

A REVIEW OF THEORETICAL DEBATES ON THE MEASUREMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR HOSPITALITY RESEARCH

Yuksel Ekinçi
University of Surrey

The complexity of the factors defining service quality has led to the development of multidimensional models, which are divided into two schools of thought: the North American and the Nordic European. The aim of this article is twofold. First, it reviews some of the key issues raised in relation to the theoretical formations of these two schools of thought. Second, it outlines further research areas in the hospitality industry.

KEYWORDS: *service quality; customer satisfaction; hotels; measurement scales; importance performance analysis; critical incident technique.*

Although establishing service quality may require a lot of time and effort, it eventually provides an effective way of achieving success among competing services (B. R. Lewis, 1993). It is claimed that high-quality services enhance customer satisfaction, increase market share, and enhance profitability of service organizations (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). Despite its strategic importance, to date, service quality is considered as a complex construct and, as such, generates many debates regarding its conceptualization and measurement, causing confusion among researchers and practitioners alike.

The complexity of the factors defining service quality has led to the development of multidimensional models, which are divided into two schools of thought: the North American (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) and the Nordic European (Gronroos, 1984; Lehtinen & Lehtinen, 1991). The aim of this article is twofold. First, it attempts to outline some of the key issues relating to the theoretical formations of the two schools of thought—due to their profound influence on the measurement of service quality. Second, it delineates further research areas in the hospitality industry. The discussion begins with the American school of thought but then concentrates on the European school of thought, as extensive reviews have been made elsewhere regarding the former (Buttle, 1996; Ekinçi & Riley, 1998). The discussion then moves on to the role of some popular service quality measurement techniques and their contribution to the practical measurement of service quality.

MODELS OF SERVICE QUALITY

The North American school of thought is dominated by Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) service quality model known as SERVQUAL, which was developed after an extensive study of both customers and executives of different organizations. The SERVQUAL model views service quality as the gap that occurs between customer expectation and perceived performance. Therefore, service quality is explained and assessed by the formula of perception minus expectation, which is also known as the inferred disconfirmation measurement. According to this computation, the higher the score, the better the quality of service and vice versa (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

By using the gap formulation of service quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) subsequently developed a model and a multidimensional scale called SERVQUAL. It is claimed that perception of service quality emanates from five generic dimensions regardless of the types of service evaluated: tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Because the measurement scale has been criticized, hospitality researchers designed a content-specific scale—LODGSERV—for assessing service quality in hotels (Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert, & Yokoyoma, 1990). However, the superiority of this scale over the SERVQUAL is still questionable (Ekinci, 1999).

One of the early representatives of the Nordic European school of thought—Gronroos (1984)—argued that perceived service quality (which he called *satisfaction*) is essentially a function of expected service and perceived performance—an idea similar to that expressed in the North American school of thought. This model is based on the expectancy-disconfirmation theory, and the term of expectation occupies the central location of the model. However, the model operates on the basis of a perceived disconfirmation process (as opposed to an inferred disconfirmation process); therefore, the measurement of service quality takes place on a bipolar scale labeled *better than expectations* and *worse than expectations*.

In contrast to the SERVQUAL model, Gronroos' (1984) summary of service quality is based on the "what" and "how" questions. The former concerns what the consumers receive as a result of interaction with a service organization, and this is called *technical quality*. The latter seeks to address how consumers receive services; this is called *functional quality*. To be more precise, functional quality refers to the evaluation of the service process. Together, the technical and functional quality dimensions form the primary constituents of corporate image (i.e., how consumers see the service organization), which is claimed to be the third dimension of the model.

In response to the theoretical relationship between these dimensions, Gronroos (1988) argued that the two dimensions of output and technical quality are the antecedents of corporate image. A strong image can be established through these dimensions due to the fact that consumers can see and participate in service delivery processes. Also, functional quality may make a more significant contribution to perception of service quality compared with technical quality, as long as the latter is maintained at a minimum acceptable level. Therefore, functional quality

should be of greater interest to managers in terms of controlling customer satisfaction or service quality. Although this notion may be accepted as a general rule of thumb, Haywood-Farmer (1988) suggested that the importance of the dimensions should be determined according to the kind of services or organizations.

Later, Gronroos (1988) identified six subdimensions or determinants of service quality that would be useful for managerial purposes. These are (a) professionalism and skills, (b) attitudes and behavior, (c) accessibility and flexibility, (d) reliability and trustworthiness, (e) recovery, and (f) reputation and credibility. According to his suggestion, professionalism and skills are outcome related and therefore should be assigned to the technical quality dimension. Reputation and credibility are image related and serve as a filter for our evaluation of services. The other four criteria are process related and therefore correspond to the functional quality dimension.

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) provided another comprehensive analysis of service quality from the Nordic school of thought. Their approach views service quality as either two- or three dimensional. The three-dimensional approach consists of physical quality, interactive quality, and corporate quality dimensions. According to the two-dimensional approach, service quality consists of process quality and outcome quality dimensions. Process quality is the customer's evaluation of participation in the service delivery process, and output quality is the evaluation of service outcome.

Limitations of the Nordic European School of Thought

Gronroos's model has greatly contributed to our understanding of the different components of service quality. This model not only outlines the conceptual relationships between the dimensions but also stipulates the practical implications for measuring and improving service quality. However, a number of criticisms of this model have been raised. First, Moore (1994) argued that the sample used to test the model is biased because the sample was specific to a single group containing only Swedish service firm executives who had participated in service-marketing seminars. Hence, doubt is shed on whether the results can be generalized to all service companies (e.g., hotels, restaurants) or to a specific customer segment. A country-specific bias may also have arisen because the survey was confined to Swedish executives.

Second, despite the fact that employing the Perceived Disconfirmation scale provides a better reliability and validity score, the explanatory power of the survey findings is limited, and thus the results obtained are not particularly useful to policy makers. For example, managers would like to know the level of service performance compared to various types of expectation (e.g., whether performance is below the ideal level or above the minimum tolerable level) so that action can be taken toward further improvement. Unfortunately, Gronroos (1984) offered no insight into the types of expectation being measured.

Third, despite the fact that Lehtinen and Lehtinen's (1991) study broadened the Gronroos (1984) model overall, their two-dimensional approach, consisting of process and outcome quality, is basically equivalent to Gronroos's functional and technical quality dimensions, respectively.

The final criticism of the Nordic European school of thought is that it remains on a theoretical level. Its proponents tend to focus on the theory of service quality rather than providing strong empirical evidence for the validity of their model and dimensions. Notwithstanding such limitations, the Nordic European school of thought has made a substantial contribution to service quality research, in particular, recognizing the existence of output quality and image dimensions as different from the North American school.

The Universal Acceptability of Service Quality Dimensions

Because the most influential service quality scholars, Parasuraman et al. (1988), proposed that their five-factorial model SERVQUAL is generic for the evaluation of services, attempts have been made to reproduce the model's dimensions in a specific industry (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Two types of conclusion have been reported from such empirical studies, which use factor analysis as a primary construct validation procedure. First, the item loading indicates the five factors overlap. Second, applications of the original SERVQUAL scale or content-specific scales using this model display either unidimensional or multidimensional structures that are different from the SERVQUAL model.

Empirical studies in hotels provide evidence that customers cannot distinguish some of the SERVQUAL dimensions. Saleh and Ryan's (1991) work in the hotel industry indicates that whereas tangibles and assurance are generic, the dimensions of empathy, assurance, and reliability cannot be replicated. Similarly, Getty and Thompson (1994) showed that the dimensions of tangibles and reliability are generic, but that assurance, responsiveness, and empathy merge in a single dimension called *contact*. It is interesting that both studies suggest a three-dimensional model for the evaluation of hotels. What is also interesting is that this structure is similar to Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1994a) empirical findings when they tested the original SERVQUAL scale and eventually found a three-dimensional rather than a five-dimensional model in retailing. Similarly, Oberoi and Hales's (1990) study in U.K. conference hotels showed that perception of service quality is two- as opposed to five dimensional. This was also confirmed by a team of researchers when the SERVQUAL scale initially failed to reveal the five dimensions in assessing service quality in resort hotels but later, the same data supported a two-dimensional structure (Ekinci, Riley, & Fife-Schaw, 1998). These studies suggest that some of the dimensions proposed by the existing models are not generic for the evaluation of hotels.

Despite the fact that these studies question the validity of the five-dimensional structure, it is worth reporting a piece of research that appears to support the five SERVQUAL dimensions in the hospitality industry (Wuest, Tas, & Emenheiser, 1996). Although the content-specific scale reinforced the validity of the five dimensions in the factor analysis, serious limitations seemed to be involved. First, the study sample was confined to a specific market segment consisting of older customers (age 55 and older). Second, some of the nominated items (e.g., reliability and empathy) were loaded on different factors and therefore this compromised the validity of the dimensions. Third, the reliability of the tangible scale ($\alpha = .43$) was much lower than minimum acceptable standards (Churchill, 1979).

Not only empirical studies indicate the lack of discriminant validity but also some content validity studies give discouraging results in that the conceptual definitions of service quality dimensions overlap (Buttle, 1996; Lehtinen, Ojasalo, & Ojasalo, 1996). In an attempt to bring the ideas of the two schools of thought together, Lapierre and Filiatrault (1996) argued that the contents of the two dimensions—empathy and reliability—are confusing for the evaluation of professional services. Furthermore, they advocated that the operational definition of the SERVQUAL reliability dimension is inadequate because its items overlap with the conceptual definition of technical quality dimension offered by Gronroos (1988). As a result, they suggested the concept of reliability should be split into the technical and functional quality dimensions. On the contrary, Gronroos noted that reliability is a functional quality-related dimension.

In response to this issue, Babakus and Boller (1992) commented that “the domain of service quality can be factorially complex in some industries or unidimensional in others and therefore the number of service quality dimensions may be dependent on a particular service being studied” (p. 265). Similarly, Carmen (1990) introduced a contingency approach in response to dealing with this issue. He proposed that if a dimension is important for customers, it should be decomposed into a number of subdimensions. However, it is essential that this structure should emerge in the scaling procedure.

One line of argument emphasizes the possibility that existing service quality dimensions can be used as complements to each other. For example, one of the important criticisms of the SERVQUAL model is that the scale dimensions only capture customers’ perception of service delivery rather than outcome (Babakus & Mangold, 1992). In line with this, R. C. Lewis (1987) argued that the dimension of output quality may be critical for the evaluation of hotel services. In a study of service quality in restaurants, Richard and Allaway (1994) showed that the predictive power of the SERVQUAL scale significantly improves when the output quality dimension is incorporated into the scale. A similar approach, taken by Mittal and Lasser (1996), indicated that the dimension of personalization, which is substituted for the two SERVQUAL dimensions empathy and assurance, is the most important determinant of perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, and other patronage indicators.

Models of service quality employ various comparison standards for the evaluation and measurement of service quality. Expectations are always at the heart of these practices. The following section aims to outline the nature of expectations as a comparison standard and their role in the measurement of service quality.

THE ISSUE OF A COMPARISON STANDARD

Several comparison standards have been introduced into the literature using different perspectives such as expectations, equity, experience-based norms, and desires. However, their use often triggers conceptual and methodological problems in the evaluation of services, mainly because of vague conceptualization and misinterpretation. The results have been diverged and methodological problems have arisen when a single comparison standard is expected to be generic for the

measurement of service quality. Having recognized the deficiencies of a comparison standard in service quality research, the discussion will now focus on the examination of expectations.

The Role of Expectations

Expectations are the most frequently cited comparison standard in the majority of service quality and customer satisfaction studies. However, Liljander and Strandvik (1993) argued that conceptualization of expectation is vague and that this makes interpretation of surveys difficult, as follows:

The term expectations in service quality literature has a different meaning for different authors and the meaning is not always made clear to the reader, who reads into the word his/her own interpretation. Some research reports do not even mention how expectations were operationalized, thus making it difficult for the reader to draw any conclusion from the results. (p. 12)

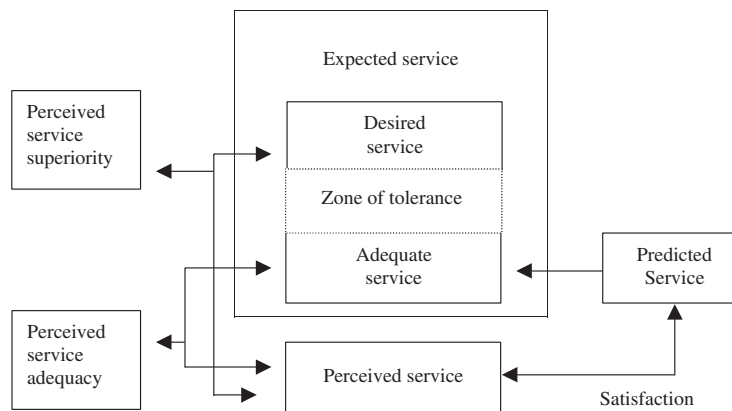
More confusion has arisen when expectations fail to predict customer satisfaction in different applications. LaTour and Peat (1979) contended that consumers can still be satisfied with products, although the product does not meet their expectations, for example, when the product is better than anything else currently available.

In specific terms, expectations can be seen as a belief in future performance of the product or service. A broader definition of expectations implies that they are associated with different levels of performance. In this respect, Miller's (1977) conceptualization of expectations is credible.

According to Miller (1977), expectations are classified into ideal, expected, minimum tolerable, and deserved levels. The ideal is the wished-for level and reflects what the performance of the product or service can be. The expected is based on respondents' objective calculation of what the performance will be. This is also known as predictive expectation. The minimum tolerable is the least acceptable performance level that is "better than nothing" and reflects what the minimum level of respondents' perceived performance must be. The deserved level is determined by individuals' evaluation of the rewards and costs of the relationship. Hence, it indicates what individuals, in the light of their investments, feel should be the performance (Miller, 1977). According to this theory, expectations are structured in a hierarchical order, with desired expectation at the top and minimum tolerable at the bottom. Also, the position of the expected and deserved service may change in response to situational factors such as consumers' investments of product and degrees of feeling.

The nature of expectation has been of great interest in the North American school of thought. Parasuraman et al. (1988) initially stated that the "should" type of expectation is appropriate for measuring service quality. This is actually based on customers' belief probabilities of the service performance and it reflects customers' desires and wants. However, in a subsequent study, Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) reported that the "should" type of expectation is not useful in measuring service quality due to the fact that the gap score always comes out neg-

Figure 1
The Expectation Model



Source: Adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1993).

ative when expectation is subtracted from perception in the gap equation. Then, they introduced the idea of the normative expectation, changing the statement from “A company should have . . .” to “An excellent company will have . . .” To outline what excellent service means, Parasuraman et al. (1991) stated that an excellent service is similar to the ideal standard used in the satisfaction literature. However, the concept of an ideal point is found to be problematic. In gap scoring, the perceived quality might decline as perception exceeds the ideal point in some cases (Teas, 1994).

According to their subsequent research, two types of expectations corresponding to two levels of performance are proposed: desired service and adequate service (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993). Figure 1 shows Zeithaml et al.’s expectation model.

Desired service expectation is the level of service that customers hope to receive. This is a mixture of what customers believe the level of performance can be and should be and therefore achieving that level of performance refers to service quality. The adequate service expectation is defined as the lower level of performance consumers will accept. Zeithaml et al. (1993) noted this level of expectation is comparable to Miller’s (1977) minimum tolerable expectation and corresponds to customer satisfaction. An adequate service can be obtained when the level of service performance is equal to minimum tolerable expectation. The area between desired expectation and adequate expectation is called the *zone of tolerance* (ZOT).

However, according to Zeithaml et al.’s study, the definition of desired service is a mix of Miller’s (1977) definition of ideal service and deserved service expectations. Although they argued that the definition of adequate service is comparable to Miller’s minimum tolerable level, Miller emphasized that this level of service means merely better than nothing. He noted that even if the performance is above the minimum tolerable level,

the consumer experiences dissatisfaction. He may attempt to remedy the situation and probably won't purchase that brand (continue patronizing that store) but will switch to another. If no alternative is available, he will probably continue to use the product as long as it "satisfies" or fills a need. (Miller, 1977, p. 79)

Based on the previous statement, consumers would not be tolerant of a level of performance equal to the minimum tolerable level as Zeithaml et al. (1993) proposed they would. Taking into account Miller's (1977) definition, consumers may tolerate it only if the actual performance is equal to the predictive or deserved expectations. A ZOT may occur when the actual performance is lower than expected (predicted) but equal to the deserved expectations. According to Miller, consumers may be disappointed by such a level of performance and experience some weak dissatisfaction. But this situation can best be described as one of "unsatisfaction" rather than "dissatisfaction." On the contrary, if performance falls between the minimum tolerable expectation and the deserved expectation, consumers experience dissatisfaction. Hence, the bottom line of satisfaction would be where the actual performance is equal to the deserved expectation.

Despite the fact that perceived performance alone has been found to be a strong variable in predicting service quality in empirical studies, it is still a fairly vague measure and provides limited information to enhance our understanding. Assessing desired and deserved expectations may be valuable in determining the optimum level of performance. Such information provides additional insight with which managers can improve the current service performance. Alternatively, the ideal or deserved expectation may be used as a benchmark or a standard by which to set the future performance level. Also, assessing expectations at the preconsumption point separately would provide valuable information for market segmentation. However, attempting to outline the difference between service quality and customer satisfaction by Zeithaml et al.'s (1993) model seems to be dubious considering the fact that these two concepts are usually highly correlated in empirical studies.

Other Comparison Standards

Three other comparison standards frequently mentioned in literature are equity, values (desires), and experience-based norms.

Equity theory postulates that people involved in social (or exchange) relationships compare their input-outcome ratios with the input-outcome ratios of others. In line with this view, equity theory is a bipolar concept similar to the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm. However, differences between the two are explained by the kind of comparative factors used or by the consequences that emerged at the postpurchase point (Oliver, 1997). Equity theory has been applied to the study of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction within different consumption situations (Oliver & Swan, 1989). Although some of these studies have produced inconsistent results (Tse & Wilton, 1988), Liljander (1995) argued that this might be due to poor measurement.

The theoretical arguments employing values (desires, needs, or wants) as a comparison standard are compelling because values occupy the central position in

human perception and evaluation (Rokeach, 1973). For instance, means-end models imply that product attributes are linked to consumer values (Gutman, 1982), and the consequence of this evaluation is the desired outcomes (Olshavsky & Spreng, 1989). Although early empirical studies do not support using values as a comparison standard, it is postulated that this is due to deficient practices (Westbrook & Reilly, 1983). For example, it was noted that expressing desired expectation as "The company should have . . ." provokes serious problems in gap measurement (Teas, 1994).

Taking into account the previous methodological problems, Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky (1996) proposed an alternative assessment in response to the measurement of values. Their study indicated that the desired congruency between what individuals desire and what they receive has a significant effect on attribute satisfaction, information satisfaction, and overall satisfaction. However, their findings are limited due to the fact that the study is based on an experimental research design. As a consequence, the concept of value and its relationship with service quality and customer satisfaction need further elaboration.

It is proposed that consumers employ previous experiences as a comparison standard for the evaluation of services. Experiences may be accumulated from more than one source and eventually constitute norms. In one sense, this is suggested to be how a focal brand should perform. Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) claimed that the experience-based norm is different from customer expectations in the sense that it is accumulated as a result of experiences of the focal brand or different brands and is thus not an attainable ideal.

In a comparative study of various standards, Cadotte, Woodruff, and Jenkins (1987) showed that the best-brand norm or product-type norm explains customer satisfaction better than the focal brand norm. Similarly, the expectation model based on consumers' belief probabilities fails to show significant results for predicting satisfaction across three service situations. As a result, their study indicated that there is no best comparison standard that explains customer satisfaction. Rather, consumers use multiple comparison standards in their evaluation of services and, if necessary, change them according to their goals (Woodruff et al., 1983).

An alternative argument emphasizes that consumers employ different evaluation strategies at prepurchase and postpurchase points (Gardial, Clemons, Woodruff, Schumann, & Burns, 1994), and therefore different comparison standards are applied according to different times of appraisal. Hence, consumers not only change comparison standard from single to multiple in assessing service quality but also apply various combinations according to different situations and goals.

Which Comparison Standard Should Be Used?

If one accepts that customers employ various comparison standards on the basis of different occasions and goals, a further issue is what would be the correct pairs. Liljander (1994) argued that if the nature of the comparison standard were articulated, it would shed light on the conceptual distinction between satisfaction and service quality.

The question of which comparison standard is most likely to influence satisfaction or service quality has been addressed, but the findings are mixed, according to the researchers' interpretations of the concept of service quality and satisfaction. Tse and Wilton's (1988) study indicated that customers simultaneously use two types of comparison standard, namely, expectation and brand norm, to make satisfaction decisions. Liljander's (1995) research identified deserved service as the best determinant of satisfaction among the other alternatives, including service excellence, best-brand norm, product-type norm, brand norm, adequate service, predicted service, and equity. Spreng et al.'s (1996) experimental survey showed that both expectations and the desired congruency affect customer satisfaction.

Woodruff, Clemons, Schumann, Gardial, and Burns (1991) raised the issue that if a customer uses multiple comparison standards, identification of the right standard may be difficult at the time of measurement due to poor memory (e.g., regarding accessibility to information, different product types, lifestyle, etc.). Although this problem may be overcome by providing as many standards as possible, it is an issue of ongoing debate in service quality research (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994b).

TECHNIQUES PROPOSED TO ASSESS SERVICE QUALITY

A search of service quality literature shows frequent use of the critical incident technique (CIT) and importance performance analysis (IPA) (Martilla & James, 1977). IPA is considered to be useful for assessing service quality for a number of reasons. First, it substitutes importance of attributes for expectations. Second, it separates but then combines attribute rating and importance rating in the manner of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). Third, the technique proposes that service quality should be assessed according to performance-only measurement. This is consistent with developing literature, as on application, neither the perception and importance combination nor the performance minus expectation formulation were found to be good measures of service quality (Babakus, Pedric, & Richardson, 1995; Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

Basically, this technique offers a practical tool for managers because it provides additional information and diagnostic capabilities for developing and tracking quality improvement strategies. Service quality attributes are plotted on a 2 × 2 matrix, but use of this technique can be very versatile for constructing matrices and developing marketing strategies. In constructing matrices, ratings of service quality attributes or their dimensions may be employed. However, before doing that, reliability and validity of the scale must be established.

Another method, frequently cited by the Nordic European school, is the CIT. CIT was first developed by Flanagan (1954) to assess the critical requirements in job performance. The technique involves the collection and systematic classification of stories or "critical incidents" using content analysis. CIT is mainly employed to establish priorities for improvement of service quality (Lockwood, 1994). It is claimed that both customer satisfaction and service quality can be assessed using this methodology (Cadotte & Turgeon, 1988; Gabbot & Hogg,

1996). However, several criticisms of the use of this technique have been addressed, such as difficulty of processing information, subjectivity of interpretation, and temporary nature of incidents due to modification of consumer perception over time (Johnston, 1995; Lockwood, 1994).

In a longitudinal service quality study, Haller (1995) demonstrated that IPA is adequate for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the service operation as well as priorities for service quality. Stauss and Hantschel (1991) compared IPA with CIT and showed that attribute ratings and CIT produce different results although both are employed to assess the same service. A recent study of service quality in hotels indicated that the majority of positive and negative critical incidents reported have only a minor impact on consumer behavior (Edvardsson & Strandvik, 2000). It should be noted that this methodology is far removed from measuring perception of service quality or satisfaction. However, CIT can be valuable for understanding service delivery process (e.g., the negative or positive aspects of the service delivery system) or developing a measurement scale (e.g., generating statements), as initially recommended by the North American school of thought (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994; Churchill, 1979).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In light of the previous examination, it is possible to make a number of suggestions for future research. Discussions together with implications for further research derived from this review are summarized in two parts: the issue of universal service quality dimensions and the issue of a comparison standard.

The Issue of Universal Service Quality Dimensions

The service quality literature asserts that the evaluation of service quality is generic and multidimensional, but empirical studies show that the recommended dimensions are not generic for the evaluation of hotels. To date, researchers have failed to determine the exact nature and number of dimensions in the lodging industry. The notion of generic or specific dimension may have important implications for managing and measuring service quality. Basically, generic dimensions are required to make comparative analyses across markets. In this respect, if a dimension is generic, it should emerge even in a specific context. By implication, if the dimension of physical quality were considered to be generic, then service improvement strategies should apply to all services and organizations for improving quality. However, if a dimension were found to be specific, this would not mean the dimension had no value but would limit its generalizability to other consumption situations, for example, to budget hotels. Such a dimension may still be used as a strategic tool for positioning products or services in submarkets (Shocker & Srinivasan, 1979). Therefore, despite the fact that generic dimensions are necessary to conduct comparative studies for macro analyses, specific dimensions are valuable for gaining competitive advantages or positioning in market. However, in either case, the scaling procedure should capture the dimensions to draw valid conclusions. By the same token, the reliability and validity of the scale must be established before making decisions (Ekinci & Riley, 1999).

In view of the foregoing arguments, it is possible to speculate about the SERVQUAL scale and its dimensions. On one hand, the operational definitions of the SERVQUAL dimensions may be very specific to the retail environment, therefore making replications impossible in different situations. On the other hand, a number of studies demonstrate that the two- or three-dimensional structure may be more suitable for the evaluation of hotels (Ekinici et al., 1998; Ekinici & Riley, 2000; Oberoi & Hales, 1990). In this respect, the service quality models recommended by the Nordic European school of thought (e.g., Gronroos' [1984] model) seem to be more generic than the North American model, and therefore it may be more suitable for the evaluation of hotels. However, this review suggests that a scaling procedure is important and confirmatory studies are needed to secure the exact nature and number of specific-generic dimensions.

One issue that has persistently arisen in response to the existing studies is that the current models fail to provide discrimination between service quality and customer satisfaction. Literatures relating to the two have been developing in parallel. Despite the fact that SERVQUAL authors describe themselves as service quality scholars, there is no clear evidence as to how their study differs from that of customer satisfaction studies (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Furthermore, empirical studies indicate that these two constructs are highly correlated. As a result, there is often confusion as to whether the right construct is being measured.

One of the conceptual differences proposed between these two constructs is that service quality is multidimensional, whereas customer satisfaction is unidimensional. Also, studies in both branches of the literature argue that these two constructs are similar to the concept of attitude without making a clear conceptual framework. Hence, the two schools of thought have provided no clear insights into the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. What is also interesting is that although there is no clear conceptual definition of these constructs, the research attempts to measure them. Perhaps this is the reason why the methodological problems persist. In light of the previous examination, it could be argued that customer satisfaction is more evaluative and should be seen as identical to the concept of attitude (Oliver, 1980). Thus, it is multidimensional, as consistent with the theory of attitude. On the contrary, service quality is unidimensional and may be specific to consumers' goals (Juran, 1979). However, it would be fruitful to investigate the relationship between the two constructs.

With regard to service quality measurement techniques, CIT should be used for exploratory purposes to understand the service delivery process from the consumer's point of view. Then, the service delivery process can be improved by taking appropriate actions. In response to IPA, it can be used to develop service quality or customer satisfaction strategies after securing validity and reliability of the measurement scales.

The Issue of a Comparison Standard

It is suggested that the concept of expectation is not only dynamic during the service delivery process but is also one of the most important variables for the evaluation of services (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), and therefore, this variable should not be ignored. However, it would be more meaningful to measure customer

expectations at the postpurchase point to locate and track the level of service performance. Cote, Foxman, & Cutler (1989) argued that current expectation rather than prior expectation should be used as a comparison standard at the postpurchase point. Their rationale for this decision is credible:

Current expectations should be more closely related to current needs and should also account for satisfying decisions . . . Our conception of current expectations is most similar to product norm expectations. They are expectations about brands in the current evoked set. Current expectations differ from prior expectations in the timing of the measurement. Rather than assessing expectations at the time of purchase, current expectations assess product norm expectations now (at the time the respondent answers the question). (p. 504)

We argue that predictive expectations and deserved expectations are crucial (and may serve as a minimum threshold) in forming service quality or customer satisfaction decisions at the postpurchase point. Also, postpurchase evaluations are likely to be affected by the ideal expectation that may be contingent on goals. Achieving or failing goals critically affects individuals' evaluations of services. This information can aid management in visualizing the marketing environment and creating a promising strategy. Shocker and Srinivasan (1979) argued that "such a framework provides the analyst with a systematic way of tracking parameter values over time and relating such changes to developments in the marketplace" (p. 177).

However, as the measurement of an ideal point can be problematic (finite or infinite vector attribute; Teas, 1994), an alternative method—the measure of congruency—can be employed to assess expectations (Spreng et al., 1996). Although the idea of measuring congruency appears to be similar to the final version of the SERVQUAL scale, its operationalization is quite different. Furthermore, testing of Miller's (1977) expectation model would be fruitful. Whether this model is unidimensional or multidimensional provides important information for our understanding of service quality and customer satisfaction.

In addition to the previous conceptual and methodological ramifications, researchers might profitably consider exploring some of the issues surrounding the use of comparison standards in the hospitality industry. First, what is the relationship between different types of expectation and other comparison standards? Second, what type of comparison standard is more relevant to (a) service quality and (b) customer satisfaction? Third, is there a concept such as ZOT? If so, does this vary according to hospitality units or customer segments, or what is the effect of this concept on customers' postpurchase (e.g., intention to recommend and intention to visit again) behavior? Finally, can differences between service quality and customer satisfaction be explained by the ZOT or Zeithaml et al.'s (1993) model?

CONCLUSION

A realistic view of the literature dealing with service quality measurement seems to be that although considerable progress has been made in both conceptu-

alizations and measurements of service quality, there are still some fundamental problems relating to both. This study does not change that position but makes a contribution by outlining some of the persisting debates affecting the measurement of service quality from the perspective of the two schools of thought. The North American school is largely dependent on empirical studies, but these studies have produced mixed results and therefore some of the conclusions were inconsistent. This might have occurred due to lack of well-established theory. The Nordic European school is mainly dependent on theoretical arguments, but they fail to support their arguments by strong empirical results. Perhaps the two schools of thought should exchange their findings to improve their weaknesses and make progress in this field of study.

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Yuksel Ekinci (e-mail: yukselekinici@hotmail.com), Ph.D., is a lecturer in the School of Management Studies for the Service Sector at the University of Surrey.