

## **A Phenomenological Study Exploring Consumers' Perception of E-Service Quality: A Case Study on Online Shoppers**

**By**

**Abdul Rahman bin S Senathirajah**

INTI International University, Persiaran Perdana BBN Putra Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Communications.

Email: [arahman.senathirajah@newinti.edu.my](mailto:arahman.senathirajah@newinti.edu.my)

**Dr. Rasheedul Haque**

Associate Professor

MAHSA University, Malaysia

Email: [rasheedul@mahsa.edu.my](mailto:rasheedul@mahsa.edu.my)

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore consumers' perceptions of Internet retail service quality. The phenomenal growth of Chinese Internet users and the explosive growth of China's e-commerce trade has necessitated this study. This study is a unique contribution to the e-commerce literature as it was accomplished through a phenomenological qualitative based study. This study uses in-depth interviews to identify five dimensions important to Chinese online shoppers in their evaluation of e-service quality. A phenomenological based interviewing was used to explore consumers' perception towards online shopping service quality. This was done by studying their feelings and attitude towards online shopping service quality the resulting data were transcribed, coded and analysed based on service quality themes. The results revealed that information, navigation, variety of products and services, security and responsiveness were key dimensions that affects consumer perception of Internet service quality. These five dimensions are unique to the Internet environment and mark a departure from the traditional service quality models which has dominated the literature for years. The qualitative approach used in this study is also a significant contribution to the current scenario which mainly consists of quantitative studies. E- Retailers can use the findings of this paper to design a better service quality experience for their customers. By focusing on these five dimensions, e-retailers can formulate effective strategies for their web sites to improve their competitive advantage. Theoretical and managerial implications of the results are also discussed.

**Keywords** e-service quality, e-commerce, internet, user satisfaction, service quality

## Introduction

A recent Chinese Internet survey indicated that there has been a phenomenal growth in China's Internet usage over the last few years, with about 1.02 billion Chinese currently using the Internet. Internet penetration in China for the year 2022 stands at 70.9% (Datareportal, 2022). Similar trends are found to be present across the world. Although Chinese retail websites sold a record 13.1 trillion Yuan worth of goods in 2021, previous studies have shown that the Internet is primarily used as a tool for information search rather than as a means to purchase products. Online shopping accounts for only 12.9% of retail purchases in China (Tong, 2016). Similarly, research indicates that 90% consumers prefer to shop in brick-and-mortar shops, mainly because "they love going out, shopping with people and touching stuff." (Kearney, 2016). These trends indicate that although there is a growth in the number of Internet users, this is not a correlated growth in terms of people buying goods and services directly online.

In order to increase the demand for their offerings, online retailers, both those that are exclusive e-retailers and those that are traditional brick-and-mortar retailers with a presence on the Internet, need to better understand key dimensions of the online shopping experience that are the most important to current and potential customers. Investigating consumers' perceptions of Internet retail service quality will help toward this end. This type of research is most timely in the current competitive e-commerce marketplace because customer loyalty depends on the level of customer service quality. Furthermore past studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between customer service quality and customer loyalty and vice versa. (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Studies have also revealed that superior quality facilitates customer acquisition (Dana Jr, 2001; Ernst & Powell, 1995).

In light of the growing importance of consumers' perception of e-service quality, a key question is what are the most important dimensions to consumers when evaluating Internet retail service quality or e-service quality? A review of the current literature is full of research studies in the areas of service quality in a number of areas such as banking, health care, restaurants, hotels and many other sectors. Despite this vast volume of literature, one can quickly point out that the dimensions used to evaluate service quality in a traditional setting may not be applicable to a technology based medium such as the Internet.

In the emerging field of e-commerce, academics and practitioners have voiced that modifications are required to the traditional service quality models. Dominant traditional service quality models such as the SERVQUAL model need to be reassessed if they are to be applied to the Internet medium to assess e- service quality. The current literature needs to be reshaped with newer emerging web based models which have generated new e- service quality dimensions as access, ease of navigation, efficiency, flexibility, reliability, personalization, security/privacy, responsiveness, assurance/trust, site aesthetics and price were used to measure perceived quality of web sites (Barnes & Vidgen, 2002; Szymanski & Hise, 2000; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000). The occurrence and importance of these dimensions are further discussed in the next few sections

The main purpose of this study is to narrow the gap in the current e-retailing literature by identifying key dimensions of e-service quality that are important to online customers and secondly to contribute to the growth of China's digital economy through e-retailing. A third purpose of this paper is to employ the use of a phenomenological based qualitative approach

which is less obvious in current e-service quality research papers to uncover emerging e-service quality themes. These are the unique contributions of this paper to the current literature gap.

The structure of this paper will proceed to review pertinent service quality literature and online service quality studies, followed by the research methodology, results and discussion. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

## Literature Review

### *Service Quality*

There have been numerous research papers that have developed models and theories of service quality (Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Some of these models were general service quality models while the others focused on a particular sector or specific industries. For example Joseph, McClure, and Joseph (1999) and Bitner, Brown, and Meuter (2000) have developed models that focused more specifically on banking services being offered in an electronic context. There have also been studies which have studied the food service industry specifically (Johns & Howard, 1998; Tam, 2003) which have revealed industry specific attributes, such as low price, food quality (food taste and nutrition properties), value for money, service, location, brand name, and image.

A study of the service quality literature revealed that the SERVQUAL model has been the most dominant model used in various studies. This comprehensive and detailed model originated way back in 1998 and is widely used till today. Recently, however, most research papers have developed models which are markedly different from the SERVQUAL model. For example, models such as SERVPERF (Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992) and QUALITEMETRO (Franceschini & Rossetto, 1998) have also emerged. The QUALITOMETRO model was developed for the evaluation of online service quality (Franceschini, Cignetti, & Caldara, 1998) where else the SERVPERF model is evaluated by perceptions of service delivered and without expectations and also without the importance weight. However, despite the emergence of these models, SERVQUAL model has stood as the most widely used service quality model to measure service quality (Gabbie & O'Neill, 1996; Newman, 2001).

### *Internet Retail Service Quality*

In recent years, there is a growing interest into online e-shopping service quality. Despite the growing literature in this field of Internet service quality, none of the developed models have dominated the literature. Most of the papers have taken various forms of approaches in their development of e-service quality models. This diverse approaches have provided a greater understanding in the field of service quality. In spite of their contribution to the current literature, most of the studies have some form of theoretical or methodological weakness. In general it is observed that most of the studies have focussed on a quantitative approach and lack the use of qualitative methodologies. The qualitative approach is much needed as it provides newer insights on service quality dimensions and customers satisfaction. Furthermore it is observed that in some qualitative studies, only a particular form of data collection is used. A good qualitative research study will employ various forms of data collections such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation etc. In the next section, this paper will analyse and discuss some key dimensions of e-service quality that have emerged from research papers. We will then discuss this trends

and explain how this study will further improve and contribute to the current literature on e-service quality.

### *Critical Review of Prominent Models Measuring Consumers' Perception of Internet Service Quality*

The current literature on e-service quality can be classified into two major groups, namely:

- (1) SERVQUAL based models
- (2) Web quality based models

SERVQUAL based models originate from the traditional SERVQUAL models but with some form of modifications (Choi et al., 2004). An evaluation of these models indicate that the key dimensions used in evaluating e-service quality are the same as the dimensions used in evaluating service quality in a traditional non Internet based environment. In the SERVQUAL based models, the original key dimensions have been termed and redefined to suit the Internet environment (Iwardeen & Wiele, 2003). For example the tangible dimension which refers to the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel has redefined as Web site aesthetics, navigation, site map and web page layout.

A review of the SERVQUAL based models reveal that appropriate web based dimensions which can influence the performance of web sites are missing from these models (Trocchia & Janda, 2003; Zeithaml et al., 2000). Some examples of these dimensions are personalization, information, ease of use need to be included to better understand e- service quality

On the other hand, literature pertaining to web based models have seen the emergence of web specific dimensions such as access, ease of navigation, efficiency, flexibility, reliability, personalization, security/privacy, responsiveness, and assurance/trust and site aesthetics. The number of key dimensions in the web based models can range from 3 dimensions such as usability, information quality and service interaction quality (Barnes & Vidgen, 2002) to an comprehensive list of 11 dimensions such as access, ease of navigation, efficiency, flexibility, reliability, personalization, security/privacy, responsiveness, assurance / trust, site aesthesis and price knowledge (Zeithaml et al., 2000).

The current literature reveals that most of the e-service quality models have a different emphasis concerning the key dimensions. Bitner et al. (2000) e-service quality model for example has a comprehensive 11 dimensions. Despite its many dimensions, it apparently lacks emphasis on some key dimensions. This model is criticized as it disregards consumers needing pre-purchasing customer service (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2003).

The research paper aims to fill the gap in the current literature by identifying key dimensions which are relevant to China's e-commerce market place. There is an apparent lack of empirical e-service quality research papers on China's business to consumer marketplace. Secondly, most of the current research papers have been strongly grounded in the use of quantitative approaches and are lacking in the use of exploration methodologies most commonly found in qualitative studies.

## **Methodology**

Phenomenological based interviewing was a central part of this research study which differentiates it from most of the previous studies. This method has been used in a number of consumer based research studies (Patton, 1990). The sampling was purposive in nature and covered

25 interviews and requires respondents to describe details of specific events of the phenomena under study (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The purpose of this activity was to explore consumer's perception regarding online e-service quality dimensions in an online shopping context.

Respondents were required to describe and discuss their experience in online shopping web sites which led them to making web purchases. Respondents were guided through the use of predesigned questions which among other focused on information, navigation, variety of products and services, security and responsiveness. The interviews were conducted in a conducive and relaxed environment to ensure a suitable discussion (McCracken, 1988; Thompson et al., 1989). Interview guides were designed and used to ensure that all key issues were covered (McCracken, 1988; Patton, 1990).

A total of 25 interviews took place lasting from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. The sampling respondents were mainly Chinese students who were in tertiary education which represented the largest Internet users in China. Educational levels ranged from diploma to Masters. This sample was chosen because they would become the future main purchases in the China's economy in the next 5 years. The study participants comprised 13 women and 12 men ranging in age from 21 to 26. All interviews were taped recorded and transcribed.

## Analysis and Emergent Themes

**Table 1** Data analysis procedure for the phenomenological study

Step	Task	Task description
1	Bracketing	In this stage the researcher suspended his perception and conceptions related to e-service quality. This was done to allow the respondents views, perspectives and understanding of e-service quality to emerge without being biased by the researcher's perspectives. The researcher provided for a conducive environment which allowed an atmosphere of openness to prevail. The analysis of taped interviews and written data of the Chinese online shoppers were analysed to gather and understand the concept of e-service quality and its components.
2	Reading and re-reading	Audio files were listened and re-listened too where else the written data were read and reread. Data were translated from Chinese to English without alteration to its original meaning. Data coding was carried out manually. Key statements on e-service quality were highlighted.
3	Preliminary Coding	Statements were highlighted based on its frequency of occurrence and strong emphasis. Key statements were highlighted and numbered based on each interview transcript.
4	Extraction of key statements	These statements were extracted and listed in a separate file for further analysis.
5	Formulation of meaning units	The researcher isolated key statements into different groups. This process is termed as the interpretive part of the phenomenological process. The different meaning units were organized and analysed repeatedly.
6	Themes	This was done until the key themes of e-service quality were identified and linked to the concept of e-service quality.
7	Description of e-service quality	A description of each theme was formulated and revised a number of times to ensure they meet the definition of each clustered theme.



Step	Task	Task description
8	Validation	<p>The themes were presented to an e-commerce panel to validate its meaning to ensure its relevance.</p> <p>The validations was also carried out with the participants to ensure an alignment between al the stakeholders involved in this process.</p>

The transcribed data were analysed and coded. The interview transcripts were analysed using hermeneutic logic. This method involves an iterative process of reading, documenting, and systematizing the data (Thompson et al., 1989). Marginal comments representing abstractions from experience-near descriptions were made alongside each transcript (Geertz, 1979; Thompson, 1996). Some examples of marginal comments. Were “Provides ability to check for immediate product availability (in stock) before buying” and “Provides trustworthy product information”. These marginal comments were then labelled under the theme of “information”. This process produced five dimensions of Internet retail service quality. The findings were then provided to experts in the field of e-commerce for face validity tests. The final version of the findings incorporated all the comments and changes provided by the panel. The data analysis procedure for the phenomenological study is tabulated in Table 1. The tasks from the table was adapted from previous phenomenological studies (Chong & Ahmed, 2014).

## Results and Discussion

### *Information*

Most respondents considered information as a key dimension of Internet retail service quality. Key aspects of information which emerged in the interviews were timeliness, accuracy and quantity. Timeliness refers to the most current and updated information, accuracy referred to the trustworthiness and reliability of information whereas quantity related to the completeness and adequate information of the product and services enquired.

The following statements highlight the importance of the information dimension:

“Information which is updated and most current helps me to make my purchase decisions” (male, 23).

“The more information I get helps me to make a fast decision whether to buy a product or not” (female, 21)

“Accurate information is very crucial to avoid making wrong buying decisions and helps me buying the right product” (male, 27)

However, some informants expressed negative perceptions relating to information:

The following quotes express these sentiments:

I typed “management books” and got an endless list of information. I am overwhelmed” (female, 24)

How do I trust the information given to me? There is no way to check its authenticity” (male, 23)

Recent studies have confirmed the importance of information to improve

consumer's perception of e- service quality. This dimension is further supported by a study by Negash, Ryan, and Igbaria (2003) which states that the quality of information improves customer support on web based support systems. [Park and Kim \(2003\)](#) provide additional support for this dimension by revealing that service information quality is a vital factor which influences the buying and selling process online. [Szymanski and Hise \(2000\)](#) have also identified information as a vital dimension in their e-satisfaction model.

### ***Security***

In the exploratory interviews, respondents were mainly concerned with the security of financial information. The financial information relate to their credit card number or debit card number. The study also found that respondents were not concerned of the security of non - financial based information such as age, sex, name, profession etc. Past research have shown that online consumers generally expect that their personal information and records to be stored accurately and securely ([Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001](#)). Respondents were highly concerned if their financial information becomes public to unknown others ([Thomas, 1999](#)). Based on these findings, there is high degree of support for security as an important Internet Retail Service Quality dimension.

Some of the recorded quotes pertain to this theme were:

I feel not secured revealing my credit card number online. I fear my number will be hacked” (male, 25).

I have heard many cases of financial information being stolen online. I am worried that my credit card details will be stolen” (female, 22).

### ***Responsiveness***

Responsiveness has been found to be a key dimension in e-service quality assessment by most research studies ([Elliot & Fowell, 2000](#); [Rotondaro, 2002](#)). This dimension has arguably become more important due to the absence of human to human interaction which amplifies the need for an efficient form of customer service in the event that any untoward issue or problem transpires during the buying and selling process ([Keating, Rugimbana, & Quazi, 2003](#); [Parasuraman et al., 1994](#)). In summary, it would appear that the responsiveness dimension becomes important to the customer especially if he is faced with complex situations which requires a form of intervention.

The following comments were recorded during the interviews:

“I just need to talk to someone when I face problems in completing my purchase”  
(male, 24)

“I am frustrated no able to speak to someone when I need more information,  
technology does not help at times” (female, 21)

### ***Navigation***

This theme has emerged consistently during the qualitative exploratory interviews. Respondents wanted web sites which allow them to move from web page to web page with ease. Additionally, they wanted to be able to move quickly within each web page with no obstacles. [Ramayah \(1970\)](#) have also found the importance of navigation in their study in the banking sector in northern Malaysia. This dimension has also provided to be a key dimension in the SITEQUAL model ([Szymanski & Hise, 2000](#)).

Selected quotes from the respondents are as follows:

“At Amazon.com you have full control of your movements and you know which buttons to click. This gives you a seamless and smooth manoeuvring when you move from web page to web page” (male, 25).

“I must be able to move from page to page and button to button seamlessly without interruptions- it’s vital to my purchasing process” (female, 21)

### *Access to variety of products*

The ability to access a range of products at a single web site has proven to be instrumental in influencing consumers to stay longer and to continue to revisit a web site. Customers are seeking to purchase products which originate from their home country and also from foreign countries thus giving them a choice of selection. In addition the availability of rare and unique products and services appear to be a deciding factor to shop at a certain web site. This dimension was not apparent in the past literature studied and can be considered an addition to the current literature.

“Taobao is fantastic, I can find almost anything there without having to leave web site” (male, 24).

“I keep coming back to this web site as it has many, many products which meet all my requirements- convenience” (male,25).

Table 2 below provides discussion relating to the five dimensions of Internet service quality that were uncovered in this study. Included in each theme is a selected sample of representative quotes provided by informants.

**Table 2** E-Service Quality Dimensions

<b>E-Service Quality Dimensions</b>	<b>Components of E-Service Quality</b>	<b>Selected Quotes</b>
Information	Timeliness Accurate Quantity	“Information must be updated continuously to help me make a buying decision” “Pictures, audio and details help me in my purchasing decisions”
Security	Confidential Privacy	“ I am worried if my credit card number is stolen and used elsewhere” “My privacy and data must not be shared with other parties”



<b>E-Service Quality Dimensions</b>	<b>Components of E-Service Quality</b>	<b>Selected Quotes</b>
Responsiveness	Fast Updates on queries Accurate replies	“Customer service must resolve my surfing needs immediately, I cannot be kept waiting” “ If I am asked to wait for more than 30sec to get a reply, I better shop elsewhere- there are many web sites to choose from”
Navigation	Ease of use Speed in navigating Search engine	“ The web site must be user friendly to help me move around efficiently with minimum disruptions” “ I need a search engine to help me locate items that I am looking for”
Access to variety of products and services	Many products and services Rare products Customized products and services	“Retailers must carry many different products from which I can choose from” “ I am looking to buy all my products from one site without leaving to go to another web site, I want convenience”

## **Theoretical Implications**

The analysis of the qualitative study suggest that online shoppers are influenced by the following dimensions: (1) Information (2) Security (3) Navigation (4) Access to variety of products (5) Responsiveness

The results of this exploratory study contributes to the literature on service quality within the context of Chinese e-commerce. Previous studies on Chinese online shopping market has been rather limited. This study has identified key dimensions which influence Chinese consumers to purchase online. These five dimensions are unique to the Internet environment and mark a departure from the traditional service quality models which has dominated the literature for years. The qualitative approach used in this study is also a significant contribution to the current literature which mainly consists of quantitative studies. The qualitative approached used in this study has allowed the emergence of new themes in the Chinese online shopping environment.

The service quality dimensions which have emerged in this study need to be tested and validated by using a quantitative method using a multi item scale. Furthermore a large sampling plan is required to confirm this findings.

## **Managerial Implications**

The growing competition among online e-retailers indicate that focussing on customer needs may be crucial to attract and retaining online shoppers. By studying and improving on the five key dimensions discovered in this study, e-retailers can help to design a better service quality experience for their customers. With this knowledge, e-retailers can craft appropriate strategies for their web sites to improve their competitive advantage.

Information has proven to be a key dimension influencing consumer perception of Internet retail service quality. Online retailers need to ensure on the timeliness, accuracy and quantity aspects of their information. The availability of quality information can trigger consumers to make immediate purchase decisions. Furthermore, retailers need to ensure that their information is constantly updated due to the dynamic nature of Internet whereby information keeps changing.

Consumers are becoming more wary on the security, confidentiality and privacy of their financial information. In this respect, retailers need to take protective measures to protect consumer data. The numerous cases of online security breaches has further underlined the fact that retailers need to invest and constantly update their security hardware and software to prevent security breaches. Once a retailer's web site is hacked, the reputation of the organization will be affected and customer loyalty may decline.

Proactive online retailers should provide a multitude of products and services to consumers. The ability to provide a wide range of product and services will build a one stop image whereby consumers do not need to shop at different web sites as all their needs will be catered at a particular site. The site should provide products and services which are made in China and also from overseas. The products provided should also be rare, unique and customized to ensure its attractiveness to consumers.

Online retailers need to pay utmost attention to the responsiveness dimension. Retail sites need to respond to consumers within 24 hours of a lodged query or complain. They must also be able to provide updates on order status and provide fast delivery of products and services. Retailers cannot keep potential and existing customers waiting as time is an essence of a successful business in a fast moving economy such as the digital economy. The use of live chats is another web based application which can build a sound customer relationship.

Finally, the web site needs to be user friendly in its navigation capability. Consumers must be able to move from web page to web page smoothly and the use of a site map will enhance this experience. Secondly, they must be able to locate their item or service easily without confusion. This will help build a good navigation experience for the consumer. The use of a search engine on a web site will help to a great extent. The use of a one click ordering is a key factor in its navigation capability to ensure the final purchase experience is executed with a minimum effort.

## **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study mainly focussed on the younger generation from the ages of 21-25 years. This limits the generalizability of this study to the other age groups on the Chinese e-commerce market. Future studies can include the teenager age group, middle age group and the older

generation. These age groups may provide a different insight and perspective which may contribute to a more in-depth literature on China's growing e-consumer market.

Secondly, this study is primarily a qualitative study seeking to explore key dimensions which shape consumers perception of Internet retail service quality. The absence of quantitative study limits the confirmation of our findings. Furthermore, we are not able to show a relationship between the service quality dimensions with dependent variables such as customer satisfaction and likelihood of future purchase. This relationship dependency pathway can only be confirmed with the use of modelling techniques such as structure equation modelling or regression statistical analysis in a quantitative methodology.

Another productive area for future research can involve examining differences of consumers from different provinces in China with respect to the five dimensions. For example, consumers from the different provinces of China may exhibit different perception towards shopping which may influence their perception of the importance of the five dimensions. Exploring the moderating role of this factor would be useful for helping online retailers understand how particular market segments might react to the different dimensions. Such information could then provide guidance for how retailers should best allocate resources for online service quality improvement with respect to the particular market segment they target.

## Conclusion

Information, navigation, variety of products and services, security and responsiveness were key dimensions found to affect consumers' perception of Internet service quality. These dimensions are specific only to Internet environment and contributes to the e-service quality literature. Furthermore the use of phenomenological qualitative based study adds to the richness of current literature which only employs the use of quantitative methodologies. The use of a student sample who will progress to become key consumers with purchasing power in the next few years has provided valuable insights to predict future patterns of Internet purchasing. By studying and improving on the five key dimensions discovered in this study, e-retailers can help to design a better service quality experience for their customers. With this knowledge, e-retailers can craft appropriate strategies for their web sites to improve their competitive advantage.

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