

Empirical Evidence of Service Quality in Group Encounters

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Extended Abstract

In examining current literature, a lack of research on group service encounters is apparent. In particular, the influence of each individual's and other group members' contributions on the service experience seems to be underrepresented in scholarly publications. Service quality research, despite having received considerable attention from academics and practitioners alike (Hu et al. 2009), has largely and almost exclusively focused on perceptions of the individual customer and the role of the service employee (Rosenbaum and Massiah 2007; Sigala 2009), which is also represented in the use of service quality models and approaches (see, for example, Bolton and Drew 1991; Boulding et al. 1993; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Parasuraman et al. 1985). Only very few scholarly articles integrate the customer's contribution. Kelley et al. (1990), for example, propose a conceptual framework which integrates the customer's activity during service co-creation by extending the technical and functional quality dimensions of employees, as suggested by Grönroos (1983), to contributions of customers. Kelley et al. (1990) propose a service quality framework which includes two additional constructs yet to be tested, namely customer technical (what the customer provides) and customer functional quality (how the customer behaves). Another stream of research focuses on other customers present in a service encounter, mostly accidental. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007), for example, study the impact of customer-to-customer interactions on service encounters. Adelman et al. (1994) develop a concept of inter-customer support.

Only few models or frameworks can be found which address both service quality and customers in a group context, i.e. quality aspects of individuals co-creating a service encounter who are not just occasionally present when other consumers experience a dyadic encounter with a service provider. This is surprising especially in times of increasing numbers of customer communities and groups, virtual or physical. A customer's own contribution and efforts as well as the efforts of other customers to co-create the service play a vital role in a group service encounter and influence one's quality perceptions. Due to varying expectations, skills and experiences of the individual customer, group services are much more complex than individual services. The individual customer in a group exerts influence on other customers during the service encounter. These factors influence the process of co-creating the service and finally the perception of quality during the service encounter. The few models which address or attempt to concentrate on these issues are Rosenbaum and Massiah's (2007) expansion of the SERVQUAL model taking the impact of inter-customer support into account, Sigala's (2009) conceptual e-service quality model as an expansion of Collier and Bienstock's (2006) model and Finsterwalder and Tuzovic's (2010) model which explicitly denotes a "customer B" (Eiglier and Langeard 1977) as well as the socio-emotional and task-related activities of customers and service employees during a service encounter.

In this paper we empirically test a service quality model designed for a customer group experience. Drawing on a sample of 235 customers who have experienced a group service encounter we show how a customer's individual effort as well as the contribution of the other group members ("other customers"), can influence perceived service quality. We tested the following hypotheses:

- H₁: One's own contribution has a positive influence on one's service quality perceptions
- H₂: Other customers' contributions have an influence on one's service quality perceptions;

- H_{2a}: Other customer 1's contribution has a positive influence on one's service quality perceptions
- H_{2b}: Other customer 2's contribution has a positive influence on one's service quality perceptions

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a survey with customer groups asking the respondents to evaluate themselves as well as two individuals out of the group who attracted their attention. This is in line with the work of Grove and Fisk (1997) who examined the impact of other customers in a service setting by using critical incident technique (CIT) analysis. In addition we used the SERVQUAL items to measure service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1991). In order to reduce the impact of common method variance and to reduce the possible influence of specific service contexts (Podsakoff et al. 2003) we asked customer groups, across two different services, to fill out our paper-and-pencil questionnaire. We found rafting and indoor soccer group experiences to be appropriate for our study. In both types of services, people may or may not know each other before the group experience, but have to work in groups to achieve a high quality service experience. At the end of the survey process, the data set consisted of 235 cases after missing value analysis, of which 21 groups were indoor soccer teams with 119 group members in total and 23 rafting teams had 116 group members in total.

The results show that one's own contribution is perceived as having a positive effect on the perception of service quality (H₁). Surprisingly, others' contributions have inconsistent effects on service quality. Other customer 1's contribution has a non-significant impact on one's service quality perceptions (H_{2a}) whereas other customer 2's contribution has a significant positive effect on one's service quality perceptions (H_{2b}). A reason for this might be how we framed the question "Please think of two team members who attracted your attention either positively or negatively."

Limitations of our research are that the model works with constructs on a very high aggregation level, i.e. the constructs need to be more specific. In addition, the study is limited to a specific research context. Furthermore, the data set is still single sourced, i.e. exogenous and endogenous variables are surveyed from the same person and therefore potentially biased (see Podsakoff et al. 2003).

Future research should examine the contribution of others and the effects of this contribution in detail. The survey has to be extended and different services should be included to get a broader view of the constructs. It seems also useful to adapt the SERVQUAL scale further to fit the group context.

Keywords

Customer groups; co-creation; contribution; service encounter; service quality

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