An Empirical Study of E-Service Quality and User Satisfaction of Public Service Centers in China

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how as part of the reform of the administrative system of China, most local governments have set up public service centers; meanwhile, ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has been commonly applied to make e-services more convenient, efficient and transparent. However, the existing studies in the Chinese context are mostly qualitative and the relationship between service quality and citizen satisfaction has not been tested. This article adopted the D&M model to develop an e-service quality model and tested the impact of service quality on citizen satisfaction. A survey was conducted and 364 valid questionnaires were analyzed. The results showed that the data fit the model well. Most of the hypotheses formulated in this article was proven. Additionally, an important finding was that the impact of service quality on specific satisfaction is stronger than that of information quality and system quality, which indicates that face-to-face services cannot simply be substituted by electronic systems. Both the theoretical and practical implications of the findings were discussed.

KEYWORDS

China, E-Government, E-Service, Public Service Center, Service Quality

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the reform of the administrative system of China, many local governments have set up public service centers. Just as citizens can purchase various goods in a single supermarket, they can access various public services in a single hall, called either a public service center or an administrative service center. Most government sectors have set up access points in the hall and work together to offer one-stop services to the public. The purpose is to provide convenience to citizens, reduce the time and the stages needed for approvals, accept public supervision and prevent corruption. This practice has been considered as an important step towards the realization of a service-oriented government.

DOI: 10.4018/IJPADA.2018070104

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As Gu (2015) said in a preface of one book, by the end of 2012, 35% of province governments, 98% of city governments and 96% of county governments in China have set up public service centers.

In the development process of such public service centers, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been widely used to facilitate the setting up of the one-stop service, which have made significant progress. Most public centers have set up official websites to provide information and e-services to the public. Citizens can search online and inquire about the services, the processes, and the costs, download the relevant forms, and book appointments. Besides, E-government platforms have been developed to promote cross-department information sharing and collaboration. By adopting E-services and sharing information resources, the public service centers can improve government efficiency, reduce administrative costs, and improve public service quality.

Despite the increase in the literature on E-service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005; Carlson and O’Cass, 2010; Udo, Bagchi, & Kirs, 2010; Yang, 2013; Mouakket, 2014; Stamenkov and Dika, 2015; Kao and Lin, 2016; Sá, Rocha, & Cota, 2016), few of it has focused on public service centers and the empirical research is insufficient. Meanwhile, the relationship between E-service quality and user satisfaction in the Chinese context has not been the subject of sufficient attention. This research adopted the D&M information system success model to develop an e-service quality model, and explored the impact of service quality on citizen satisfaction. A survey was conducted in the public service center in Xisaishan District, Huangshi City. The authors administered the survey questionnaire to citizens who had gone to the public service center to apply for services, and 364 valid responses were collected. This paper aimed at exploring and testing the mechanism among the dimensions of e-service quality, citizen satisfaction, and continuous motivation.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it introduces the practices and studies of public service centers in China and reviews the existing research on E-government service quality and customer satisfaction. Secondly, it develops the research model and discusses the hypotheses formulated based on theories and practices. Thirdly, it introduces the research design and presents the results of the testing of both the model and the hypotheses. Finally, the paper draws its conclusions by discussing the implications, limitations, and future directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Service Centers in China

The history of public service center in China can be traced back to the 1980s. In the wave of the new public management movement that began in the late 1970s, many countries took innovative initiatives to improve public services; these included one-stop service centers in the UK, seamless government in the USA, kindness service hall in South Korea, etc. (Ruan, 2006). These practices had reduced the misalignment between the old government systems and the demand of new developments in economics and society. Some Chinese coastal open cities imitated these reforms and Chinese public service centers began to appear. According to a news article written by Li (2005), Guangzhou brought together three government sectors and nine consulting companies in one street to offer one-stop service to foreign companies in 1985. Guo (2016) found that, in 1995, Shenzhen had set up a foreign investment service center to centralize the approval process, while, in 1999, Jinhua had gathered 46 sectors, which held different approval powers, in one place to provide approval services to the public. It is easy to see that these early initiatives were just rudimentary public service centers and that most of them focused on economics and trades, offering few other services. Yu, Wu, & Jiang (2016) found that public service centers began to appear from 2001, the same year in which China became a member of the WTO. These service centers were aimed at integrating fragmented services from different sectors and at providing better and more transparent services to the public by shortening the processes, cutting the costs, and enhancing the services. They were concrete manifestations of the construction of a legalization- and service-oriented government. As found by a study conducted by
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