Strategies for Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills and Quality Coffee Service in Rated Restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills and their influence on coffee service quality in rated restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya. Guided by SERVQUAL Theory and Experiential Learning Theory, the study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods research design. The target population comprised 150 baristas, 25 restaurant supervisors, and 15 food and beverage managers drawn from rated restaurants, from which a sample of 120 respondents was selected using stratified sampling based on restaurant star ratings and purposive sampling for key informants. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through key informant interviews and direct observation of coffee preparation and service practices. The study assessed key strategies for enhancing barista mastery, including formal training and certification, on-the-job experiential learning, mentorship and coaching, investment in modern coffee equipment, implementation of standard operating procedures, and quality assurance systems. Coffee service quality was evaluated using SERVQUAL dimensions—reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles supplemented by sensory attributes such as taste consistency, aroma, temperature control, and presentation. Descriptive findings indicated that on-the-job experiential learning and mentorship were the most commonly applied strategies, while formal training and adherence to standard operating procedures varied across establishments. Overall coffee service quality was rated moderate to high, with reliability and tangibles recording the highest mean scores, whereas empathy and personalized service scored comparatively lower. Inferential analysis using Pearson correlation revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between barista mastery enhancement strategies and coffee service quality ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). The study concludes that barista mastery is a multidimensional construct shaped by technical training, experiential learning, managerial support, and standardized operational systems. It recommends continuous professional development, structured mentorship programs, strengthened implementation of standard operating procedures, and institutionalized certification pathways. Additionally, closer alignment between industry practices and TVET curricula is advocated to sustainably enhance coffee service quality in rated restaurants.

Keywords: strategies, Barista Mastery, Coffee Service Quality, Rated Restaurants, Experiential Learning, and Skills Development

INTRODUCTION

The global coffee industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, shifting from mass-market commodity consumption to a culture characterized by specialty coffee, experiential consumption, and professionalized service delivery. As consumers increasingly seek differentiated, artisanal, and sensory-driven coffee experiences, the role of the barista has evolved from routine beverage preparation to a specialized

craft central to value creation in contemporary hospitality establishments (Specialty Coffee Association [SCA], 2025). Barista competency—encompassing technical proficiency, sensory accuracy, customer interaction, workflow management, and adherence to quality protocols—has consequently become a critical determinant of beverage quality, customer satisfaction, and service differentiation within global hospitality markets (Samoggia & Riedel, 2020).

In coffee-producing countries such as Kenya, these global shifts align with national efforts to enhance value addition, stimulate domestic consumption, and strengthen competitiveness within the specialty coffee value chain. Recent sector data indicate that Kenya's coffee exports increased by 12% in 2024, rising from 47,861 tonnes in 2023 to 53,519 tonnes in 2024, reflecting renewed market performance and a growing emphasis on value-driven segments (Food Business Africa, 2024). At the same time, domestic coffee consumption has expanded steadily, reaching 2,062 metric tonnes in the 2023/2024 period, driven by an emerging urban coffee culture and the proliferation of specialty cafés (Agriculture and Food Authority [AFA], 2025). This growth is further evidenced by the rapid increase in registered coffee houses, which rose from 231 in 2019 to 757 by 2022, underscoring significant sectoral expansion and diversification of coffee service outlets (AFA, 2025).

Nairobi County has emerged as a focal point of these developments, marked by the growth of specialty cafés, micro-roasteries, barista training institutions, and experience-oriented restaurants offering manual brew methods, single-origin espresso beverages, and innovative signature drinks (SCA, 2025). Complementing these trends are professional training initiatives such as the Barista Mtaani programme, which aim to enhance technical competencies while promoting youth empowerment through specialty coffee skills development (Nairobi Coffee School, 2025). Despite these advancements, rated restaurants in Nairobi County continue to face persistent challenges in delivering consistent, high-quality coffee service. While many establishments have invested heavily in modern espresso equipment and premium coffee beans, gaps remain in barista mastery, process standardization, quality control systems, and sustained professional development.

Empirical evidence from international studies consistently demonstrates that structured barista training, competency-based development, and mentorship positively influence beverage consistency, customer satisfaction, and perceived service quality (Kim & Park, 2021; Goh, 2022). However, within the Kenyan context—particularly with regard to the operational realities of rated restaurants—empirical research remains limited. As consumer expectations continue to rise and competition intensifies within Nairobi's hospitality sector, restaurants face increasing pressure to differentiate themselves through superior service quality and consistently high coffee experiences.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the strategies employed to enhance barista mastery skills within rated restaurants in Nairobi County. Specifically, it examines the roles of formal certification, on-the-job training, mentorship, investment in modern coffee equipment, implementation of standard operating procedures, and quality assurance mechanisms, and analyses how these strategies influence coffee service quality. By focusing on both practical and managerial dimensions of barista skill development, the study seeks to generate evidence-based insights to inform restaurant managers, barista training institutions, policymakers, and industry stakeholders. The findings are expected to contribute to strengthening professional training pathways, improving service quality standards, and enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of Kenya's rapidly expanding specialty coffee service sector.

Problem Statement

The global coffee industry has transitioned from mass-market commodity consumption to specialty, experience-driven, and professionalized service delivery, positioning the barista as a central contributor to value creation through technical expertise, sensory precision, and experiential service (Specialty Coffee Association [SCA], 2025; Samoggia & Riedel, 2020). Despite rapid growth in the specialty coffee sector and increased investments in premium coffee infrastructure, empirical understanding of how barista mastery skills are systematically developed, institutionalized, and translated into consistent coffee service quality within rated restaurant environments remains limited, particularly in emerging specialty coffee markets (Goh, 2022).

Existing empirical studies on barista skills and coffee service quality are largely drawn from mature specialty coffee markets and café-based contexts, which differ substantially from rated restaurant environments characterized by standardized hospitality protocols, menu complexity, multitasking demands, and time-sensitive service delivery (Kim & Park, 2021). In coffee-producing countries such as Kenya—where specialty coffee consumption is expanding alongside the growth of premium restaurants and national value-addition initiatives rated restaurants, particularly in Nairobi County, continue to experience inconsistencies in coffee taste, presentation, and service delivery (Agriculture and Food Authority [AFA], 2025). This situation suggests a persistent gap between investments in modern coffee equipment and the development of structured, sustainable frameworks for barista mastery.

Conceptually, much of the existing literature treats barista training, skills development, and service quality as discrete constructs, offering limited insight into barista mastery as an integrated system encompassing formal certification, experiential learning, mentorship, operational standardization, effective equipment utilization, and quality assurance mechanisms (Kolb, 1984; Kim & Lee, 2021). Moreover, hospitality service quality research has relied extensively on generic measurement models such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), which, when applied in isolation, inadequately capture coffee-specific sensory attributes such as taste consistency, aroma, temperature control, and presentation—that are central to specialty coffee service excellence (Samoggia & Riedel, 2020).

Methodologically, prior studies have been dominated by single-method, survey-based designs rooted in positivist traditions, emphasizing measurable service outcomes while underexploring the experiential and developmental processes through which barista mastery is acquired, refined, and sustained (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The limited integration of qualitative methods and direct observation of coffee preparation practices further constrains holistic understanding of how barista mastery strategies are operationalized within dynamic restaurant environments (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In light of these contextual, conceptual, and methodological gaps, there is a need for an integrated and context-specific investigation of strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills and their influence on coffee service quality within rated restaurants. Accordingly, this study examines the strategies employed to enhance barista mastery skills and their effect on coffee service quality in rated restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya, using a mixed-methods approach grounded in SERVQUAL Theory and Experiential Learning Theory. The study seeks to generate evidence-based insights to support the development of structured barista mastery frameworks capable of improving service consistency, quality excellence, and competitiveness in the rated restaurant sector.

Objective of the Study

To examine the strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills and their influence on the quality of coffee service in rated restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Hypothesis of the Study

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills and the quality of coffee service in rated restaurants in Nairobi County, Kenya

Significance and Justification of the Study

The rapid expansion of specialty coffee culture, both globally and within Kenya, has increased the demand for a highly competent barista workforce capable of delivering consistent, high-quality, and experience-driven coffee service (Specialty Coffee Association [SCA], 2025; Samoggia & Riedel, 2020). Despite growth in Kenya's coffee sector—including an increase in registered coffee outlets from 231 in 2019 to 757 by 2022 and rising domestic consumption (Agriculture and Food Authority [AFA], 2025)—rated restaurants continue to face challenges in beverage consistency, service quality, and adherence to international specialty coffee standards. This indicates that investments in modern equipment and premium coffee beans alone are insufficient without structured and sustained development of barista mastery skills (Kim & Park, 2021). Existing research has largely focused on consumer behaviour, general service quality, or café-based contexts, with limited attention to

strategies that enhance barista competence in professional restaurant environments (Goh, 2022; Kim & Lee, 2021). In Nairobi County, where competition among rated restaurants is intensifying and customer expectations for premium coffee experiences are rising, evidence-based insights into effective barista development strategies are particularly needed (SCA, 2025).

This study addresses these gaps by examining strategies such as structured mentorship, experiential learning, formal certification, operational standardization, and quality assurance systems, and by evaluating their influence on coffee service quality (Kolb, 1984; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

The findings are expected to contribute in three key ways. First, they will inform policy by guiding government agencies, hospitality regulators, and training institutions in designing competency-based barista programs aligned with industry standards, thereby supporting workforce development and value addition in Kenya's specialty coffee sector

Second, they will provide actionable insights for industry stakeholders, including restaurant managers, barista trainers, and hospitality investors, to enhance training systems, professionalize barista work, improve service quality, and strengthen employee satisfaction, retention, and career development.

Third, the study contributes to academia by filling conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps through empirical evidence from a developing-market context, advancing understanding of experiential learning, skills development, and service quality in hospitality. By linking barista mastery strategies to operational performance and service quality, the study provides a comprehensive evidence base to inform practice, policy, and scholarship, supporting sustainable and competitive growth in Kenya's specialty coffee sector.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was geographically confined to Nairobi County and focused exclusively on rated restaurants, limiting the generalizability of results to non-rated establishments or restaurants in other regions, where operational standards, customer expectations, and access to training resources may differ. This limitation was partially mitigated by selecting a diverse sample of restaurants across different star ratings to capture variations in operational practices and service quality.

Second, the study relied in part on self-reported data from baristas, supervisors, and food and beverage managers, which may be subject to response and social desirability bias. Participants could overstate skill mastery, training effectiveness, or service quality. To mitigate this, the study triangulated data through key informant interviews and direct observation of coffee preparation and service practices, enhancing credibility and providing a more comprehensive perspective.

Third, the cross-sectional design captured data at a single point in time, limiting the ability to assess the long-term impact of barista training and development strategies on sustained skill mastery, service consistency, and customer satisfaction. While the design allowed efficient assessment of current practices, longitudinal studies are recommended for examining causal relationships and the durability of training outcomes over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barista mastery and the delivery of high-quality coffee service are critical determinants of customer satisfaction and business performance within the hospitality industry. Evidence from operational hospitality contexts consistently demonstrates that service quality drives customer experiences, loyalty, and competitive advantage (Parasuraman et al., 1985, as cited in International Journal on Social Science, Economics and Art, 2024). The widely applied SERVQUAL model conceptualizes service quality as the gap between customer expectations and perceived performance, encompassing five dimensions reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles which together provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating service outcomes (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; International Journal on Social Science, Economics and Art, 2024). This model has

been extensively adopted in hospitality research, including assessments of restaurant and café service quality, making it particularly relevant for evaluating coffee service performance.

In the coffee service domain, barista training and skill development are fundamental strategies for enhancing service quality and customer experience. Professional training extends beyond beverage preparation to include technical competencies—such as espresso extraction, milk texturing, and manual brewing methods as well as interpersonal skills, including active listening, customer engagement, and conflict resolution (Forbes Business Council, 2025). Well-designed training programs improve workflow efficiency, consistency in beverage quality, and service reliability, all of which are essential components of superior coffee service (Forbes Business Council, 2025).

Empirical evidence further demonstrates the effectiveness of integrated training management approaches in addressing barista skill gaps. For instance, research in Indonesia shows that competency-aligned curricula, strong industry partnerships, and competency-based assessment frameworks significantly enhance barista performance and professional readiness. However, challenges such as limited training facilities and insufficient instructor expertise can constrain the effectiveness of barista development programs (Pujiono et al., 2025).

Beyond formal training, continuous practice, experiential learning, and peer feedback are essential for developing technical mastery and service excellence. Strategies such as regular skills practice, participation in barista competitions, and engagement in professional coffee communities foster knowledge exchange, innovation, and refinement of craft, elevating overall service quality (BrewRoost, 2025).

While structured education and technical skill enhancement are critical, the growing emphasis on soft skills and customer service competencies underscores the importance of holistic barista development. Research highlights that perceived service quality is influenced not only by beverage attributes but also by interpersonal interactions and service etiquette. Consequently, effective strategies for enhancing barista mastery must integrate both technical proficiency and customer engagement skills to achieve comprehensive service excellence, particularly in rated or upscale restaurant settings (Kenya Coffee School, 2025).

Theoretical Underpinnings

SERVQUAL Theory (Service Quality Theory)

The SERVQUAL Theory, originally developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985; 1988), posits that service quality is best understood through the comparison between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. When perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, service quality is considered high; conversely, when expectations surpass perceptions, a service quality gap emerges (International Journal on Social Science, Economics and Art, 2024). This gap-based approach positions service quality as a critical determinant of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage, particularly within service-intensive industries such as hospitality.

SERVQUAL conceptualizes service quality across five core dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. Reliability refers to the ability to deliver promised services accurately and consistently; responsiveness reflects employees' willingness to provide prompt and efficient service; assurance encompasses staff knowledge, competence, and the ability to inspire trust and confidence; empathy involves individualized attention and care for customers; and tangibles relate to the physical aspects of service delivery, including equipment, cleanliness, ambiance, and staff appearance (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Collectively, these dimensions provide a structured and comprehensive framework for evaluating both functional and experiential elements of service encounters.

Within hospitality research, SERVQUAL has been widely applied to assess service quality in restaurants, cafés, and hotels, where frontline employee interactions play a central role in shaping customer experiences. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that service quality dimensions significantly influence customer satisfaction and perceived value, with reliability and assurance frequently identified as the strongest predictors in food-and-beverage service contexts (International Journal on Social Science, Economics and Art, 2024). As such,

SERVQUAL remains particularly relevant in environments where service delivery is highly personalized and experience-driven.

In coffee service environments, baristas function as key service providers whose technical competencies and interpersonal behaviours directly shape customer perceptions of service quality. Reliability is reflected through consistency in beverage preparation and adherence to standardized recipes; responsiveness through efficient order handling and timely service delivery; assurance through barista expertise, product knowledge, hygiene practices, and professionalism; empathy through personalized interactions and attentiveness to customer preferences; and tangibles through the quality of coffee equipment, beverage presentation, and the aesthetics of the service area. These attributes align closely with SERVQUAL dimensions while accommodating the sensory and experiential nature of specialty coffee service.

Although SERVQUAL has faced criticism for its perceived rigidity and generic application, it remains a robust and widely accepted framework when adapted to specific service contexts. In this study, SERVQUAL Theory provides an appropriate theoretical lens for examining how strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills such as formal training, mentorship, implementation of standard operating procedures, and quality assurance systems translate into measurable coffee service quality outcomes in rated restaurants. By integrating SERVQUAL dimensions with coffee-specific service and sensory attributes, the study adopts a customer-centred and contextually grounded approach to evaluating barista-driven service quality.

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process through which knowledge is created by transforming experience into understanding. The theory emphasizes four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In hospitality and other practice-oriented industries, hands-on experience combined with structured reflection has been shown to enhance competency development more effectively than passive or classroom-based learning alone (Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management, 2025).

When applied to barista mastery, ELT suggests that active engagement in coffee preparation, continuous reflection on performance outcomes, and repeated experimentation lead to deeper technical proficiency and the refinement of service skills. Through experiential learning, baristas internalize complex competencies such as espresso calibration, milk texturing, sensory evaluation, and workflow management, while simultaneously developing interpersonal skills through direct customer interaction and service encounters.

In rated restaurant settings where baristas are required to deliver consistently high standards under time pressure and diverse service demands structured experiential learning mechanisms are particularly valuable. Training approaches such as guided practice sessions, sensory training exercises, on-the-job coaching, and real-time performance feedback enable baristas to link theory with practice and progressively improve service quality. Reflection on customer feedback and service outcomes further reinforces learning and skill consolidation.

Overall, Experiential Learning Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how barista mastery develops over time through practice-based learning. It supports the adoption of training strategies that integrate hands-on experience, reflective practice, mentorship, and continuous improvement, thereby enhancing both technical competence and service delivery quality in rated restaurant environments.

Summary and Research Gaps

The reviewed literature establishes that barista mastery and high-quality coffee service are critical drivers of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage within the hospitality industry. Empirical studies demonstrate that service quality, as conceptualized through the SERVQUAL model, is multidimensional, encompassing reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, all of which are essential for delivering consistent and superior customer experiences (Parasuraman et al., 1985; International Journal on Social Science, Economics and Art, 2024). Within coffee service contexts, research highlights that professional barista training encompassing both technical competencies such as espresso extraction, milk texturing, and

manual brewing, and interpersonal skills including customer engagement and conflict resolution directly influences workflow efficiency, beverage consistency, and service reliability (Forbes Business Council, 2025). Further empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of integrated training approaches, mentorship, and competency-based frameworks in developing professional barista skills and improving service outcomes (Pujiono et al., 2025). In addition, continuous practice, participation in barista competitions, and engagement within professional coffee communities foster experiential learning, innovation, and refinement of craft, reinforcing the importance of ongoing skill development in achieving service excellence (BrewRoost, 2025).

Despite these insights, several research gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on training and skill development within general hospitality or vocational education contexts, with limited emphasis on strategies specifically designed to enhance barista mastery in rated or upscale restaurant environments. Second, much of the available research is region-specific, predominantly conducted in developed or Asian contexts, and may not adequately reflect the operational, cultural, and resource-related realities of hospitality establishments in African settings, particularly in Kenya. Third, while technical skills are well documented, the integration of soft skills, customer engagement competencies, and experiential learning into holistic barista mastery frameworks remains underexplored. Fourth, empirical evidence directly linking structured barista development strategies to measurable coffee service quality outcomes—particularly using established frameworks such as SERVQUAL is limited. Finally, longitudinal and comparative studies assessing the sustained impact, scalability, and effectiveness of barista mastery interventions across different restaurant types and service levels are scarce.

Addressing these gaps is essential for developing contextually relevant and evidence-based strategies that enhance barista mastery skills, improve coffee service quality, and strengthen competitive advantage within rated restaurants in Nairobi County.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional research design using a mixed-methods approach to examine existing strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills and their influence on coffee service quality in rated restaurants. Data were collected at a single point in time, enabling efficient assessment of prevailing operational practices and service outcomes without the need for prolonged follow-up periods, which were constrained by time and resource limitations. The cross-sectional design was appropriate for capturing real-time operational realities within rated restaurant settings and for establishing relationships between skill-enhancement strategies and service quality indicators.

The mixed-methods approach integrated quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data facilitated statistical testing of relationships between barista skill-enhancement strategies and coffee service quality, while qualitative data offered contextual insights into training practices, managerial perspectives, and experiential factors influencing barista performance. This methodological integration is particularly suitable for hospitality research, where service quality encompasses both measurable performance outcomes and experiential dimensions that cannot be adequately captured through a single methodological tradition (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019; Taherdoost, 2021).

The study was conducted in rated restaurants within Nairobi County, Kenya. Nairobi was selected due to its high concentration of rated restaurants, advanced hospitality infrastructure, and vibrant specialty coffee culture. As the country's primary business and hospitality hub, Nairobi hosts diverse high-end restaurants operating under standardized quality and service benchmarks. These establishments provided an appropriate context for examining structured strategies aimed at enhancing barista mastery skills, given their elevated customer expectations, formal operational standards, isnd emphasis on consistent service delivery. The presence of specialized barista training institutions, micro-roasteries, and experience-oriented cafés further enhanced the county's suitability as a representative setting for the study (UNWTO, 2022).

The target population comprised baristas, restaurant supervisors, and food and beverage managers employed in rated restaurants within Nairobi County. Baristas were included due to their direct involvement in coffee

preparation and frontline service delivery, while supervisors and managers were selected because of their responsibility for designing, implementing, and monitoring training programs, standard operating procedures, and quality assurance systems. Inclusion of both operational and managerial personnel ensured a holistic perspective on barista mastery development, capturing both practice-based and policy-driven dimensions (Kim & Lee, 2021). Participants were required to have a minimum of six months' continuous experience in their current role to ensure adequate familiarity with organizational practices. Employees from non-rated or unregistered restaurants, those with less than six months of experience, and temporary or casual staff not directly involved in routine coffee preparation or service operations were excluded.

A stratified sampling technique was used to categorize rated restaurants according to star ratings, ensuring proportional representation across establishments operating at different service levels. Within each stratum, simple random sampling was applied to minimize selection bias. Baristas were purposively selected due to their direct engagement in coffee preparation and customer interaction, ensuring the collection of relevant experiential data. Census sampling was applied to restaurant supervisors and food and beverage managers wherever feasible, given their relatively small numbers and their critical role in decision-making related to training and service quality (Saunders et al., 2019). The final sample comprised 120 respondents drawn from a population of 190.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires, interview guides, and observation checklists to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the study. Questionnaires enabled standardized data collection and facilitated statistical analysis and comparison across establishments. Interview guides were used to obtain in-depth insights from supervisors and managers regarding training approaches, mentorship practices, operational challenges, and quality assurance mechanisms. Observation checklists supported direct assessment of coffee preparation processes, service delivery, and adherence to standard operating procedures, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation.

Validity and reliability of the research instruments were rigorously addressed. Content and construct validity were established through expert review by hospitality scholars and industry professionals to ensure alignment with the study objectives and theoretical foundations. A pilot study was conducted in selected rated restaurants not included in the main survey to assess clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the instruments. Reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 and above deemed acceptable, confirming satisfactory internal consistency of the measurement scales (Hair et al., 2022).

Data collection was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity before providing informed consent. Questionnaires were administered in person to enhance response rates and data completeness. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for respondents to minimize disruption to restaurant operations, while observations were conducted unobtrusively to capture authentic barista behaviours and service practices.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and key study variables. Inferential analyses, including Pearson correlation and multiple regression, were conducted to determine the strength, direction, and predictive power of the relationships between barista mastery enhancement strategies and coffee service quality. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed thematically, following established procedures for identifying patterns and recurring themes that complemented and enriched the quantitative findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study targeted 190 respondents, comprising 150 baristas, 25 restaurant supervisors, and 15 food and beverage managers from rated restaurants. A sample of 120 respondents was selected, using stratified sampling based on restaurant star ratings to ensure proportional representation. Baristas were purposively selected for their direct involvement in beverage preparation, while supervisors and managers were included through a census due to their small numbers and critical managerial roles.

Out of 120 questionnaires administered, 110 were returned, yielding a response rate of 91.7%, which exceeds the recommended 70% threshold for reliable statistical analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The high response rate reflects strong cooperation from participants and enhances the credibility of the findings.

Stratified and purposive sampling ensured representation across restaurant categories and relevant operational and managerial experience, providing comprehensive insights into barista skill-enhancement strategies and coffee service quality.

Descriptive and narrative Analysis of Strategies for Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills

The study assessed the extent to which rated restaurants implement various strategies aimed at enhancing barista mastery skills. Six core strategies were examined: on-the-job training and experiential learning, investment in modern coffee equipment, mentorship and coaching, formal training and certification, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and quality assurance mechanisms. Descriptive statistics specifically mean scores, standard deviations (SD), and ranking were used to determine the level of emphasis placed on each strategy.

The study assessed the extent to which rated restaurants implement various strategies to enhance barista mastery skills. The analysis focused on six core strategies: on-the-job training and experiential learning, mentorship and coaching, formal training and certification, investment in modern coffee equipment, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and quality assurance mechanisms. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations (SD), and ranking, were used to evaluate the prevalence and emphasis of each strategy.

From Table 4.2, it is evident that on-the-job training and experiential learning was the most emphasized strategy ($\bar{x}$ = 4.56, SD = 0.52; Rank 1), indicating that rated restaurants strongly rely on hands-on learning approaches to build barista competence. This suggests a preference for practical skill acquisition through real-time service environments. Investment in modern coffee equipment was ranked second ($\bar{x}$ = 4.42, SD = 0.59; Rank 2), highlighting the importance attached to advanced brewing tools and technology in enhancing service quality and consistency.

Mentorship and coaching recorded a relatively high mean score ($\bar{x}$ = 4.18, SD = 0.67; Rank 3), reflecting moderate implementation of guided learning and knowledge transfer from experienced staff to junior baristas. In contrast, more structured and formalized approaches—namely formal training and certification ($\bar{x}$ = 3.72, SD = 0.81; Rank 4), standard operating procedures (SOPs) ($\bar{x}$ = 3.65, SD = 0.85; Rank 5), and quality assurance mechanisms ($\bar{x}$ = 3.60, SD = 0.88; Rank 6) were less emphasized.

Overall, the findings indicate that while rated restaurants actively implement multiple strategies to strengthen barista mastery skills, greater emphasis is placed on experiential and resource-based approaches than on formalized training structures and quality control systems. This suggests potential gaps in standardized skill development and monitoring, presenting opportunities for improvement in achieving consistent and sustainable barista performance across rated restaurants.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics of Strategies for Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills (n = 110)

Strategy	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Rank
On-the-job training & experiential learning	4.56	0.52	1
Investment in modern coffee equipment	4.42	0.59	2
Mentorship & coaching	4.18	0.67	3
Formal training & certification	3.72	0.81	4

Standard operating procedures (SOPs)	3.65	0.85	5
Quality assurance mechanisms	3.60	0.88	6

Source: Field Data, 2025

Narrative evidence from managers reinforced these quantitative findings. Manager X observed that *"hands-on managerial involvement significantly enhances barista competence; restaurants where supervisors actively monitor training achieve greater skill consistency."* Similarly, Manager XXV emphasized that *"investment in human capital yields more sustainable performance than investment in machines alone, highlighting the critical role of people-centered development in building barista mastery."*

Formal training and certification programs, while recognized as valuable, were constrained by cost and time. Manager I explained that *"although formal training helps standardize beverage preparation, cost and time constraints limit its implementation,"* whereas Manager XII noted that *"certifications, though valuable, often take a backseat to practical consistency and experiential learning."*

Mentorship practices also showed variability across establishments. Manager II highlighted that *"baristas learn best through hands-on practice rather than classroom instruction,"* while Manager III added that *"mentorship is often informal and contingent on the availability and willingness of senior baristas."* Manager V further observed that *"high staff turnover disrupts mentorship continuity, limiting the long-term effectiveness of experiential learning strategies."*

In summary, the descriptive analysis demonstrates that rated restaurants employ a combination of experiential learning, managerial oversight, mentorship, formal training, modern equipment, SOPs, and quality assurance mechanisms to enhance barista mastery. While experiential and equipment-based strategies are widely applied and highly rated, formalized training, mentorship consistency, and institutionalized quality procedures vary across establishments. These findings directly address the study's core objective by identifying which strategies are most commonly applied to enhance barista skills and highlighting areas where improvement is needed to support consistent, high-quality coffee service.

Descriptive and Narrative Analysis of Coffee Service Quality

The analysis of coffee service quality in rated restaurants revealed moderate to high performance across the SERVQUAL dimensions and key sensory attributes, indicating generally positive perceptions of coffee service delivery among respondents. The use of descriptive statistics—mean scores, standard deviations (SD), and ranking—enabled an assessment of both the level and consistency of performance across the evaluated dimensions.

Mean ($\bar{x}$) values represent the average perceived performance for each coffee service quality dimension, while the standard deviation (SD) indicates the degree of variability in respondents' perceptions. Lower SD values suggest greater consistency in service delivery across establishments, whereas higher SD values point to variations in performance. Ranking was used to order the dimensions from the highest to the lowest mean score, thereby identifying areas of strength and those requiring improvement.

As presented in Table 4.3, reliability emerged as the strongest dimension of coffee service quality *($\bar{x}$ = 4.48, SD = 0.55; Rank 1)*, indicating that rated restaurants consistently deliver coffee services as promised, including accuracy of orders and dependability in service execution. This was followed by tangibles *($\bar{x}$ = 4.36, SD = 0.61; Rank 2)*, reflecting positive perceptions regarding the physical aspects of coffee service such as equipment, cleanliness, and staff appearance.

Among the sensory attributes, taste consistency ranked third *($\bar{x}$ = 4.25, SD = 0.64; Rank 3)*, demonstrating that customers generally experienced uniform flavor quality across visits. Aroma *($\bar{x}$ = 4.18, SD = 0.68; Rank 4)* and temperature control *($\bar{x}$ = 4.12, SD = 0.71; Rank 5)* also recorded relatively high mean scores, suggesting

satisfactory control of sensory elements critical to overall coffee enjoyment. Presentation followed closely *($\bar{x}$ = 4.05, SD = 0.74; Rank 6)*, indicating acceptable but less emphasized visual appeal of coffee service.

In contrast, the interpersonal SERVQUAL dimensions recorded comparatively lower mean scores. Responsiveness *($\bar{x}$ = 3.92, SD = 0.78; Rank 7)* and **assurance** *($\bar{x}$ = 3.88, SD = 0.81; Rank 8)* suggest moderate performance in prompt service delivery and staff confidence or competence. Empathy ranked lowest *($\bar{x}$ = 3.72, SD = 0.86; Rank 9)*, indicating that personalized attention and understanding of customer needs were less consistently demonstrated across rated restaurants.

Table 4.3 presents the descriptive statistics for coffee service quality.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics of Coffee Service Quality (n = 110)

Coffee Service Dimension	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Rank
Reliability	4.48	0.55	1
Tangibles	4.36	0.61	2
Taste Consistency	4.25	0.64	3
Aroma	4.18	0.68	4
Temperature Control	4.12	0.71	5
Presentation	4.05	0.74	6
Responsiveness	3.92	0.78	7

Source: Field Data, 2025

The results indicate that rated restaurants consistently perform best in reliability and tangibles, highlighting strong adherence to standard operating procedures, consistent beverage preparation, and attention to physical presentation. Sensory attributes such as taste consistency and aroma also scored moderately high, reflecting the importance of technical skills in producing high-quality coffee. On the other hand, dimensions such as empathy, responsiveness, and assurance received lower scores, indicating that customer engagement and personalized service were less consistently delivered.

Managerial insights reinforced the quantitative findings. Manager VI observed that *"customers immediately notice consistency and presentation; these tangible aspects often define perceived service quality more than formal training."* Manager IX added that *"while technical skills ensure the drink is excellent, personalized engagement is harder to maintain consistently, especially during peak hours."* Manager XIV highlighted that *"staff can produce perfect coffee, but service perception is also shaped by small gestures, attentiveness, and customer interaction, which are often overlooked."*

In conclusion, coffee service quality in rated restaurants is largely driven by operational consistency, technical proficiency, and attention to sensory details. While reliability, tangibles, and sensory attributes are well-maintained, empathy, assurance, and responsiveness require targeted interventions. These findings support the study's core objective by demonstrating the impact of barista mastery strategies particularly experiential learning, mentorship, and investment in equipment on tangible service outcomes, while identifying opportunities for enhancing customer interaction and soft skills development

Inferential Analysis on Strategies Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills

Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationship between strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills (formal training, experiential learning, mentorship, equipment investment, standards of operating procedures and coffee service quality (SERVQUAL dimensions and sensory attributes).

Variables	Strategies for Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills	Coffee Service Quality
Strategies for Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills	1	0.684**
Coffee Service Quality	0.684**	1

Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed, n = 110).

Figure 4.1 Strategies Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills

The inferential analysis examined the relationship between strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills—including formal training, experiential learning, mentorship, investment in equipment, and adherence to standards of operating procedures and coffee service quality, measured through SERVQUAL dimensions and sensory attributes. The results revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that rated restaurants employing robust strategies for developing barista competencies consistently report higher levels of coffee service quality.

Managerial narratives reinforced this quantitative evidence, emphasizing that hands-on management, continuous training, structured mentorship, and investment in human capital directly contribute to service reliability, consistency, and customer assurance. Variations in service quality, however, were attributed to challenges such as inconsistent enforcement of operating procedures, staff turnover, and pressures during peak service periods.

These findings align with SERVQUAL Theory, highlighting that employee competence significantly influences key service dimensions, including reliability, assurance, and responsiveness. They also support Experiential Learning Theory, demonstrating that continuous practice, feedback, and mentorship enhance skill mastery and promote consistent service delivery.

The strength of the correlation suggests that improvements in training programs, mentorship practices, experiential learning opportunities, and adherence to standardized operating procedures are associated with enhanced reliability, beverage consistency, responsiveness, and customer satisfaction. This quantitative relationship complements the descriptive findings in Section 4.2, where 80% of respondents acknowledged the presence of barista skill-development strategies, and Section 4.3, where a similar proportion rated coffee service quality as satisfactory.

Further support from managerial insights highlighted the practical significance of these strategies. Manager X noted that *active managerial involvement improves skill consistency*, while Manager XXV emphasized that *investing in human capital leads to sustainable service outcomes*. Conversely, "*there were challenges such as inconsistent application of operating procedures, high turnover, and operational pressures during peak hours*", as reported by Managers IV, V, VII, and XV, help explain occasional variability in service quality despite the presence of modern equipment.

Overall, the correlation analysis provides strong empirical evidence that strategies aimed at enhancing barista mastery play a critical role in determining coffee service quality. The statistically significant association confirms that improvements in service quality are closely linked to deliberate investments in barista skill development and operational standardization rather than occurring by chance. The observed positive relationship underscores that integrating formal training, experiential learning, mentorship, and standardized procedures

effectively strengthens both technical and service competencies. Consequently, the study offers strong inferential support for the conclusion that strategies enhancing barista mastery directly contribute to improved coffee service quality in rated restaurants.

Summary of the Findings of the Strategies Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills.

Table 4.2 Summary of Key Findings of the strategies Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills

Table of Key Findings summarizing the strategies enhancing barista mastery skills and their effect on coffee service quality based on the study is as follows:

Strategy	Observed Effect on Coffee Service Quality	Managerial Insights
a) Formal Training & Certification	Standardizes beverage preparation; improves technical competence	Cost and time constraints limit adoption; practical experience often prioritized
b) On-the-Job Training & Experiential Learning	Enhances skill mastery, service consistency, and responsiveness	Hands-on practice most effective; high staff turnover can limit continuity
c) Mentorship & Coaching	Improves skill transfer and soft skills where structured	Often informal and dependent on senior barista availability; consistency varies
d) Investment in Modern Coffee Equipment	Improves efficiency, beverage quality, and tangibles	Equipment alone insufficient; requires strict adherence to standard operating procedures
e) Adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) & Quality Assurance	Ensures consistency, reliability, and customer assurance	Inconsistent implementation noted; gaps in documentation and enforcement
f) Managerial Oversight / Supervision	Supports skill consistency, accountability, and service reliability	Hands-on involvement reinforces training, mitigates service lapses during peak periods

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Study

The study sought to examine the influence of Strategies Enhancing Barista Mastery Skills on coffee service quality in rated restaurants. Both descriptive and inferential analyses, complemented by managerial narratives, provided insights into the effectiveness of these strategies and their relationship to service quality.

Findings indicate that rated restaurants employed multiple strategies to enhance barista mastery skills. Formal training and certification programs were moderately implemented, particularly in higher-rated establishments. Overall, 80% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their establishments had put in place measures to develop barista competencies, while 15% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed. Managerial narratives confirmed that formal training helps standardize beverage preparation; however, practical experience often took precedence, and cost or time constraints limited the implementation of structured programs in smaller establishments.

On-the-job training and experiential learning emerged as the most commonly applied strategies, reflecting the

practical and skill-intensive nature of coffee preparation. Managers emphasized that baristas learn best through hands-on practice and that experiential learning significantly contributes to skill development and service consistency. Nevertheless, high staff turnover and reliance on informal mentorship limited the long-term effectiveness of these strategies. Mentorship and coaching practices varied considerably across restaurants, with some establishments depending on senior baristas to guide less experienced staff, while others lacked formal mentorship structures. Managers noted that informal mentorship was dependent on the availability and willingness of senior staff, highlighting the need for structured programs to ensure consistency in skill transfer.

Investment in modern coffee equipment was generally rated highly, reflecting a commitment to operational standards. However, inconsistencies in the application of standard operating procedures and quality assurance mechanisms were evident. Managers indicated that while equipment improves efficiency, it does not guarantee consistent service unless standard operating procedures are strictly followed and quality control is enforced. These findings suggest that although physical resources and infrastructure were largely available, systematic and institutionalized skill-development frameworks were not uniformly adopted across all establishments.

Analysis of coffee service quality revealed moderate to high performance across the SERVQUAL dimensions. The majority of respondents perceived the overall quality of coffee service as satisfactory, with high ratings for reliability and tangibles, indicating that restaurants were generally effective in delivering core service outcomes and maintaining operational standards. However, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and personalized service varied across establishments, particularly during peak service periods. Managers highlighted that even well-trained baristas struggled to maintain speed and consistency under high customer volumes, and that soft skills, such as customer engagement and individualized service, required continuous reinforcement. Sensory attributes—including taste, aroma, temperature control, and presentation were positively rated overall but showed occasional variability, especially during busy periods. Managerial insights suggested that service quality fluctuates when refresher training is lacking or when baristas are fatigued, further emphasizing the need for ongoing skill reinforcement.

Inferential analysis using Pearson correlation revealed a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between strategies enhancing barista mastery skills and coffee service quality ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that restaurants with well-developed strategies consistently deliver higher quality coffee service. Managerial narratives corroborated these results, emphasizing that hands-on managerial involvement, continuous training, mentorship, and human capital investment significantly enhance service outcomes. Observed challenges, such as inconsistent adherence to standard operating procedures, high staff turnover, and peak-hour pressures, explained variations in service quality despite high equipment investment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that structured training, experiential learning, mentorship, and adherence to operational standards are critical for maintaining high coffee service quality. While technical competence is essential, service consistency, interpersonal skills, and managerial oversight play equally important roles. The significant positive correlation confirms that enhancing barista mastery strategies directly contributes to improved coffee service quality, supporting the study's theoretical framework based on SERVQUAL and Experiential Learning Theory.

These findings are consistent with prior studies that emphasize the role of structured training, experiential learning, and operational standardization in improving service quality in hospitality contexts (Pujiono et al., 2025; Forbes Business Council, 2025; BrewRoost, 2025). Overall, the study confirms that barista mastery is multidimensional, encompassing technical competencies, customer-service skills, managerial support, and adherence to operational protocols. Effective integration of these strategies is essential for enhancing coffee service quality, meeting customer expectations, and sustaining competitiveness in Nairobi's specialty coffee sector.

Conclusions

The study concludes that strategies for enhancing barista mastery skills have a significant influence on the quality of coffee service in rated restaurants. Structured training programs, mentorship, and consistent implementation

of standard operating procedures emerged as critical drivers of beverage consistency, service reliability, and customer confidence. Experiential learning was identified as a key mechanism for skill acquisition and performance improvement, particularly in high-pressure, customer-facing environments.

While investment in modern coffee equipment enhances operational efficiency, its impact is optimized only when supported by competent baristas and robust quality-control systems. The findings underscore the centrality of human capital development in sustaining service excellence, enhancing customer satisfaction, and maintaining competitive advantage in Nairobi's rapidly growing specialty coffee sector. These results align with global literature emphasizing the importance of training, mentorship, and service quality management in hospitality contexts (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Pujiono et al., 2025).

Thus, the study affirms that barista mastery is multidimensional, integrating technical skills, experiential learning, managerial support, and adherence to operational standards, and that effective implementation of these strategies is essential for achieving high-quality coffee service and meeting elevated customer expectations.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Restaurant Management

i. Rated restaurants should institutionalize continuous professional development initiatives, including formal certification programs, regular skills refresher training, and structured mentorship systems for baristas.

ii. Restaurants should strictly enforce standardized operating procedures for coffee preparation and service to ensure consistency and quality across all shifts.

iii. Periodic performance evaluations and systematic skills audits should be conducted to identify competency gaps and inform targeted training and professional development interventions

Recommendations for Training Institutions and TVET Providers

i. Barista training institutions and TVET colleges should align their curricula with industry requirements and international standards by integrating technical competencies, sensory evaluation skills, customer-service abilities, and experiential learning components.

ii. Training institutions should strengthen partnerships with the coffee and hospitality industry to facilitate workplace-based learning, internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs, thereby effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Industry Stakeholders

i. Policymakers and industry regulators should advance the professionalization of barista work by establishing standardized national certification frameworks aligned with industry needs and global best practices. These frameworks should emphasize competency-based training, assessment, and continuous professional development to ensure consistent skill mastery and service quality.

ii. Policymakers should strengthen collaboration among government agencies, hospitality and tourism associations, training institutions, and coffee-industry stakeholders to support workforce development through curriculum harmonization, apprenticeship and mentorship opportunities, and continuous skills upgrading.

iii. Collectively, these measures will enhance service standards, improve employability and career progression for baristas, and increase the overall competitiveness and sustainability of the hospitality and coffee service sector.

Recommendations for Further Research

i. Future research should employ longitudinal study designs to assess the sustained impact of barista training strategies on service quality and customer satisfaction over time.

ii. Comparative studies across counties, between rated and non-rated restaurants, and among different hospitality segments should be conducted to enhance the generalizability of findings.

iii. Further research should directly explore customer perceptions of coffee service quality to complement operational and managerial assessments, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of service outcomes.

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