Beyond the "Mythical Centre": An Affirmative Post-Modern View of SERVQUAL Research in Information Systems

Allan Sylvester  
*Victoria University of Wellington, allan.sylvester@vuw.ac.nz*

Mary Tate  
*Victoria University of Wellington, Mary.tate@vuw.ac.nz*

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Conventional approaches to literature reviews tend to perform a meta-analysis of previous literature, based on a modernist, normal science paradigm. These reviews typically seek a ‘mythical centre’ based on synthesis and consensus. This is not always appropriate for research areas that have been characterised by heterogeneous and inconsistent studies. In this paper, we examine the discourse associated with SERVQUAL research in information systems and electronic commerce. We identify seven distinct ‘storylines’ that have emerged. We conclude that a discourse-based approach to analysing literature gives a richer and more representative picture of the state of knowledge than conventional meta-analysis.

Keywords: Literature review, post-modernism, SERVQUAL
1 INTRODUCTION

Service quality is one of the most researched topics in marketing. Its popularity in information systems (IS) and electronic commerce (EC) is only slightly less. A cursory search on online databases easily found at least fifty peer-reviewed studies in the last ten years that include “SERVQUAL” in keyword lists; and countless more that include wider issues of service quality.

Despite this, there is relatively little consensus about the dimensions of service quality, or the validity and reliability of the SERVQUAL instrument. There seemed to be a possibility that further studies were ‘piling up’ rather than ‘building up’, and creating noise rather than contributing to our understanding of service quality in IS and EC. We decided to explore alternative approaches to reviewing and representing the body of existing knowledge. Our research question is “How do we identify a suitable way of examining the body of promulgated knowledge in service quality in IS and EC in such a way that fairly represents its diversity and accumulated character?

In the rest of the paper, we provide a literature review to briefly describe both traditional and alternative approaches to literature reviews. We describe the methodology we applied and the seven ‘stories’ of service quality research we identified. We finish with the implications and a conclusion.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous approaches to integrative SERVQUAL studies

Previous approaches to analysis of the SERVQUAL literature have generally followed a modernist approach, principally aimed at identifying the centre and achieving a degree of paradigmatic unity (Killduff & Mehra 1997). Over time, the findings of the original studies were subjected to deeper scrutiny and replication (Carman 1990, Teas 1993) as post-positivist researchers sought to uncover generalisable and predictive outcomes typical of their “normal science” expectations (Kuhn 1996). Reviews of previous literature assumed a value-neutral scientific approach. This was usually carried out by means of meta-analysis. Meta analysis has been used in various forms since the early 1900’s to aggregate the work of multiple studies into new accumulated insights (Pawson 2002). In the natural sciences, meta-analysis is a well-grounded, statistical method suitable for evaluating the results of a group of similar studies to observe common patterns and effects. However, when the available pool of data is sparse, heterogeneous, or of inconsistent quality then meta-analysis is unlikely to be able to supply useful results (Glass 1976). There is a risk of semantic ambiguity, where the same term is used with slightly different meanings. In SERVQUAL research a diverse range of analytical methods have been applied to the interpretation of survey results, in many cases context-specific alterations to the instrument have been necessary to fit the method chosen. There has been a ‘piling up’ of studies, rather than a real extension of existing knowledge.

2.2 Historiography and discourse analysis as an approach to reviewing literature

This led us to the conclusion that an alternative approach was required. The selection of historical ‘viewpoints’ is often broadly termed historiography, or the philosophy of history. It considers factors such as how the style of historical writing, methods of interpretation, and tools of investigation have changed over time. A historiographic interpretation of research literature requires a critical examination of the literature-review component of the studies in the sample, which are selected as representative of the historical record.

In this process we were influenced by a viewpoint of “affirmative post-modernism” as proposed by Rosenau (1992). Affirmative post-modernism rejects nihilism and relativism of some post-modern
viewpoints, and asserts that it is possible to represent diverse viewpoints in a way that still “retains the possibility of making discriminations among competing interpretations”. This viewpoint “underscores novelty...as it looks to the richness of difference and concentrates on the unusual” (Rosenau 1992, p. 456). In this process, the research “calls attention to the margins and away from preoccupation with some mythical centre” (Killduff & Mehra 1997, p. 459). Proponents note that they “inevitably struggle against entrenched interests” (Killduff & Mehra 1997, p. 460).

Our approach sought to represent diversity while still offering the ability to compare viewpoints. The analysis is based on ‘storylines’ (Greenhalgh et al 2005). The unfolding storyline becomes the unit of analysis that guides the identification and synthesis of the discourse from a representative sample of the available literature (ibid). This approach examines the literature for convergence in viewpoints towards: persons, events, periods, or seminal works. These defining events and lines of inquiry help to establish the nature of the historic discourse. Every time a scholar has published a new SERVQUAL study, they have contributed to one or more of the storylines that represent the aggregated body of knowledge relating to SERVQUAL. The important milestones in the life of the instrument and the effects those milestones have had will emerge from the sample and serve to illustrate the formation of alternative paths in the timeline that contributes to the research discourse.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

We use a six-stage iterative process (Gorman & Clayton 1997). This process is outlined in Figure 1. In the planning stage, we established the research questions in order to provide a boundary for our literature search. We decided to restrict the scope of the articles chosen to those studies whose phenomenon of interest was clearly an IS, or a related technology, artefact, with the addition of conceptual articles which had an influence on the subsequent evolution and history of the discourse.

In the searching stage, we also followed a broad and inclusive approach. The sources used included physical library stacks, interloan services, online bibliographic databases, and professional subscriptions (e.g. IS-World). This process provided a set of 87 candidate items.

The mapping stage represents the first part of the sense-making process. In this stage, we refined the selection according to recurring themes and extracting keywords and phrases for the subsequent classifying exercise. The mapping stage helped to establish the identities and contributions of the milestone actors and the major events.

The classifying stage involved devising a process to refine our ability to identify and analyse recurring storylines. We followed an affirmative post-modern approach which allowed us to make discriminations amongst the large body of published literature (Rosenau 1992), by defining a set of
criteria for identifying an original story-line, based on those developed by Greenhalgh et al (2005). Our criteria included: (i) does it make a substantial scholarly contribution, (ii) does it set a new research agenda for the research tradition, and (iii) has it subsequently been cited sufficiently often to be regarded as a guiding influence on the tradition? We identified 30 items and 13 sub items that could be used to analyse the storylines. This contributes to the truthfulness of the study by identifying how aspects of the terms and phrases actually used in the discourse relate to one another, and providing a means for consistent and repeatable treatment in the appraisal stage.

The appraisal stage involved a detailed reading of each article, and applying the coding categories. Additional codes were added as required in an iterative process of coding and recoding. The primary researcher initially coded the transcripts. Approximately 20% of the data was coded independently by a second researcher, with an inter-rater agreement of 85%, which indicates sufficient reliability. During this stage we further refined the article set. The result was that the sample size fluctuated up and down during the process and finally settled down at 59 validated and reviewed articles.

In the synthesis stage the material was evaluated holistically. This stage considered how the storylines have evolved over time within the IS domain. For example, service quality in IS has become increasingly concerned with electronic commerce activities over the Internet. Three threads of discourse were identified as being of particular relevance to this study. They are: (i) the discourse on concerns about validity of the SERVQUAL instrument originally published by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, (frequently referred to as ‘PZB’) in 1988, (ii) the discourse on the user of SERVQUAL within the IS setting, and (iii) the discourse on the application of SERVQUAL to the e-business setting. The relationship between these threads of discourse serves to form the framework illustrated in Figure 2. The following seven stories are the outcome of our discourse analysis.

![Figure 2: The Story-Map framework](image_url)
4 RESULTS

4.1 Story 1 - the validity of SERVQUAL

Early investigations of service quality were based on the notion of a positive or negative disconfirmation of the customer's prior expectation (E) forming a subsequent perception (P) of service quality (E-P). In 1985, Parasuraman went on to expand on the idea in the seminal article: A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and its Implications For Further Research (Parasuraman 1985). This paper reinforced the disconfirmation notion and made two new contributions: the 'gaps' model and the potential determinants of service quality. The gaps model identified potential internal and external points of failure in creation and execution of a service. The initial determinants of service quality later condensed into five clear dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness (RATER) during the development of the SERVQUAL survey instrument (Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1988). Initially, SERVQUAL was designed for the conventional retail customer service encounter such as banking in a branch office (Zeithaml & Parasuraman & Berry 1990).

This storyline begins at the two original PZB papers that began what was to become the SERVQUAL research paradigm. Parasuraman, in his initial paper, introduced the gaps model and established ten possible determinants of service quality (Parasuraman 1985). The second PZB paper documented the development of the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1988). These two papers represent the beginning of the SERVQUAL branch of the service quality research discourse. However, there has been an ongoing debate concerning the ability for researchers to make valid predictive claims from the findings of SERVQUAL studies. Carmen (1990) criticised SERVQUAL for the lack of dimensional stability that he found when he used the instrument across different service settings from those that PZB had used in their original studies. In the following years, as more studies appeared that relied upon SERVQUAL as a foundation more issues around factor stability began to emerge (PZB 1991). These problems with stability were partially due to the requirement that each new SERVQUAL study needed to make context-sensitive adjustments to the instrument in order to cater for the unique aspects of their particular service setting. However, this was in keeping with PZB's original published intent and because it served more to strengthen and enhance the diagnostic reputation of SERVQUAL than to reduce its popularity (Berry & Zeithaml & Parasuraman 1990, Zeithaml & Berry & Parasuraman 1988).

To critics, these studies were suggestive of a failure to establish sufficient discriminant validity. In addition, they were concerned that the consequence of this diagnostic flexibility and predictive instability would be that the combined results would be so divergent rather than convergent that no theory-building contributions would emerge (Teas 1993). As a result, those researchers began to vocalise their concerns in the literature (Babakus & Boller 1992, Carman 1990, Teas 1993). In response to the critics, PZB refined and continued the development of SERVQUAL with a substantial review of the instrument in 1991. This involved an empirical retest of the original service quality dimensions combined with an evaluation and comparison exercise with the findings of similar studies (Parasuraman & Berry & Zeithaml 1991a). The 1991 revision produced three key outcomes: it confirmed the diagnostic value of SERVQUAL, it provided an opportunity to reword the instrument to address concerns about negatively worded statements, and it reaffirmed the validity of the original RATER factors (Parasuraman & Berry & Zeithaml 1991b).

Challenging the stability of these factors became a regular point of departure for many SERVQUAL based studies. Babakus & Boller (1992) found that they had only two distinct dimensions and Carman (1990) managed to find eight. This served to reinforce the rumbling concerns about the discriminant validity.
Over-time, the initial debate settled down in response to PZB's, at times, vigorous defence and the growing evidence in support of the diagnostic usefulness of the instrument (Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1994a, 1994b). The emergence of new (technology driven) business models and the Internet has redefined the nature of service quality in many business contexts (Grapentine 1998, Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1994b). In addition, new management tools such as Kaplan and Norton's balanced scorecard, created an awareness of the need for service evaluation techniques that went beyond just measuring if a customer's basic needs had been met. Managers were recognising the need for firms to exceed (by an order of magnitude) their customers expectations (Li & Tan & Xie 2003, Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001, Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1994b). The resulting extended gaps model was labelled the 'Extended Model of Service Quality'. Parasuraman’s original 1985 work had focused solely on face-to-face service encounters. By 2000, PZB had revised and reworked the gaps model several times to make it applicable to the new organizational forms by building in to it constructs that would address other types of service encounter such as technology mediated transactions and 'zones of tolerance' around the original five factors.

The original conceptual model of service quality was also grounded in the disconfirmation statement that says service quality (Q) is the result of Expectations (E) minus Perceptions (P) (Q= E – P). Brown & Churchill & Peter (1993), Cronin & Taylor (1994), and Teas (1993) maintained that the disconfirmation score was intrinsically unreliable and that it was more viable to base service quality assessment on the measurement of perceptions alone. In their defence of the paradigm, PZB responded with a systematic rebuttal that effectively killed the debate in the marketing area (although it would be re-litigated in the information systems literature several years later).

This storyline tracked the life of the original SERVQUAL instrument: the dimensionality debate; the disconfirmation thesis; the discourse on validity, and its ongoing evolution. This discourse was characterised in the main by critiques from other services marketing researchers (PZB’s primary research domain).

4.2 Story 2 - SERVQUAL and the rise of e-business

PZB as the originators of SERVQUAL did not simply publish the instrument and then leave it at that. As described in story one, PZB's SERVQUAL instrument was subjected to intense scrutiny and criticised by some well established researchers almost from its inception. PZB continued to develop the framework throughout the 1990's and have maintained an active stream of new contributions to services science knowledge based on the original gaps and SERVQUAL concepts well into the current e-business era.

In the late 1990's the SERVQUAL related paradigm may well have levelled off into what Kuhn (1996) describes as 'mopping-up activity', where studies become increasingly focused on minor esoteric issues that are interesting only to very small audiences. However, interest had been rejuvenated by the major changes to business forms brought about by the growth in e-commerce (Cox & Dale 2001, Das & Soh & Lee 1999, Devaraj & Fan & Kohli 2002, Pather & Erwin & Remenyi 2003).

The SERVQUAL instrument had been subjected to fifteen years of use and scrutiny, and the gaps framework was well placed for those researchers wanting to explore and propose a forward looking research agenda for the e-business era. Which is exactly what Parasuraman and Zeithaml did in 2001 by publishing a review and agenda in the Handbook of Marketing (Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001). These extensions were attuned to the new methods required when customers and organisations are conducting business in electronically mediated contexts, such as the Internet and mobile technology, where service quality is still critical but face-to-face contact is absent (Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001, Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Malhotra 2005, Zeithaml & Berry & Parasuraman 1988, Zeithaml & Parasuraman & Malhotra & Malhotra 2002). The extension to the gaps model then created a need for new ways of measuring service quality. As a result, a revised SERVQUAL instrument has been proposed (Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Malhotra 2005).
4.3 Story 3 - SERVQUAL in the IS setting

This storyline describes the movement of the SERVQUAL paradigm across disciplinary boundaries. The particular boundary of interest concerns the transition from marketing to IS. In the early 1990's IS was increasingly acknowledging the need to incorporate customer expectations and perceptions into its engineering and organisational behaviour lines of inquiry (Kettinger & Lee 1995, Pitt & Watson & Kavan 1995).

At the same time, customers were acquiring unprecedented access to information on which to form expectations and base their service perceptions, compared with similar customers of even a decade ago (Davenport & Harris & Kohli 2001, Jon 2000, McKenna 2002). This convergence of IS technologists needing to understand their users and marketing information becoming more dispersed across the value chain has created a strong new motivator for service quality to be on the IS research agenda.

The article; Service Quality: A Measure of Information Systems Effectiveness published in MIS Quarterly/June 1995 is a widely-cited article that heralded the crossover of the SERVQUAL paradigm into the IS domain (Pitt & Watson & Kavan 1995). The IS domain had already adopted several models aimed at understanding customer behaviour such as the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the DeLone and McLean IS success model that had relied on the customer's (also, synonymously called the 'user' or 'client' in IS) combination of cognitive and affective reactions to a product or service encounter as their unit of analysis (Davis 1989, DeLone & Mclean 1992). However, there was a perceived shortfall in the explanatory power of those models that Pitt et al thought could be addressed by alerting the IS community to PZB's work. They demonstrated this by proposing that PZB's service quality construct could form a useful extension to Delone and McLean's IS success model. As a result, a subsequent wave of SERVQUAL related IS studies appeared that cited Pitt et al. This research was soon to be challenged (Kettinger & Lee 1997, Pitt & Watson & Kavan 1997, Van Dyke & Kappelman & Prybutok 1997).

4.4 Story 4 - SERVQUAL in IS and the validity concerns

Pitt et al (1995) are credited with bringing SERVQUAL to the attention of the IS research domain. IS researchers were quick to adopt the PZB paradigm as presented by Pitt. However, it was not long (almost immediately allowing for the MIS Quarterly publishing cycle) before other IS researchers found and took up the concerns previously voiced by Babakus, Carman, Teas, Cronin and others in the marketing literature. The June issue of MIS Quarterly in 1997 was dominated by challenges to, and defences of IS-SERVQUAL. (Kettinger & Lee 1997, Pitt & Watson & Kavan 1997, Van Dyke & Kappelman & Prybutok 1997).

Van Dyke & Kappelman & Prybutok (1997) began the debate by calling into question Pitt et al's choice of the SERVQUAL paradigm and by drawing attention to the collective concerns of Babakus, Carman, Cronin and Taylor, and Teas's about the predictive value of SERVQUAL. Their debate mainly focused on restating Teas's concerns about the instrument development and instantiation, challenging the E-P construct suitability, and describing in detail their concerns about the finer points of the use of statistical techniques. They concluded with a discussion about their opinions on the dimensional instability of SERVQUAL, but stopped short of offering a practical alternative (Van Dyke & Kappelman & Prybutok 1997).

Pitt, Watson and Kavan had the right of reply in the same issue of MIS Quarterly. Interestingly, as much as Van Dyke had restated the marketing literatures concerns that had been voiced in the marketing context, Pitt et al employed the same strategy when it came to the response. They addressed Van Dykes points by citing the matching PZB responses that had already been given in the marketing literature to the same issues. In fact, they said as much: "The SERVQUAL debate has certainly not been one sided. Parasuraman et al have responded in full, with sound and solid arguments regarding the conceptual and empirical aspects of their conceptualization of service
quality. The IS community deserves to hear these counter arguments.” (Pitt & Watson & Kavan 1997, p. 210)

By performing a role similar to that which Roland Rust had performed at the academy of marketing retrospective panel discussion; William Kettinger joined in the MIS Quarterly debate to act as something of a rational voice. He did this by reinforcing Pitt et al's assertion that SERVQUAL had much to offer IS by way of diagnostic relevance; even if that meant trading-off some statistical rigor. This effectively took the heat out of the debate and provided the sort of support necessary for future IS-SERVQUAL studies to proceed, relying on the historical support of the PZB research while being able to acknowledge its limits.

This storyline and the preceding story three illustrate that the SERVQUAL discourse has crossed disciplinary boundaries more or less intact. Although challenged, the core of the original SERVQUAL was adopted as IS-SERVQUAL. The IS-Marketing convergence was even further evidenced by the fact that PZB themselves refocused their own research agendas away from traditional face-to-face marketing and onto e-commerce topics as we will see in the following stories (Parasuraman 2004, Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Malhotra 2005, Zeithaml 2002, Zeithaml & Parasuraman & Malhotra 2002).

4.5 Story 5 – Dissenting voices and PZB’s responses

Expressions of dissenting views is one of the signs of a healthy discourse (Crane 1972, Kuhn 1996). The SERVQUAL paradigm has its share of dissenting voices. However, it has not been the sort of dissent that has succeeded in displacing the prevailing wisdom. This may be partly a result of modernist, normal science assumptions, which still seek a centre despite considerable evidence of dissent. This storyline follows the main actors of the SERVQUAL criticism. Carman (1990) was one of the earliest critics of SERVQUAL. His criticism was directed more at the relative newness and unproven aspects of the instrument and its underlying constructs rather than a wholesale rejection. Instead, he called for more replication studies based on the original PZB study and for cross-context validation of the determinants of service quality. He described the initial PZB SERVQUAL study as a "basic skeleton for use across a broad spectrum of services". He then stated that his intent was "to put some meat on that skeleton" (Carman 1990, p. 7). The points he raised concerning dimensionality, service complexity, and wording of the perception and expectation batteries were subsequently addressed specifically in PZB's 1991 revision. Since that time, Carman has been a prolific author and researcher in the service marketing area, but seemed to have decided to leave the SERVQUAL discourse.

Another dissenting voice came from Cronin and Taylor (1992). They directly challenged the perceptions minus expectations disconfirmation theory upon which the SERVQUAL approach is based. They asserted that assessing perceptions alone is a sufficient measure of overall service quality. However, they chose not to reject SERVQUAL entirely and begin from scratch. Instead, they chose to retain the performance half of the SERVQUAL instrument and rename it SERVPERF. The effect of doing this was to attract the attention of PZB as defenders of SERVQUAL and to provide a platform for other dissenting voices such as Teas. Like Carman before them, Cronin also continued to publish prolifically in the services marketing discipline but largely left SERVQUAL alone after this study.

Teas (1993) picked up on the thread of dissent that Cronin and Carman had begun. He chose to systematically examine and challenge the perception minus expectations construct, to expose what he felt to be major validity problems with the SERVQUAL instruments development, and to review and carry out an empirical comparison of the perceptions minus expectations construct with two different perception-only approaches. The two alternative approaches he chose were the Evaluated Performance (EP) model and the Normed Quality (NQ) approach. Teas's conclusions favoured the EP model over the E-P and the NQ models. He asserted that E-P had discriminant validity issues that were severe enough to question its usefulness as a diagnostic or predictive instrument. Unlike the
previous two authors, Teas was not ready to concede. He responded in the same January 1994 *Journal of Marketing* issue as Cronin and Taylor and then continued to voice his concerns at the 1998 Academy of Marketing special panel session on SERVQUAL (Grapentine 1998).

Typically, PZB's response to this criticism was, professional, systematic and thorough enough to effectively quash the debate before it could seriously threaten SERVQUAL. The debate would ultimately form a body of knowledge that subsequent researchers would use as a reason to approach SERVQUAL studies with care (Parasuraman & Zeithaml & Berry 1994b). PZB always took care to acknowledge that Carman, Cronin and Taylor, Teas and other critics were raising legitimate concerns worthy of careful examination and considered response. However, PZB's responses were always (naturally) supportive of the viewpoint that they represented and while they accepted the need for further research they came to be the personification of SERVQUAL. In the marketing discipline, the dissenters largely quietened down over time. As we noted earlier, Van Dyke and others had transferred these same dissenting voices into the IS context.

4.6 Story 6 - the ongoing application of SERVQUAL in IS and E-business research

The emergence of Internet-based online transactions between businesses and consumers has removed much of the face-to-face aspect that formed a significant part of the psychometric basis during the original SERVQUAL development in the mid 1980's (Alzola & Robaina 2005, Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001). This transformation period in the history could well have been the ideal opportunity for SERVQUAL to be discarded and replaced with a revolutionary new approach. Instead, a renewed interest in SERVQUAL occurred as a new generation of researchers sought a sensible starting point for an adapted instrument with which to examine this new phenomenon.

E-business provides the capacity for firms to collect and analyse digital data about customer activity as it occurs. (Alzola & Robaina 2005). In contrast, from the customer's perspective the online situation gives customers the ability to easily amass knowledge about product and services by aggregating information across multiple organisations. This is achieved prior to having to engage in a financial transaction with an organisation (Cox & Dale 2001). The effect of this realignment of the information balance between customers and the organisation is that a new type of informed and highly mobile customer demands a new type of high-quality service encounter (McKenna 2002, Zeithaml 2002). The nature of marketing information, its collection, and subsequent use has changed radically in the e-commerce context. Although the defining construct labels have shifted onto items such as trust, commitment and satisfaction, these are claimed to readily map onto the established RATER framework that underpins the SERVQUAL paradigm (Bauer & Grether & Leach 2000, McKenna 2002, Mehta & Durvasula 1998).

As we mentioned earlier in story 2, PZB have not shown any signs of giving up on ServQual (Parasuraman 2004, Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001, Zeithaml & Parasuraman & Malhotra 2002). Instead, Parasuraman and Zeithaml decided to champion the SERVQUAL paradigm again in the new e-business context with a renewed enthusiasm. IS and EC researchers continue to cite PZB, although the communication flow in the other direction, from IS to Marketing, is much more restricted. Although Berry seems conspicuous by his absence in collaborative publications with Parasuraman and Zeithaml in the later literature, he is still prolific in the services marketing literature.

4.7 Story 7 – The present: the overlap of all three narrative streams, the validity concerns, SERVQUAL in IS, and SERVQUAL in e-business

This final story represents a summary of all six threads from the preceding stories. It does this by acting as the link between the concerns of researchers seeking predictive validity, confirming SERVQUAL's role in IS research, and its application with the recently emerged e-business area of inquiry.
Despite the ongoing discourse about discriminant validity and stability of the dimensions of SERVQUAL, new studies continue to be published regularly that place themselves clearly within the SERVQUAL domain (Alzola & Robaina 2005, Badri & Abdulla & Al-Madani 2005, Cheung & Lee 2005, Jabnoun & Khalifa 2005, Kuo et al. 2005). Those studies do, however, appear to take heed of the earlier warnings about dimensional stability and construct reliability. A recent study by Badri (2005) provides an excellent example of best-practice in the current generation of SERVQUAL studies. A significant portion of the study is taken up with a thorough confirmatory factor analysis that develops the necessary dimensional grounding for a sound diagnostic investigation within the specified context. In addition, the context-specific limitations of the study are thoroughly described. This practice is consistent with the recommendations and acknowledgement of the dimensionality concerns and the 'zones of tolerance' extensions as discussed by PZB (Parasuraman 2004, Parasuraman & Zeithaml 2001).

Within the preceding validity stories, Carman, Cronin and Taylor, Teas and others brought alternative views of SERVQUAL research to the attention of the marketing research tradition. Within a short time; Pitt, Watson and Kavan, Van Dyke, Kettinger and Lee and others had repeated those same concerns for the benefit of the IS research tradition. However, these concerns about validity did not slow down the SERVQUAL express. By the time the criticism gained momentum, PZB were firmly ensconced as the champions and defenders of the instrument, and oversaw its defence, adaptation and growth.

5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are typically two leading approaches to presenting literature reviews; either each new author rehashes the most popular current “storyline”, or performs a meta-analysis to broker a consensus that does not really exist, but is constructed by the researcher. There is probably less agreement about the status of SERVQUAL research than our collective preoccupation with achieving a consensus (a “mythical centre”) would suggest. Many of the ServQual dissenters have not been comprehensively rebutted, but have simply given up in the face of ongoing and determined advocacy from the ServQual authors. An affirmative post-modern, discourse-based approach offers an alternative to a normal science approach, and allows this diversity to be represented while still retaining the ability to critically evaluate the merits of the various storylines.

We have illustrated the process by which discourse within marketing research crossed the boundary into information systems, where it was extensively re-litigated. We showed how technology-driven changes have affected conceptualisations of the service relationship, and the viewpoints of Marketing, IS and EC researchers. In particular, there has been an extensive flow of ideas from Marketing to IS and EC, and limited flow in the other direction. Most importantly, we give voice to the many proponents of alternative viewpoints that “inevitably struggle against entrenched interests” (Killduff & Mehra 1997, p. 460).

Many other areas of IS and EC research are equally diverse and heterogeneous, and would benefit from a discourse-based approach to reviewing literature.

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