SERVICE QUALITY MEASUREMENT: THE AREA OF (DIS)AGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT
Service quality is a concept that has aroused considerable interest and debate in the research literature. Because of its importance, researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to service quality, but there are many areas of disagreement in the debate over how to measure service quality.
The purpose of this paper is to review the literature considering service quality, focusing on the agreement and disagreement in this complex area. Also, the instruments for service quality measurement and models for service quality are emphasized.

INTRODUCTION
The word *quality* has been derived from the Latin word *qualis*, meaning "what kind of". With a wide variety of meanings and connotations attached to it, quality is a difficult and elusive term to define, having thus been referred to as a *slippery concept*.
Interest for quality, especially for service quality was challenged with the intangible nature of service quality and the complexity of the service quality measurement. It is difficult for the service provider to define and provide quality service. Researchers are trying to define the concept of the service quality as well as the way to measure it effectively. There has been controversy about the concept and the measurement of service quality and several questions have not yet been answered. In this respect, the service sector lags behind the manufacturing sector [3,5].

1. THE MAIN DISSAGREEMENT
There are many areas of disagreement in the debate over how to measure service quality. A summary of the main areas of disagreement are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: A summary of areas of disagreement [4]

Area	Nature of disagreement
The definition of service quality	The nature of the attitude: whether it relates to performance, expectations and/or ideal standards
Models for service quality	Whether to measure expectations or not Whether to measure importance or not
The dimensionality of service quality	Whether the five dimensions model is correct for its original context
Issues relating to expectations	The definition of expectations Whether it is necessary to identify which items are vector atrributes and which are classif ideal point atrributes When to measure expectations, before or after the service encounter
The format of the measurement instrument	Which measurement approach is best: difference score, non-difference score or semantic-differential scales Whether importance should be measured by item or dimension, or inferred from performance and expectations scores

Some of the main disagreements are shortly described below.

1.1. The definition of service quality

A universaly accepted definition of quality is not apparent in the academic literature. Indeed, the situation could be characterised as one of confusion, particularly in the service sector. Most definitions of service quality are customer centred, although the relations between quality and satisfaction is disputed. An all-embracing definition of service quality is notoriously difficulut to produce [12].

It is generally agreed that service quality is an attitude or global judgement about the superiority of a service, athough the exact nature of this attitude is not agreed. Quality in a service organization is a complex measure of the extent to which the service delivered meets the customers' expectations [3].

Parasuraman, **Zeithaml** and **Berry** (1985, 1988) described service quality as the ability of an organization to meet or exceed customer expectations. They suggested three underlying themes on services: 1) service quality is more difficult for the consumer to evaluate than goods quality, 2.) service quality perceptions result from a comparison of consumer expectations with actual service performance and 3.) quality evaluations are not made solely on the outcome of service; they also involve evaluations of the process of service delivery [7].

A common definition of service quality is similar to **Parasuraman** *el. al.*'s definition, and saying that the service should correspond to the customers' expectations and satisfy their needs and requirements. But, this definition is customer-oriented, stated **Edvardsson** (1998), and emphasized that it is often appropriate to distinguish three groups of people whose expectations, needs and demands should be taken into account: apart from customers, these are employees and owners.

1.2. Models for service quality

There are several conceptual models of service quality, but there are not generic model for service quality. Primary focus of the existing service quality models are depicted in the **Table II** [5]:

Table 2: Service quality models [5]

Model	Primary focus of the model	The authors
Quality gap analysis	A diagnostic management tool which facilitates the identification of several salient quality gaps. These gaps are: 1) consumer expectation – management perception, 2) service quality specification gap, 3) service delivery gap, 4) external communication gap and 5) expected service – perceived service gap.	**Parasuraman** *et. al.* (1985,1988)
Organizational service quality improvement	The model provides a framework for launching an overall quality improvement programs. It highlights the steps involved in an organizational quality drive and the pertinent factors at each stage	**Moore** (1987)
Service quality trade-offs	The model facilities the identification of quality trade-offs using three salient service atributes. These are: a) degree of customization, b) degree of labour inteensity, c) the degree of contact and integretion	**Haywood**-**Farmer** (1988)
Service journey and customer processing	These two model focus primarily on operational issues. They depict the stages of a service journey. Moreover, they attempt to show the impact of the experience at each stage on the formation of expectations and perception of quality.	**Nash** (1988), **Johnston** (1988)
Behavioural	This model stresses the importance of the behaviour of the delivery personnel on the perceived quality. The vital quality factor according to this model is the balance between the customers' and staff expectations.	**Beddowes** *et. al.* (1988)

The model presented above do not represent the total picture. There are several other models, but, the emphasized models represent the major strands of the service quality endeavours.

1.3. The dimensionality of service quality

The dimensionality of service quality is another source of disagreement. The question is, if these dimensions have one general form for any service company or if they are specific for each service sector. Debates are mostly concerning how many dimensions service should have [3].

There are many authors provided different service attributes, and most propose five dimensions. The most-known service attributes listing is by **Parasuraman** *et. al.* [1b]. In his early study (1985),

service quality was described by means of ten factors that can be generalized to any of service: dependability, willingnes, competence, aailability, courtesy, communication, thrust-worthiness, assurance, empathy and tangibility. In a later study (1988), the authors reduced (!) the ten factors to five claiming that these are valid in general terms: 1.) tangibles, 2.) reliability, 3.) empathy, 4.) assurance and 5.) responsiveness [6].

Buttle [6] mentioned the following disagreement regarding dimensionality: "Nine factors accounted for 71 per cent of SQ variance in **Carman's** (1990) hospital research: admission service, tangible accomadition, tangible food, tangible privacy, nursing care, explanation of treatment, access and courtesy; five factors were distinguished in **Saleh** and **Ryan's** (1992) work in hotel industry: conviviality, tangibles, reassurance, acoid sarcasm and empathy; four factors were extracted in **Gagliano** and **Hathcote's** (1994) investigation: personal attention, reliability, tangibles and convenience; three factors were identified in **Bouman** and **Wiele's** (1992) research into car servicing: customer kindness, tangibles and faith...".

Kitchroen [9] stated that the service quality is three-dimension structure, and quoted two authors in this respect: "**Gronroos** (1991) held that service quality is made up of three dimensions: 1.) technical quality of the outcome, 2.) functional quality of the encounter and 3.) company corporate image. **Lehtinen** (1982) also described service quality in three dimensions: 1.) the physical quality, 2.) the corporate quality and 3.) the interactive quality.

1.4. Issues relating to expectations

The service quality literature [1a,1b] defines expectations as *desires or wants of customers, i.e. what they feel a service provider should offer rather than would offer*. **Parasuraman** *et. al* (1988) argue that the gap between performance and expectations (disconfirmation, P-E) is the basis for measuring service quality. Support for this notion is provided by their original research and the limited literature. **Robledo** (2001) also claim the similar facts: "My findings support the inclusion of expectations in the assessment of service quality. Future research is needed to determine the diagnostic or other uses for expectations measurements..."

Cronin and **Taylor** [10], however, argue that there is little evidence, either theoretical or empirical, to support the notion of the expectations-performance gap as a basis for measuring service quality. "Discormmation is relevant to the formation of service quality attitudes through the moderating effect of customer satisfaction, but it is not relevant to service quality measurement", they concluded. **Carman** (1990) also state that expectations are important and the managemenet of expectations is an important aspect in the delivery of service quality. But, **Carman** points to the practical difficulties in obtaining information on customer expectations: "If expectations and perceptions are recorded following a service encounter, then the expectations are likely to be coloured by the customer's expectations...".

1.5. The format of the measurement instrument

According to the **Table 1**, it is clear that the different authors suggest different service quality approach. This is made evident by the variety of models for service quality measurement. Three main debates over how to measure service quality are: disconfirmation model vs. perception models, weighted vs. unweighted models and dimensions of service quality [11]. The most important service quality instruments are shown in the **Table 3**.

Table III: Service quality instruments [3]

Instrument	Theoretical background	The authors
SERVQUAL	The determinants method of service quality and gap theory. Service quality is calculated as the difference between perceptions and expectations with importance weights given to each dimension.	**Parasuraman**, **Zeithaml** and **Berry** (1988, 1991)
SERVPERF	Service quality is evaluated by perceptions only, without expectations and without importance wieghts.	**Cronin** and **Taylor** (1992)
NQ	This model measures service quality by the gap between perceived performance and the ideal amount of a feature, rather than the customers' expectations.	**Teas** (1992)

QUALITO-METRO	The Qualitometro method is based on service quality dimensions proposed by Parasuraman *et. al.*; it was conceived for evaluation and "on-line" service control, and allows an online quality monitoring of the differential between expected and perceived quality.	**Franceschini** and **Rosseto** (1997)
Two-Way	Two-Way model evaluated service quality from two perspectives: the first "objective" involved the presence or absence of a particular quality dimension, and the "subjective", involved the users resulting sence of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.	**Schvaneveldt**, **Enkawa** and **Miyakawa** (1991)

SERVQUAL is the first and the most popular service quality measurement tool, proposed by **Parasuraman** *et. al.* (1988). However, there have been hot issues and debates going on since SERVQUAL was proposed as a framework for the measurement of general service quality [6,7,8,10].

2. CONCLUSION

It is apparent that there is little concensus of opinion and much disagreement over how to measure service quality. The only areas of agreement appear to be that service quality is an attitude and is distinct from customer satisfaction, that perceptions of performance need to be measured and that the number of dimensions depends of the service context.

Research on developing measurements for service quality is still seeking to find the best tools, whether there should be a general tool, or unique tools for each service sector, whether customer expectation should be included in the measuring process or if perceived performance is enough, whether the tools should be weighted or unweighted, and whether dimensions for service quality should be general or specific and how many dimensions service actually has.

To date, a general service quality concept has not developed and further investigations are needed. Until then, service quality will be the area of (dis)agreement.

3. REFERENCES

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