Does E-Supporting Service Quality Deserve Significant Investment?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the question – does e-supporting service quality deserve significant investment? It summarizes a study focused on the relationship between e-supporting service quality and customer future behavioral intentions. The measurement and key findings are briefly discussed. It is found that there is a significant negative relationship between overall e-supporting service quality and complaining behavior. However, the study has not found a significant relationship between e-supporting service quality and positive word-of-mouth.

1. Background of the study

Studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, and they have concluded that the relationship is positive and significant [1] [4] [6] [12]. However, very few studies have focused on the relationship between electronic-supporting (e-supporting) service quality and customer loyalty.

Considering the customers are getting more and more demanding, specifically in expecting continuously improved supporting services from their service providers [5], an important question to be answered for all the service providers is whether it is worthwhile to make a significant investment on e-supporting service to satisfy the customers in order to enhance customer loyalty. This is due to the fact that even e-supporting service may provide added value for the customers and differentiate the firm from its competitors [15], setting up and maintaining a high quality e-supporting services is rather costly [5] [15].

In order to answer the above question, it is necessary to first understand if a significant and positive relationship exists between e-supporting service quality and customer loyalty. This study therefore aims to investigate the relationship between e-supporting service quality and customer loyalty.

2. Measurement

Although many have developed reliable scales to measure service quality, insufficient research focused on developing reliable scales to measure e-supporting service quality, and amongst the few, there is also a lack of follow up studies to test the scales developed. This study, therefore, also aims to further test the e-service quality scales developed by Kuo [7].

It was suggested that the disconfirmation model is a better approach to measure service quality [3], at the same time, some argued that performance-only approach appears to be a better indicator of service quality [9] [11]. This study employed the performance-only approach to measure e-service quality. To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the constructs, a set of multi-item scale was also employed to measure both e-supporting service quality and customer loyalty.

SERVQUAL is one of the dominating models for measuring service quality, even though it has received many criticisms [2] [8] [13] [14]. The five service quality dimensions under SERVQUAL are: *Tangibles*, *Reliability*, *Responsiveness*, *Assurance* and *Empathy* [10]. Based on the five SERVQUAL dimensions, Kuo [7] identified five function-based dimensions to measure e-service quality. The five function-based dimensions are: *Advertising mail management*, *Customer service management*, *Online and information safety*, *Webpage design and content*, and *Extra function and service*.

Based on the framework of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, Yu and Dean [16] have developed a set of future behavioural intention scales for higher education industry. The higher education future behavioural intention scales were employed in this study to measure customer loyalty. The future behavioural intentions dimensions including: *Positive word-of-mouth*, *Complaining behaviour*, *Switching behaviour*, and W*illingness to pay more*.

This study assessed the relationship between the e-supporting service quality of a virtual community website—SEASKY BBS and customer loyalty in a large university in China. Snowball online questionnaire distribution method was adopted. The sample of this study was the students who were currently studying at the undergraduate level of this large Chinese university. 105 completed and valid questionnaires were returned.

3. Key findings

Crohbach's alpha was applied to test the reliability of the scales. The alpha values for the 29-item e-supporting service quality scales and the 10-item future behavioural intention scales are: 0.84 and 0.54. It is worthwhile to note that the alpha value for the 3-item positive word-of-mouth intentions is 0.76. The results suggested that there is a significant relationship between the overall e-supporting service quality and overall customer loyalty. It was also found that there is significant negative relationship between overall e-supporting service quality and complaining behavior. However, the positive significant relationship has not been found between overall e-supporting service quality and word-of-mouth as expected.

This study provides an initial and valuable insight for the managers to determine if e-supporting service deserves significant investment. However, some research limitations, such as small sampling size and single industry studied, need to be taken into consideration when examining the results. Further studies need to be done to see if similar conclusions can be drawn across different industries and countries. The future behaviour intention scales for higher education industry need to be further developed and refined to increase the reliability level.

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