

# A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Service Quality Prioritization

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**Abstract.** *The findings of this research are mostly useful to those who intend to penetrate international “Business to Consumer” markets. One of the key challenges of online businesses is how they manage service quality, which holds a significant importance to customer satisfaction. This paper is intended to unveil customer perception on service quality priority and different cultural expectations of online shopping. The questionnaire utilized was based on the SERVQUAL instrument that identifies five quality dimensions. This study indicates that, in developing countries, customers need more security and clarity in transactions. The managerial and theoretical implications are provided.*

**Keywords:** *Electronic commerce; Online retailing; Service quality; Cross-cultural.*

## INTRODUCTION

Retailing is at the forefront of e-commerce. It is clear that e-retailing will continue to grow and become a more significant portion of retail sales than it currently is. Global B2C e-commerce is forecast to hit US\$562 billion by 2006 [1]. However, in the year 2000, nearly 900 US online firms were shut down; 31% being online retailers [2]. The importance of service quality and the challenges facing internet-based services necessitate insights, on the part of managers, into what attributes customers use in their evaluation of online service quality [3]. Customer satisfaction is strongly influenced by the overall service quality provided for them [2].

Customer willingness to use online shopping is a significant issue for researchers and practitioners. Researchers pointed out that loyal customers are vital for practitioners in the online retailing sector and they examined different factors that influenced customer intention to return online. The study of Nitse et al. in 2004 points out that companies are losing potential customers and sales as a result of having colors on the web that do not accurately represent the true colors of the products being sold. The study of Rosenbloom et al. in 2005 indicates that after-delivery satisfaction has a much stronger influence on both overall customer

satisfaction and intention to return than at-checkout satisfaction [4].

Since the internet is a relatively new transactional channel, online companies may not clearly understand what specific services are desired. Additionally, many customers have not yet formed clear expectations for online retailers [2]. Although different studies uncovered the perception of online customers about service quality, this research has mostly been done in developed countries.

In order to fill this research gap and structure the body of literature, this study empirically determines the priority of service quality, through customer perception of the online retailing sector in a developing country. Also, a comparison of results between a developing and a developed country is presented, to provide practitioners with valuable guidelines for designing appropriate online services.

We begin by integrating insights from established theories of service quality. Then, we draw on SERVQUAL dimensions in virtual environments. After describing our framework, we present the results of the analysis and explore their theoretical and managerial implementations. Finally, we assess the limitations of our study and suggest areas for future research.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Over the last several years, e-commerce has grown considerably and online shopping continues to struggle to become a leading retail channel [5]. Researchers

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have explored various aspects of internet shopping; for instance, Rodgers and Harris [5] discovered that men have a greater trust in internet shopping and perceive it as a more convenient shopping outlet than women do. The other study, by Laroche et al. [6], affirmed that “there are significant differences in offline and online retail mediums”.

As a consequences of these gaps, customer satisfaction in the online sector has become the concern of scholars and practitioners; Devaraj and Kohli measured consumer satisfaction with an Electronic Commerce (EC) channel, through constructs prescribed by three established frameworks: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Transaction Cost Analysis (TCA) and Service Quality (SERVQUAL) [7]. Yang et al. also used TAM to develop an instrument for measuring the user perceived service quality of the “information presenting web portal” [8]. Another study separated website quality into Information Quality (IQ) and System Quality (SQ) and proposed nine key constructs for web-customer satisfaction [9]. Also, Jun et al. in 2004 [2], identified six key online retailing service quality dimensions, as perceived by online customers; reliable/prompt responses, access, ease of use, attentiveness, security and credibility.

A global measurement for service quality, “SERVQUAL”, was introduced by Parasuraman et al. in 1988 [10], with five factors: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Since then, it has been used in many various contexts and disciplines, which make it a powerful tool. Kuo in 2003, introduced the definitions of SERVQUAL dimensions in original and web-based service quality (see Table 1) [11]. The key driving force in enhancing customer satisfaction

has been recognized as the subtle differentiating service quality levels of online retailers [12].

The commercial use of the web has been increasing significantly. However, many companies that rely purely on a website to trade internationally are failing to take linguistic and cultural differences sufficiently into account [13]. Cultural preferences and biases affect the degree of user friendliness of an interface, such as graphics, background color and spatial orientation. A very extreme example of this is regarding the color white, while white represents purity in the U.S. The Japanese associate this color with death [13].

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Websites, the same as bricks and mortar stores, have to offer excellent services. As the expansion of e-commerce continues, the role of the website becomes more and more important. Now that many Persian retailers have launched websites, it is the right time to undertake local research on service quality. The purpose of this research is to provide empirical evidence regarding the prioritization of service quality factors. Thus, the first research question is:

- What are the most important service quality factors in online purchasing?

It is important for managers and providers alike to comprehend how and why technology has or has not been adopted for knowledge work in less-developed countries [14]. Singh et al. in 2006 cited that “culturally adapted websites show the commitment of the foreign vendor to invest in the local culture and to be receptive to their unique demands” [15]. The findings of the following research question have important

**Table 1.** Definition of SERVQUAL dimensions in web-based services (source: [11]).

	Definitions in Original	Definitions in Web-Based Service
<b>Tangibles</b>	Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials	Suitable infrastructure includes software and hardware
<b>Reliability</b>	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately	Ability of e-mail systems and websites to provide accurate information and perform the promised service
<b>Responsiveness</b>	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt services	The ability of web-based service systems to perform the online service consistently and accurately
<b>Assurance</b>	Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence	The ability of web-based systems to convey trust and confidence
<b>Empathy</b>	Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers	The ability of e-mail systems or websites to provide caring and individual attention

implications for international marketers wishing to use a website for targeting global consumers. The second research question is:

- Does environment influence the importance of the different factors of service quality?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper takes its population sample from Iran; one of the main markets in the Middle East. The choice of this group was based on the fact that Iran, as a developing country, has the largest online population among countries of the Middle East ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)) and, also, that it was readily accessible.

The research was conducted by means of a questionnaire, an online survey. The survey was undertaken by members of *cloob.com*; a virtual Persian society website, on which people display their profiles, web logs, lists of friends, photo albums, clubs, messaging systems, online shopping and advertising etc. *cloob.com* has 88309 active members (based on August 24, 2005 reports). All members were provided with the questionnaire, on their personal pages, with a brief introduction about the aims of the research.

The survey contained the following questions: Personal information (gender, age, academic discipline), respondents' use of internet (equipment, frequency of use), aspects of web quality (a predefined list of 50 aspects).

The core of the questionnaire consisted of a list of web quality aspects. For every aspect, we asked the respondent to indicate the importance and their satisfaction of that aspect at the same time. These items are derived from the study of Iwaarden et al. in 2003 [16], in which they defined the aspects according to the categories of the model developed by Cox and Dale in 2001 [3]. These are: clarity of purpose, design, communication, reliability, service and frequently asked questions, accessibility and speed, product or service choice, order confirmation, product purchase, user recognition, extra service and frequent buyer incentives [3,16]. For each of these categories, a number of aspects have been defined in the questionnaire.

### Pre-Test and Pilot Study

As most of the items were obtained directly from the literature, the validity of the instrument was re-evaluated to ensure its applicability. The questionnaire was translated into the local language (Persian) and the translation was checked several times by native speakers. The instrument was then pre-tested for unclear wording and revised by two experts in the field. We conducted pilot studies with 20 students

at Tarbiat Modares University. The initial reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha. The construct validity was evaluated using a factor analysis; most items loaded properly on their expected factors, and slight changes in wording were undertaken.

## Survey Results

### *Sample and Response Rate*

All the *cloob.com* members had access to the questionnaires (approximately 88,000 members) and a link and a brief introduction about the study were provided on their personal pages. About 730 respondents submitted their answers, which made a very low response rate (approximately one [0.829] percent of the total members), although acceptable for this type of online survey.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Most of the respondents were male (66%), engineers (55.9%) and 31-35 years of age (45.8%). Respondents were generally satisfied with their personal computers but were not content with the connection speed of the internet and downloading from the web. They considered themselves knowledgeable about internet surfing; on average visiting the internet 15 times a week, each time spending about one hour on the net.

### Data Analysis

The construct validity of the instrument was evaluated by examining convergent validity, using both inter-measurement correlation analysis and factor analysis. According to the Exploratory Factor Analysis (varimax, principal components), the importance data was given a KMO value of 0.895 and, for satisfaction data, the KMO value was 0.906. Based on eigenvalues greater than one indicated 12 factor solutions. Most factors were very specific and did not disclose the underlying structure of the customer perception of website quality. The Scree plots indicated solutions with fewer factors, possibly around five. A comparison of the results of factor analyses, with varying numbers of factors, led to the conclusion that five-factor solutions best fit the data. These five-factor solutions were used to find evidence for the existence of the five dimensions, according to the SERVQUAL scale (as illustrated in Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix), for the results of these five-factor solutions. The evidence for the reliability of factors is also shown for each of the dimensions, which are at, or above, the recommended threshold of 0.7 [17]. The confirmatory factor analysis also confirmed the five dimensions of SERVQUAL for importance factors: Chi-square = 155.13, P = 0.21, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.02 and, for satisfaction factors: Chi-square = 241.25, P = 0.00, CFI = 0.98 and RMSEA=0.04.

**Table 2.** Importance of, and satisfaction with, aspects of web quality (top ten).

	<b>Top Ten with Highest Scores on Importance</b>	<b>Importance Mean</b>	<b>Satisfaction Mean</b>	<b>Delta S-I</b>
1	Access is fast	4.294	3.648	-0.65
2	Information is found with a minimum of clicks	4.186	3.651	-0.54
3	24 × 7 × 365 user accessibility	4.156	3.980	-0.18
4	Brand image is important	4.105	3.840	-0.26
5	Finding your way on the web site is easy	4.104	3.635	-0.47
6	The privacy policy is accessible	4.073	3.566	-0.51
7	The security policy is accessible	4.035	3.392	-0.64
8	There are well programmed search options	3.979	3.718	-0.26
9	Instructions are directly available	3.968	3.677	-0.29
10	A standard navigation bar, a home button and back/forward button are available on every page	3.957	3.902	-0.06

Note: Mean values on five-point scales.

## RESULTS

In Table 2, importance (expectations) and satisfaction (experiences) are summarized on predefined aspects related to the quality of the websites. The top ten aspects seem to relate to the basic infrastructure of e-commerce. Respondents believe that the most important aspect of service quality must be “Fast Access”. As they were asked about their PC satisfaction (the satisfaction mean is: 4.098 on a five point scale) they seemed pretty satisfied with their own systems, so, the main problem is the speed of the internet connection. The second important factor, “Information is found with a minimum of clicks”, is related to the first problem. When respondents have proper access, they wish to reach the required information as fast as possible. It also refers to the design of the websites; customers are not happy with complicated pages. The third factor is “24 × 7 × 365 user accessibility”, which refers to the availability of the websites.

The bottom ten aspects (refer to Table 3) seem to relate to extra services, such as “A customer platform is provided for an exchange of ideas” or “Website

animations are meaningful” and information such as “Tax and/or other charges are clearly detailed” or “An email address for queries and complaints is provided”. Apparently, respondents do not find these extras very important in their use of the internet. Respondents are mostly anxious about the speed of their connection and the safety of their personal information online through their visits and shopping.

The gaps between experiences and expectations (satisfaction minus importance refer to Table 2) are widest for the aspects that respondents perceive as most important. The aspect with the largest gap is “access is fast” (satisfaction score 3.648 and importance score 4.294). In the top ten aspects, there are no aspects with a positive delta, which means that, for every aspect, respondents are not satisfied with current services. In the bottom ten aspects, there are seven aspects with a (very small) positive delta, which shows that respondents are quite satisfied with these features of the website.

A two-tailed *t*-test was performed on satisfaction and importance scores:  $df = 49$ , mean = 0.89, standard deviation = 0.2216,  $t = 2.85$ , sig = .006, which

**Table 3.** Importance of, and satisfaction with, aspects of web quality (bottom ten).

	<b>Bottom Ten with Highest Scores on Importance</b>	<b>Importance Mean</b>	<b>Satisfaction Mean</b>	<b>Delta S-I</b>
41	Web site animations are meaningful	3.632	3.513	-0.12
42	It is easy to print from the web	3.606	3.497	-0.11
43	An email address for queries and complaints is provided	3.605	3.760	0.15
44	Different payment options are stated clearly	3.579	3.704	0.13
45	The home page feature options for new and registered users	3.559	3.574	0.01
46	A customer platform is provided for exchange of ideas	3.558	3.817	0.26
47	Web sites that focus on brand awareness have a store locator	3.506	3.652	0.15
48	The user is invited into a frequent buyer program	3.482	3.714	0.23
49	Links are provided to pages on related products and services	3.469	3.648	0.18
50	The user can make a purchase without website registration	3.338	3.600	0.26

Note: Mean values on five-point scales.

statistically confirms that respondents’ expectations are far from their experiences.

**COMPARING WEB QUALITY FACTORS BETWEEN PERSIAN AND AMERICAN ONLINE CUSTOMERS**

Here, the top ten highest and the ten bottom lowest web quality scores of importance for the American perspective are compared with the Persian perspective (based on research for 293 American students that was conducted by Iwaarden et al. in 2003 [16]).

Table 4 illustrates the top ten highest scores of importance from the Persian and American perspective. In this table, only three aspects are common between these two groups: Both strongly expect websites to provide fast access; an easy navigating design and well functioning search options. Although the connection speed in the USA is more advanced, people still expect faster internet services.

Table 5 shows the bottom ten, with the lowest

scores of importance. As this table explains, there are four common aspects that both groups consider quite unimportant. Online customers give extra services less priority than other web quality factors. For instance, many web designers believe that meaningful animation brings spirit to a website, but, as determined, customers do not really expect this feature.

An interesting point is that the following three aspects: “The security policy is accessible”, “The privacy policy is accessible” and “Brand image is important”, are available in the top ten column of the Persian perspective, but in the bottom ten column of the American perspective. It illustrates that customers of developing countries are more concerned about security issues, while, in developed countries, it is not a main concern of online shoppers. One of the reasons is that the policies, instructions and laws of e-commerce are not very clear for online buyers and sellers in developing countries. To put it briefly, varied expectations of web quality may stem from economics, technologies and infrastructures, not only from culture [18].

**Table 4.** The top ten with highest score on importance from Persian and American perspective.

Persian Perspective		American Perspective	
1	Access is fast	Finding your way on the website is easy	5
2	Information is found with a minimum of clicks	Access is fast	1
3	24 × 7 × 365 user accessibility	A complete overview of the order is presented before final purchase decision	19
4	Brand image is important	Tax and/or other charges are clearly detailed	40
5	Finding your way on the website is easy	The registration process is simple	23
6	The privacy policy is accessible	Access to anticipated delivery times is available at all times	20
7	The security policy is accessible	All relevant order confirmation details sent by e-mail	38
8	There are well programmed search options	Order cancellation and returns details are confirmed within three days	37
9	Instructions are directly available	Order-tracking details are available until delivery	33
10	A standard navigation bar, a home button and back/forward button are available on every page	There are well programmed search options	8

**Table 5.** The bottom ten with lowest scores of importance from Persian and American perspective.

Persian Perspective		American Perspective	
41	Website animations are meaningful	Searches on related sites are provided	35
42	It is easy to print from the web	The privacy policy is accessible	6
43	An email address for queries and complaints is provided	The security policy is accessible	7
44	Different payment options are stated clearly	The website contains company details	25
45	The home page feature options for new and registered users	Scrolling kept to a minimum through pages and text	29
46	A customer platform is provided for exchange of ideas	Links are provided to pages on related products and services	49
47	Websites that focus on brand awareness have a store locator	Website animations are meaningful	41
48	The user is invited into a frequent buyer program	A customer platform is provided for exchange of ideas	46
49	Links are provided to pages on related products and services	The user is invited into a frequent buyer program	48
50	The user can make a purchase without website registration	Brand image is important	4

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study focuses on an investigation into customer perception of online shopping. The research was performed under the light of the well recognized SERVQUAL theory. The online consumers were addressed on a web-survey conducted in Tehran, Iran. The study provided also a comparison of findings between a developed and a developing country.

This manuscript has several strengths, which are important to highlight. First, the constructs studied were confirmed as relevant for addressing consumer perception of online shopping and SERVQUAL is applicable in an online shopping context. The second strength of this study lies in the sample used, since the study was conducted among a great variety of customers with different characteristics. A quite balanced sample exists, in terms of gender, the large range of ages and computer and internet experience, for the representatives of the sample, regarding the Persian population.

Our findings suggest that managers, without considering for which country their target market is designed, should make their websites fast, provide easy access to information and have well programmed search engines. However, the initial step in endeavoring to plan service quality improvement is listening to the voice of customers [19]. As internet technologies become increasingly sophisticated and websites can deliver a more targeted content, the demand for personalization continues to grow. On the other hand, many online customers are very concerned about threats to their personal privacy. Thus, online stores must try to ensure that customers receive relevant information while simultaneously protecting their privacy, because personalization should not be intrusive. Finally, service quality is one of the key elements in adding value for companies. Practitioners need to understand the factors that make people visit a website, spend some time there, and make their purchases online.

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper is considered to be accomplished (i.e. "to provide empirical evidence on the cross-cultural comparison of service quality prioritization"). By doing this, we have gained a better understanding within the field of service quality, have contributed to easing the gap in user-centric research within online shopping and have added to academic knowledge, regarding consumer behaviour, specifically focused on online purchasing.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, which are useful for inspiring future studies. First, with the number of internet users now over one billion, the group of online users in Tehran is very small, which may not

be representative of the general population of online shoppers. The analytical results presented here, thus, may have limited generalization. Research with larger samples that pose the same or similar questions would be appropriate, would enrich the findings of this study and provide a better understanding for providers and developers of the services. Also, studies that could address other cultures and geographical areas would contribute to this research by adding different perspectives.

It could be also important to conduct studies that focus on different online services. Addressing other services might provide an insight into a more comprehensive model of online service quality.

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## APPENDIX A

SERVQUAL dimensions on Persian data.

**Table A1.** Factor analysis on "Importance" data (five factor solution).

<b>Importance</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
<b>Reliability</b>	.869	
All relevant order confirmation details are sent by e-mail within 24 hours		.745
24 hours/7 days user accessibility		.712
A complete overview of the order is presented before final purchase decision		.681
Tax and/or other charges are clearly detailed		.629
Access is fast		.611
Order tracking details are available until delivery		.589
Different payment options are stated clearly		.546
Order cancellation and return details are confirmed within three days		.537
Access to anticipated delivery times is available at all times		.526
<b>Empathy</b>	.796	
Searches on related sites are provided (e.g. a flight/hotel search on travel sites)		.803
Links are provided to pages on related products and services		.778
The user can customize the web site and the information is retained (e.g. seat and meal preferences on travel sites)		.753
A customer platform is provided for exchange of ideas		.639
The links to related sites are meaningful		.559
Web sites that focus on brand awareness have a store locator		.557
<b>Responsiveness</b>	.796	
Full product or service characteristics are available		.734
Full details of product or service pricing are available		.730
Graphics and animations do not detract from use		.634
Required stock information is available throughout the buying process		.584
<b>Assurance</b>	.852	
The website has external validation of trustworthiness		.748
The web site contains company details		.744
The privacy policy is accessible		.634
The security policy is accessible		.614
Terms and conditions of sales are accessible		.519
<b>Tangibles</b>	.794	
The home page feature options for new and registered users		.800
Registration process details are retained		.737
The registration process is simple		.674

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. A Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

**Table A2.** Factor analysis on “Satisfaction” data (five factor solution).

<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
<b>Responsiveness</b>	.850	
Full details of product or service pricing are available		.758
Access is fast		.692
Page availability information is given on entry		.681
There are well programmed search options		.673
Information is found with a minimum of clicks		.650
Page availability information is given on entry		.502
<b>Reliability</b>	.817	
Order cancellation and return details are confirmed within three days		.778
Access to anticipated delivery times is available at all times		.745
Order tracking details are available until delivery		.707
Tax and/or other charges are clearly detailed		.622
Queries or complaints are resolved within 24 hours		.533
<b>Assurance</b>	.783	
Information is provided to Frequently asked questions and answers		.798
The Frequently Asked Questions and answers contain links that take the user to the relevant page(s)		.676
User feedback is sought to measure customer satisfaction		.675
An email address for queries and complaints is provided		.558
<b>Empathy</b>	.761	
Searches on related sites are provided (e.g. a flight/hotel search on travel sites)		.853
The user can customize the website and the information is retained (e.g. seat and meal preferences on travel sites)		.771
Links are provided to pages on related products and services		.679
Websites that focus on brand awareness have a store locator		.578
<b>Tangibles</b>	.798	
Registration process details are retained		.812
The registration process is simple		.710
The home page feature options for new and registered users		.704

Note: Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. A rotation converged in 7 iterations.