

2011

Toward an Inclusive Model of E-Service Quality: A Content Analysis Study of Dutch E-Commerce Websites

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Recommended Citation

Cupido, Andries; Lim, Eric Tze Kuan; Tan, Chee-Wee; and Cyr, Dianne, "Toward an Inclusive Model of E-Service Quality: A Content Analysis Study of Dutch E-Commerce Websites" (2011). *SIGHCI 2011 Proceedings*. 21.

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Toward an Inclusive Model of E-Service Quality: A Content Analysis Study of Dutch E-Commerce Websites

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ABSTRACT

The commercialization of the Internet has prompted organizations to maintain a strong web presence. E-commerce websites have thus evolved to become the focal point of contact between e-merchants and consumers, representing vital touch-points for both parties to engage each other. Yet, e-merchants continue to struggle with the provision of quality e-services via e-commerce websites. Despite the maturity of e-commerce websites, they continue to be plagued by technical problems. Technical errors on e-commerce websites erode consumers' confidence toward the site and constitute a missed opportunity to make a sale.

Scholars have claimed that the e-service quality of e-commerce websites plays a major role in shaping consumers' transactional experience. To have quality e-services however, e-merchants must possess an in-depth appreciation of what consumers expect from e-commerce websites and tailor their service offerings accordingly.

Yet, the majority of e-service quality studies to-date has focused on the needs and priorities of consumers while neglecting the viewpoints of e-merchants. Despite much progress being achieved by prior research in understanding consumers' service expectations, there is comparatively less work being done on the derivation of actionable design principles that could inform the design of e-commerce websites in order to meet those expectations. Even for those studies that endeavored to prescribe a set of guidelines for designing quality-driven e-commerce websites, they tend to rely on perceptual measures to validate their relevance. Such studies however, lack univocality in that they may not capture true indicators of e-service quality due to the existence of response bias or ambivalent feelings on the part of respondents. An e-service quality model with objective design principles is hence beneficial in providing universal guidelines to e-merchants for improving the service quality of e-commerce websites.

This study synthesizes extant literature to advance a dual-layered e-service quality model that not only sheds light on the complete range of service expectations harbored by consumers during online transactions, but also prescribes actionable design principles for e-commerce websites that could be leveraged by e-merchants to satisfy those

expectations. Adapting Parasuraman et al.'s (2005) E-S-QUAL model, we argue that consumers' service expectations stem from quality dimensions of *efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, privacy, responsiveness, compensation, contact* and *personalization*. Grounded in these eight dimensions of e-service quality, we then identified 36 objective design principles that can be acted upon by e-merchants to fulfill such service expectations.

To verify the validity and generalizability of our proposed e-service quality model, content analysis is performed on the e-commerce websites of the top 100 e-merchants in the Netherlands in the years 2008 and 2009.

Of the eight e-service quality dimensions, most e-commerce websites (94%) fare well in terms of system availability, thereby implying that e-merchants are generally aware of the importance of ensuring website accessibility. Comparisons between product-oriented and service-oriented websites reveal no significant differences for the eight e-service quality dimensions. This implies that the contextual nature of an e-commerce website is not a factor affecting consumers' expectations of the quality of e-services to be delivered by the website.

Two of 36 design principles (i.e., graphic quality and availability) are evaluated positively for all e-commerce websites (100%) in our sample. This suggests that matured e-commerce websites are, at the very least, free from graphical errors and inaccessibility problems. Additionally, a substantial portion of the e-commerce websites in our sample (87%) not only offer encryption during online transactions, but also make provisions for service recovery via refund (96%) and return policy (95%).

We also observe that the relevance of certain design principles varies across e-commerce websites. For instance, the presence of a resolution center is sometimes made redundant through the existence of other aspects of an e-commerce website such as comprehensive return or refund policies. Similarly, an instant help library could be redundant whenever FAQs (E1) would suffice in addressing common customer inquiries. Comparing product-oriented websites to service-oriented e-commerce websites, content analysis results are relatively alike with main variations attributable to contextual differences between them.