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SERVICE QUALITY MEASUREMENT IN THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF INTERNET-BASED SELF-SERVICE TECHNOLOGIES: A REVIEW

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Abstract

The main aim of this research is to review comprehensively previous literature on service quality measurement and to discuss the key issues on the development of an industry-specific scale for measuring customer service quality in the specific context of Internet-based self-service technologies. The survival of any company in a highly competitive environment depends on its ability to provide the best service quality to its existing customers as the quality of service is a key factor in the success of any organization. It is well established that the measurement of the service quality is an important procedure for the improvement of the overall service quality performance. Facts indicate that more attention is needed for developing an industry specific scale for measuring customer service quality within the still developing industry of self service technologies.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Internet-Based Self-Service Technologies, Service Quality.

1.0   Research Background

Nowadays, in a severe competitive environment, the most central key to sustainable competitive advantage is to provide the best possible service quality which will result in improved customer satisfaction (Sureshchandar et al., 2002). This will result in advanced customer loyalty and retention which will lead to more successful and more profitable organization (Johnson and Gustafsson, 2000). The significance of the service quality concept derived researchers and scholars to address this issue and to investigate it further across different service sectors. Thus, throughout the past two decades, service quality has become an established area in the service quality literature (Seth et al., 2005). There have been many research studies that have studied, examined, and investigated its nature in the traditional face-to-face service

environment and its noticeable impact on customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability (see, for example, Zeithaml, 1988; Oliver, 1993; Johnston, 1995; Hallowell, 1996; Oh, 1999; Sureshchanar et al., 2002, etc.). Moreover, numerous traditional service quality models have been developed to assess and evaluate service quality performance in the traditional service environment such as the Technical-Functional quality model (Gronroos, 1984) and the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, 1991).

Internet services were introduced for public use back in the 1990s; as a result, commercial communications began over the Internet (Jasimuddain, 2001). This technology development is changing the way business is carried out and changing the way companies interact with their customers (Ba and Johansson, 2008). Different businesses across different service sectors, including, for example, financial services, health care services, educational services, and tourism services recognized the importance of the Internet as a medium to communicate with potential customers and to provide a wide range of valuable services. With this development, it is logical that organizations are required to offer customers with high quality of service as the quality of service is a key factor in the success of organizations. Thus, throughout the previous few years more attention was paid by researchers and scholars to investigate the service quality concept within the still-developing sector of Internet-based self-service technologies, where the communication channel between employees and customers is electronically performed (see, for example, Zeithaml et al., 2000, Janda et al 2002; Santos, 2003; Lee and Lin, 2005; Swaid and Wigand, 2007, etc.).

1.1 Service Quality Measurements

It appears that that service quality is not a new concept; however, measuring service quality from the consumers' point of view is rather a still-developing issue. The survival of any company in a highly competitive environment depends on its ability to provide the best service quality to its existence customers as the quality of service is a key factor in the success of any organization. It is well established that the measurement of the service quality is an important procedure for the improvement of the overall service quality performance. The significance of service quality measurement derived researchers and scholars to study it and investigate it in details. There has been a non-stopping research on the measurement issues of service quality,

which have contributed to the development of a solid research base (Seth et al., 2005). In the current service literature, there are three key instruments available for measuring service quality performance (Tih, 2004) namely SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988, 1991), SERVPERF (Cornin and Taylor, 1992), and SERVPEX (Robledo, 2001).

1.2   The SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL instrument has been the major technique used to measure customer service quality and has been extensively implemented and valued by academics and practitioners (Buttle, 1996). It was developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1988, and 1991). The main aim of the instrument was to be employed as a generic instrument for measuring customer service quality across different service sectors (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The SERVQUAL model has been applied to measure customer service quality across different service industries (Ladhari, 2008). Moreover, the SERVQUAL model has been implemented in different countries and various cultural backgrounds across the world (Ladhari, 2008). However, although the SERVQUAL model was used a great deal across different service sectors and across different cultural backgrounds, a number of theoretical and empirical criticisms of the measurement model have been pointed out (Ladhari, 2008). The validity of the SERVQUAL model as a generic instrument for measuring customer service quality across different service sectors has been raised (Ladhari, 2008). There has been an argument that a simple revision of the SERVQUAL items is not enough for measuring service quality across different service settings (Ladhari, 2008). As a result of these points, Ladhari (2008, p. 68) stated that "It has been suggested that industry-specific measures of service quality might be more appropriate than a single generic scale". This argument was supported by Dabholkar et al., (1996, p. 14) who stated that "It appears that a single measure of service quality across industries is not feasible, therefore, future research on service quality should involve the development of industry-specific measures of service quality". As a result of these arguments, more attention was paid by researchers and scholars in recent years toward the development of an alternative industry-specific research instruments for measuring customer service quality (Ladhari, 2008). A number of industry-specific research instruments

have been developed in the past several years for measuring service quality (Ladhari, 2008). Summary of some of their empirical contexts may include, for example, restaurants (Stevens et al., 1995), retail banks (Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2002; Sureshchandar et al., 2002), career centres (Engelland et al., 2000), hotels (Ekinci and Riley, 1998; Akbaba, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2007), and hospitals (Sower et al., 2001). In addition, those research instruments have been developed in different countries and cultural backgrounds, including, for example, Turkey (Akbaba, 2006), Australia (Wilkins et al, 2007), Canada (Saleh and Ryan, 1991), and India (Sureshchandar et al., 2002).

1.3   Self Service Technologies (SSTs)

Nowadays, technology development along with increasing in labour costs made it essential for service companies to discover self-service delivery options (Shamdasani et al., 2008). Self-service technologies (SSTs) are defined as "technological interfaces that enable customers to produce a service independent of direct service employee involvement" (Shamdasani et al., 2008, p. 117). Types of SSTs may include, for example, Automated Teller Machine (ATM), automated hotel checkout, electronic airplane ticketing, and Internet banking (Shamdasani et al., 2008). Shamdasani et al. (2008) emphasized some potential benefits derived from SSTs employment such as, ease of access, improvement in efficiencies and competitiveness, savings in time, and improvement in the performance of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. With a noticeable growing rate of the users of self-service technologies all over the world, more attention is needed to present more understanding about the service evaluation process in terms of exploring the key determinants and consequences of service quality which represents an important factor for the success of any organization (Shamdasani et al., 2008).

1.4   Future Research Directions

The main intention of this research is to be extended in turn to develop a conceptual framework in order to be implemented as a frame of reference for measuring service quality from a customer perspective in the specific context of Internet-based self-service technologies. The intention is: firstly, to explore the key determinants of service quality in the Internet context through reviewing comprehensively previous

literatures; secondly, to propose a conceptual model for service quality perceptions of Internet-Based self-service technologies through identifying its key antecedents and consequences; thirdly, to conduct an empirical primary research to discover and validate the inter-relationships between the constructs of the proposed conceptual model in order to offer possible explanations and comparisons that would assist to build research assumptions from the obtained primary data; and finally, to present a conceptual framework to serve as an outline for both research and practical sides in order to provide guidelines to help improve the overall service quality performance of the Internet-based self-service technologies and to raise questions and point out directions for future research.

1.5   Research Significance

The intended research study is going to be essential and valuable for both researchers and practitioners for a number of important reasons. From the academic community point of view, it is generally established that service quality assessment depends on the consumers' evaluation of the service (Tih, 2004). Therefore, Internet service providers need to be aware of the key determinants used by consumers in evaluating Internet service quality in order to improve the overall performance of Internet service quality (Tih, 2004). From the practitioner's point of view, the survival of any company in a highly competitive environment depends on its ability to provide the best service quality to its existence customers as the quality of service is a key factor in the success of any organization (Tih, 2004). In business practice, measurement of service quality is considered as an important process for improving the quality of the service (Jayawardhena et al., 2004). For the purpose of services delivered electronically, this is can be accomplished by developing a conceptual framework in order to be implemented as a frame of reference for measuring service quality from a customer perspective in the specific context of Internet-based self-service technologies. So the findings of this study will be significant for both scholars and practitioners in this area.

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