	5
4.5	There is sufficient space to ensure social distancing.	1	2	3	4	5
4.6	<b>Reliability</b> The store offers clear indication of product prices.	1	2	3	4	5
4.7	The store offers appropriate and punctual information about sales promotions	1	2	3	4	5
4.8	The store has short waiting time at cash registers	1	2	3	4	5
4.9	The store offers easy location of products on promotion or discount.	1	2	3	4	5
4.10	This store can be trusted in applying the correct hygiene measures.	1	2	3	4	6
4.11	<b>Problem-solving</b> The store has a guarantee of product quality and a possibility of returns	1	2	3	4	5
4.12	Employees shows great interest and motivation to resolve any difficulty or customer problems	1	2	3	4	5
4.13	Stock availability is always on point.	1	2	3	4	5

4.14	The store has applied a number of safety techniques to ensure that the customers health is protected	1	2	3	4	5
4.15	<b>Personal interaction</b> All employees always show courtesy towards customers. (e.g Cashiers, replenishment staff etc).	1	2	3	4	5

4.16	Employees shows enough knowledge to assist and advise customers.	1	2	3	4	5
4.17	Employees instil confidence in customers when assisting or advising them.	1	2	3	4	5
4.18	Employees social distancing enable customers to feel secure in the environment.	1	2	3	4	5
4.19	<b>Policies</b> The store Offers interesting sales promotions and discounts.	1	2	3	4	5
4.20	The store offers free choice of alternatives for payment (e.g in cash, via store card, credit card etc).	1	2	3	4	5
4.21	The store offers fresh and quality products in the fresh section (e.g fish, fruits and vegetables).	1	2	3	4	5
4.22	The store offers products from well-known brands and leading brands in the market.	1	2	3	4	5
4.23	The store offers a wide assortment of product brands and varieties.	1	2	3	4	5
4.24	The store offers products from the retailers' own brand with high quality	1	2	3	4	5
4.25	The store offers easy access to the store and availability of parking spaces.	1	2	3	4	5
4.26	<b>Customer satisfaction</b> Compared with other stores, I am very satisfied with this store	1	2	3	4	5
4.27	I am satisfied with the price/quality ratio offered at the store.	1	2	3	4	5

4.28	In general I am satisfied with the service offered at this store	1	2	3	4	5
4.29	In general, this store offers a satisfactory assortment of products	1	2	3	4	5
4.30	<b>Customer loyalty</b> If I have a bad experience at a supermarket, I am likely to tell someone about it.	1	2	3	4	5
4.31	When I have a good experience at a supermarket, I am likely to tell someone about it.	1	2	3	4	5
4.30	If I am satisfied with the quality of offerings of a supermarket, I will continue buying from there even if it is difficult to reach	1	2	3	4	5
4.31	When I am satisfied with the quality of the shopping experience, I continue shopping at that supermarket store	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted from: (Beneke et al. 2012: 34) and (Amorim and Saghezchi 201

## APPENDIX A 2 – IsiZulu QUESTIONNAIRE

Isizulu is spoken by a majority of black South Africans over any other languages. Therefore, to accommodate the participants that do not understand English, the questionnaire of this study was also translated in Isizulu.

### Uhlu lwemibuzo

Ithuluzi lokucwaninga: Imibuzo Isihloko: Imibono yekhwalithi yesevisi yokuThengisa ezitolo ezinkulu ngokwesimo sobhadane lweCovid-19 eNingizimu Afrika.

#### Inhloso enkulu yalolu cwaningo ngakho-ke:

- Ukuhlola imibono yamakhasimende esezingeni eliphezulu yensizakalo ezitolo ezinkulu eNingizimu Afrika selokhu kwaqubuka ubhadane lwe-COVID-19 kanye negalelo lalo ekwenzeni ukwethembana, ukwaneliseka, nokwethembeka kwamakhasimende.

#### Izinhloso ezingezansi yilezi:

- Ukuhlaziya imibono yabathengi yekhwalithi yesevisi enikezwa izitolo ezinkulu selokhu kwaqubuka ubhadane lwamanje lweCovid-19.
- Ukuthola ukuthi imibono yekhasimende ngobukhulu bekhwalithi yesevisi ezitolo ezinkulu iholela ekwanelisekeni kwamakhasimende.
- Ukuthola ukuthi imibono yamakhasimende ngobukhulu bekhwalithi yesevisi ezitolo ezinkulu iholela ekwethembeni yini.
- Ukuthola ukuthi kwaneliseka kwamakhasimende nokwethembela ezitolo ezinkulu ezikhethiwe kuholela ekwethembekeni kwamakhasimende.

### Imiyalo

Sicela ufunde isitatimende ngasinye ngaphambi kokunikeza umbono wakho.

Linganisela ngomusa insizakalo oyilindele esitolo sakho ngokuthikha inombolo eyodwa kuphela kwisititimende ngasinye.

- Sicela ungaxoxi nanoma ngubani ngezitatimende.
- Sicela ubuyise uhlu lwemibuzo ngemuva kokuphuthulwa

### A: Iphrofayili Yabantu

#### 1.1 Ubudala

18-25	1
26-44	2

45-64	3
Iminyaka engama-65 nangaphezulu	4

## 1.2 Ubulili

Owesifazane	1
Owesilisa	2
okunye	3

## Isigaba B:

➤ Isuphamakethe ekhethwayo nokuziphatha kokuthenga

2.1 Sicela ukhethe isitolo sakho ozikhethele sona. Noma yimiphi imibuzo elandelayo izophendulwa ngaleso sitolo osikhethile.

Shoprite	1
PnP	2
Spar	3
Woolworths	4
Ezinye (sicela ucacise)	5

2.2 Uthenga kangaki esitolo esishiwo ngenhla?

Kanye ngesonto	1
Izikhathi ezingana ngesonto	2
Kanye ngenyanga	3
Izikhathi ezingana ngenyanga	4

➤ Khetha ngokuthikha wonke amabhokisi achaza insizakalo enhle kakhulu kuwe. 2.4 Yini echaza insizakalo engcono kakhulu kuwe

Izinhlobonhlobo ezibanzi ezihlinzekwa sistolo	1
ukugcinwa amahora okusebenza (amahora anwetshiwe)	2
Usizo lwabasebenzi	3
Izinsizakalo ezihambisanayo ezinikezwa yisitolo (Ukupakisha, i-ATM, imakethe yeMali njll)	4
Isakhiwo sesitolo	5
Ukufaneleka kwendawo yestolo	6

Ukubukeka kwesitolo (Ukucoceka, Ukutholakala kwezinqola zokuthenga)	7
Ukutholakala komkhiqizo	8

**Isigaba C: Imibono yekhasimende yensizakalo enikezwe yisuphamakethe ekhethiwe. >**  
Umhlahandlela

Isilinganisio

Angivumi kakhulu	1
angivumi	2
Ngiphakathi nendawo	3
Ngiyavuma	4
Ngiyavuma kakhulu	5

4. Imibono yekhasimende ngezinsizakalo ezinikezwa yisuphamakethe.

		Angivum i kakhulu	Angivum i	Ngiphakat h i nendawo	Ngiyavum a	Ngiyavum a kakhulu
4.1	<b>Izici zomzimba</b> Isitolo sihlala njalo sihlanzekile futhi siyakhanga					
4.2	Izinsiza zesitolo zisebenza kanye nezinsiza zesimanje futhi ezikhangayo					
4.3	Ukuhlelwa kwesitolo kwenza amakhasimende akwazi ukuthola kalula imikhiqizo ayidingayo					
4.4	Izinto ezisetshenziswayo ezihlotshaniswa nesevisi yalesi sitolo (njengezikhwama zokuthenga, amakhathalogi, noma izitatimende) ziyakhanga futhi zibukeka kahle.					
4.5	Kunesikhala esanele ukuqinisekisa ukuhlukaniswa kwabantu estolo.					
4.6	<b>Ukuthembeka</b> Isitolo sinikeza inkomba ecacile yamanani womkhiqizo.					
4.7	Isitolo sinikela ngemininingwane efanele futhi yokugcina isikhathi mayelana nokukhushulwa kokuthengisa.					
4.8	Isitolo sinikela ngemininingwane efanele futhi yokugcina isikhathi mayelana nokukhushulwa kokuthengisa.					

4.9	Isitolo sinikeza indawo elula yemikhiqizo enyusiwe noma ehlisiwe.					
4.10	Lesi sitolo singathembeka ekusebenziseni izindlela ezifanele zenhlanzeko.					
4.11	<b>Ukuxazulula izinkinga</b> Isitolo sinesiqinisekiso sekhwalithi yomkhiqizo namathuba okubuyiselwa					
4.12	Abasebenzi bakhombisa intshisekelo enkulu kanyenogqozi lokuxazulula noma iziphi izinkinga noma izinkinga zamakhasimende					
4.13	Ukutholakala kwesitoko kuhlala kusezingeni elilungileyo					
4.14	Isitolo sisebenzise izindlela eziningi zokuphepha nokuqinisekisa ukuthi ezempilo zamakhasimende zivikelekile					
4.15	<b>Ukuxhumana komuntu siqu.</b> Bonke abasebenzi ngaso sonke isikhathi bakhombisa inhlonipho ku makhasimende (isb okheshi, replenishment staff etc).					
4.16	Abasebenzi bakhombisa ulwazi olwanele ukusiza nokweluleka amakhasimende					
4.17	Abasebenzi benza amakhasimende azethembe uma bewasiza noma bewaluleka					



4.18	Ukuhlukaniswa (social distancing) kwabasebenzi emphakathini kwenza amakhasimende azizwe evikelekile estolo					
4.19	<b>Izinqubomgomo</b> isitolo sinikeza ukukhushulwa kokuthengisa okuthokozisayo nezaphulelo					
4.20	Isitolo sinikeza ukhetho lwamahhala lwezindlela zokukhokha (isb. Ngokheshi, ngekhadi lesitolo, ikhadi lesikweletu njll					
4.21	Isitolo sinikela ngemikhiqizo enekhwalithi ekwizinga elihle nelincomekayo (isb izinhlanzi, izithelo nemifino).					
4.22	Isitolo sinikela ngemikhiqizo ephuma kumikhiqizo eyaziwayo kanye nemikhiqizo ehamba phambili emakethe.					
4.23	Isitolo sinikela ngezinhlobonhlobo eziningi zemikhiqizo yemikhiqizo ehlukile					

4.24	Isitolo sinikela ngemikhiqizo evela kubathengisi uqobo bekhwalithi ephezulu					
4.25	Isitolo sinikeza ukufinyelela okulula esitolo nokutholakala kwezindawo zokupaka					
4.26	<b>Ukwaneliseka kwamakhasimende</b> Uma kuqhathaniswa nezinye izitolo, nganelisekile ngalesi sitolo					

4.27	Ngiyaneliseka ngenani lentengo / lekhwalithi elinikezwa esitolo					
4.28	Ngokuvamile, ngiyaneliseka ngensizakalo enikezwa kulesi sitolo					
4.29	Ngokuvamile, lesi sitolo sinikela ngemikhiqizo ehlukahlukene egculisayo					
4.30	<b><i>Ukwethembeka</i></b> <b><i>Kwamakhasimende</i></b> Uma ngihlangene nesipiliyoni esibi estolo, ngingahle ngitshele othile ngakho.					
4.31	Uma ngihlangene nesipiliyoni esihle esitolo, ngingahle ngitshele othile ngakho.					
4.32	Uma ngigculisekile ngekhwalthi yokunikezwa kwesitolo esikhulu, ngizoqhubeka ngithenga lapho ngisho noma kunjima ukufinyelela khona					
4.33	Uma ngigculisekile ngekhwalthi yesipiliyoni sokuthenga, ngiyaqhubeka nokuthenga kuleso sitolo esitolo					

## APPENDIX B: LETTERS OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT

### APPENDIX B1 – LETTER OF INFORMATION



Letter of Information

#### **Title of the Research Study:**

Perceptions of retail service quality at supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

**Principal Investigator/s/researcher:** Busisiwe Diamond

**Qualification:** BTech: Retail Business Management

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:** Dr Karen Corbishley, DPhil: Mngt Sci Mktg

**Greeting:** Good day, I am a student at DUT conducting research towards my Master's degree in Marketing. I would like to invite you to participate in my research by answering a few questions. You are welcome to ask as many questions as you wish if there is anything you do not understand. Please feel free to discuss this letter of information with family and friends before completing the questionnaire, if you are unsure in any way.

**Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:** This study aims to measure the perceptions of retail service quality at supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 in South Africa. This study hopes to assist supermarket managers by informing them about customers' perceptions of service quality since the advent of the Covid-19 crisis, and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty. High levels of service quality can potentially help to allay fears and heighten levels of customer satisfaction, value and loyalty. It will also contribute towards ongoing academic research on retail service quality, in a turbulent environment.

**What is Research:** Research is a systematic search or enquiry for generalized new knowledge.

**Aim of this study:** The aim of this study is to evaluate customer perceptions of retail service quality and their effect on satisfaction, trust and customer loyalty towards major supermarket chains since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa.

**The main objective of this study is therefore to:**

Evaluate overall customer perceptions of retail service quality towards supermarkets in South Africa since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and their contribution towards trust, satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

**Outline of the procedures:**

To accomplish this, an online questionnaire will be made available to you via a link on the internet. You will have been notified via social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. This should take no longer than 10 minutes of your time. No follow ups will be required, and your participation will remain anonymous

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:**

There are no potential risks to participating in this study. You may withdraw from the study at any time. There will be no consequences for doing so. Please note that there will be no financial remuneration or other benefits for participating in this study. There are also no costs involved for any participants for participating.

**Confidentiality:** You will remain anonymous; no personal details will be taken ensuring your confidentiality and protection.

**Results:** Should you wish to be informed of the results of the study, please contact myself or my supervisor. The details are listed below. The results will also be included in the dissertation of the researcher.

**Research-related Injury:** As this is an online questionnaire, there is no possibility of injury.

**Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings:** Only the researcher will have access to all data collected and intended for the purpose of this research study. All data collected for this study will be stored electronically on DUT drive for a period of five years. Once that time has lapsed, the data will be deleted or destroyed in DUT procedures befitting the mode of documentation (ie Deleting or shredding)

**Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:**

Please contact the researcher, Busisiwe Diamond (tel no. 0838825283), my supervisor, Dr Karen Corbishley (email. karenc@dut.ac.za or tel. 0836332257) or the Institutional Research Ethics administrator on 031 373 2900. Complaints can also be reported to the director: Research & Postgraduate Support is Dr. Linda Linganiso (tel. 031 373 2326



## APPENDIX B3 – ISIZULU LETTER OF INFORMATION



### Incwadi yeminingwane/ Letter of information

**sihloko Sesifundo Sokucwaninga:**

Imibono yekhwalthi yesevisi yezitolo ezinkulu ngokwesimo sobhadane lweCovid-19 eNingizimu Afrika.

**Umphenyi / s / umcwaningi oyinhloko:** Busisiwe Diamond

**Isiqu:** I-BTech: Retail Business management

**Co-Investigator / s / supervisor / s:** DR Karen Corbishley, DPhil: Mngt Sci Mktg

**Ukubingelela:** Sawubona, ngingumfundi e-DUT ngenza ucwaningo nge-Master's degree yami ye-Marketing. Ngingathanda ukukumema ukuthi ubambe iqhaza kucwaningo lwami ngokuphendula imibuzo embalwa. Wamukelekile ukubuzwa imibuzo eminingi njengoba ufisa uma kukhona ongakuqondi. Sicela ukhululeke ukuxoxa ngale ncwadi yolwazi nomndeneni nabangane ngaphambi kokugcwalisa uhlu lwemibuzo, uma ungaqiniseki nganoma iyiphi indlela.

**Isingeniso Esifushane Nenjongo Yocwaningo:** Lolu cwano luhlose ukukala imibono yekhwalthi yesevisi yezitolo ezinkulu ngokwesimo seCovid-19 eNingizimu Afrika. Lolu cwano lunethemba lokusiza abaphathi bezitolo ezinkulu ngokubazisa ngemibono yamakhasimende mayelana nekwalthi yesevisi selokhu kwafika inkinga ye-Covid-19, nomphumela wabo ekwanelisekeni, ukwethembana nokwethembeka kwamakhasimende. Izinga eliphakeme lekwalthi yesevisi lingasiza ekunciphiseni ukwesaba nokukhuphula amazanga okwaneliseka kwamakhasimende, inani nokwethembeka. Izophinde ibambe iqhaza ekucwaningweni okuqhubekayo kwezemfundo ngekhwalthi yezinsizakalo zokuthengisa, endaweni enesiphithiphithi.

**Luyini Ucwaningo:** Ucwaningo lucwaningo oluhlelekile noma uphenyo lolwazi olusha olwenziwe jikelele.

**Inhloso yalolu cwano:** Inhloso yalolu cwano ukuhlola imibono yamakhasimende yekhwalthi yezinsizakalo zokuthengisa kanye nomthelela wayo ekwanelisekeni, ukwethembeka nokwethembeka kwamakhasimende kumaketanga amakhulu ezitolo kusukela kwafika ubhadane lweCovid-19 eNingizimu Afrika.

**Inhloso enkulu yalolu cwano ngakho-ke:**

Hlaziya imibono yekhasimende jikelele yekhwalthi yesevisi yezitolo ezinkulu eNingizimu Afrika selokhu kwaqubuka ubhadane lwe-COVID-19 kanye negalelo labo ekwethembaneni, ekwanelisekeni, nasekuthembekeni kwamakhasimende.

**Uhlaka lwezinqubo:**

Ukufeza lokhu, uhlu lwemibuzo oluku-inthanethi luzotholakala kuwe ngesixhumanisi esikuinthanethi. Uzokwaziswa ngezinkundla zokuxhumana ezifana noWhatsApp, Facebook noInstagram. Lokhu akufanele kuthathe isikhathi esingaphezu kwemizuzu engu-10 yesikhathi sakho. Akukho ukulandelwa okuzodingeka, futhi ukubamba iqhaza kwakho kuzohlala kungaziwa

**Izingozi noma ukungahambisani nombambiqhaza:**

Azikho izingcuphe ezingaba khona ngokubamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo. Ungahoxa esifundweni nganoma yisiphi isikhathi. Ngeke kube nemiphumela ngokwenza lokho. Sicela wazi ukuthi ngeke kube khona umholo wezezimali noma ezinye izinzuzo ngokuhlanganyela kulolu cwaningo. Azikho nezindleko ezibandakanyekayo kunoma yibaphi ababambiqhaza zokubamba iqhaza.

**Imfihlo:** Uzohlala ungaziwa; akukho mininingwane eqondene nawe ezothathwa ukuqinisekisa imfihlo yakho nokuvikelwa kwakho.

**Imiphumela:** Uma ufisa ukwaziswa ngemiphumela yocwaningo, sicela uxhumane nami noma nomphathi wami. Imininingwane ibhalwe ngezansi. Imiphumela izophinde ifakwe kucwaningo lomcwaningi.

**Ukulimala okuhlobene nocwaningo:** Njengoba lena imibuzo iyimibuzo eku-inthanethi, akunakwenzeka ulimale.

**Ukugcinwa kwawo wonke amakhophi kagesi nawamakhompiyutha afaka ukuqoshwa kwamateyipu:** Umcwaningi kuphela ozokwazi ukufinyelela kuyo yonke imininingwane eqoqiwe futhi ehlokelwe injongo yalolu cwaningo. Yonke imininingwane eqoqiwe yalolu cwaningo izogcinwa nge-elektroniki kwi-DUT drive isikhathi esiyiminyaka emihlanu. Lapho nje leso sikhathi sesiphelile, idatha izosuswa noma icekelwe phansi ngokweziqubo ze-DUT ezihambisana nendlela yemibhalo (okusho Ukususa noma ukuchitha)

**Abantu ongathintana nabo kwisehlakalo sanoma iziphi izinkinga noma Imibuzo:**

Sicela uthinte umcwaningi, uBusisiwe Diamond (inombolo yocingo 0838825283), umphathi wami, uDkt Karen Corbishley (i-imeyili. Karenc@dut.ac.za noma ucingo: 0836332257) noma umphathi we-Institutional Research Ethics ku-031 373 2900. Izikhalazo nazo zingaba kubika kumqondisi: Research & Postgraduate Support nguDkt Linda Linganiso (Ucingo 031 373 2326)

## APPENDIX B4 – ZULU LETTER OF CONSENT



### IMVUME/ Consent form

Isitatimende Sesivumelwano Sokubamba iqhaza Esifundweni Sokucwaninga:

- Ngiyaqinisekisa ukuthi ngazisiwe ngumcwaningi, \_\_\_\_\_ (igama lomcwaningi), ngohlobo, ukuziphatha, izinzuzo nezingozi zalolu cwaningo - Inombolo Yesibalo Sokucwaninga Ukuziphatha: \_\_\_\_\_,
- Sengithole, ngafunda futhi ngalugqonda ulwazi olubhaliwe olungenhla (Incwadi Yomhlanganyeli Yemininingwane) mayelana nesifundo.
- Ngiyazi ukuthi imiphumela yocwaningo, kubandakanya imininingwane yomuntu mayelana nobulili bami, iminyaka, usuku lokuzalwa, ama-initials kanye nokuxilongwa kuzocutshungulwa kungaziwa kube wumbiko wocwaningo.
- Ngenxa yezidingo zocwaningo, ngiyavuma ukuthi idatha eqoqwe phakathi nalolu cwaningo ingacutshungulwa ngohlelo lwekhompyutha ngumcwaningi.
- Ngingahle, noma ngasiphi isigaba, ngaphandle kokubandlulula, ngihoxise imvume yami futhi ngibambe iqhaza ocwaningweni.
- Ngibe nothura elanele lokubuza imibuzo futhi (ngentando yami) ngizibonakalise ngikulungele ukubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.
- Ngiyakuqonda ukuthi okutholakele okusha okuphawulekayo okwenziwe phakathi nalolu cwaningo okungenzeka kuhambisane nokubamba kwami iqhaza kuzonikezwa kimi.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Igama eligcwele Losuku Lomhlanganyeli Isiginesha / Isithupha Somunwe Kwesokudla

Mina, \_\_\_\_\_ (igama lomcwaningi) ngalokhu ngiyaqinisekisa ukuthi umhlanganyeli ongenhla waziswe ngokugcwele ngohlobo, ukuziphatha kanye nobungozi besifundo esingenhla.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Igama eligcwele losuku lomcwaningi  
Isiginesha



---

Igama Eligcwele Lofakazi (Uma kudingeka) Usuku Isiginesha

---

Igama Eliphelele Lombheki Wezomthetho (Uma kudingeka) Isiginesha Yosuku

**Sicela uqaphele okulandelayo:**

Imininingwane yocwaningo kufanele inikezwe ngendlela ecacile, elula futhi efanelekile ngokwesiko futhi ababambiqhaza kufanele basizwe ukuthi bafinyelele esinqumweni esinolwazi ngokusebenzisa ulimi olufanele (izinga le-grade 10 - sebenzisa izikolo ze-Flesch Reading Ease Scores ku-Microsoft Word), ukukhetha okungekho imvelo esongela ukuxhumana nokutholakala kokululekwa kontanga (UMnyango Wezempilo, 2004)

Uma umuntu ongaba umhlanganyeli engakwazi ukufunda / ukungafundi, kudingeka ukuphrinta isithupha kwesokudla kanye nofakazi ongakhethi, ofundile futhi owazi umhlanganyeli isib. umzali, ingane yakini, umngani, umfundisi, njll. kufanele baqinisekise ngokubhala, basayine ngokufanele ukuthi kutholakale imvume yomlomo enolwazi (UMnyango Wezempilo, 2004).

Uma kukhona owenza iphutha ngokugcwalisa le dokhumenti isb. usuku olungalungile noma iphutha lesipelingi kufanele kugcwaliswe idokhumenti entsha. Idokhumenti yangempela engaphelele kufanele igcinwe kufayela elibambe iqhaza hhayi ukuthi ilahlwe futhi amakhophi ayo kufanele anikezwe lowo obambe iqhaza.

Izinkomba:

UMnyango Wezempilo: 2004. Izimiso Zokuziphatha Kucwaningo Lwezempilo: Izimiso, Izakhiwo Nezinqubo <http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/factsheets/guidelines/ethnics/>

UMnyango Wezempilo. 2006. Izinkombandlela Zemikhuba Emihle Yomtholampilo yaseNingizimu Afrika. Umhleli wesibili. Itholakala ku: [http://www.nhrec.org.za/?page\\_id=14](http://www.nhrec.org.za/?page_id=14)





## APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table C1: Derivation of the questionnaire**

Construct	Statement	Source	CA
Hygiene Practice	This retailer disinfects surfaces repeatedly touched by employees or customers	Yang et2021	.79
	This retailer cleans and disinfects floors, counters and other facility areas		
	Employees wear a mask or face covering		
	Employees practice social distancing		
	Barriers have been constructed between the cashier and the customer	Self	Not tested
Physical Appearance/aspects Tangibles	The overall appearance of the store is good	Beneke, Hayworth, Hobson and Mia 2012	0.64
	The shopping environment is clean and runs efficiently		
	The store design allows me to move around with ease		
	The store layout allows me to easily find the products.		
	I do not feel crowded in this store	Self	Not tested
Physical aspects	The layout allows me to easily find the products I need	Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2016	0.87
	This supermarket has modern-looking equipment and fixtures		
	The physical facilities of this supermarket are visually appealing		
	This supermarket has clean, attractive and convenient areas		
	The layout of this supermarket makes it easy to find what I need		
	The layout of the supermarket makes it easy to move around in the store		
Tangibility	The supermarket makes use of modern equipment	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.645
	The interior of the supermarket is attractive		
	Materials such as informative signs are visually appealing and easy to understand		
	The supermarket has modern looking equipment		
Tangibility	Physical facilities are visually appealing	Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017	0.823
	Employees are neat and tidy		
	Materials associated with services (such as shopping bags and promotional material look good		

Responsiveness	Employees respond to customers request promptly	Yang 2021	0.85
	Employees are willing to help customers		
	This retailer provides a prompt service to customers		
Safety assurance / Personal	At this retailer, safety-related information is well informed and maintained	Yang 2021	0.78
	At this retailer the check-out process ins safe		
	At this retailer, employees are knowledgeable to answers customers' questions.		
Assurance / Personal interaction	Employee Behavior raises my confidence	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.739
	Home deliveries make me feel confident		
	Employees are knowledgeable and are able to respond to any queries		
Assurance / Personal interaction	Employees behavior instils confidence in customers	Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017	0.817
	I feel safe when making transactions at this supermarket		
	Employees are polite and courteous		
	Employees are knowledgeable and are able to respond to any queries		
Reliability	This retailer provides services to customers on time or sooner	Yang	.81
	This retailer keeps informed about when services (adjusted store hours) will be performed.		
	This retailer provides services right the first time		
Reliability	Information on sales promotions is correct and up to date	Beneke, Hayworth Hobson and Mia 2012	0.58
	I don't have to wait too long in a queue to check out		
	I always find the stock I need		
Reliability	The supermarket provides its services without making mistakes	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.740
	Promises to customers are met on time		
	The supermarket is serious about solving customer pr0blems		
	Planned promotions are committed to	Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017	0.796
	Management shows a sincere interest in solving customer problems		
	Services are performed properly the first time		
	Transactions and records are error free		

	I am able to get goods and services when I require them from this supermarket	Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2016	0.78
	Promises to customers are met on time		
	This supermarket pays attention to customer suggestions and implements them when they can		
	Services provided are usually right the first time		
	Transactions and records at this supermarket are error-free		
Problem solving	The store deals with my queries and complaints professionally	Beneke, Hayworth Hobson and Mia 2012	0.77
	The store is effective in resolving my questions and Problems		
	The store has a good returns policy		
Personal Interaction	The staff has enough knowledge to answer my questions	Beneke, Hayworth Hobson and Mia 2012	0.79
	The staff are friendly and polite		
	The staff are always willing to assist		
	Employees have enough knowledge to answer my questions	Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2016	0.74
	The behavior of employees instills confidence in me		
	I feel safe when doing transactions in this supermarket		
Empathy ? Policy	Employees in the supermarket understand particular customer needs	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.740
	Employees in the supermarket dedicate enough personal; attention to customers		
	The supermarket gives me the impression that their priority is what is best for the customer		
	This supermarket gives customers individual attention	Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017	0.809
	This supermarket gives customers personal attention		
	This supermarket understands customer needs		
	This supermarket offers convenient shopping hours		

	This supermarket offers high quality goods/products	Dabolkhar 1996	CR = 0.92
	This supermarket has operating hours convenient to all their customers		
	This supermarket accepts most major credit cards		
	This supermarket provides safe and convenient parking for its customers		
	This supermarket offers rewards to loyal customers	Added	
Responsiveness /personal interaction	Employees provide prompt and actual service to customers	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.761
	Employees are ready to assist at any time		
	Employees provide customers with all the necessary information		
Responsiveness / Personal interaction	Employees make information easily available for customers	Elmelegy, Ponnaiyan and Alnajem 2017	0.836
	Employees give prompt service to customers		
	Employees are always willing to assist		
	Employees are always available and willing to respond to your queries		
Satisfaction	Overall, I am satisfied with my entire experience with the supermarket	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.786
	My satisfaction levels with the supermarket are high		
	The entire service offering is higher than expected		
	Overall, I am satisfied with this supermarket.	Filipe, Marques, and Salgueiro 2017	0.94
	This supermarket comes very close to offering 'perfect' service levels		
	This supermarket offers superior service in relation to other supermarkets.		
	My expectations are always met when I shop at this supermarket.		
	I believe that I have made the right choice to shop at this supermarket.		
Loyalty	I plan to continue to visit this supermarket	Kltapci, Dortyol, Yaman and Gulmez 2013	0.713
	I recommend this supermarket to my friends and family		
	When I am extremely satisfied with my shopping experience, I am likely to tell someone about it.		
	I consider myself a loyal patron of this supermarket.		0.75

	I would say positive things about this supermarket to other people.	Sivapalan and Jebarajakirthy 2016	
	I would recommend this supermarket to someone who seeks my advice.		
Loyalty	I say positive things about this company to other people	Filipe. Marques, Salgueiro 2017. Originally Zeithaml <i>et al.</i> 1996	0.92
	I consider this company first choice when I need products of categories sold		
	I encourage friends and relatives to do business with this company		
	I intend to do more business with this company in the next few years		
	I recommend this company to someone who seeks my advice		
Trust	I trust this retailer.	Corbishley 2017	0.949
	I think that this retailer acts in my best interests.		
	This retailer is honest.		
	This retailer us just as concerned with my welfare as it is with making a profit.		
	I have confidence in this retailer.		
	Whenever this retailer advises me of any issue, I know that they are making use of their best judgement.		
	This retailer usually keeps its promises		
	I have confidence in this retailer.		



**Table C2: Comments for the Pilot study**

<b>Respondent No</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Response</b>
1.*	<p>Section A (Demographics)</p> <p>I would recommend you ask this information at the end. If questions appear too invasive or are outwardly irrelevant to the overall topic of the survey, you run the risk of alienating your respondents.</p> <p>Section B</p> <p>Why buying behaviour?</p> <p>Rephrase.</p> <p>List these supermarkets separately. They do not target the same consumers; location and store layout are also totally different although it is the same company.</p> <p>Change to Frequency</p> <p>I recommend that the student removes slightly disagree and slightly agree. The 5-point Likert scale is simple to understand and use for survey administrators and respondents alike.</p> <p>3.2 What is the difference between statement 3.1 and 3.2? It appears like you are asking the same thing in different terminologies.</p> <p>3.5 Need or want?</p> <p>3.15 I think this statement should be moved and placed under Policies. If you decide to add more statement(s) refer to RATER model.</p>	<p>It is my opinion that these two statements are not that invasive and will therefore leave it where it is.</p> <p>Disagreed and left it as it was</p> <p>This is merely an identification process. Do not want to change the entire study.</p> <p>Wording changed to frequency at descriptive statement</p> <p>Statistician prefers a 7-point scale, so will leave it.</p> <p>Leave at present, but will consult with statistician – the word ‘counters’ was removed to differentiate between the two statements</p> <p>Accepted – changed to want</p> <p>Changed wording to eliminate the word ‘policies.</p> <p>New wording: The store is willing to accept and exchange or refund returned products</p> <p>Accepted – changes made. Realise that further analysis might result in changes.</p>

	<p>Be consistent. Are you using store or supermarket?</p> <p>Perfect- Excellent</p>	<p><i>Statistician comment: this is fine. I do understand his point but you were guided by previously used scales. In the end it does not matter where they are because I will still do analysis to determine groupings. If the groupings change, the construct names could be different!</i></p> <p>Changed all words to 'supermarket'</p>
<p>2. *</p>	<p>3.37- 3.39 Are very similar to me and I would answer them the same, I'm not sure if they are meant to be so similar?</p> <p>3.45 I wasn't sure with regards to what I should feel confident about.</p>	<p>Left them as is as per statistician comment – see below</p> <p><i>Statistician comment: please leave them all in. Once analysis is done, some could be dropped and we need this buffer to work with. They are not the same but are all measuring some form of loyalty. A person may indicate that this is their store of choice but they won't necessary recommend it to others...</i></p>
<p>3. *</p>	<p>1. This is not clear. What is meant by areas – shopping areas, or does it include entrance, toilets, parking, etc.</p>	<p>Provided examples</p>

	<p>Is it possible to be a bit more specific?</p> <p>2. Above all questions are addressed to third persons – suddenly now, and ongoing, it is first person. Why? I think some consistency would be better, if possible.</p>	<p><i>Statistician comment: No – <u>where possible</u> they should be in the first person as we want to get these from the respondents’ experience. In some instances it is less clumsy to use the third person – hence wording. Please leave these as they were.</i></p>
4. *	From a customer’s point of view no comments – just that in Germany “diverse” would be a necessary gender to ad.	Not an issue in SA yet
5. AN Other	All questions understood. No changes.	
6. AN Other	All questions understood. No changes.	
7. AN Other	No changes, All the questions are clear.	
8. AN Other	All questions understood.	

\* Academics and /or research specialists

## APPENDIX D: EDITORS CERTIFICATE AND TURNITIN STATEMENT

### APPENDIX D1: EDITORS CERTIFICATE

#### **DR RICHARD STEELE**

BA HDE MTech(Hom)

**HOMEOPATH**

Registration No. A07309 HM

Practice No. 0807524

**Freelance academic editor**

Associate member: Professional Editors'  
Guild, South Africa

154 Magenta Place

Morgan Bay

5292

Eastern Cape

082-928-6208

rsteele@vodamail.co.za

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#### **EDITING CERTIFICATE**

Re: **BUSISIWE ANETIA DIAMOND**

DUT Master's dissertation: **PERCEPTIONS OF RETAIL SERVICE  
QUALITY AT SUPERMARKETS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA**

I confirm that I have edited this dissertation and the references for clarity and language. I returned the document to the author with track changes so correct implementation of the changes and clarifications requested in the text and references is the responsibility of the author. I am a freelance editor specialising in proofreading and editing academic documents. My original tertiary degree which I obtained at the University of Cape Town was a B.A. with English as a major and I went on to complete an H.D.E. (P.G.) Sec. with English as my teaching subject. I was a part-time lecturer in the Department of Homoeopathy at the Durban University of Technology for 13 years and supervised many master's degree dissertations during that period.

Dr Richard Steele  
**01 December 2022**  
*per email*

## APPENDIX D2: IREC ETHICS APPROVAL



27 October 2021

Ms B A Diamond  
625 Madolo Street  
Molteno  
5500

Dear Ms Diamond

**Perceptions of Retail service quality at supermarkets in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa**

I am pleased to inform you that Full Approval has been granted to your proposal.

The Proposal has been allocated the following Ethical Clearance number **IREC 199/21**. Please use this number in all communication with this office.

Approval has been granted for a period of **ONE YEAR**, before the expiry of which you are required to apply for safety monitoring and annual recertification. Please use the Safety Monitoring and Annual Recertification Report form which can be found in the Standard Operating Procedures [SOP's] of the IREC. This form must be submitted to the IREC at least 3 months before the ethics approval for the study expires.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the IREC according to the IREC SOP's.

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the IREC as outlined in the IREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor J K Adam  
Chairperson: IREC

## APPENDIX D3: TURNITIN CERTIFICATE

Signed: 12 April 2023

# Thesis 3

*by* B Diamond

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**Submission date:** 15-Apr-2023 03:15PM (UTC+0200)

**Submission ID:** 2065241083

**File name:** B\_A\_Diamond\_s\_Thesis\_Final\_for\_TII\_1404232.docx (644.49K)

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