

GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES IN SERVICE QUALITY AND RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED OUTCOMES: A GERMAN STUDY IN THE HAIR-CARE SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relative efficacies of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy as drivers of satisfaction, and continued patronage and recommendation intentions within the context of hair-care services. A related objective of the study is to determine if service quality predictors of the three relationship-oriented outcomes converge or diverge across female and male consumers. A survey of residents in Rostock, Germany serves as the study setting. Results are presented and their implications are discussed. Avenues for future research are offered.

Keywords: service quality, behavioral intentions, Germany, hair-care services, survey

PURPOSE AND METHOD

The objectives of the research reported here are two-fold. First, the study investigates the relative efficacies of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy as drivers of satisfaction, and continued patronage and recommendation intentions within the context of female and male consumers of hair-care services in Germany. Second, the study seeks to determine if service quality predictors of relationship-oriented outcomes converge or diverge across female and male consumers.

Variables pertinent to the study were collected via self-administrated questionnaires from the residents of Rostock, a city of about 200,000 people located near the Baltic Sea. Five hundred questionnaires were hand distributed to potential respondents living in different neighborhoods of the city and after a two-week period, 226 usable ones were retrieved. Of those respondents, 126 were female and the remaining 100 were male.

Service quality was operationalized via Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1988) time-honored (Carrilat et al, 2007) 22-item SERVQUAL instrument which consists of four tangibility (TANG), five reliability (RELI), four responsiveness (RESP), four assurance (ASSU) and five empathy (EMPA) items. *Satisfaction* was operationalized by a five-item measure. These items related to the five dimensions of SERVQUAL. After defining each dimension, respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction on that dimension on a five-point scale ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied." A respondent's overall satisfaction score was derived by linearly combining his/her scores on the five dimensions.

The internal consistency reliabilities (coefficient alphas) of all these multiple-item measures well exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70, ranging from a low of .86 (tangibility and responsiveness) to a high of .90 (satisfaction). The remaining variables were operationalized via single-item measures. Specifically, to measure respondents' *continued patronage* and *recommendation* intentions, respondents were asked to indicate the likelihood with which they would engage in each of these behaviors on five-point balanced scales ranging from "very likely" to very "unlikely".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Which service quality factors lead to satisfaction and behavioral intentions among female and male consumers? To determine the relative efficacies of the drivers of satisfaction and behavioral intentions, six regression models were run (three for each gender) by using tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy as the independent, and satisfaction and, continued patronage and recommendation intentions as the dependent variables. All the models run for the female group proved to be significant. The independent variables (components of service quality) collectively were most effective in explaining the variance in satisfaction with an R^2 value of 47% and least effective in the case of continued patronage intentions ($R^2 = 12\%$). A closer scrutiny of the results showed that reliability emerged as a significant predictor in all three equations. In fact, it was the only significant variable in the case of continued patronage intentions. Besides reliability, tangibility surfaced as a significant predictor of satisfaction, and empathy as a significant predictor of recommendation. In both instances, reliability was the most important antecedent.

All three regression models run for the male group, as well, were significant. The explained variances ranged from a high of 43% (satisfaction) to a low of 21% (continued patronage intentions). In each model, a single component of service quality, however, surfaced as a significant variable. These were empathy in the case of satisfaction, reliability in the case of continued patronage intentions, and assurance in the case of recommendation.

Do the service quality predictors of relationship-oriented outcomes between females and males converge or diverge? To address this question and discern the extent of within-group agreement as well as between-group concordance, beta coefficients were rank-ordered from 1 to 5 in terms of their absolute magnitudes across each dependent variable for both groups separately. Schucany and Frawley test was then applied to the data. The test statistic can range between -1 and 1 where a coefficient of 1 signifies perfect similarity and a coefficient of -1 perfect dissimilarity. The results showed that overall there was a modest degree of similarity between the female and male consumers ($W = 0.38$).

On balance, our results suggest that in the case of male consumers, different aspects of service quality have bearing on different outcomes (i.e., satisfaction, continued patronage intentions, recommendation). This is partly true in the case of female consumers. However, for this group reliability emerges as a consistent predictor of all three outcomes. Our results also show that, on balance, service quality predictors converge across gender segments. Therefore, a holistic approach in serving the needs of female and male customers would be the prudent course of action to follow.

On a closing note it should be noted that although this study expands our knowledge base and provides useful insights, viable prospects for further research remain. For instance, the setting of this study consisted of respondents in a particular city in Germany. This may have led to sampling artifacts. Therefore, generalizations beyond the specific context of this research must be guarded. Replications in Germany and other countries among other samples of consumers are in order. Also, this study was conducted within the context of a single service sector. This may delimit generalizations. Extensions into other sectors, which differ in terms of type of customer contact, level of customization, transaction type etc. would be fruitful. Generalizability of our findings to such other settings awaits confirmation through future research.

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