

Service Quality Determinants of Electricity Consumers in The Gambia

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Abstract—In a competitive market environment where goods and services are rendered to consumers, the quality of products has significant impact on its price. Competition in energy sector directly affects the nature and quality of service delivery to its consumers, thus the quality of service will greatly determine the level of satisfaction customers received from the quality of delivered service. To this effect, this study focus on the utility service industry through investing the determinants of service quality on customer satisfaction on the Gambian electricity service consumers – a case study of National Water and Electricity Company Limited (NAWEC). This paper also identifies key strategies that the utility service company can employ to increase its customer satisfaction. Using non-probability convenience sampling, data was collected from 250 domestic consumers of electricity in the Gambia using self-administered questionnaires. Descriptive statistics; Correlation and regression analysis were used to analyze the data through IBM SPSS statistics Version 20. The results of the regression analysis identify assurance, responsiveness and empathy as the top most consumer perceived service quality determinants of Gambian electricity consumers respectively. This implies that NAWEC should develop and implement excellent quality service delivery initiatives with much emphasis on service assurance, responsiveness and emotional empathy as well as business models and strategies gear towards consumerism, in addition to professional and competent staff recruitment and training. The result of which will significantly lead to an increase customer satisfaction for the corporation.

Index Terms— Determinants, Service Quality, NAWEC, Electricity Consumers.

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive business environment, firms that are able to deliver high quality service by meeting or exceeding customer's expectation are expected to perform more than their rivals in the same industry [58]. This implies that, understanding service quality and customer satisfaction notion by corporations serve as a roadmap for building competitive advantage and growth against competitors in the market [1]. Services are defined as economic activities whose outputs are in a form of deeds, processes and performances rather than physical products [2]. According to [24] service can be defined as an action or an activity which can be offered by a party to another party, which is basically intangible and cannot affect any ownership. This

research added that, service may be related to tangible or intangible product, thus service is an assortment of how well a delivered service conforms to the client's expectations. Therefore, service business operators often assess the service quality provided to their customers in order to improve their service, to quickly identify problems and to better assess client satisfaction [17]. Given that services can satisfy clients' needs, they are viewed as products representing a wide range of intangible offerings that clients value and pay for in the market place [3]. Due to their intangibility, services are produced and consumed simultaneously with a focus dimension of offering quality service to customers.

The concept "service quality" as conceptualized in service marketing literature centers on perceived quality and has been defined as clients' judgment of an overall service experience [4]. In addition [5], [6] all alluded that, customer-perceived service quality is theoretically defined as the customers' experience on the actual service on several constituents of the service experience. Also, [7] stated that service quality is "just measuring of a particular service and also understanding the customer's expectation on the service". [8] mentioned similar definition. Despite being intangible, services are nonetheless able to provide added value to their clients or receivers just like tangible products [1]. Service quality is the backbone of customer satisfaction that is why most companies are focusing on service quality to satisfy and retain their customers [9]. Service quality does not only plays a role in retaining existing customers but also attracting new ones. In addition, Service quality and customer satisfaction are the most popular areas of research in assessing the quality service delivery of a firm [11]. Most of the previous researchers in the areas of service quality and its influence on customer satisfaction [10] were mostly centered on other service areas like banking and hospitality industries, but very limited in electricity utilities cooperation.

Furthermore, the studies of [12] affirm that good customer service is part of ensuring high service quality. Based on the assessment of service quality provided to the customers, business operators are able to identify problem quickly, improve their service and better assess client expectation. Service quality therefore, is a focused evaluation that reflects the customer's perception of specific dimensions of service namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles [13].

Despite significant studies on service quality especially on hard core services like banking, tourism, insurance, transportation among a host of others but there is limited empirical research conducted on the service quality determinants in the energy industry, thus leaving the arena

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not fully explored although the few studies conducted confirmed that there is a relationship between service quality delivery of energy services and customer satisfaction. As a result, this study focuses specifically on electricity service industry to investigate the determinants of service quality of Gambian domestic consumers of electricity, the case of National Water and Electricity Company Limited (NAWEC).

Research problem: The characteristics of service make it one of the most difficult areas to handle. The quality of service may vary depending on the provider. This variance nature of service may have a significant impact on the customers. The quality of service provided to the customer determines their level of satisfaction. As electricity devastation continues to rise in the Gambia resulting to huge economic and human losses. Consequently, customers are becoming more worried about their safety, thus deems it prudent for service provider to account for the quality of service delivery to their clients. It is therefore timely for NAWEC as an energy service provider to consider the plight of its customers through service quality evaluation, thus the motivation and reason for this research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. What is Service Quality?

Quality has been perceived in different perspectives by number of researchers. It can simply be defined as conformance to requirements that satisfies the customer. According to [19] quality of service(s) rendered to customers of electricity could be boosted by the level of competition, where a particular service supplier will have an edge over others in terms of quality service delivery and vice versa. This implies that with value addition to the services, the market entities will be more active in the industrial network resulting to the growth of countries national economy [20].

Further, [14] describe service quality as a relationship between customer perception and expectation over a particular service offering. It gauges whether the customers perception of a service met or surpassed what they expect prior to their encounter with the service delivered. While [15] viewed it as portion of customer attitude, perception, expectation as well as satisfaction over a specific service. [16] considered service quality as a “universal judgment or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service”. They further alluded that Service quality presents “the consumer’s overall impression of the relative lowliness or dominance of the organization and its services”.

Service quality poses a significant boost on the performance of firms, thus makes it one of the key areas of devotion for many organizations in recent years [21]. This study further poised that companies that provide superior service quality are more likely to be valued by their customers as opposed to those offering inferior service delivery. This is established on the notion that customers measure the quality of service based on their perception of service experience against the expected service. [18] stressed that service aspect of the product is mostly neglected by marketers focusing more on the tangible components of products. This creates a gap which needs to

be explored.

Studies conducted by [19] in Indian electricity utility sector provides a system designed framework in electricity utility service as per the customer requirements and has identified seven items which includes, quality of power supply, electric bills payment mode, complain handling, new connectivity, safety, voltage inconsistency and time management in bill payments, requires a significant adjustment and appropriate policy measures in order to boost up service quality in electricity sector. They further stressed the significant of the role of continuous customer service provision as a means to improving quality service delivery.

B. Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty and Service Quality

Customer loyalty is the tendency of customers repeating a purchase of particular product or service based on the satisfaction they received. According to [30] customers that are loyal have the propensity to be retained and thus generate profitability and growth for the firm and assure continuous survival of a firm. [24] defined customer loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service in the future despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior”. Also, [25] expresses loyalty as the attachment a customer feels for a company’s people, products and service delivery. While [26] describes a loyal customer as someone who engages in regular purchases of a firm’s product at the same time refers others towards the company’s products. In addition, [27] do not only define true customer loyalty to be based on their repeat purchase behavior but also their connection to a particular brand or firms.

[28] revealed that customer loyalty is based on customer’s emotional commitment towards a particular brand or firms. In addition, [29], [2] all alluded that customer loyalty gives customers the desire to pay for the product on repeatedly basis and engaged in cross-buying intention of firms different brands. On the contrast, [22] stressed that loyal customers are not necessarily satisfied customers but satisfied customers tend to be loyal customers. Therefore, satisfaction can be summary as a psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feelings about the consumption experience. [24] defined it as “a person’s feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product perceived performance or (outcome) in relation to his or her expectations”. However, [31] claimed that “satisfaction is an overall customer attitude towards a service provider or an emotional reaction to the difference between what customers anticipate and what they receive, regarding the fulfillment of some need, goal or desire”.

[32] stressed that customer satisfaction is based on the customer’s judgment after purchase decision has been made, whereas [34] poised that it is based on the amount of interaction a customer has with the product which if it satisfies will make purchase decision vice versa. According to [36] customer satisfaction can be enhance through effective management of the appearance of sales people as being trust worthy with a high degree of expertise resulting

to establishing long term business relationship. [37] added that satisfaction is a means for profit maximization, thus provide more dividend to shareholders and assurance of a firm's future growth. A firm's profitability is positively influenced by satisfaction of customers with repeat purchasing, loyalty and word of mouth advocacy [38].

Studies by [39] underscored that overall customer satisfaction is greatly influenced by the behavior of employees towards serving their customers which is perceived either negatively or positively. The enhancement of a firm's market share and its overall performance improvement according to [40] depends on its physical distribution process as a means to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings of [41] revealed that employee attitude has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction in the US grocery stores.

According to [42] customer satisfaction is prudent in creating competitive edge against competitors in the market, thus resulting to increase in shareholders wealth. Satisfied customers serve as an advocate through word-of-mouth to a firm, thus increasing their customer base [43], [44]. [45] asserted that word-of-mouth activities positively influence customer satisfaction, adding that when customers are satisfied they become more loyal than other customers in terms of repeat purchase intentions. [22] underscored that outstanding service level as compared to competitors is a means to achieve satisfaction and loyalty of customers. According to [47] "the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty on the Internet is moderated by involvement and partially mediated by trust". [46] asserted that customer satisfaction by firms serves as a means to secure funding from creditors.

Researchers in the power industry have also identified customer satisfaction to be a good attributed of power quality and reliability, customer service, company image, billing and payment, price and communications [48]. According to [19] customers of electricity expect consistency in the supply of electricity with very minimal power cuts.

C. Determinants of Service Quality

According to [32] service quality is regarded as the difference between customer's expectation and perception of service. This research added that the difference between perceived and actual service makes SERVQUAL a measure of attitude that has some degree of connection with satisfaction. This therefore creates a gap that determines the customer's perception of service quality either satisfied or dissatisfied. The SERVQUAL model by [18], [32] has recognized service quality into five scopes, however, for the purpose of this research two other determinants are added, thus a blended SERVQUAL model was adopted for the study. These variables are as follows:

Tangibility: According to [54] tangibility of service is defined to be physical facilities, appearances of employees plus equipment's of the firm and as well as the management team constitutes firms tangibility. [18] describe it as visible resources of a firm for service execution with the intention of satisfying customers. However, [53] adduced to the fact that modern sophisticated devices and anything a firm has which is visually appealing are regarded to be positive

impact of tangibility thus resulting to customer satisfaction.

Empathy: Empathy is been defined by [54] as an individual attention accorded to a customer during or after the delivery of service. According to [32] customers becomes satisfied when their expectations are fully comprehended by a firm and a due customer service rendered without any tiresomeness in resolving their plights. [23] viewed empathy to be a process of enhancing communication between the company and its individual customers, to ascertain and provide the exact remedies to their unmet desires from the services rendered a means for customer satisfaction.

Responsiveness: The responsiveness of a firm describes the passion employees have in providing immediate services whenever required by customers [33]. In addition, [32] emphasized that enthusiastic employees provides customer delight when appropriate customer service are rendered on time without any difficulties. Responding to individual customer concern when needed and employees providing them with safety solutions on their issues makes them satisfied [17].

Reliability: [35] ascribed reliability to correct and consistent delivery of service as expected by the customer with the intention of satisfying. Reliability results to customer retention when service providers have the ability to uphold and accurately render to their customers the expected perceived service that they are looking for [33]. While [35] maintained that reliability has a significant impact on overall quality. Also [32] asserted that the basis for reliability in service quality for customer satisfaction is based on the ability of a firm to overcome any potential hindrance that may impede the timely delivery of the expected service and maintaining a high degree of error free.

Assurance: [54] have ascribed assurance to be employee's personality such as the knowledge and skills as well as positive conducts to gain customer trust in service delivery. In addition, [32] described assurance as the employee's abilities in satisfying their customers with the knowledge and skills they acquired to deliver effective and efficient service, a means for building trust and buoyancy between a firm and its customers. Assurance is the experience and professionalism conduct of a firm in its service delivery which results to an outcome of a positive image of the company and its employees in the minds of its customers, a means to satisfaction [49].

D. Service Quality Dimension in Electricity Supply

According to [50] the essence of power system is to provide consumers of electricity with consistent economic electric service. There are number of similar problems facing the power industries as alluded to by [55] in which service quality is not an exception. Therefore, the demand for good service delivery continues to be on the rise from the perspectives of customers of electricity [51]. As a result, [52] has proposed an efficient assessment and transmission optimization system based on combined data development analysis and principal component analysis. On the other hand, [55] focuses on control measures to improve on power system reliability, stability and security. Consequently, it is imperative to look at the application of service quality and how it impacts customer's satisfaction in electricity power sector using the blended SERVQUAL model. Therefore, the

application of this model in the power sector requires investigating stability and security variables [19].

Stability: Power system stability is the ability of an electric power system for a given initial operating condition to regain a state of operating equilibrium after being subjected to a physical disturbance with most system variables bounded so that practically the entire system remains intact [51]. [49] has identified power system stability as an important factor for any secure system operation. In addition [52] has attributed major blackouts as instability of the power system which can result to customer dissatisfaction.

Security: According to [48] security of a power system refers to the degree of risk in its ability to survive imminent disturbances (contingencies) without interruption of customer service. It relates to robustness of the system to imminent disturbances and hence depends on the system operating condition as well as the contingent probability of disturbances [50]. Security threat which may result to disconnection is a means to customer dissatisfaction, preventive mitigating strategy such as additional reserve allocation, generator re-dispatch, re switching of lines, reactive power re-dispatch (capacitor switching) are means to preventing security hazards and improving customer satisfaction [49], [51].

E. Electricity market of the Gambia

The key stakeholders of the Gambia electricity sector are National Water and Electricity Company (NAWEC), the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA), the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (MoPE). Electricity, Water and sewerage services in The Gambia are provided by NAWEC, a vertically integrated public utility corporation that handles generation, transmission and distribution of electricity as well as water production and distribution in addition to sewerage. The MoPE is responsible for the implementation of Government policy in relation to electricity supply and distribution among others through its utility sector regulator PURA. NAWEC first started as Gambia Utilities Corporation (GUC) in 1972 under the Utilities Corporation Act to supply and conserve electricity and water for the general public, industry and domestic households. Then 1993 over seen by Management Services Gambia Ltd. (MSG) and the Utilities Holding Corporation (UHC) which later combined to form NAWEC in 1996 [57].

The Electricity Act of 2004 partially liberalized the electricity market specifically opening up electricity generation to independent producers. Currently, there are two independent power producers (IPPs) operating in The Gambia in addition to the cross boarder -interconnection from Senegal but Transmission and Distribution still remains the exclusive domain of NAWEC [56].

The corporation currently have two main power station in Kotu and Brikama supplying the main industrial areas of the country- Grater Banjul Area (GBA) while the seven (7) standalone diesel generators supplying the utility's rural customers. NAWEC operates on two types of meter system, credit and cash power. The former allows post payment of electricity bills while the latter is through prepayment at the various outlets or affiliated companies like the GSM communications and petrol station outlets. In addition,

NAWEC's customer base is segmented into both geographic (urban and rural) and user category (domestic and industrial) customers [58]. However, the focus of this study was on NAWEC's domestic customers of both urban and rural market segment.

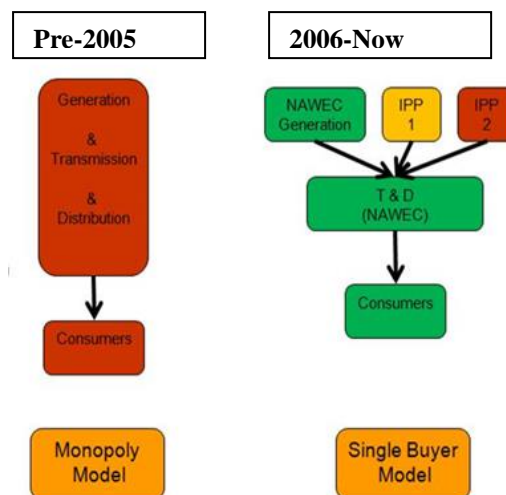


Fig. 1: Shift in Electricity Generation, Transmission and Distribution in the Gambia. Source Energy Data (G),2020

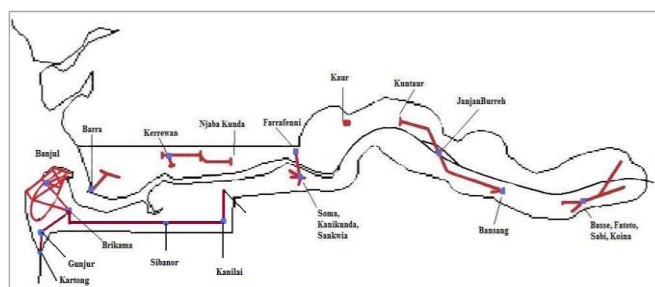


Fig. 2: Electricity Grid Infrastructural in The Gambia
Source: The Gambia Electricity Sector Roadmap, 2017

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The aim of this research analysis was to examine the determinants of service quality of the electricity utility customers in the Gambia. The respondents are individual domestic consumers. The study employs a convenience sampling which is a non-probability sampling technique where respondents are selected based on their availability, accessibility, willingness and proximity to participate in the study. A sample size of 250 respondents was used in the survey. A Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the direction, strength and significance of the variables relationships as well as multiple regressions. SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the data. The study was entirely conducted in English Language and all the questions of the constructs were obtained from previous literatures. The scale items in all constructs are at least three (3) questions as recommended by most researchers.

B. Hypothesis Statement

Based on the above scientific literature review, seven hypotheses statement were adapted to further test the validity and reliability of the variables. Table 1 shows that all the seven constructs were statistically significant with service quality (i.e. $p < 0.05$), thereby allowing us to confirm

the hypotheses. The summary of the hypothesis statements adopted for this study are as follows:

TABLE 1: Summary of the Result of Hypothesis Test

Hypotheses	Values Scored	Determination
H ₁ : Tangibility has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.450 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported
H ₂ : Empathy has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.596 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported
H ₃ : Responsiveness has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.649 p = 0.000 (p>0.05)	Supported
H ₄ : Reliability has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.579 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported
H ₅ : Assurance has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.657 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported
H ₆ : Stability has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.500 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported
H ₇ : Security has influence on NAWEC Customer's perceive service quality.	r = 0.582 p = 0.000 (p<0.05)	Supported

C. Reliability Test

The reliability test for this study was quite imperative which enable the researchers to assess the relevance of the item scales used in the study (Table 1). A Cronbach's Alpha reliability score for Tangibility (0.903), Empathy (0.887), Responsiveness (0.890), Reliability (0.889), Assurance (0.885), Stability (0.899) and Security (0.899) are obtained from the study.

TABLE 2: Cronbach's Alpha values obtained from this study

Scale Name	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Value
Tangibility	5	.903
Empathy	3	.887
Responsiveness	3	.890
Reliability	4	.889
Assurance	3	.885
Stability	3	.899
Security	3	.889

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To evaluate the relationship between Tangibility, Empathy, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance, Stability and Security, a Pearson correlation analysis is used to measure the level of linear relationship between two constructs (Table 4). The correlation coefficient of all the constructs tested did not exceed 0.74 which shows that the constructs are disperse and do not overlap with each other.

Added to Pearson's correlation analysis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to further test the seven hypotheses identified for this study. The results of analysis are presented below in Table 5 and Table 6.

Furthermore, the stepwise regression model result indicates that Assurance has the highest influence on consumer perceived service quality with a standardized coefficient β value of 0.658. This is followed by Responsiveness with standardized coefficient β value of

0.712 and finally Empathy with a standardized coefficient β value of 0.728. This study result is in tandem with the assertion of [19], [48], [49], [56]. Similarly, the study result of [20], [51], [52] share similar conclusion with this study. Furthermore, the highest Adjusted R² value recorded 0.523 which show that this research constructs explains (52%) of the determinants of perceive service quality of utility consumers in The Gambia. Moreover, this research finding revealed that, Gambian utility consumers are said to realize their value for money as well as gain satisfaction from ESCOs who give them assurance, responsiveness and show empathy during service delivery.

TABLE 3: Correlation Summary of the Determinants of Consumer Preference

Constructs	Statistics	Consumer Preference
Tangibility	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.450** 0.000
Empathy	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.596** 0.000
Responsiveness	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.649** 0.000
Reliability	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.579** 0.000
Assurance	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.657** 0.000
Stability	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.500** 0.000
Security	Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.582** 0.000

TABLE 4: Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.	
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.304	0.167		7.822	0.000
	Assurance	0.602	0.049	0.658	12.281	0.000
2	(Constant)	0.825	0.179		4.607	0.000
	Assurance	0.398	0.059	0.435	6.730	0.000
	Responsiveness	0.362	0.067	0.351	5.434	0.000
3	(Constant)	0.651	0.184		3.546	0.000
	Assurance	0.349	0.060	0.382	5.834	0.000
	Responsiveness	0.260	0.073	0.252	3.571	0.000
	Empathy	0.085	0.027	0.208	3.150	0.002

TABLE 5: Stepwise Regression Strength of the Relationship

Model Summary ^d (Stepwise method)				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.658 ^a	.432	.430	1.00751
2	.712 ^b	.506	.501	.94194
3	.728 ^c	.530	.523	.92131

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of service quality on the perceived customer satisfaction of Gambian electricity users generated by NAWEC. The results revealed that assurance, responsiveness and empathy are the topmost service quality determinants of utility industry valued by domestic consumers in the Gambia. In light of this both ESCOs and Utility regulators should develop and implement robust strategies and business models back by professional service delivery with focus on consumerism.

B. Recommendations

NAWEC and other Independent Power Producers (IPPs) should employ effective and efficient energy service delivery strategies with emphasis on service professionalism as well as employee ethical and moral behavior towards customers during service provision. This will give assurance and boost customer satisfaction. Also, ESCOs should provide responsive and enthusiastic customer safety solution through excellent customer care services. As a result, customer's emotional unmet needs will be fulfilled; this will give rise to enhancement of customer service quality and satisfaction.

C. Research Contribution

This research is the first scientific study that investigates the determinants of perceived service quality of utility consumers in the Gambia. Therefore, this study will benefit future researchers by establishing a knowledge base about utility service consumers for both Energy service Companies e.g. NAWEC and Utility regulator like Public Utility Regulatory Authority.

D. Energy Service Companies (ESCOs)

This study wills opportune ESCOs like NAWEC and future ones the knowledge base of utility service consumers perceive service quality in preferential order. This will help ESCOs to develop and implement befitting strategies that will enhance utility customer satisfaction as well as create competitive advantage for them.

Utility Regulators (PURA): This research findings will not only benefit utility service providers but also regulators like PURA by developing and implementing new energy business models with focus on consumerism.

E. Limitation and Suggestion for Future Research

This study used a convenience sample rather than a random sample i.e. the study adopts non- probability sampling instead of probability sampling. Therefore, future studies should use probability sampling like random or stratified sampling in order to generalize results obtained to a larger population.

Secondly, future studies should employ longitudinal survey rather than cross sectional survey because in cross sectional survey, data is collected at a single point of time from multiple cases but does not consider the issues of causality, so future studies should use longitudinal in which the researchers will administer a survey to one set of respondents over multiple time points and issues of causality

can be determined.

Additionally, the survey used quantitative method which is based on questionnaires. One key benefit of using questionnaires or quantitative analysis is that hypotheses can be directly tested based on the empirical data collected from questionnaires. However, future studies should incorporate qualitative analysis which will further explore this research. In-depth interviews utilizing open-ended questions could allow for deeper exploration of these measures. Future researches should also focus on other group of respondents and lastly compare domestic versus commercial utility consumers in Gambia.

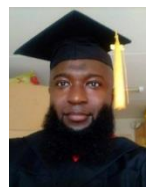
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