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## CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND MEASUREMENTS OF SERVICE QUALITY: MAJOR ISSUES

**Ruksana Sultana**

Librarian, Sundarban Mahavidyalaya, Kakdwip, 24 Parganas (S).

### AIM:-

**S**ervice quality, an attribute, cannot be measured and tested in a straight forward manner like any quantitative observation, the variable. Conceptualization and measurement of service quality have been the most debated topic in the literature of service marketing till date. This paper analyses the major debates about how to conceptualize service quality – about the nature of perceived service quality and about the formation of service quality. This paper also highlights on the major issues of measurement of service quality, mainly by using the generic models.

**KEYWORDS:** Service Quality, Attribute, Variable, Service Marketing, Generic Models.

### INTRODUCTION

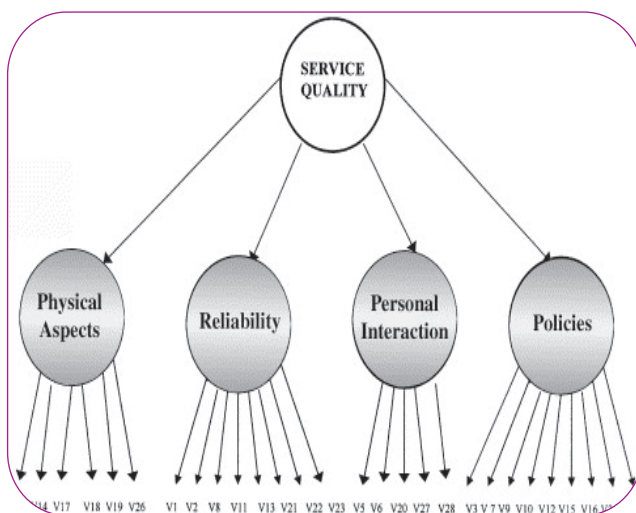
Quality is an ongoing process where the user is a key determinant. The quest for quality improvement has become a highly desired objective of today's globalized world. Maynes (1985) defined how quality should be conceptualized and measured in an economist's outlook. In this normative outlook, quality is a weighted average of characteristics. Characteristics represent services that consumers want. Characteristics' scores for particular varieties express the utility obtained from that variety as a ratio to that conferred by an ideal variety. During the past several decades service quality has become a major area of concern to the researchers owing to its strong influence on business performance, lowering expenditures, customer satisfaction, etc. There have been a lot of research studies on the definition, nature, dimensions, measurement, etc., issues of service quality.

Measurement and management of service quality is the fundamental issue for the survival of service sector in this modern era of Globalization. Conceptualization and measurement of service quality perceptions has been considered as the most debated and controversial topic.

**The main debates about conceptualization of service quality exist in two angles:**

1. About the nature: is service quality a perception of performance or disconfirmation?
2. About the formation: is service quality a single entity or an aggregation of several components?

In this background this paper tries to focus on the debates around the conceptualizing of service quality, as well as to through some light on the different generic models for measuring service quality.



## MAJOR DEBATES ON THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SERVICE QUALITY

### About the Nature

Parasuraman, et al (1985) opined that service quality neither is conceptualized, nor is measured by relying on traditional theories concerning the quality of goods. The traditional conceptualizations of service quality are based on the expectancy disconfirmation theory where perceived quality is considered as the result of comparing particular performance with some kind of standard. Gronroos (1984) defined perceived quality as the outcome of an evaluation process, where the customers compare their expectations with the services they have actually received. Parasuraman, et al (1988) extended their arguments by proposing that service quality is a construct, related, but not identical to the customer satisfaction emerging from the comparison between expectation and perception as described by Gronroos in 1988. In their opinion, expectations are the desires of customers what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer. They proposed that service quality should be operationalized as a comparison between the expectations the customers hold for a class of service providers and the relative performance of the firm on specific attributes related to quality assessments. The service quality construct emerges as the result of the following relationship:

$$SQ = f(P - E)$$

Where,

SQ = Service Quality, P = Performance and E = Expectation.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) argued that service quality should be the customers' attitude towards the service. They pointed out that little theoretical and empirical evidence supports the relevance of the expectations-performance gap as the basis for measuring service quality. Van Dyke, et al (1999) articulate that the disconfirmation (P-E) concept is a poor choice by which to measure psychological paradigms because there is little evidence of customers' actual assessments of service quality, in terms of performance-minus-expectation scores.

Brady and Cronin (2001) criticizing the (P-E) concept, suggested that service quality should be a performance-based construct and more appropriately measured with perceptions, rather than expectations. They question the validity of the (P-E) specification introduced in the disconfirmation paradigm by Cronin and Taylor in 1992 suggesting this concept as a potentially misleading indicator of service quality perceptions.

### About the formation

Traditional service quality models considered that perceptions of service quality are based on multiple components. Gronroos (1984) opines that the customers' perceptions of the service process are divided into two dimensions:

1. Technical quality: the outcome dimension, or what the process leads to for the customer as a result of the process.
2. Functional quality: the process dimension, or how the service process functions.

He suggests that in the context of services, functional quality is generally perceived to be more important than technical quality, assuming that the service is provided at a technically satisfactory level. He further points out that functional quality domains can be perceived very subjectively. Subsequently, Gronroos (1990) identified six specific domains in which service quality could be measured: professionalism and skills, reliability and trustworthiness, attitudes and behaviour, accessibility and flexibility, recovery and reputation, and credibility.

### Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) have proposed service quality as three dimensional:

1. physical quality,
2. interactive quality
3. corporate (image) quality.

Physical quality relates to the tangible aspects of the service. Corporate quality involves the company's image or profile, and interactive quality is derived from whether the service provider's interaction style fits in with customer's participation style.

Parasuraman, et al (1985) identified ten domains of service quality from a qualitative study and later

reduced them to five domains through empirical research. The five domains include tangible, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy (Parasuraman, et al, 1988):

1. Tangibles: physical facilities, equipments and appearance of personnel;
2. Reliability : ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;
3. Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;
4. Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence;
5. Empathy: caring, individualized attention that the firm provides to its customers.

There is another conceptual argument, which is also based upon the (P-E) concept. Buttle (1995) highlights the fact that (P-E) is based upon disconfirmation, rather than customer attitudes. The idea behind disconfirmation is that service quality depends not on the absolute level of performance experienced, but on performance compared to expected performance. Jhonston (1995) tries to investigate whether there are service quality determinants that are predominantly satisfiers and others that are predominantly dis-satisfiers. Responsiveness has been shown to be an important factor determining service quality. This suggests that certain actions, such as increasing the speed of processing information are likely to have an important and positive effect on customer. However, other activities, such as improving the reliability of equipments would lessen dissatisfaction rather than delight customers. Functionality, security, reliability and integrity, although would not lead to delighted customers; are areas where banks can not afford to make mistakes as they are very important to customers and are potentially highly dissatisfying factors. Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is more important to ensure that dis-satisfiers should be dealt with before the satisfiers.

Brady and Cronin (2001) have considered service quality as consisting of three components and added a third one, viz, physical environment quality to Gronroos's two dimensions. They suggested that each of the primary dimensions of service quality has three sub-dimensions, and customers aggregate their evaluations of the sub-dimensions to form their perceptions of an organization's performance on each of the three primary dimensions. For the period of developing the concept of service quality in service industries, a similarity between service quality and customer satisfaction was discovered because these two constructs are structurally similar and are examined using the same framework of expectations and/or perceptions (Hernon and Nitecki, 2001).

### SERVICE QUALITY PARADIGMS

Service quality is an important area to academicians because of its relevancy to service companies and therefore many researchers have tried to develop various models to measure it. It is very important to measure service quality because it allows for comparisons before and after changes, identifies quality related problems, and helps in developing clear standards for service delivery (Shahin, 2005). The theories that form the basis for service quality model for measuring users' satisfaction are:

- 1. Equity Theory:** It explains relational satisfaction in terms of perceptions of fair/unfair distributions of resources within interpersonal relationships.
- 2. Attribution Theory:** It operates when services fail to meet customer expectations and assumes that people search for causes of events, such causes being either buyer-related or seller-related.
- 3. Performance Theory:** Users' satisfaction is directly associated with the objectively perceived performance of the product/service.
- 4. Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory:** Users develop expectations of product or service performance prior to purchase. When the product/service is bought and used, the expectations are compared with actual performance, using a 'better-than' or 'worse-than' expression.

### Generic Service Quality Models

Some of THE main and most used service quality models which are more accepted in field of service quality measurement evaluated in this section. Strengths and weaknesses of each model discussed in order to represent the best fit model in the service quality measurement.

### Gap Model

The Gaps Model was first published in 1985 and then further modified and developed by the same authors (Parasuraman, et al, 1988, 1991). The model, based on the expectation-confirmation theory illustrates how consumers assess quality, taking into account the factors that contribute to determine quality in its various connotations: quality expected by customers, quality offered by firms, quality perceived by users after the service consumption. Stemming from the definition of quality as the capability to satisfy consumer expectations, the Gaps Model aims to identify the possible causes for a gap between expected quality and perceived quality. The model conceptualizes key concepts, strategies and decisions which are essential for the quality offer according to a sequence which starts from the consumer, identifies necessary actions for the firm to plan and offer a service, and go back to the consumer in the hub of the model: the comparison between expectations and perceptions. They developed a service quality model based on gap analysis.

### SERVQUAL Model

Parasuraman, et al. (1988) state that SERVQUAL provides a basic skeleton through its expectations/perceptions format. SERVQUAL is a reliable tool that service provider can use to understand the customer's expectations and perceptions about service quality and thus improve services. In practice, a service quality survey will ask customers to complete a questionnaire listing the 22 statements in the SERVQUAL instrument. Each statement is put to the respondent twice, once to measure expectations and once to measure perceptions of performance. Respondents will rate both forms of the statement on a Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'; the SERVQUAL instrument uses a seven point scale. Each respondent's rating for expectations is then subtracted from the same respondent's perceptions rating, giving a score for the 'gap' for each individual on each statement. Each individual's gap score is of no great value, however, and only when all the separate gaps have been totaled and a mean calculated for all respondents does the figure have real meaning. The normal calculation used is performance minus expectations or  $(P - E)$ , though in practice the opposite  $(E - P)$  is often used instead, for the original will produce mostly negative scores, whereas,  $(E - P)$  will produce positive scores that seem easier to interpret. It is the gap score that defines the SERVQUAL instrument. Analysis of SERVQUAL data can take several forms: item-by-item analysis (e.g.  $P1 - E1, P2 - E2$ ); dimension-by-dimension analysis (e.g.  $(P1 + P2 + P3 + P4/4) - (E1 + E2 + E3 + E4/4)$ , where  $P1$  to  $P4$ , and  $E1$  to  $E4$ , represent the four perception and expectation statements relating to a single dimension); and computation of the single measure of service quality  $[(P1 + P2 + P3 \dots + P22/22) - (E1 + E2 + E3 + \dots + E22/22)]$ , the so-called SERVQUAL gap. A smaller gap score means the service means higher quality in services. Negative gap scores indicate weakness in that particular attribute or domain and positive gap scores indicate strength in that particular attribute or domain.

One observation of PZB's SERVQUAL tool is that, while the criteria for judging are embodied by the five dimensions of service quality and are therefore fixed, the scales of each criterion may change from time to time depending on certain factors such as the mood and past experience of the individual being interviewed. This is one weakness of this market research tool. Perhaps a way around it is to spread the survey across a diverse sample of the market and across various time periods to mitigate the effect of unrelated events that can affect the perception of a group of people. The problem with this, however, is that it can increase the survey cost. Carman (1990) also recognized the possibility that the customer's familiarity with the service can also play a role in setting his or her expectations. Thus his suggestion involves measuring the customer's level of familiarity with the services and to differentiate in that dimension among customers. While this seems like sound advice, it still does not make up for the scenario where a user, after having 8 of 16 experienced a service of low quality, has lowered his expectations of future service encounters. The result might be that management will mistakenly interpret the SERVQUAL scores in the next testing period as a signal that their service quality has increased when, in fact, it is only the customer's expectation that decreased. This shortcoming has been identified by other critics such as Buttle (1996).

### SERVPERF Model

SERVPERF is an instrument to measure service quality and users' satisfaction. SERVPERF model had been developed by Cronin and Taylor 1992 from SERVQUAL model basis. It contains the same domains used in the SERVQUAL model. The five domains—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy—identified in the SERVQUAL model are equally applicable to the SERVPERF model. Its framework is based upon the performance theory and is a modification of the SERVQUAL model. The SERVQUAL scale is based on a difference score between customer expectations of service and their perceptions after receiving the service. Besides theoretical arguments, they provided empirical evidence across four industries (namely banks, pest control, dry cleaning, and fast food) to corroborate the superiority of their 'performance-only' model (shown in figure: 4) over disconfirmation-based SERVQUAL scale.

At present, there is still no consensus among scholars on how to measure service quality perceptions. Even so, SERVQUAL remains to be the dominantly used model for evaluating service quality (Woo and Ennew, 2005) despite it being highly criticized by scholars such as Buttle (1996) and Cronin and Taylor (1992).

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**Ruksana Sultana**

Librarian, Sundarban Mahavidyalaya, Kakdwip, 24 Parganas (S).



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