Measuring E-Learners’ Perceptions of Service Quality

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the factors of e-learners’ perceptions of service quality in terms of the physical appearance of the learning management system, students’ assurance of personnel’s level of knowledge, and the customized attention to students’ needs. The authors use a survey to measure the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL scale, adapted to the e-learning context. A total of 325 responses were obtained. To validate their scale, the authors performed exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. They found that the most important determining factors for e-learning are: ergonomics, corresponding to the attractiveness of the e-learning system; assurance, corresponding to instructors’ ability to satisfy students’ needs; and empathy, corresponding to the attention given to each individual student. The authors also found that in the context of e-learning, the relative importance of the dimensions of perceived quality is different from what is typically observed in more traditional services. Their findings enable educational institutions to improve their understanding of the expectations and perceptions of e-learners.

KEYWORDS
E-Learning, Electronic Services, Measurement Scale, Online Education Systems, Perceived Quality, Traditional Services

1. INTRODUCTION

E-learning is a form of education that benefits from the use of information and communication technology at all levels of the training process. More specifically, it is a method of training whose primary objectives are learning autonomy, tailored training courses to meet individuals’ needs, and the development of educational relationships online. The most commonly accepted definition of e-learning is given by Rosenberg (2001), who defines e-learning as “the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance.” His definition is based on three main assumptions: e-learning is networked, is delivered using a standard Internet technology and goes beyond the traditional paradigms of training.

E-learning relies on the organization of educational content to achieve greater flexibility in the diversification of personalized pedagogical options and programs. The differences between e-learning

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systems and the classical system are found primarily in the organization of one’s time dedicated to work, the pedagogical options available and curriculum content. The internationalization of education, which is made possible by relaxing certain space-time constraints, benefits directly from the proliferation of e-learning systems in both private and public fields. E-learning is becoming the cost-effective solution of choice for many corporations (Santhanam, Sasidharan, & Webster, 2008) to deliver training anytime and anywhere to large numbers of employees and students.

These benefits aside, the implementation of e-learning environments can be cost-prohibitive in many situations. The setup costs of e-learning are usually spread over five phases: requirement analysis, design, web development, implementation and evaluation/control. Depending on the context and technological and strategic choices, these costs can be very high for some organizations. Sometimes, e-learning programs are costlier than expected, so organizations retrench (Smith & Mitry, 2008). Beyond the investment hurdle, risks are inherent in e-learning development. For example, system malfunctions, business process inefficiencies, and misinterpretations of learners’ needs can sometimes lead to failure. Another important factor is the fact that organizations often assume that trainers and trainees are already familiar with e-learning and therefore do not support the change associated with such training. Additionally, current e-learning platforms and processes face many issues related to quality (Préau et al., 2002). The effectiveness of e-learning depends principally on five factors that often overlap with one another: technology, trainee motivation, teachers, content quality and the implemented pedagogy. Student motivation, for example, depends on the quality of the proposed scheme, the cost of training, the level of interactivity, the quality of support by teachers, etc.

Many attempts have been made to establish quality standards for e-learning. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), United Kingdom, has tried to establish effective practices with e-learning. The European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning (EFQUEL) has developed a label for quality e-learning, “UNIQue.” Kidney, Cummings, Boehm, (2007) identified eight quality assurance strategies: web development, editing, usability and accessibility, maintainability, copyright, infrastructure impact, content and rigor. Despite these attempts, there is not yet a well-established and commonly accepted standard to measure e-learning quality. As MacDonald & Donio (2007) underscored, “It is imperative that universities come to some kind of agreement regarding procedures and policies for quality standards in eLearning.” E-learning development and marketing have not ceased to progress despite the absence of e-learning quality standards. Therefore, many questions remain about the integrity and quality of e-learning. It is necessary to await a long track record of successes and failures before identifying the best standards for measuring the quality of e-learning.

As with other services, e-learning faces intense and increasingly competition, and the immateriality, intangibility, and heterogeneity of the service pose a challenge. At this point, it is a difficult concept to comprehend; it has historically been an important topic of debate and continues to be a pertinent issue in industry (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). In services marketing, for example, past research defines quality from different perspectives. Service quality can be viewed as value (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), as excellence (Pirsig, 1992), as conformity to specifications (Garvin, 1988), or as the disconfirmation of expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988; McKinney, Kanghyun, & Zahedi, 2002). In that way, quality evaluation depends largely on users’ perceptions, i.e., the extent to which a service or experience meets users’ expectations or needs. Several instruments have been widely used to measure retail service quality. The three most common instruments are SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al.1985, 1988), SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1992, 1994), and RSQS (Dabholkar, Thorpe, & Rentz, 1996), which were developed to measure retail service quality. Despite some minor problems raised in the literature (Sánchez-Hernández, Martínez-Tur, Peiró, & Ramos, 2009), most studies have used the SERVQUAL scale to assess quality, as it is widely recognized for its flexibility, making it adaptable to many situations, including to the educational context. In the absence of common objective standards, in a few recent works that refer to the quality of e-learning, “expectancy disconfirmation theory” has been adapted to define quality (Uppal et al. 2015). Chiu & Wang (2008) were among the first researchers to use this theory to study learners’ continuance
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