Beyond SERVQUAL: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: The current exploratory study reviews the most widely used service quality models such as SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, and the Human-Societal Element (HSE) model, and presents a critique of each of them by relying on various empirical studies that have proven beyond any doubt the inability of such models to ensure the proper measurement of service quality in various and/or specific service settings. It is evident that the orthodox SURVQUAL model is fraught with numerous shortcomings and operational flaws, major among them is its inapplicability to all cases, countries, services, ethnicities, etc. Modified service quality models have been developed in an attempt to fill the deficiency gaps of the SERVQUAL model. Yet these modified models have also fallen short of reflecting the real service quality dimensions impacting customer's satisfaction. The current study suggests a number of solutions that may lead to the development of a model/models that enjoy a certain degree of consistency and universality. The implications of such developments are highlighted, and suggestions for future research are presented. Light is also shed on the limitations of the current study.

Key words: SERVQUAL; SERVPERF; Human-Societal Element (HSE); customer satisfaction; service quality dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

In a fiercely competitive business environment, where new markets are speedily emerging, and where enterprises are exerting utmost efforts to attract and retain highly demanding customers, customer satisfaction becomes a vital tool of differentiator of any meaningful marketing strategy. Numerous research studies have shown that satisfied, or more importantly delighted customers, are a real source of competitive advantage. Yet, it is becoming increasingly difficult for many organisations to realize and sustain a competitive advantage in their respective industries and target markets. This may be attributed to the fact that the drivers of customer satisfaction, namely service quality domains or dimensions are so diverse and evolving that no single instrument has yet been devised to explain fully the real quality dimensions that customer use to judge their assessment of and satisfaction with the provided service. It is no wonder, therefore that different service quality models have been developed to measure the quality of services, and investigate its impact on customer satisfaction. The primary aim of the current exploratory research is to review the various service quality models that have been proposed and developed to measure customers' perceptions of service quality. The current research will present a critique of such models with a view to encouraging scholars and researchers from all over the world to indulge into further investigations to formulate valid models that are specific to certain service industries, cultures, countries, and ethnicities, or develop a holistic model that empirically explains and validates the real service quality dimensions that make customers satisfied with and loyal to certain service providers at the expense of others.

2. Vague and Conflicting Concepts:
2.1. Service Quality:

Although service quality is viewed as a requirement for all successful organizations to remain competitive (Gronroos, 1998), and to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Shekarchi-Zadeh, et al., 2011), there is no consistency in the definition of the term (Beecham, 2009). As a multi-dimensional concept with multi-attributes, service quality means different things to different people (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar, 1996).
Furthermore, it has been empirically proven that due to the generic nature of the concept, the standards set for defining quality vary from culture to culture, country to country, product to product, ethnicities to environments, and across time (Jayasundar, et al., 2009; Al-alak, 2009; Bekhet and Al-alak, 2011). As some quality dimensions are qualitative in nature (e.g. luxury, excellence, satisfaction and delight), researchers often encounter numerous difficulties when attempting to quantify these dimensions or attributes. Other limitations include the vague nature of the concept and its diversity so far as different people are concerned. It is quite clear that different customers attach different weightages to quality, as quality is often judged by customers depending on a wide range of issues, beliefs, values, attitudes, experience, backgrounds, etc. (Al-alak and Alnawas, 2010). Worse still, the different indicators of service quality not only differ from one service sector and sub-sectors to another, but are also not always understood by those who are supposed to agree or disagree with them (Ganguli and Roy, 2011). Therefore, studies on service quality may not be consistent across different contexts, and as such studies predicting customer satisfaction in different settings based on the quality of service are limited, especially when it appears that the results cannot be generalised.

2.2. Customer Satisfaction:

Although consensus is growing that service quality and customer satisfaction are fundamentally different in terms of their underlying causes and outcomes, many often use the two terms interchangeably, resulting in further ambiguity, confusion and invalid measurements and results (AL-alak, 2009). Indeed, customer satisfaction remains to be seen as an abstract and rather ambiguous concept. Like service quality, satisfaction depends on a set of psychological and physical variables and correlates with certain behaviours. In this context, manifestations of satisfaction vary from one person to another and from one product to another rendering its measurement both difficult and debatable (Munteanu, et al. 2010). Along these lines, Westbrook and Oliver (1981) argue that satisfaction is an evaluation of the totality of the purchase situation relative to expectations, whereas an attitude is a liking for a product or service that lacks the element of comparison. Satisfaction is influenced by perceptions of service quality, which are qualitative and subjective in nature, meaning that the level of satisfaction not only varies depending on the alternatives available to customers, but also seems to be affected by other unpredictable occurrences (Al-alak, 2009; Ajzen and Fishbin, 1980). The notion of 'satisfaction' relates to desires or feelings and is therefore one wedded completely to a sentient being. It is by its nature a subjective phenomenon, even outside its specifically psychological meaning of the satisfying of a need or desire as it affects or motivates behaviour (Beecham,2009).

3. A Critique of Existing Service Quality Models:

In the fierce competitive milieu, measurement of service quality has increasingly created an interest among service organizations and researchers alike. It is so because this growing competition and the current market environment have brought satisfaction in the centre of focus, and has therefore become extremely important for competing organisations to enlarge and especially to retain their customer base if they want to survive and perform under the current economic conditions. However, existing service quality models have fallen short of identifying the set of holistic and real service quality attributes impacting customer satisfaction. This is attributed to numerous reasons. In this section, an attempt will be made to review the different service quality models that have been developed to measure the quality of service in chronological order, presenting a critique of each of them with a view to encouraging researchers to get more involved in the development of models that address the peculiarities of their different environments.

3.1. the SERVQUAL Model:

Parasuraman et al. (1988, 1994) were the first to coin the concept of measuring service quality, popularly referred to as SERVQUAL model. These authors derived a specific measure for quality especially designed for the service industry instead of referring to quality addressed in the manufactured goods industry. They started the unending journey of conceptualizing the measurement of service quality in 1985 with ten service quality dimensions. Later on the number was reduced to five major quality dimensions namely: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. These scales are measured through a questionnaire which identifies the perceptions and expectations of customers regarding this different aspect of the service quality construct. The total score is derived from the difference between perceptions and expectations scores. Although it is widely used, the SERVQUAL model has been criticized on several grounds, namely:

- The inability of expectations to remain constant over time (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).
- The inability of SERVQUAL to provide management with sufficient information for strategy implementation and resource allocation aimed at enhancing customer satisfaction (Hemmasi et al., 1997).
• SERVQUAL has not been used to measure customer satisfaction to any great extent due to its primary concern with gauging service quality in a given scenario (Jayasundara, et al., 2009; Al-alak, 2009).
• The insustainability of SERVQUAL dimensions across different cultures, countries and ethnicities (Furer, et al., 2002).
• The inapplicability of SERVQUAL model to all service sectors. Indeed different modified versions of SERVQUAL model have been used by several scholars (Bekhet and Al-alak, 2011; Eastman, et al., 2011; Beacham, 2009; Micuda and Crucern, 2010; Kanning and Bergmann, 2009; Munteanu, et al., 2010; Maditinos and Theodoridis, 2010) to assess service quality. However, these studies did not entirely rely on the SERVQUAL model.

3.2. The SERVPERF Model:
The strong critics of the SERVQUAL model developed a new model in 1992 to fill the deficiency gags of the SERVQUAL model (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). They developed their model based on Performance Model Satisfaction over the Disconfirmation Paradigm used by the SERVQUAL scale. They used 22 questions with respondents' perception-only scores to measure service quality instead of SERVQUAL's disconfirmation scores. The SERVPERF instrument is therefore identical to SERVQUAL, with the exception that SERVQUAL has 44 items (22 items for expectation of service quality and 22 items for performance of service quality), while SERVPERF has 22 items addressing only actual performance. This model has been criticized for being preoccupied with psychometric and methodological soundness of scales (Jayasundra, et al., 2009). It is used and tested only in developed nations (Mostafa, 2006). Like SERVQUAL, the SERVPERF model's measures are static, in that they do not consider the history of the service, and they fail to capture the dynamics of the changing expectation (Jayasundra, et al., 2009).

3.3. the Human-societal Elements Model (HSE):
This model was developed by Sureshchander, et al., (2010) to overcome the drawbacks of SERVQUAL scale and SERVPERF scale, as both these instruments failed to address certain important constituents of service quality, like service product or core service and systematization/standardization of service delivery. This model conceptualizes customer perceived service quality based on a number of dimensions such as core service or service product, human element of service delivery, systematization of service delivery, tangibles of service and social responsibility. However, the model has been subject to criticisms as it cannot be applied to profit-oriented service organizations (Al-alak, 2010).

Based on the conceptual, methodological, operational and logical evaluation of the above-mentioned service quality models, it may be safely concluded that there is no universally accepted notion of the optimal instrument to conceptualize customer satisfaction in relation to service quality. It is therefore important that the current exploratory research makes the initiative for service quality model/models that will ensure that measuring service quality in various and/or specific service settings would be based on attributes that are both relevant and dynamic in so far as the environment where it is employed is concerned.

4. Beyond SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and HSE:
It is not a coincidence that the majority of research studies investigating and measuring customer satisfaction as related to service quality have either used modified forms of SERVQUAL, SERVPERF and HSE, or ignored these models entirely. Reference is made to these studies in the current research. It is also striking that these studies were mainly conducted in either developing countries in general or in Asia and Africa in particular. This brings us to the crucial observation that the above-mentioned models cannot be applied in all service sectors, cultures, countries, and ethnicities, indicating that their employed dimensions, irrespective of their number, do not enjoy the required universality.

Based on such observations and empirical findings, it is only fair to assume that the Western-engineered models do not seem to be applicable in developing countries' setting. Even the initiators of the SERVQUAL model (i.e. Parasuraman et al., 1994) have moved from five dimensions to three, combining responsiveness, assurance, and empathy into one single dimension. There are also other studies that suggest consolidation and rethinking of the SERVQUAL dimensions (Dabholkar, 1996; Gervey and Gao, 2009; Chou, H-J, 2009). Others have called for a more realistic and relevant model and methodology for assessing customer outcomes and satisfaction, away from the orthodox SERVQUAL model.
These researchers and practitioners doubt the logic behind the measurement of expectations in the SERVQUAL model, the operationalization of these expectations, the reliability and validity of the difference score formulation of SERVQUAL, and SERVQUAL's dimensionality across various service encounters (Carman, 1990; Finn and Lamb, 1991; Babakus and Boller, 1992; Brown et al., 1993; Teas, 1993, 1994; Cronin and Taylor 1992, 1994; Bekhet and Al-alak, 2011).

Conclusions, Implications and Future Research:

It is quite apparent that the existing service quality models are fraught with numerous shortcomings and operational flaws. It has been shown in the current exploratory research that the existing models are static and generic in nature and have not been specifically developed for a particular environment, for example, health care centres in Malaysia, Islamic banks in Saudi Arabic, or libraries in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, review of literature reveals that the orthodox SERVQUAL model not only suffers from conceptual, measurement, dimensionality and operational drawbacks, but it is also not applicable to all cases, countries, ethnicities etc. for example, the appropriateness of the SERVQUAL's dimensions to service settings in the majority of developing countries has been doubted, and there are numerous evidence to prove and suggest that existing service quality models are not universal tools to measure the service quality in any service industry, country, different cultures, and among different ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the inapplicability of SERVQUAL model to all environment settings seems to have resulted in the emergence of numerous adapted and modified models attempting to measure the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction. However, these different measurement scales may lead to some empirical errors because of measurement inconsistency. As such, scholars are called upon to develop either a realistic model or a specific model that encompasses variables closely related to 'universal culture', or be specific to certain cultures, countries, services, and ethnicities. It is not a best business practice to duplicate models that are not reflective of a business culture, its geographical location, mission, etc. Such duplication may lead to the formulation of marketing strategies that are not relevant to or expressive of customer demands, wants, and needs. Practitioners are called upon to predict customer satisfaction in their service settings by first understanding the different dimensions of service quality as they apply to their specific settings. Because satisfaction is basically a psychological state (Fournier and Mick, 1999), care should be taken in the effort of quantitative measurement, although a large quantity of research in this area has been developed. This, of course, is not an invitation to abandon the existing models, but rather to use their rationale and initial logic to build upon them, and avoiding their flaws and shortcomings. Researchers in the developing countries besides the emerging economies in china, India and parts of the Middle East, are called upon to propose models that respond to the peculiarities of their different environments. Replicating models fit for advanced countries may result in false or fabricated outcomes, and if decisions are to be based on such outcomes, marketing strategies will certainly be ineffective in realizing the desired objectives. As for the limitation of this study, it should be pointed out that this study is only exploratory, and therefore further studies are needed to investigate and develop models that can be applied to different environments, and to think of dimensions that are both dynamic and flexible. Such models must be subjected to further validity tests to ensure their sustainability and applicability. Further studies may also addresses aspects of marketing strategy, promotional and communication issues to acquire new customers, and effectively maintain the existing customers. In this context, more relevant service quality dimensions should be included in any future models of service quality.

REFERENCES


