

THE EFFECT OF E-SERVICE QUALITY ON CUSTOMER PERCEPTION

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Abstract- E-service quality is increasingly recognized as a key determinant for successful electronic commerce as an antecedent of satisfaction with services. In the e-shopping environment context, some recent research has supported the impact of e-service quality on customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty. However, there is no comprehensive study to capture the perceptions of online customers in relation to antecedents and consequences of e-service quality attributes. The purpose of this paper is to explore the roles of e-service quality dimensions on attitudes and feelings of customers and to develop a conceptual framework to identify the antecedents and consequences of E-SQ based on grounded theory analysis of literature.

Keywords- E-Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Trust, Loyalty.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research into service quality area has been popular for more than two decades being recognized as a key factor in differentiating service products and building competitive advantage (Zeithaml, 1996; Bitner, 2000) but it has been applied to e-commerce environments very recently. "E-service" has recently become a popular research topic with growth of e-commerce and various number of published studies have offered a variety of conceptual definitions with the pioneering works of Rust and Lemmon (2001) and Zeithaml (2002). After Zeithaml (2002), the quality of service in electronic environment has been explored more in depth by Santos (2003) and Rowley (2006) through measures across different market sectors including e-retailing (Collier and Bienstock, 2003; Parasuraman, 2005; Trabold, 2006).

The preceding literature supports the notion that favorable service quality perceptions lead to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty. Customer satisfaction is a post consumption experience which compares perceived quality with expected quality (Anderson, 1993; Ennew and Binks, 1999; Sivadas and Prewit, 2000). Although the relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction and consumers' behavioural intentions are well documented in classical service literature (Parasuraman, 1985; Zeithaml, 1996), such relationships have not been fully subjected to conceptual and empirical investigation in the e-business context. Zeithaml (2002) calls researchers to pay particular attention to the concept of e-service quality and its associated consequences. In the e-context, several researchers have confirmed the impact of e-quality on satisfaction and loyalty (Lee and Lin, 2005; Collier and Bienstock, 2006; Shamdasani, 2008). This study is also another attempt to answer this research call and help to fill this gap in literature knowledge.

In order to provide superior service quality to influence customer e-satisfaction and loyalty, e-retailers should pay more attention to the attributes

which customers actually use in their evaluation of e-service quality. No longer price and web-presence are considered as drivers of success (Parasuraman, 2005) and price is found as the least important determinant influencing intention to return to the site by Zeithaml (2002). In a severe competitive market situation, an important strategy for success in e-business is to extend business globally, understand and satisfy e-shoppers by improving e-service quality (Kuo, 2003; Silverstein, 2003). So, it will be beneficial to understand which e-service quality dimensions are considered by e-customers to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty as aimed in this study.

Under the light of preceding discussions, the objective of this paper is to explore what affects users' perceptions about a Web site in terms of e-service quality attributes. This study engages in a comprehensive literature review investigating dimensions of web service quality and constructing a theoretical framework including antecedents and consequences of e-service quality perceptions of customers.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. E-Service Quality

Zeithaml (2002) defined "e-service" from a service quality perspective as "the extent to which a website facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing and delivering of products and services". "E-service quality" is a standard of means by which the potential benefits of Internet are realized (Yang, 2001). Santos (2003, p.235) defined e-service quality as "overall customer assessment and judgements in relation to the excellence and the quality of e-service delivery in the virtual marketplace". Davis (1989) and Dabholkar (1996) found ease of use and fun, Kling (1994) argued interactive features, multimedia content and capacity in e-service quality concept. Ennew (1993) suggested safety issue and Abels (1999) proposed six operational definitions of user criteria as use, content, structure, linkage, search and

appearance. Yang (2001) proposed potential factors of online service quality that align with those of SERVQUAL instrument as reliability, responsiveness, access, ease of use, attentiveness and credibility. Wolfinger and Gilly (2001) conducted an extensive study including focus groups and online panel survey of 1,013 customers in order to establish a valid scale based on four quality dimensions as customer service, privacy/security, web site design and fulfillment/reliability. Pan (2002) used web site evaluation scale of BizRate.com to assess e-tailers' service quality. Trocchia and Janda (2003) using in depth interviews identified five dimensions of e-service quality: performance, access, security, sensation and information. Santos (2003) proposed an integrated set of online service quality dimensions suggesting that the factors influencing the adoption of online services are grouped into two categories as incubative dimension and active dimension. The incubative dimension includes ease of use, appearance, linkage and content while the active dimension consists reliability, efficiency, support, communication, security and incentive.

More recently, Parasuraman (2005) used a means end framework in order to develop a scale for measuring e-service quality. Through a two-stage empirical data collection, two different interrelated scales were identified for e-service quality. The basic e-service quality scale consisted of four dimensions: efficiency, fulfillment, system availability and privacy. Because recovery was considered as a critical aspect of service, a separate scale concerned aspects of e-service recovery and contained three dimensions: responsiveness, compensation and contact. The first four dimensions of E-SQ (efficiency, system availability, fulfillment and privacy) are related to core online service, whereas the remaining three dimensions concern service recovery (responsiveness, compensation and contact). E-SQ is related to customers' perceptions of e-service quality when customers experience no problems with the site, whereas E-RecSQ deals with problems encountered during the online purchase process. So, both parts worth to investigate since they have significant effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty in e-services. The seven dimensions of Parasuraman's E-SQ and E-RecSQ (2005) are described as: 1- Efficiency: The ease and speed of accessing and using the site. 2- Fulfillment: The extent to which the site's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled. 3- System availability: The correct technical functioning of the site. 4- Privacy: The degree to which the site is safe and protects customer information. 5- Responsiveness: Effective handling of problems and returns through the site. 6- Compensation: The degree to which the site compensates customers for problems. 7- Contact: The availability of assistance through telephone or online representatives.

Building on Parasuraman's work (2005), Collier and Bienstock (2006) made a further distinction among process of interactive quality, outcome quality and recovery. Finally, Cristobal (2007) suggested a multiple-item scale consisted of four perceived e-service quality dimensions; web design, customer service, assurance and order management. E-SQ developed by Parasuraman (2005) has been employed by many researchers as a means of gauging e-service quality (Yen and Lu, 2008). Compared to other e-service scales, Parasuraman's E-SQ covers customers' whole shopping experience. Seven E-SQ and E-RecSQ dimensions developed by Parasuraman (2005) are wholly taken for the framework of this paper to explore which quality factors effect customer satisfaction and loyalty in e-services. In addition to Parasuraman's E-SQ dimensions, some additional dimensions are included in the conceptual framework in accordance with literature findings. Product assortment, product quality and product customization items are taken under "Product factor" dimension name from study of Schaupp and Belanger (2005).

Jarvenpaa and Todd (1997) found that consumers were impressed by the breadth of stores on the Internet, but were disappointed with the depth of a merchant's offerings. Merchants who have offered a wide variety of products and selections seem to be more successful. Even beyond offering a broad product selection, Jarvenpaa and Todd (1997) claim that consumers expect e-commerce to offer a wider product variety because of the easy reachability to the Internet and the potential to track down specialty goods and services. Superior product assortment results in positive perceptions of customer satisfaction (Szymanski & Hise 2000), especially if the customer wants an item that isn't widely available.

Minimizing product cost and maximizing product quality are the other major factors in e-commerce success (Keeney, 1999). Product quality is the expected standard of product or service excellence (Jarvenpaa & Todd 1997). Brands and retailers that are well known and well regarded from the traditional channels may translate the quality on an online channel. The question becomes how consumers will assess product quality when they are unfamiliar with the retailer or the product brand (Jarvenpaa & Todd 1997). Kalakota and Whinston (1996) stress the need to provide independent evaluations of goods and services to convince consumers of the quality of the merchandise sold by the Internet merchant on the web. Thus, the end result for the consumer should be a feeling of gratification with the purchase once completed.

Product customization is the users' ability to customize products according to personal preferences (Zhu & Kraemer 2002). Customization is one of the great advantages of online shopping (Van Slyke, 2004) allowing each customer to be a segment of

himself, where each customer is unique in his or her tastes, choices, and acquisitions.

2.2. E-satisfaction in relation to e-service quality

Several studies conclude that satisfaction is an affective, rather than cognitive construct (Oliver, 1997; Olsen, 2002). It is an indication of customer's belief of the probability of a service leading to a positive feeling. In accordance with early researches on customers' satisfaction in traditional areas, Oliver (1980) initially proposed the theory of "expectation inconformity" that is the customers feel satisfied when the goods are beyond their expectation. Zeithaml (2002) believe that the theory of "expectation inconformity" is inapplicable to explain the customers' satisfaction of their online business because there is not a standard to measure their expectation prior to the online business, which enables scholars to further support that e-service quality itself is an important motivation of customers' satisfaction.

Anderson and Srinivasan (2003, p.125) defined e-satisfaction as "the contentment of the customer with respect to his or her prior purchasing experience with a given e-commerce firm". The positive relationship between e-service quality and e-satisfaction is well examined in the previous e-service quality related studies (Loiacono, 2002; Zeithaml, 2002; Zhang and Prybutok, 2005). Grönroos (2000) mentioned that increased e-service quality can make e-retailers more appealing thus can help them to attain higher customer satisfaction levels.

Many authors have emphasized the importance of e-service quality as antecedents of online customer satisfaction in literature (Loiacono, Watson and Goodhue, 2002; Negash, Ryan and Igbaria, 2003; Yang and Jun, 2002). E-service quality is crucial not only being a primary asset that e-customers look for, but also it shapes their initial impression of a web site's value and determines whether they will continue their present and future searches on the web site (Barnes and Vidgen, 2006; Than and Grandon, 2002, Yang and Peterson 2004). Lee and Lin (2005) also found that e-service quality contributes to overall e-customer satisfaction. Wolfenbarger and Gilly (2003) posit that e-customers' quality judgement, satisfaction and loyalty are positively influenced by the design quality of the firm's web site. Cho and Park (2001) studied 453 e-customers in order to develop a user satisfaction index, and found that e-service quality has a dominant influence on online customer satisfaction. Loiacono (2002) developed an e-service quality instrument consisting of 12 dimensions which were found to be significantly related to e-customer satisfaction. So, e-service quality dimensions are taken as the focus of this study in affecting online customer satisfaction.

This paper believes that it is worthwhile to analyze the relationship between e-service quality dimensions of Parasuraman's E-SQ (2005) being most

extensively and successfully used service quality measurement in the twenty first century and e-satisfaction of customers (Tsoukatos and Rand, 2006). As explained in the previous section in detail, some additional dimensions related with the product factors such as product assortment, product quality and product customization are also included in the conceptual framework of the relationship between e-service quality, e-satisfaction and loyalty in accordance with literature findings. Product assortment, product quality and product customization items are taken under "Product factor" dimension name inspired by the reviewed study of Schaupp and Belanger (2005) and other studies from literature like Jarvenpaa and Todd (1997), Szymanski & Hise (2000) and Van Slyke (2004).

Under the light of these, the first proposition of this study which is intended to be tested in future studies is:

H1: In the e-shopping environment, e-service quality positively impacts satisfaction.

2.3 Loyalty in relation to e-satisfaction and e-service quality

E-loyalty is understood as a consumer's intention to revisit a web site and to consider purchasing from it in the future (Cyr, 2008). The significant positive relationship between e-satisfaction and e-loyalty has been widely studied (Kim, 2009; Shankar, 2003; Yang and Peterson, 2004; Yen and Lu, 2008). Yen and Lu (2008) indicated that satisfaction influences consumer post-purchase intention to repurchase a product or re-use a service. According to Zhang and Prybutok (2005), e-service quality and satisfaction are significant predictors for loyalty. Gronroos (2000) mentioned that increased e-service quality can make e-retailers more appealing thus can help them to attain higher customer satisfaction levels and retention.

Much research in the last two decades has investigated the various definitions of loyalty (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). They argue that there must be a strong "attitudinal commitment" to a brand for true loyalty to exist (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). Past research has consistently found a direct relationship between both service quality and likeliness or willingness to recommend by saying positive things about the organization. Indeed, satisfied customers are also known to provide positive WOM to individuals who have no relation to a specific transaction which eventually will influence their purchasing intentions. This type of loyalty is known as an emotionally expressed behavior (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003) where customers are willing to inform others on service incidents that have given them satisfaction. Based on this research (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003), it was reported that 78 percent of the consumers said that they trusted direct

recommendations from other consumers through WOM of which 61 percent said they trusted consumer opinions posted online. So, either online or offline, people still trust their friends (Pfanner, 2007). Trust component is very important and should take place in this study's framework linking the path of relationship between satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty constructs. As has been repeatedly modeled in the field of customer satisfaction, satisfaction and trust are causal drivers of recommendation (WOM) and repeat intentions both in offline and online environments (Ribbink, 2004). So, the following four propositions of this study are developed in parallel with the above literature findings as:

H2: *In the e-shopping environment, e-satisfaction positively impacts trust.*

H3: *In the e-shopping environment, e-satisfaction positively impacts WOM (attitudinal loyalty).*

H4: *In the e-shopping environment, trust positively impacts WOM (attitudinal loyalty).*

Attitudinal loyalty, which is developed by satisfaction and trust in turn, determines consumer intentions being site revisit and purchase intention for online shopping which is a part of behavioural loyalty. Consumer intentions to purchase a particular brand, for example, should grow stronger as his or her attitude toward this brand becomes more favorable. As such, the strength of this attitude is considered by many researchers as the key predictor of a brand's purchase and repeat patronage (Donio, 2006). As a result, intent to purchase and repurchase capture the behavioral component of loyalty.

The fifth proposition of this study is suggested on basis of the above research findings to be tested in future studies as:

H5: *In the e-shopping environment, WOM (attitudinal loyalty) positively impacts site revisit and purchase intention (behavioural loyalty).*

Research on factors that influence customer loyalty has made considerable progress within the field of consumer behavior for many years. In this study's conceptual framework, customer loyalty is behaviorally presented by retention component including site revisit and purchase intention (Bansal and Taylor, 1999) and emotionally (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003) presented by WOM component.

III. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The perceived e-service quality part of the conceptual model of this study is mostly based on Parasuraman's E-SQ model (2005) being most extensively and successfully used model in literature and also has a wide coverage of factors included in other models. Parasuraman's dimensions are grouped into factors as Technology Factors, Shopping Factors and Product

Factors inspired from the study of Schaupp and Belanger (2005). Technology Factors and Shopping Factors include Parasuraman's (2005) items having some common features with researchers like Yaobin and Tao (2005), Yang (2001) and Santos (2003) while Product Factors include items from studies of Belanger (2002), Nielsen (2000), Torkzadeh and Dhillon (2002).

The skill level of e-customers in manipulating the prevailing technology can affect the outcome of the service experience. One difference between traditional service encounters and e-service experiences is that the e-customer relies entirely on his or her ability to use technology to obtain the service, thus becoming a partner in the delivery of the e-service (Kim, Chun, & Song, 2009). Ford (2001) establish a strong relationship between individual differences and behavior in internet search. Rowley (2006) argues that increasing a customer's knowledge and skill sets with a service process is a key organizational strategy for managing customer satisfaction. Sanchez-Franco and Roldan (2005) point to the fact that differences in individual expertise can account for differences in perceived e-service quality and satisfaction. A skillful web user is more likely to overcome website challenges and hence more likely to have a favorable assessment of web service (Shih, 2004). Alford and Biswas (2002) concluded that individual differences account for the difference in intentions to search or purchase among e-customers. So, individual pc skills construct is added to the conceptual framework having a positive impact on efficiency thus, perceived e-service quality. In parallel with this addition, the last proposition of this study is produced as:

H6: *In the e-shopping environment, individual PC skills positively impacts efficiency dimension of perceived e-service quality.*

Below Figure 1. represents the conceptual model of this study including e-service quality dimensions, e-satisfaction, trust and loyalty relationship which is suggested to be tested in further research for future.

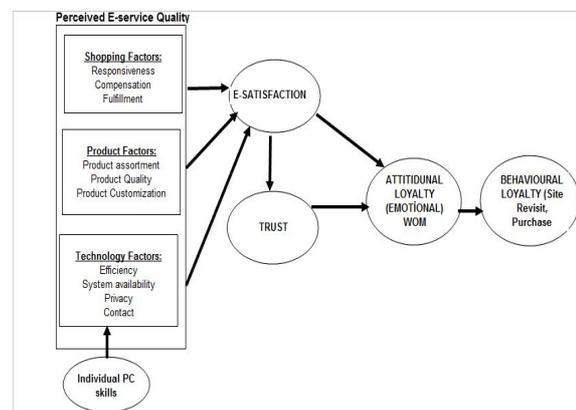


Figure: Conceptual Model

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The development of e-commerce and the challenge of building sustainable competitive advantage on internet create the necessity to better understand how customers perceive and react to e-companies' offerings. E-commerce sites have to perform more qualities today and an understanding of the impacts of web service quality research becomes more crucial for achieving e-customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions to purchase. This study generates important implications for web merchants by indicating the need to develop online systems which are trustworthy, user friendly, secured, responsive, personalized and product rich to encourage repeating visits and repurchase intentions of their customers.

The conceptual model of this study has a wide coverage of key dimensions of e-service quality in relation to their impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty by introducing some additional dimensions like product assortment, product quality and product customization to perceived e-service quality construct in addition to Parasuraman's E-SQ (2005). This paper provides a comprehensive view to customer's online shopping perceptions by making contribution to the present knowledge with the consideration of some additional constructs like trust, attitudinal and behavioural loyalty items.

This study offers a number of avenues for future research areas and may be extended in a number of ways. Further research might be conducted for testing the proposed hypotheses of this conceptual study by use of SEM analysis which provides statistical efficiency to assess the relationships of impacts among the constructs of the conceptual framework.

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