

WEB USERS' CULTURAL PROFILES AND E-SERVICE QUALITY: INTERNATIONALIZATION IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM WEB SITES

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Although e-service quality (e-SQ) is vital for online purchases and loyalty, and the Internet is globalizing services, limited knowledge exists regarding the impact of Web users' cultural profiles on their perceptions of e-SQ. Within the tourism industry, this is crucial as Web sites target multicultural users and firms are trying to develop localized Web stores. This study addresses this gap by examining the link between cultural dimensions of Web site users and their e-SQ expectations. Based on an extensive literature review, research hypotheses are formulated and then tested by gathering data from a multinational student body. Findings provide useful implications for users' segmentation and Web site globalization.

Key words: Culture; Impact; Users; Web site; Design; Tourism

Introduction

Research has revealed that e-service quality (e-SQ) is a crucial factor that can significantly determine customer satisfaction, purchase, loyalty and retention through a Web site (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2002; Voss, 2000; Zeithaml, 2002). A few recent studies have also examined the relationship between culture and service quality (Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Furrer, Liu, & Sudharsham, 2000; Mattila, 1999). However, although the Internet enables the globalization of the services, no research has so far examined the relationship and impact of cultural features and characteristics on e-SQ, while a recent exploratory research (Markus & Gould, 2000) has

only provided preliminary comparisons of the Web site features and design of Internet portals across different cultures. In the case of tourism and hospitality Web sites, research on the impact of culture on Web site service quality dimensions becomes more important because of two major reasons. First, tourism and hospitality Web sites frequently target multinational and multicultural audiences. Second, as a result of the former, the greatest majority of tourism and hospitality Web sites are trying to develop successful localized and national gateways of their Web stores (e.g., opodo.fr, opodo.de, opodo.uk).

In this vein, this article aims to examine the link between cultural dimensions of Web site users and their service quality expectations for tourism and

hospitality Web sites. To achieve that, the following steps were undertaken. An extensive literature review was undertaken for investigating the concept of e-SQ and identifying a reliable model for measuring it. Cultural features and dimensions were measured by using Furrer et al.'s (2000) version of the Hofstede's cultural dimensions model. Then, after reviewing previous studies investigating the impact of cultural dimensions on service quality as well as on Web site design and features, the research hypotheses were formulated. Data for testing the hypotheses were collected from an international and multicultural student audience. Hypotheses were tested by using multiple regression analyses. Findings provide useful theoretical and managerial implications for globalizing tourism and hospitality e-services and for developing international market segmentation strategies.

e-Service Quality

In reviewing the literature on service quality and ICT, Sigala (2004a) concluded that research on service quality on the Internet has been mainly based on the SERVQUAL model. Long and McMellon (2004) have provided evidence for the applicability of the SERVQUAL model on the Internet but they have also highlighted the need to adapt its dimensions in order to make it less reliant on interpersonal interactions but more technologically relevant. Actually, there is a debate in the literature as to whether existing measures of service quality (e.g., SERVQUAL) apply to e-services. Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2000) defined e-SQ as the extent to which a Web site facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchase, and delivery. Voss (2000) claimed that the five SERVQUAL dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles) are also important on the Internet, with the possible exception of empathy as this is based on human interaction. However, he argued that responsiveness is vitally important for e-services, which is reflected not only on e-mail response times but also on Web site customization and the provision of proactive online service. Reliability was considered as the ability to connect to the Internet, download time, systems not crashing, and order fulfillment. Assurance was also considered as critical, because on the Internet it refers to the ability to

convey trust and confidence. Coupled with the lack of empathy online, the provision of online assurance becomes quite difficult.

In building a construct for service quality in e-commerce, Voss (2000) considered video, animation, sound, simulations, and other multimedia features to enhance the tangibility aspects of the Internet. Cox and Dale (2001) also claimed that the lack of online human interaction means that determinants such as competence, courtesy, cleanliness, comfort, friendliness, helpfulness, care, commitment, and flexibility are not particularly relevant in e-commerce, but determinants such as accessibility, communication, credibility, understanding, appearance, availability, integrity, and trustfulness are equally applicable to e-commerce as in physical services. Yang and Jun (2002) examined perceptions of service quality by sampling both Internet purchasers and nonpurchasers. They found six service quality dimensions were perceived by Internet purchasers: reliability, access, ease of use, personalization, security, and credibility. However, seven dimensions were present for the nonusers. Unique to nonpurchasers were the dimensions of responsiveness and availability, while the credibility dimension did not come up.

In adapting SERVQUAL to measure Web sites' quality, Barnes, Liu, and Vidgen (2001) developed the WebQual (including information quality, Web site navigation/appearance, user empathy/mobility) for measuring service quality in PCs and mobile phones. Madu and Madu (2002) also proposed a model for e-quality including: performance (easy of navigation and information quality); Web site features (e.g., search engine); structure (e.g., hyperlinks); aesthetics (Web site appearance); reliability (consistency of Web site functionality); storage capability (easy of data retrieval); serviceability (complaints handling/solution); security, system integrity; trust for data sharing; responsiveness (courtesy, flexibility to respond to customer needs); product/service quality differentiation and customization; Web store policies; reputation; assurance; empathy in elements of human contact (e.g., e-mail, call centers).

Recent studies have also tried to model and measure e-SQ. Research in the e-tailing context (Zeithaml, 2002) showed that e-SQ has seven dimensions that form two scales: *a core e-SQ scale* including efficiency (ability, easiness to get to and

navigate a Web site), fulfillment (having products in stock and delivering them on time), reliability (technical functioning of a Web site), and privacy (assurance regarding data sharing and security); and a *recovery e-SQ scale* including responsiveness (provide appropriate data when problems occur, online guarantees and mechanisms for handling returns), compensation and contact (speak to service agent). Voss's (2000) exploratory research suggested the existence of a pyramid of e-SQ. The lower level (what is expected) includes Web site responsiveness and effectiveness, and order fulfillment. The middle level (what differentiates—customer-centered service) consists of trust, customization, information, and status, while the top level (what excites—value added) includes proactive service and value-added service. Using a sample of college students, Yoo and Donthu (2001) developed a scale—SITEQUAL—to measure the perceived quality of an Internet shopping site. This resulted in a nine-item scale with four dimensions: ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, and security.

Loiacono et al. (2002) developed the WEBQUAL model, which was also tested and consequently validated for content, convergent, discriminant, and nomological validity. Because of the latter, the WEBQUAL model has also been adopted in this study for measuring e-SQ. The WEBQUAL consists of 12 dimensions (Table 3): 1) information fits to task: the extent to which Web site information is accurate, updated, and appropriate; 2) interactivity: consumers' ability to interact with Web site and to receive tailored/personalized information/service; 3) trust: online security and information privacy; 4) responsiveness: Web site downloading and interaction time; 5) design: aesthetics and navigation; 6) intuitiveness: ease of Web site use/interaction; 7) visual appeal; 8) innovativeness: Web site uniqueness and creativity; 9) Web site's flow—emotional appeal to online users; 10) integrated communications: Web site integration with other communication/marketing media; 11) business processes: Web site integration with other processes; 12) viable substitute: Web site viability relative to other media.

By comparing WEBQUAL with SERVQUAL the following can be concluded: reliability as defined by Voss is not addressed by WEBQUAL, which in turn takes reliability as a given or a precondition. Both models address responsiveness, while in the

WEBQUAL the assurance as defined by SERVQUAL is captured by trust, empathy is reflected on emotional appeal, tangibles are captured by design and visual appeal.

Culture and Service Quality: Formulation of Research Hypotheses

Hofstede (1994) defined culture as the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from those of another" (p. 4). Although the service quality concept has been researched in the context of IS, B2C Web sites on PCs, mobile phones, and ASP (Sigala, 2004a), limited research deals with the impact of cultural differences on e-SQ. A study by Markus and Gould (2000) provides some insight on the impact of cultural differences on Web site design and features, but users' cultural characteristics on their e-SQ expectations have not been examined yet. On the other hand, by using Hofstede's (1994) dimensions of culture (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation), several studies (see literature review by Furrer et al., 2000) provided evidence of the impact of the five cultural dimensions on the importance and expectations consumers place on service quality features. In the same vein, this study examined the impact of Web site users' cultural differences on their e-SQ expectations. To achieve the latter, findings of past studies were used for developing a number of hypotheses linking each cultural dimension to those WEBQUAL dimensions that are associated with the SERVQUAL dimensions. This process is analyzed as follows.

Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution within a culture. Donthu and Yoo (1998) argued that most services involve some kind of power of providers over their customers and they showed that customers with high levels of power distance (Asians) have lower expectations about responsiveness than customers with lower levels of power distance (Westerns). Furrer et al. (2000) also found that power distance is negatively correlated with reliability, responsiveness, and empathy and positively correlated with assurance and tangibles. Markus and Gould (2000) also claimed that online users give more importance on security and focus on Web site

symbols and design that reinforces expertise, authority, and social and moral order. Mattila (1999) proved that the hedonic dimension of consumption (i.e., Web site aesthetics) is more important to customers from lower power than from higher power distance cultures. So, in e-SQ, the following hypothesis is formed:

Hypothesis 1: Customers with high power distance have lower expectations in terms of Web site responsiveness and flow–emotional appeal, but have higher expectations about trust (security and privacy), interactivity, design, and visual appeal than do customers from lower power distance cultures.

Individualism implies loose ties, while collectivism implies that people are integrated from birth into strong, cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Individualistic customers pursue primarily their own interests, not others, and so they are not willing to accept poor service. Collectivism customers would tolerate poor service as they do not want to break harmony (i.e., good relationship between provider and customer) (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). Furrer et al. (2000) found: 1) individualists demand responsiveness and reliability, and because of their self-confidence and self-responsibility, they do not expect to be assured; 2) a strong link between intangibles and individualism. Mattila (1999) showed that individual guests (Westerns) rely more on tangible cues than collectivism customers (Asians). In this vein, Hypothesis 1 is formulated as:

Hypothesis 2: High individualism customers have higher expectations about Web site responsiveness, interactivity, design, and visual appeal, but have lower expectations about trust than customers with higher collectivism.

Masculinity refers to gender roles, not physical characteristics. Hofstede (1994) focused on the traditional assignment of masculine roles of assertiveness, competition, and toughness and to feminine roles of orientation to home, people, and tenderness. Hofstede found that men focus more on material things, whereas women are more concerned with emotions. Sigala (2003) also found that Web

site users with higher femininity values expected Web site features that appealed to emotional and psychological feelings (such as virtual communities and chat facilities features) more than users that reported higher masculinity features. Hence, the Hypothesis 3 is developed as:

Hypothesis 3: Customers with higher masculinity have higher expectations about tangibles (design, visuals, and interactivity), but have lower expectations about emotional appeal than do customers with lower masculinity.

People vary in the extent that they feel anxiety about uncertain or unknown matters, as opposed to the more universal feeling of fear caused by known or understood threats. So, people differ in their avoidance of uncertainty, creating different rituals and having different values regarding formality, punctuality, legal–social requirements, and tolerance for ambiguity. Generally, low uncertainty avoidance customers are more accepting of uncertainty and risk. Donthu and Yoo (1998) found that high uncertain avoidance customers have higher service quality expectations than people with low uncertainty avoidance. Furrer et al. (2000) found that uncertainty avoidance is positively related with reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, but negatively with tangibles. In their studies investigating the effectiveness of communication strategies in multicultural contexts, Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) and Pollay (1983) also found that soft-sell approaches, such as celebrity endorsement and emotional and/or psychological appeals, are more commonly used and effective in Japan rather than in the US (i.e., meaning in high avoidance cultures rather than in low avoidance uncertainty cultures). So, Hypothesis 4 is formulated as:

Hypothesis 4: Higher uncertainty avoidance customers have higher expectations about Web site responsiveness, trust (concerns about security and privacy), and flow–emotional appeal, but lower expectations for interactivity, design, and visual appeal than customers with lower uncertainty avoidance.

Long-term orientation plays an important role in Asian countries that had been influenced by Confu-

cian philosophy (Hofstede, 1994). Furrer et al. (2000) found that long-term orientation is associated with responsiveness and reliable service, while it is negatively associated with assurance and intangibles. Marcus and Gould (2000) claimed that short-term customers pay more attention to Web site design, symbols, and visual cues than long-term customers. So, Hypothesis 5 tests the following relationships

Hypothesis 5: Long-term-oriented customers have higher expectations for Web site responsiveness, but lower expectations for tangibles (design, visual appeal) and trust than do short-term customers.

Methodology

The study aimed to examine the impact of Web site users' cultural differences on their expectations regarding e-SQ features. To achieve that, the literature was reviewed and research hypotheses were developed based on past findings. Although the literature review has found a plethora of models mea-

suring service quality online, only one model has been tested and validated for its reliability and validity (i.e., the one by Loiacono et al., 2002). For measuring work-related aspects, Hofstede's (1994) cultural dimensions model was developed and it has subsequently been widely used even within the e-commerce context (Okazaki, 2004). However, Furrer et al. (2000) have adapted Hofstede's model in order to apply it in the service context and so they have developed their own model (Table 1). Thus, regarding construct operationalization in this study, cultural dimensions were measured by using Furrer et al.'s model, while e-SQ was measured by using Loiacono et al.'s WEBQUAL model.

A questionnaire measuring e-SQ, cultural dimensions, and demographic data (age, gender, and nationality) was developed and distributed to the researchers' students who had been studying at the researchers' home and other teaching affiliated institutions. Students were asked to state their e-SQ expectations when using a tourism Web site by filling the WEBQUAL model. Tourism is an ideal context for conducting such research as tourism services take place via multiple distribution channels and so

Table 1
Furrer et al.'s Cultural Dimensions

Power distance

- Inequalities amongst people are both expected and desired
- Less powerful people should be dependent on the more powerful
- Inequalities among people should be minimized (R)
- There must be, and there are to some extent, interdependencies between less and more powerful people (R)

Individualism

- Everyone grows up to look after himself/herself and his/her immediate family only
- People are identified independently of the groups they belong to
- Other members in exchange for loyalty should protect an extended family member (R)
- People are identified by their position in the social networks to which they belong (R)

Masculinity

- Money and material things are important
- Men are supposed to be assertive, ambitious, and tough
- The dominant values in society are caring for others and preservation (R)
- Both men and women are allowed to be tender and to be concerned with relationships (R)

Uncertainty avoidance

- High stress and subjective feeling of anxiety are frequent among people
- Fear of ambiguous situations and of unfamiliar risks is normal
- Uncertainty is a normal feature of life and each day is accepted as it comes (R)
- Emotions should not be shown (R)

Long-term orientation

- Willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose is normal
 - People should be perseverant toward long-term results
 - Traditions should be respected (R)
 - Social obligations should be respected regardless of cost (R)
-

7-point Likert scale ranging from totally agree to totally disagree. (R) denotes items that were reverse coded.

the WEBQUAL can be used in its entirety (e.g., viable substitution of other media, online transactions). Tourism also targets multicultural audiences and the Internet further enables the globalization of tourism. Students were used because: they constitute a homogeneous group from an occupational stage of life cycle viewpoint (Furrer et al. 2000); it allowed researchers to control the impact of several demographic variables on Web site service quality perceptions such as education level, age, IT skills, and perceptions. Overall, 582 undergraduate and post-graduate students were targeted. Students were studying modules in “e-commerce and tourism” and were based in the following countries: Cyprus, Iran, UK, Greece, France, and Italy. Students based in the UK actually represent a much wider and multicultural student body than students studying in other countries, and so responses represent a much wider multicultural and multinational audience (Table 2).

Regarding data analysis, multiple regression analysis was used for testing the research hypotheses and examining whether each WEBQUAL dimension is affected by Hofstede’s cultural dimension. The estimation model controlling for students’ age, gender, and nationality is given below:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{WEBQUAL dimension} = & \\ & \text{constant} + b_a \times \text{Age} + b_b \times \\ & \text{Gender} + b_c \times \text{Nation} + b_1 \times \\ & \text{Power Distance} + b_2 \times \text{Individualism} + b_3 \times \\ & \text{Masculinity} + b_4 \times \text{Uncertainty Avoidance} + \\ & b_5 \times \text{Long-Term Orientation} \end{aligned}$$

Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

The questionnaire was distributed to 636 students studying in six countries. Overall, from the 636 students targeted, 421 usable questionnaires were gathered giving a response rate of 66.2%. The high response rate can be attributed to the fact that the questionnaire was given to students by their lecturers and was promoted a helpful exercise and case study for their learning process. The profile of the 421 respondents is given in Table 2. Despite the different response rates achieved in each country, a good balance of gender (46% male) and a mix of varied nationalities were found in the research sample. The age range is 19–26 years (average age 24), indicating that students come from a specific stage of the life cycle.

WEBQUAL Reliability and Validity

The following analysis provides findings regarding the content validity, reliability, and construct validity of the WEBQUAL model. Content validity refers to the extent to which an instrument covers the range of meanings included in the concept. Content validity is not computed numerically but is subjectively judged by researchers. It represents the adequacy with which a specific domain of contents is sampled and it is determined based on two criteria (Nunnally, 1978): 1) whether an instrument contains a representative collection of items, and 2) whether a satisfactory method to test the instrument is used. To meet the first criterion, content validity was established by reviewing an extensive literature and

Table 2
Respondents’ Profile

Students Studying in Iran (44)	Students Studying in Cyprus (15)	Students Studying in France (62)	Students Studying in S. Tyrol Italy (63)	Students Studying in UK (259)	Students Studying in Greece (193)
Persian: 36	Cypriot: 6 Persia: 1 Indian: 1 Chinese: 2	French: 37 Servian: 1 Peru: 2 Chile: 1 Greek: 2	Italian: 28 German: 19	UK: 79 Greeks: 7 China: 38 Indian: 4 Persian: 5 Taiwan: 13 Malais: 9 US: 2	Greeks: 125 Danish: 2 Sweden: 1
Total 36	10	43	47	157	128

Figures in parentheses indicate the number of targeted students.

by using previously validated constructs. To satisfy the second criterion, the questionnaire was pilot tested with nine students.

The multi-item constructs of the WEBQUAL model were also tested for their clarity and appropriateness. Reliability is the degree to which measures are free from errors thus yield consistent results. The Cronbach's standardized alpha was estimated to assess reliability, as this is the most commonly used reliability test in survey research. The recommended minimum acceptability value for alpha is 0.70, although some studies use alpha as low as 0.60 (Nunnally, 1978). As the reliabilities varied from 0.60 to 0.92, the reliability test is passed (Table 3), with the concerns that four dimensions have a reliability score between the critical area 0.60–0.70. Construct validity refers to an observed relationship between measures purported to assess different but conceptually related constructs and is indicated if items expected to load together in a factor analysis actually do so. Confirmatory factor analysis was used for testing the unidimensionality of the items. Results confirmed unidimensionality (loadings and factors are provided in Table 3) and, based on Loiacono et al.'s (2002) findings regarding WEBQUAL's reliability and validity, it is concluded that the WEBQUAL's format is correct.

Trust, responsiveness, and viable substitute have the highest expectations scores (6.89, 6.71, and 6.48, respectively), while flow–emotional appeal has the lowest (4.1). This is not surprising given the high concerns for online privacy and security nowadays. Data also show that the students take a more utilitarian than hedonic approach when shopping travel online, requiring service on time and preferring Web sites that are easy rather than fun to use.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 4 provides the results of the regression analyses examining the impact of each cultural dimension on WEBQUAL factors, as stated in the research hypotheses. Exploratory analysis was also done for testing the cultural impact on the WEBQUAL dimensions for which past studies could not support the formulation of hypotheses. Four out of the six regression models are significant at 0.05; trust and responsiveness expectations are not affected by cultural dimensions, but

interactivity, design, visual, and flow–emotional appeal are.

Regarding the cultural dimensions affecting the four WEBQUAL items, the following are found. Power distance significantly affects only the interactivity expectations of e-SQ and so H1 is partly supported. Individualism did not impact any WEBQUAL items and so H2 is not supported. Masculinity plays a more vital role in e-SQ expectations, as high masculinity users expect high interactivity ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), good design ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$), and positive emotional appeal ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.001$). However, H3 is partly supported, as masculinity does not affect visual appeal and the masculinity and emotional appeal relation has an opposite direction than expected. As uncertainty avoidance has no impact on e-SQ expectations, H4 is not supported. Long-term orientation users expect Web sites to have good visuals and positive emotional appeal ($\beta = 0.284$, $\beta = 0.253$, respectively, $p < 0.001$). Hence, H5 is partly supported as there is positive evidence for only one of the hypothesized relation.

Concerning the cultural impact on the other WEBQUAL dimensions, two models are significant at 0.05: innovativeness and integrated communication. Long-term orientation was the cultural dimension significantly impacting on the latter ($\beta = 0.231$ and $\beta = 0.269$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Control variables had a limited impact on WEBQUAL: flow–emotional appeal was positively related to age and more expected by women.

Based on these findings, the following strategies are suggested. Trust and responsiveness are equally important to all Web users irrespective of their cultural background. This is not surprising considering that the adoption of e-commerce has been globally affected by consumers' concerns regarding online security and privacy (Sigala, 2004b) as well as consumers' technological infrastructure (fast, reliable connections to download high bandwidth Web sites with security or flash features). In this vein, firms need to allocate resources for providing high online trust and responsiveness irrespective of users' culture. Such users' concerns for security and information privacy can be addressed by publishing online highly clear and transparent privacy policies and adopting security procedures. Moreover, online managers should consider privacy policies not only

Table 3
WEBQUAL Dimensions: Reliability and Validity Results

Construct	Mean	α	% Var. Expl.	Factor Loading
Information fit to task	6.45	0.67	59.34	
Web site information must be pretty much what I need to carry out my tasks				0.64
Web site must adequately meet my information needs				0.82
The Web site information should be effective				0.72
Interactivity	6.01	0.74	64.99	
Web site must allow me to interact with it to receive tailored information				0.78
Web site must have interactive features to help me achieve my task				0.71
I must be able to interact with Web site to get information tailored to my needs				0.83
Trust	6.89	0.88	79.46	
I should feel safe in my Web site transactions				0.89
I must trust the Web site to keep my personal information safe				0.91
I trust the Web site administrators will not misuse my personal information				0.82
Responsiveness	6.71	0.87	78.02	
It must be little waiting time between my actions & Web site's reply				0.86
The Web site should load quickly				0.81
The Web site should not take long to load				0.91
Design appeal	6.41	0.60	44.97	
The Web site pages should be easy to read				0.81
The Web site text should be easy to read				0.78
The Web site labels should be easy to understand ^a				0.28
Intuitiveness	6.16	0.61	56.01	
Learning to use the Web site must be easy for me				0.62
It must be easy for me to become skilful at using the Web site				0.77
I should find the Web site easy to use				0.82
Visual appeal	4.67	0.88	85.01	
The Web site should be visually pleasing				0.86
Web site should display visually pleasing design				0.91
The Web site should be visually appealing				0.92
Innovativeness	4.56	0.84	76.2	
The Web site should be innovative				0.86
The Web site design should be innovative				0.92
The Web site should be creative				0.88
Flow-emotional appeal	4.10	0.78	72.93	
I should feel happy when using the Web site				0.74
I should feel cheerful when using the Web site				0.82
I should feel sociable when using the Web site				0.66
Integrated communications	5.95	0.92	86.97	
Web site should project an image consistent with company's image				0.93
The Web site should fit with my image of the company				0.91
The Web site's image should match that of the company				0.94
Business process	5.84	0.65	54.75	
The Web site should allow transactions online				0.66
All my business with the firm must be completed online				0.83
Most all business processes must be completed online				0.74
Viable substitute	6.48	0.74	63.41	
It must be easier to use the Web site to complete my business with the firm than it is to call, fax, or post a mail				0.71
The Web site must be easier to use than calling a firm representative				0.65
Web site must be an alternative to calling customer service/sale ^a				0.32

7-point Likert scale: (7) totally agree to (1) totally disagree.

The WEBQUAL has been modified from its original in order to measure expectations rather than perceptions.

^aItems that were dropped as a result of reliability analysis.

as a legal commitment but as a critical tool for establishing and maintaining trust, reputation, and long-term relationships with their customers. Finally,

the privacy and security policies should be placed where they will be very easy to find, while they should be highlighted and/or provided by a hyperlink

in Web pages where the consumer would be more concerned about them (i.e., in the Web page related with the order form, the payment methods, etc.).

Moreover, because of the lack of a person-to-person interaction, consumers give a higher importance and relevance to cues that are related to the technical aspects of the online transaction, as well as the logistics of receiving or returning the product. Therefore, online managers need to assess their sites for factors such as clarity, ease of use, technical support, return policies, and adequate shipping options. Web site traffic must be measured and tools should be given for ensuring acceptable downloading times. Web sites should be tested with different browsers, Internet connection speeds, and systems that users may use. Providers serving high masculinity users (e.g., Japan, Italy, Austria, Venezuela, Italy, Mexico; Hofstede, 1994) must ensure easy Web site interaction and personalization, while their design should allow easy reading and understanding and online activities that provoke emotional and positive appeal. Companies targeting users from long-term orientation cultures (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Japan) should allocate extra resources for making the Web sites unique, creative, entertaining, and consistent with other media and for avoiding cluttered pages. To achieve that they could use games, contests, bright colors, and frequent changes that tend to enhance interactivity and appeal to users with high power distance or long-term orientation.

Conclusions and Implications of the Research

Given the importance and boost of the Internet in services' and companies' internationalization, this study aimed at examining the impact of Web users' cultural profiles on their e-SQ expectations. Data were gathered from a multicultural audience and findings provided evidence that Web users with cultural profile have different expectations on the e-SQ dimensions. Findings also provide useful academic and practical implications. Overall, although previous studies proved the impact of all five dimensions on service quality, this study revealed that only three cultural dimensions (power distance, masculinity, long-term orientation) affect expectations for certain WEBQUAL dimensions. Donthu and Yoo (1998) argued it is when services involve a high degree of customer-provider interaction that cultural

elements have the greatest influence. Hence, given the limited online human interaction, the impact of the three out of the five cultural dimensions on online service quality is not surprising. The fact that trust and responsiveness are not affected by cultural profiles actually reflects the high concerns on privacy, security, and bad online practices by firms and/or hackers. Responsiveness is also universally important as time savings and convenience are the most heavily reported reasons for buying online and adopting e-commerce (Sigala, 2003b).

However, the failure to support all of our hypotheses based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions has raised some further questions that need future and in-depth investigations. Thus, on the one hand, it could be argued that perhaps not all differences were found because "cultural convergence" may have occurred as a result of the globalization of cultures, behaviors, lifestyles, and expectations that the Internet fosters, in the sense that nontraditional or contrary values as until now perceived for some people do not anymore exist and/or are not any more nontraditional or contrary. Alternatively, it could perhaps be argued that the Internet has created a new "cultural region" where extant cultural classification schemes, such as Hofstede's dimensions, cannot be applied. If this is the case, research should be directed for identifying and measuring this Web culture as well as recognizing the mechanisms that are creating it. Furthermore, if the second case applies, more effort should be made to find new ways to articulate specific lifestyles, habits, and needs on Web sites to incorporate "desired" values for the target market.

Finally, the study presents four limitations that should be identified but also analyzed in order to suggest directions for future research. First, it is assumed that the WEBQUAL dimensions are the same across cultures although some have questioned the SERVQUAL's validity across cultures (Furrer et al., 2000). Secondly, the e-SQ is specific for the Web site rather than the entire Internet activity (e.g., order fulfillment, customer service). In this vein, this study has missed the numerous other possibilities to investigate the impact of Web users (cultural profiles on e-commerce practices, such as CRM, order fulfillment and delivery, after sales support). Third, the study's sample is limited to young, educated, and Internet-skilled users. As education, experience with the Internet, and technology skills of the study's re-

spondents could have easily affected their e-SQ expectations, future research should try to validate and generalize the findings of this study by using a wider sample. Finally, the study has focused on measuring e-SQ expectations within the tourism context. However, as Bolton and Drew (1994) noted that different service quality dimensions are relevant in different industries, there is a need to further generalize the findings of the study in different industries or develop multiple scale items that would adequately capture the specificities and particularities of a certain context.

Biographical Note

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