Understanding Service Quality From The Islamic Customer Perspective

Gita Gayatri, Chris Chan, Australian National University,
Gillian Sullivan Mort, Margee Hume, Griffith University

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore service quality from the perspectives of the Muslim customers in Indonesia. There is growing evidence that culture influences buying-habits and behavior of customers in a service context. The fact that most cross-cultural consumer research in Asia has focused on the dimension of Chinese-Confucian beliefs provides this research opportunity to investigate other religious-cultural aspects of Asian context and service quality. In this study, the key attributes/factors of quality of services according to Muslim customers are explored using the verbal protocol method. The verbal protocol is followed by in-depth probing of respondents. Interviews were conducted in Indonesia with a sample of Javanese-Muslim customers of airline, retail, hotel and restaurant industries. Preliminary analysis suggests some distinct outcomes and results in identification of this area as a fertile field for future research. The research provides important insights for service providers who will target the Muslim customers. This research also has potential to enrich service quality conceptualization, theory and measurement.

Keywords: Service Quality, Islam/Muslim Customer, Service Quality Theory

Introduction

There is growing evidence that culture influences buying-habits and behavior of customers in a service context (e.g. Matilla, 1999; Ueltschy and Krampf, 2001). Essentially, service quality definitions fall within the consumer-led interpretation, and they are focused on external (customer) judgments about service performance (Ghobadian, Speller, and Jones, 1994). Importantly the consumer-led definitions are generated from the interaction between the service providers and the customers who live in certain societies that have specific cultural backgrounds.

At the international level, researchers have realized that the cultural impact on service quality has to be taken into consideration. However, research to date is still fragmented with much specific attention focused on Chinese-Confucian beliefs and addressing conceptualization and measurement of service quality, such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1985, 1988), that have been argued to be conceptually flawed. The criticisms about SERVQUAL address two important aspects; first, the inconsistency of SERVQUAL-dimension application across contexts/cultures (e.g. Akan, 1995; Imrie, Durden, Cardogan, 1999, 2000); and second, the weakness of its (dis)confirmation paradigm in describing service quality (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Page and Spreng, 2002).

Based on the above rationale and from previous studies that the performance only approach is an adequate tool for measuring service quality (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Espinoza, 1999), the expansion of service quality model into different cultures and its revision into performance-only measurement paradigm as engaged in this research are justified. This paper reports an initial qualitative study of Muslim customers addressing the issue of cultural effects, grounded in recent advanced conceptualization and measurement of service quality.
Literature Review: The Relation between Culture and Service Quality

As the international marketplace is diverse culturally, it is important to have a good understanding of how culture exerts influence on service quality evaluation (Imrie, et al., 1999, 2000). Some studies have found, for example, that cultural values might provide customers with unique rules and customs to guide service quality evaluation (Ellis, Williams and Zuo, 2003; Imrie, Cadogan, McNaughton, 2002; Strauss and Mang, 1999). If cultural issues can be accommodated in the service quality and delivery, the behavior of customers can be predicted with greater accuracy (Donthu and Yoo, 1998), which might improve customer satisfaction retention. Several studies have argued that perceived service quality varies across cultural groups (e.g.: Espinoza, 1999; Smith and Reynolds, 2002).

In relation to cultural influences on service quality, religion is one of the cultural elements that influence the customers’ perception of service quality. Study of Taiwanese society has generated a new dimension of services quality drawn from Confucian beliefs (Imrie, et al., 1999, 2000; Imrie et al., 2002). Researchers have equated this Confucian influence on service quality as reflecting a general Asian influence. However, previous studies were mainly conducted in China and used Confucian belief as the research base (e.g. Imrie et al., 1999, 2000; Imrie et al., 2002; Calvert, 2001; Lam, 2002). None of the existing research explores the Asian Muslim customers’ perspective about service quality. This potential gap provides an opportunity for research on the mechanism of influence of culture on service quality, in the particular context of Muslim customers and from Muslim perspectives. In the first instance we seek to validate the influence of culture found in earlier studies, secondly to test the mechanism of influence of culture and to investigate how service quality evaluations vary. This preliminary research is guided by the following research questions: “What do Muslim customers in Indonesia perceive to be the key attributes of quality in services?”

Methodology

In the context of recent advances in research on service quality, and consistent with Eisenhardt’s (1989) advice to enter the field informed by previous literature, this research is consistent with Brady and Cronin’s (2001) performance–only approach.

Javanese Muslim respondents were recruited through a theoretical sampling process. Inclusion criteria included middle to upper class social standing, age ranging from 24-65 years, and having born and/or lived in Java for at least 10 years. Data were collected in Jabotabek, Semarang and Surabaya. A total of 35 respondents participated in this study. For the purpose of this paper, 10 transcriptions were selected to provide preliminary data on service quality performance experience of Muslim customers.

This research employed the retrospective verbal protocol method to conduct in-depth interviews of consumers. Verbal protocol method is a diagnostic tool (Payne, 1994; Berne, 2004) in the study of consumer judgment and decision-making process (Kuusela and Paul, 2000; Ericsson and Simon, 1984) as well as consumer problem solving process (Ericsson and Simon, 1984). Retrospective protocols require consumers to recollect and report a prior experience. Verbal protocols are useful particularly when the research is exploratory (Kuusela and Paul, 2000).
Following data collected using verbal protocols directed interview technique was also employed to probe the Muslim customers’ perspective on four specific services consumption situations (retail, restaurant, hotel and airlines). Each interview-duration was approximately one hour and was tape-recorded. All interviews were conducted in ‘Bahasa Indonesia’. Ethical procedures consistent with ANU policy for research with human subjects were followed.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The verbal text was then segmented based on the emergent theme in a sentence, “to subsequently break the verbal text into units that could be coded with pre-defined coding scheme” (Atman and Bursic, 1998 p.123). The coding scheme was developed from existing theory (Patrick and James, 2004) about service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001) and Islamic culture (e.g.: Luqmani, Quraeshi and Delene, 1995). After the coding process, the result was translated into English. Finally, the data were analyzed by comparing the research question with themes that emerged from the coding stage (Patrick and James, 2004), with the Brady and Cronin (2001) dimensions used as a first level organizer.

Findings: Key Attributes in Assessing Service Quality for the Muslim Customer

In general, respondents expressed their thought about good service quality parallel with what Brady and Cronin (2001) found in their study. Each of nine sub-dimensions in that particular research has been repeatedly stated by respondents during the interview process, as shown with a sample quote of the verbal protocol record in Table 1.

Table 1 – General Key Attributes of Service Quality of Muslim Customers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction Quality</td>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>“I assumed that the receptionist was not feeling like, eager to answer my question, therefore I felt reluctant (to ask) as well...” (Respondent seven, line 303-306)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I considered them as proactive, when we arrived; before we said anything they brought the tea and water and then asked: “where do you want to sit, madam?” Though it was only tea and water, at least they have tried.” (Respondent four, line 218-224, 232-233)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td>“They were not bad, they were willing to help me. But because it was located in Singapore. May be their biggest weaknesses was their English...it was so disappointing!! Though we already clearly explained and asked for their help, they still could not understand (Respondent two, line 889-906)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Environment</td>
<td>Ambient Conditions</td>
<td>“During the lunch we can enjoy the nature: lot of plants there, open air, fresh, peace, good enough! If I get short holiday with my family, I will be going there again (Respondent one, line 682-684; Respondent six, line 665-667)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility Design</td>
<td></td>
<td>“It offered good infrastructure and facility and product, not too crowded as well. Secondly, they provided many counters for the payment, the parking space is so wide” (Respondent four, line 14-26; Respondent six, line 83-84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Conditions</td>
<td></td>
<td>“…It was weekend, crowded...I found it difficult to get the parking space for my car. There was a man who was about to leave, but unfortunately we had to wait long, that man was so slow! I was disappointed! Better go to the place that is not so crowded” (Respondent two, line 51-64, 634-636; Respondent nine, line 411-416)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes Quality</td>
<td>Waiting Time</td>
<td>“We experienced 30 minutes delay. If it was only five to 10 minutes, that was fine, but if 30? It was ridiculous for an airlines” (Respondent eight, line 281-284)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible Elements</td>
<td></td>
<td>“…I felt uncomfortable, we came for eating but we had to walk carefully because the floor was so slippery. Moreover on the table and some chairs, there was water spillage. (Respondent three, line 779-800)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I sent a complaint, and the Manager replied with a letter of apology along with one night hotel voucher. So it was between dissatisfaction and appreciation on my side, they responded to my complaint” (Respondent eight, line 170-181)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, a number of themes have emerged that are different from what had been found in Brady and Cronin’s (2001) work. The first issue is regarding the ‘humane’ treatment from the service provider towards the customer that is believed to influence the latter’s perception toward the quality of services. Different from ‘attitude’, ‘behavior’ or ‘valence’ subdimensions from Brady and Cronin (2001) study, the term ‘humane’ is not solely defined by the single or several actions made by the staff from one service company to its customer during the transaction/moment of truth process. It also involves a finer attributes of human beings and implies the way of how the service providers set/develop the interaction-approach with their staff and execute the service to fulfill the requirement of ‘what is properly deserved’ for human-standard in general. As some respondents expressed:

“When the staff greeted me, I felt a psychological touch like human relation, it is so humane” (Respondent three, line 71-75)

“There is no Jum’ah prayer held for the staff inside (the complex). And they are not allowed to leave their shift as well. Actually it is a bit inhumane.” (Respondent two, line 694-696)

A second issue is related to the ‘trustworthiness’. In terms of social life, Indonesian customers are living in a low trust society. This condition implies generalizations that all individuals tend to break the existing rule, undisciplined and dishonest i.e. are not well behaved. In business contexts this preconception leads to some negative treatments from company to its customer. Interestingly, the customers in this country had been forced by the circumstances and have already got used to accept this unfairness for many years. If one service provider conducts transaction assuming the customers are trustworthy, the Indonesian customers seem to appreciate it and perceive them more positively. As expressed below:

“I felt comfortable there, because I could carry my bag inside the store. Apparently the owner held the customers as trustworthy. There was no detector or camera surveillance. The customers could feel comfortable without being suspected” (Respondent three, line 51-62)

“I bought a salty egg. Unfortunately it was rotten. I went back to get the replacement. To be honest, I was doubtful whether they would treat my case positively. Fortunately, their response was great! They replace my eggs. It fulfilled my wish” (Respondent nine, line 28-33)

Along with ‘generic’ key, there are some other variables that can be categorized as – ‘Muslim specific’ key attributes. These variables are the differentiated factors that distinguish Muslim customers from the others (non Muslim) customers in evaluating the quality of services. The first variable is regarding Halal (lawful) and Haram (unlawful business transaction) that create the fixed-direction of a Muslim’s social life, (Al-Qaradawi, 1985). All respondents of the sample expressed their demeanor of refusing Haram business transaction and accepting only definite Halal business process. For example:

“If I have to choose restaurant, I will select those which substantively has Halal certificate, those which are closely related with sha’riah of Islam” (Respondent one, line 123-130)

“I do not like someone (service provider) that sells something without clearly specifying and explaining the product/giving adequate information about it. This implies the factor of Halal / Haram in Business practices” (Respondent two, line 1207-1210)

The second variable is about the attention of the service providers to the Islamic religious
activities. The compulsory Islamic religious activities in a day are likely to occur and coincide during people’s common activities. Therefore the service providers that provide the proper facilities for Muslim religious activities or give the more attention toward religiosity details are more favored by Muslim customer. Some of the respondents’ expressions are cited below:

“They always announce the time for Maghrib prayer...we were about to go, but the staff said: ‘you do not have to go home; we provide the place for you to say prayer upstairs!’ I put them in very high esteem. They did not have to spend much money for that, but people would remember. I am happy (Respondent four, line 441-457; Respondent 10, line 982-989)

“I expect they provide the space for me to say my prayer, the Kiblat direction, provide not only a Bible (but also Koran/Qur’an). It might also be better if they provide the praying tools like Sajadah” (Respondent one, line 305-311;Respondent six, line 815-824)

The last variable that may be considered as Muslim value is honesty. In Islam, honesty is something that has been ruled to be followed compulsorily in business practices, as stressed in the Holy Quran (11:85-86). Although it seems that this variable works universally and not only for Muslim customers, it was expressed significantly by some of the sample respondents:

“It is very important for me. I practically do not care whether the service provider makes large profit, as long as the profit is worth and the service provider is honest” (Respondent two, line 1216-1220)

...“If they could serve us (customers) with honesty; tell the right information transparently even though it is not significantly important issue, that will be enough. The thing is they should not confuse us, nor should they create any ambiguity (Respondents nine, line 732-735)

Conclusion and Future Direction

This paper uses the latest and relatively new performance-only service quality research approach (Brady and Cronin, 2001), changing the context by addressing quality from the Muslim customer cultural context and using new methods of verbal protocol analysis. Generally, it finds Muslim customers perceive many similar key issues when evaluating services as in Brady and Cronin’s (2001) work. However the Muslim customer also has some additional ‘standards’ that are different from other (non-Muslim) customers when perceiving the quality of services. These additional key attributes relate to the Muslim values system – both in terms of religious practices and also broader value positions and have the potential to significantly influence Muslim customers’ service quality needs and to link to their post purchase behavior. Although it is still early to conclude, investigation of the research questions indicates: Islamic-cultural values do influence Muslim’s evaluation criteria for retail; restaurant, hotel and airlines service quality. It is important to conduct further research examining whether Muslim-specific variables in evaluating service quality (Halal/Haram; Attention to Islamic Religious Activities, Honesty, Humaneness and Trustworthiness) act in parallel with the three dimensions/nine sub-dimensions in Brady and Cronin’s (2001) model as suggested by previous research of Imrie et al. (1999) on SERVQUAL or in another manner. Some or all of these new dimensions may form a separate overarching level of influence. Finally, considering that Muslims around the world hold the same basic rule, it is important to investigate whether the proposed research can be generalized to other Muslim customers outside Indonesia.
References


