Service Characteristics in Transition:
Influence of Transition from Traditional Health Services to e-Health Services in Service Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to study the influence of transition in service characteristics. The transition occurs from traditional health services to e-health services. The theoretical roots of the article rely on service characteristics and new service development (NSD). Four empirical case examples serve as an exploratory examination of service characteristics in transition. In this examination, interpretative analysis and comparative methodology were used. The case examples show that the level of manifestation of service characteristics varies from service to service regardless of them being e-services or traditional services. In both traditional services and e-services process nature and non-ownership seem to be the most representative characteristics, but all the studied characteristics are important. Interaction and perishability seem to materialise much less in the connection of e-services than in the context of traditional services.

Keywords: E-Health Services, Health Services, New Service Development (NSD), Service Characteristics, Service Definition

INTRODUCTION

A lively debate over service characteristics started in the late 1970s, but after the first stages very little has occurred in this area. Only few academics (e.g., Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004a; 2004b) have presented justified criticism against some of the earlier body of literature in this respect. They have even claimed that adhering to the earlier tradition prevents the birth of fresh ideas in service marketing literature and research. Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) pay attention especially to information technology and its impact on the content and characteristics of services. Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) and Scupola et al. (2009) conclude

DOI: 10.4018/IJESMA.2015100101
that there is insufficient research to demonstrate these effects. Their conclusion is right, because our literature search revealed only three other studies (Black et al., 2014; Kostopoulos et al., 2012; Miles, 2013) handling service characteristics, but none of them focused on service transition from traditional services to e-services. In addition, the forthcoming article by Lehtinen and Järvinen (2015) examines service characteristics in service innovation context.

Technology plays a major role in service production and delivery more often than before. Van der Aa and Elfring (2002) even argue that through a new technology many new services have been discovered. Yet, research is still sparse on how technology influences on service characteristics (see however Järvinen & Lehtinen, 2005; Lehtinen & Järvinen, 2015). Especially, there is a lack of knowledge, how transition from traditional health services to electronic health services affects on the service characteristics.

Health services like many other services have recently developed by the aid of new technology. The motivation behind this development has often been to increase efficiency and cut employee costs, even though health technology as such requires often heavy investments. New technology has been utilized in the health care sector vastly, but in reality, health care sector has started transition towards electronic services later than some other service sectors, for example financial sector. Yet, Burkhard (2009) states correctly that patient focused e-health services will lead to a revolution in the practise of medicine and health maintenance service. And this revolution is already going on.

The main objective of this article is to study the influence of transition in generally accepted service characteristics. The transition here occurs from traditional health services to e-health services. Especially, e-health services and their characteristics are the main focus of the article, as we aim to find out how service characteristics are changing when health services are electronized. Empirically we examine the research problem by the aid of four cases and limit our perspective to electronic services that are available as self-services for consumers.

The article is positioned within the paradigm of service marketing and management, and there particularly service characteristics and R&D of e-services are of our interests. Accordingly, the theoretical roots of the article rely on service characteristics and new service development (NSD).

The article is organised as follows. After the theoretical part dealing with service definitions, service characteristics and NSD, we will present an empirical examination of the service characteristics of four empirical case examples in which the traditional health service have transferred to the e-services. Finally, we will discuss about the results and suggest guidelines for future research.

DEFINING AND CHARACTERIZING SERVICES

There are many different definitions of services and many different conceptions of essential service characteristics. Any service definition and conception is more or less problematic. Finding an ideal definition and a corresponding list of characteristics is very difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, we have to start with some reasonable definitions and corresponding characteristics. Our choice is the service definition by Lehtinen (1984):

*Service, actually a service-like marketed entity, is a benefit providing object of transaction that is a more or less abstract activity or process of activities essentially produced, marketed and consumed in a simultaneous interaction.*
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