Chapter 2

e–Service Quality: Literature Review and Future Avenues of Research

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ABSTRACT

The development of new orientations and focuses for the conceptualisation and measurement of electronic service quality (henceforth, e-SQ) is demonstrably necessary. This chapter is mainly addressed to highlight research avenues for improving our understanding of e-SQ management, based on a critical review of previous literature. The orientation of this study aims to reduce the efforts of researchers who desire to enter this field. To do this, we offer a research agenda and synthesise the main previous studies, including the dimensions employed within a set of selected works. We start by expounding the reasons that justify the carrying out of a project of investigation to measure e-SQ. We move on to describe the current e-SQ research gaps (research opportunities). And we conclude with a section devoted to the setting out of our conclusions and indicating possible routes for future investigation.

OVERVIEW

This chapter has a dual purpose: (1) to describe and systematise the state of the art of literature examining the quality of electronic service or e-Quality, and (2) to indicate possible routes for future investigation.

Large growth potential is forecast for the provision of products and services via electronic channels (mainly, the Internet) (e.g. Evanschitzky et al. 2004). There is also ample evidence that service quality delivery has a positive impact on desired attitudinal, behavioural, and financial outcomes (Parasuraman et al. 2005, Fassnacht & Koese 2006). So, appropriate conceptualisation and measurement are crucial for the effective management of electronic service quality (henceforth, e-SQ) and a major issue on the market research agenda (e.g. Parasuraman & Zinkhan 2002, Fassnacht & Koese 2006).
Although e-SQ is an emergent research field (e.g. Sweeney & Lapp 2004), considerable research effort has already been devoted to it and substantial advances have been made (Francis 2007). According to Fassnacht and Koese (2006), this is not surprising given the managerial importance and theoretical appeal of the subject. But they also affirm that clear definitions, solid conceptual work, and empirical studies in multiple settings have been scarce, suggesting that we are still in the early stages within this field of research. Consistently and somewhat more flatly, Park and Gretzel (2007), affirm that “the development of Website evaluation methods has been all but systematic and conclusive” (pp.46).

Data collection was carried out in different stages between September 2003 and May 2009. Computer databases (e.g. Google scholar) were the main tools used to identify relevant research in the area. Then the electronic and physical bibliographical resources from universities in two different countries were used to obtain the papers. Both sources proved to be complementary. To cross check, the business and management journals included in the Social Citation Reports were also specifically searched. Consequently, we hope to have included in the review the highest-quality literature on the subject.

The identified papers were then evaluated with respect to their suitability for inclusion in the study. As the domain of our research is e-Quality or the customer’s overall judgment of an e-entity’s excellence (Santos 2003, pp. 235), papers had to be categorised between (1) e-SQ and (2) other related constructs such as Website satisfaction (e.g. Szymanski & Hise 2000, Evanschitzky et al. 2004), Website success (Liu & Arnett 2000), satisfactory online experiences (Novak et al. 2000), online service value (Heinonen 2007) and customer Website loyalty (e.g. Cho et al. 2002, Gummerus et al. 2004). 37 papers were selected for the first group.

To present this chapter, we commence by expounding, in detail, in a first section, the managerial and theoretical reasons that justify the carrying out of a research project to conceptualise and measure e-SQ. Then, in the second section, we explain the situation in which e-SQ investigations currently stand by focusing on research gaps. In the third section, we offer an overview of the main scales utilised in e-SQ measurement. We offer two tables (Tables 1 and Table 2) presenting a synthesis of the methods, constructs, dimensions and results of a body of selected e-SQ investigations. We end with a section devoted to the setting out of our conclusions and indicating possible routes for future investigation (summarised in Table 4).

**RELEVANCE OF E-QUALITY**

The development of new orientations and focuses for the conceptualisation and measurement of e-SQ is demonstrably necessary. The aim of this section is to offer a summary of the disposable evidence (Barrutia and Gilsanz, 2009).

Firstly, Parasuraman and Zinkhan (2002) maintain that electronic services contribute two key advantages: information efficiency and transaction efficiency. It is not surprising, therefore, that online customers should be attracted by cyberspace in their search for these two qualities. Consequently, large growth potential is forecast for the provision of products and services via electronic channels (mainly, the Internet) (e.g. Evanschitzky et al. 2004).

On the other hand, E-SQ is a basic requirement for the good performance of electronic channels. But, whereas in the first stages of electronic retail commerce low prices and a mere presence on the Web could be sufficient for commercial success, today, due to the intense competitiveness, they are simply necessary conditions for survival, but are not sufficient in themselves (e.g. Luedi 1997, Jun et al. 2004, Lee & Lin 2005). E-SQ surpasses these variables in importance in terms of predicting the success or failure of Internet-based operations (Parasuraman & Zinkhan 2002, Zeithaml et al.