



JK LAKSHMIPAT UNIVERSITY
Jaipur

Growth, Globalization & Governance Promises & Challenges

Editors
Swapan Kumar Majumdar
Lokanath Mishra
Anupam Saxena



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The Bricks Behind the Clicks: A Comparative Study of E-commerce Websites

Ajay Chandel¹, Punam Mishra^{2*}

^{1&2} Institute of Management, JK Lakshmi Pat University, Jaipur, Rajasthan

Abstract

E-commerce industry in India is still at its infancy. However, India's e-commerce industry is likely to clock a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35 percent and cross the \$100-billion mark over the next five years, from \$17 billion at present (ASSOCHAM, PwC study). To achieve competitive advantage by providing superior service quality, it is desirable for online service providers to uncover what attributes customers utilize in their assessment of overall service quality and satisfaction. There is an extant literature available on the e-commerce service quality. Yet, e-commerce service quality remains an elusive and indistinct construct. This paper explores the service quality literature and formulates a comparative study to identify service quality gaps of two Indian and two global e-commerce websites. The study, therefore, provides important service quality gaps in dimensions like reliability, responsiveness, ease of use, privacy, and so on to these e-commerce websites which need to be bridged in order to please the customers by providing excellent online service quality.

Keywords

E-commerce Websites, Online Service Quality, Service Quality Gap, Online Service Quality Dimensions

Introduction

E-commerce is the "Business activities conducted using electronic data transmission via the Internet and the WWW" (Schneider and Perry, 2000). E-commerce service quality was defined as "The extent to which a e-commerce web site facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing, and delivery of products and services" (Zeithaml et al., 2002). This transactional quality entails the evaluation of the pre- and post-service experience.

In the early days of e-commerce, web presence and low price were believed to be the drivers of success (Zeithaml et al., 2002). However, today having a simple web presence and low prices do not guarantee success anymore; instead, the service quality issues have become crucial: issues such as consumers' inability to complete transactions, products not delivered on time or at all, non-responsiveness to e-mails, and non-accessibility to desired information. Under such circumstances, Web or e-service quality has entered the picture as a differentiating strategy. To encourage repeat purchases and build customer loyalty, companies need to shift the focus of e-business from e-commerce (the transactions) to e-service (Zeithaml et al., 2002). As such, it is desirable for online service providers to uncover what attributes consumers utilize in their assessment of overall service quality and satisfaction and which attributes are more important.

* Corresponding Author: Punam Mishra (punammishra_pm@yahoo.co.in)



While in countries such as the USA and China, e-commerce has taken significant strides to achieve sales of over USD150 billion in revenue, the e-commerce industry in India is still at its infancy. However, over the past few years, the sector has grown by almost 35 percent CAGR from USD3.8 billion in 2009 to an estimated USD12.6 billion in 2013.¹ E-commerce is shifting users from shopping in stores to shopping on the go.

Review of literature

Businesses need to satisfy customers and meet their expectations of service quality in order to gain competitive advantage (Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994; Lin, 2007; Sullivan and Adcock, 2002). Thus marketers need to continually assess customers' expectations of service quality in order to avoid customer dissatisfaction (Zeithaml, Bitner, 1996). Service quality can be described as the result from customer comparisons between their expectations about the service and their perceptions. That means that if the perceptions would be higher than the expectations the service will be considered excellent, if the expectations equal the perceptions the service is considered good, and if the expectations are not met the service will be considered bad (Oliver et al., 1997). Since online market has been growing rapidly over the past several years, electronic marketing activities have drawn a lot of attention (Chang et al., 2009). The Internet users are able and willing to transact through E-commerce websites (Liang and Lai, 2000). The growth in revenues from online shopping proofreads the same (Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). Customers are turning towards e-commerce websites due to features, like increased convenience, interaction, low cost and high degree of customization and personalization (Park and Baek, 2007).

E-service quality can be defined as overall customer evaluations and judgments regarding the excellence and quality of e-service delivery in the virtual marketplace (Santos, 2003). To promote customer loyalty and customer retention, service quality is important to e-tailors (Imrie et al., 2000). Past researches have demonstrated that service recovery has a direct relationship with factors such as faith, repurchase intention, faithfulness, and word of mouth (Blodgett, Hill, and Tax 1997; Goodwin and Ross 1992; Mohr and Bitner 1995), all of which play a crucial role in success for e-commerce websites as well. A company must be able to deal with these problems as and when they occur because the resolution of these problems ultimately has an effect on repeat patronage and customer loyalty (Bitner et al., 2000; Holloway and Beatty, 2003).

Various dimensions related to e-commerce service quality have been identified. Web site design quality is extremely important for online stores (Ranganathan and Grandon, 2002; Lin, H. F., 2007). Web site design means the appeal that user interface design presents to consumers (Kim and Lee, 2002). Reliability represents the ability of the web site to fulfill orders correctly, deliver promptly, and keep personal information secure (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Janda et al., 2002; Kim and Lee, 2002). Moreover, it was argued that reliability dimension has a direct positive effect on perceived service quality and customer satisfaction by electronic banking systems (Zhu et al., 2002). Customers expect online stores to respond to their genuine concerns and enquiries promptly (Liao and Cheung, 2002). Responsiveness is yet another trait of service quality. Responsiveness is how often an online store voluntarily provides services that are important to its customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Yang, 2001; Kim and Lee, 2002). Researchers examining the responsiveness of web-based services have highlighted the relationship

¹ Internet and Mobile Association of India, research report

between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction (Yang and Jun, 2002; Zhu et al., 2002). The dearth of real-time interaction tends to prevent potential customers from shopping online. (Yang and Jun, 2002). Personalization includes individual attention and personal thank you notes from online stores, (Yang, 2001). Studies have examined the influence of the customer service provided by Internet retailers on perceptions of service quality, and therefore, satisfaction (Wolfenbarger and Gilly, 2003). One of the primary barriers that stop people from online shopping is the concerns about security (Zeithaml et al., 2002). Despite the technical advancements in Internet security such as digital signatures, certificates, customers are still worried about security issues when shopping online (Ranganathan and Ganapathy, 2002). It has been found that perceived assurance has a significant influence on the intentions to purchase online (Lee and Lin, 2005).

A significant body of research in information systems has accumulated evidence for the existence of an effect of ease of use on initial user acceptance and sustained usage of systems (Venkatesh, 2000). Ease of use is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using an information system would be free of effort. It is one of the 'classical' concepts in information systems research (Davis 1989; Sanders and Manrodt, 2003; Venkatesh, 2000). Further, information quality (IQ) plays an important role in enabling online consumers' purchase decisions in the absence of an opportunity to physically interact with products in the online environment (Wixom and Todd, 2005; Kim and Lennon, 2008).

Need for study: Research gap

Riding on the strong growth momentum of 2015, the e-commerce sector is estimated to see a 72 percent jump in the average annual spend on online purchases per individual in 2016, from the current level of 65 percent (ASSOCHAM, PwC study). There has been a mushroom growth in the number of e-commerce websites in India, but still majority of them lack in providing service quality that the customers expect. In a copycat economy, service quality can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage. The companies thus, must identify the various service quality attributes that customers use to assess the performance of these companies. Ultimately, service quality leads to customer satisfaction which in turn leads to loyalty and hence to repeat purchase behaviour. This crucial role of customer satisfaction paving the way for retention and profits may prove even more crucial in the context of online or Internet based service companies. This is because of the ease with which customers can switch between providers on the Internet. Hence there is a need to narrow down the varied e-commerce service quality dimensions. Further these service quality dimensions have to be prioritized to bridge in gaps in online service quality of more important service quality dimensions to deliver superior service quality with limited resources This paper tries to formulate a comparative study to measure customer responses to service quality constructs applied in an online context in India and to see how the customer measurement system reflects customer perception of quality online.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out the gap between the expected service quality and the perceived service quality of selected* e-commerce websites.
2. To compare the service quality of the selected* e-commerce websites.

*(*On the basis of rankings awarded to different e-commerce websites by various agencies in India)*

Research methodology

Descriptive research design was adopted for the study. To accomplish the objectives, four e-commerce websites were selected. The e-commerce websites were selected on the basis of rankings awarded by various sources. The review of literature and various scales by different researchers resulted in eight service quality dimensions and led to the formulation of a questionnaire consisting of 57 statements. These 57 statements were presented to 30 experts for vetting purpose. Vetting of 57 statements led to the final selection of 37 statements which represented eight service quality dimensions.

To ensure the internal consistency of the questionnaire so developed, reliability statistics was run. Applying reliability statistics to 37 statements resulted in the Chronbach's Alpha of .890. Six statements (items) were found to have low 'Corrected Item-Total Correlation'. These statements were found to contribute least to the Chronbach's Alpha and deleting these statements from questionnaire improved the overall reliability of the questionnaire, from 0.890 to 0.915.

The statements in the questionnaire were modified (while keeping the meaning same) to get 'expected' and 'perceived' score of respondents. The statements for measuring the 'expectation' and 'reception' were modified to measure what an ideal e-commerce website must do and what the e-commerce site they currently purchase from does, respectively. The basic idea was to find out the gap between the 'expectation' and 'perception' of respondents.

The questionnaire was administered to 300 online shoppers (75 for each of the four e-commerce websites) to share their opinion on the expected service quality from an ideal e-commerce website.

A 5-point scale was used to collect the customer's expectations and perceptions. The difference between these expectations (E) and perceptions (P) was the gap score which was then averaged (both weighted and unweighted). The gap scores so found for various e-commerce websites were then compared with each other to find out their relative competitive position. Simple descriptive statistics were used for data analysis.

Analysis

Average score of various e-commerce websites on various dimensions were calculated. 100 points were allocated among these 8 dimensions as stated below and were averaged to get the weights as below:

Findings

The gap analysis shows the comparative weighted average gap score of selected e-commerce websites on various service quality dimensions chosen for the study. Gap score shows the extent of variation in expected and perceived service quality. Highest gap score shows the dissatisfaction.

Flipkart.com with least gap in every dimension is a clear leader. Assurance, the most preferred dimension has a remarkable low gap for Flipkart.com. This indicates one of the reasons why Flipkart.com has been rated the No.1 Indian e-commerce website in India as per a myriad of surveys. Being a leader comes with responsibility, the responsibility to perform consistently. Flipkart.com has the challenge to keep performing in a similar fashion making further improvements in all eight dimensions. The company however must improve its Reliability, Privacy and Responsiveness.

Table 1: Comparative score analysis for various service quality dimensions

Expectation [E]			Perception [P]				
Sr. No	Information quality	E	Information quality	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
1	Information contained on this e-commerce website is current and timely	4.42	Information contained on this e-commerce website is current and timely	4.24	4.22	3.90	4.01
2	Information contained on this e-commerce website is at the right level of detail	4.25	Information contained on this e-commerce website is at the right level of detail	3.92	3.82	3.70	3.65
3	Information contained on the website is pretty much what I need to carry out my tasks	4.12	Information contained on the website is pretty much what I need to carry out my tasks	3.68	3.70	3.72	3.90
4	Information contained on the website is in appropriate format	4.12	Information contained on the website is in appropriate format	3.92	3.64	3.73	3.85
	Total	16.91		15.76	15.38	15.05	15.41
	Average score	4.22		3.94	3.84	3.76	3.85
	Reliability	E	Reliability	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
5	This e-commerce website if promises to do something in a certain time, it does so	4.29	This e-commerce website if promises to do something in a certain time, it does so	3.65	3.50	3.52	3.48
6	All relevant order confirmation details are sent to my email within 24 hours by this e-commerce website	4.44	All relevant order confirmation details are sent to my email within 24 hours by this e-commerce website	4.04	4.01	3.81	3.90
7	This e-commerce website performs the service right the first time	4.26	This e-commerce website performs the service right the first time	3.81	3.69	3.52	3.73

Table 1 continued

8	This e-commerce website provides order tracking details until delivery	4.44	This e-commerce website provides order tracking details until delivery	3.82	3.90	3.74	3.89
	Total	17.43		15.32	15.1	14.59	15
	Averaged score	4.35		3.83	3.77	3.65	3.75
	Responsiveness	E	Responsiveness	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
9	This e-commerce website handles product returns well	4.24	This e-commerce website handles product returns well	3.69	3.45	3.36	3.53
10	This e-commerce website shows sincere interest in resolving my problems	4.26	This e-commerce website shows sincere interest in resolving my problems	3.58	3.54	3.4	3.37
11	This e-commerce website provides prompt answers to my questions	4.02	This e-commerce website provides prompt answers to my questions	3.68	3.33	3.61	3.49
12	Email responses of this e-commerce website are relevant and accurate and appropriate to customer requirements	4.33	Email responses of this e-commerce website are relevant and accurate and appropriate to customer requirements	3.74	3.44	3.58	3.65
	Total	16.85		14.69	13.76	13.95	14.04
	Averaged score	4.21		3.67	3.44	3.48	3.51
	Assurance	E	Assurance	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
13	This e-commerce website has a good reputation	4.10	This e-commerce website has a good reputation	4.13	3.93	3.8	3.84
14	I received special rewards and discounts as promised from doing business with this e-commerce website	3.94	I received special rewards and discounts as promised from doing business with this e-commerce website	3.69	3.38	3.41	3.42
15	The testimonials of customers speak good about this e-commerce website	3.93	The testimonials of customers speak good about this e-commerce website	3.72	3.52	3.52	3.65

Table 1 continued

	Total	11.97		11.54	10.83	10.73	10.91
	Average score	3.99		3.84	3.61	3.57	3.63
	Personalization	E	Personalization	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
16	This e-commerce website gives me personal attention	3.77	This e-commerce website gives me personal attention	3.58	3.12	3.4	3.24
17	This e-commerce website enables me to order the product in a way that meets my needs	3.96	This e-commerce website enables me to order the product in a way that meets my needs	3.58	3.62	3.65	3.52
18	This e-commerce website understands my specific needs	3.81	This e-commerce website understands my specific needs	3.73	3.64	3.56	3.50
	Total	11.54		10.89	10.38	10.61	10.26
	Average score	3.84		3.63	3.46	3.53	3.42
	Website design	E	Website design	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
19	Using this e-commerce website gives me a lot of fun	3.89	Using this e-commerce website gives me a lot of fun	3.50	3.50	3.44	3.36
20	The graphical design of this e-commerce site is appropriate	4.08	The graphical design of this e-commerce site is appropriate	3.82	3.66	3.64	3.62
21	The layout of this e-commerce website meets my expectations	3.93	The layout of this e-commerce website meets my expectations	3.62	3.56	3.4	3.58
22	Finding my way on this e-commerce website was easy	4.24	Finding my way on this e-commerce website was easy	3.76	3.70	3.61	3.8
23	This e-commerce website helps in easy completion of online transactions	4.26	This e-commerce website helps in easy completion of online transactions	3.84	3.62	3.57	3.62
	Total	20.4		18.54	18.04	17.66	17.98
	Average score	4.08		3.70	3.60	3.53	3.59
	Privacy	E	Privacy	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com

Table 1 continued

24	This e-commerce website protects my bank card information	4.44	This e-commerce website protects my bank card information	3.82	3.69	3.72	3.6
25	Payments are submitted in a safe mode on this e-commerce website	4.48	Payments are submitted in a safe mode on this e-commerce website	3.85	3.72	3.74	3.86
26	This e-commerce website does not share my personal information with other websites	4.25	This e-commerce website does not share my personal information with other websites	3.88	3.62	3.63	3.78
	Total	13.17		11.55	11.03	11.09	11.24
	Average score	4.39		3.85	3.67	3.69	3.74
	Ease of use	E	Ease of Use	Flipkart.com	Snapdeal.com	Ebay.com	Amazon.com
27	The text on this e-commerce website is easy to read	4.28	The text on this e-commerce website is easy to read	4.01	3.86	3.71	3.96
28	Text/Labels/Menu items of this e-commerce website are easy to understand	4.16	Text/Labels/Menu items of this e-commerce website are easy to understand	4.02	3.77	3.83	3.88
29	Learning to operate this e-commerce website is easy for me	4.06	Learning to operate this e-commerce website is easy for me	4.14	3.82	3.82	3.81
30	It was easy for me to become skillful at using this e-commerce website	4.05	It was easy for me to become skillful at using this e-commerce website	3.94	3.66	3.71	3.73
31	Using this e-commerce website is easy	4.25	Using this e-commerce website is easy	4.06	3.98	3.85	3.88
	Total	20.8		20.17	19.09	18.92	19.26
	Average Score	4.16		4.03	3.81	3.78	3.85

Source: Primary data

Unweighted gap score calculation was done to do comparative gap score analysis of selected e-commerce websites.

Table 2: Comparative gap score of selected e-commerce websites

Sr. No.	Dimension	Flipkart.com [E-P]	Snapdeal.com [E-P]	Ebay.com [E-P]	Amazon.com [E-P]
1	Information quality	0.28**	0.38	0.46*	0.37
2	Reliability	0.52**	0.58	0.7*	0.6
3	Responsiveness	0.54**	0.77*	0.73	0.7
4	Assurance	0.15**	0.38	0.42*	0.36
5	Personalization	0.21**	0.38	0.31	0.42*
6	Website design	0.38**	0.48	0.55*	0.49
7	Privacy	0.54**	0.72*	0.7	0.65
8	Ease of use	0.13**	0.35	0.38*	0.31
Total		2.75	4.04	4.25	3.9
Average unweighted score (Total/8)		0.34	0.50	0.53	0.48

(* Shows the highest gap score whereas ** shows the lowest gap score in a particular service quality dimension) Source: Primary data

Table 3: Factors arranged according to weighted preferences

Preferential order	Dimensions	Points
1	Assurance	0.154
2	Reliability	0.145
3	Information quality	0.142
4	Ease of use	0.126
5	Website design	0.121
6	Responsiveness	0.117
7	Privacy	0.113
8	Personalization	0.083
	Total	1

Source: Primary data

Further weighted score was calculated. The step involved assigning weights to eight dimensions chosen as per the expert opinions. Thirty experts were chosen on the basis of their expertise and understanding of the e-commerce business model. The points against each of the dimensions were totaled and averaged to get a normalize weight. A total of

In the study of these four e-commerce websites the second position has been backed by Amazon.in. This e-retailer has years of expertise in this industry and in very short time it has showed excellent performance in Indian market raising the threat to domestic e-commerce websites. Amazon.in entered in India in 2013 and now follows domestic market leader Flipkart.com in the area of Information quality, Responsiveness, Assurance, Privacy and Ease of use leaving behind Snapdeal.com, another Indian origin

Table 4: Weighted gap scores of selected E-commerce websites

Dimensions	Weights	(US) Flipkart.com	(WGS) Flipkart.com	(US) Snapdeal. com	(WGS) Snapdeal. com	(US) Ebay. com	(WGS) Ebay.com	(US) Amazon. com	(WGS) Amazon. com
Information Quality	0.142	0.28	0.03976	0.38	0.05396	0.46	0.06532	0.37	0.05254
Reliability	0.145	0.52	0.0754	0.58	0.0841	0.7	0.1015	0.6	0.087
Responsiveness	0.117	0.54	0.06318	0.77	0.09009	0.73	0.08541	0.7	0.0819
Assurance	0.154	0.15	0.0231	0.38	0.05852	0.42	0.06468	0.36	0.05544
Personalization	0.083	0.21	0.01743	0.38	0.03154	0.31	0.02573	0.42	0.03486
Website design	0.121	0.38	0.04598	0.48	0.05808	0.55	0.06655	0.49	0.05929
Privacy	0.113	0.54	0.06102	0.72	0.08136	0.7	0.0791	0.65	0.07345
Ease of use	0.126	0.13	0.01638	0.35	0.0441	0.38	0.04788	0.31	0.03906
Total weighted score	1.00								

US: Unweighted score; WGS: Weighted score Source: Primary data

After this a comparative analysis was done for the selected e-commerce websites

Table 5: Comparative analysis of selected e-commerce websites

Dimensions	(E) Expected Expected(E)	(P) Flipkart. com	(P) Snapdeal. com	(P) Ebay.com	(P) Amazon. com	Flipkart.com (E-P)	Snapdeal.com (E-P)	(E-P) Ebay. com	(E-P) Amazon. com	Flipkart.com (AGS)	Snapdeal.com (AGS)	Amazon.com (AGS) Ebay. com	Weight age (W)	Flipkart.com (WGS)	Snapdeal.com (WGS)	(WS) Ebay. com	(WGS) Amazon.com
Information Quality	16.91	15.76	15.38	15.05	15.41	1.15	1.53	1.86	1.5	0.28	0.38	0.46	0.37	0.142	0.03976	0.05396	0.05254
Reliability	17.43	15.32	15.1	14.59	15	2.11	2.33	2.84	2.43	0.52	0.58	0.7	0.6	0.145	0.0754	0.1015	0.087
Responsiveness	16.85	14.69	13.76	13.95	14.04	2.16	3.09	2.9	2.81	0.54	0.77	0.73	0.7	0.117	0.06318	0.08541	0.0819
Assurance	11.97	11.54	10.83	10.73	10.91	0.43	1.14	1.24	1.06	0.15	0.38	0.42	0.36	0.154	0.0231	0.06468	0.05544
Personalization	11.54	10.89	10.38	10.61	10.26	0.65	1.16	0.93	1.28	0.21	0.38	0.31	0.42	0.083	0.01743	0.02573	0.03486
Website Design	20.4	18.54	18.04	17.66	17.98	1.86	2.36	2.74	2.42	0.38	0.48	0.55	0.49	0.121	0.04598	0.06655	0.05929
Privacy	13.17	11.55	11.03	11.09	11.24	1.62	2.14	2.08	1.93	0.54	0.72	0.7	0.65	0.113	0.06102	0.0791	0.07345
Ease of Use	20.8	20.17	19.09	18.92	19.26	0.63	1.71	1.88	1.54	0.13	0.35	0.38	0.31	0.126	0.01638	0.04788	0.03906
Total														0.34225	0.50175	0.53617	0.48354

AGS: Average gap score; WGS: Weighted gap score; P: Perceived service quality; E: Expected service quality; E-P: Service quality gap

Source: Primary data

second largest e-commerce player. The e-commerce website is suggested to maintain its low gap position in these dimensions and further bring the gap down relative to Flipkart.com. Amazon.in must try hard to bring down the gap in Reliability and Personalization. Snapdeal.com performs well on the Reliability, Information quality, Personalization dimensions whereas it performs badly on Responsiveness and Privacy dimensions, with high gaps. In today's e-commerce scenario where there is a stiff competition with domestic and international players entering into the market, effective and efficient service quality is important to attract and retain customer.

Ebay.in doesn't seem to be performing well on the eight service quality dimensions chosen. With its extremely high gaps on almost all the eight service quality dimensions it gets the last rank. Ebay.in needs to go for fundamental rethinking and restructuring of its service quality to sustain the market profitably. There is a need for E bay to go back to the rich history and relearn the lessons of business excellence.

Conclusion

E-commerce retailers have to understand the changing needs of customers, their aspirations, and expectations to create value. E-commerce websites should also have a strong customer relationship management system that would indicate the worth of the customer and be able to understand his needs while interacting with them, so as to cross sell their products. To manage growth and continuity in business, they need to focus on those areas where the expectations of customers are very high. Remarks on service reliability should be continuously obtained from customers. This will enhance their service quality to a large extent.

E-commerce websites need to focus more on getting strong on the areas, like privacy of customer data, secured online transactions, trustworthiness of customers, and consistency in performance.

Scope for further research

This paper with its results unearths the service quality gaps of major Indian e-retailers. The next link in the paper could be to benchmark these Indian e-commerce websites with world's best e-commerce websites so as to keep them competitive enough in this global competitive industry.

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