Reconceptualizing and Theorizing About Digital Consumer Services: a Critical Review

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A large and heterogeneous literature, with competing and overlapping definitions, that is manifestly dated and inappropriate to contemporary digital consumer services, is impeding progress in digital services research. This conceptual paper offers of this discourse. We propose and outline methodological approaches for reconceptualising digital services and outcomes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since products and services increasingly embed digital technologies, it has become progressively difficult to disentangle digital products and services from their underlying information technology (IT) infrastructures (Furtmueller, Wilderom & Mueller 2010; Benlian, Koufaris and Hess 2011; Tate and Johnstone 2011). Leading widely used measures of service quality are becoming increasingly divorced from the everyday practice of digital service design and delivery. With reference to service quality, a perusal of the archival academic and practitioner literature for the past three decades reveals the overriding dominance of a singular definition of service quality and its associated measurement instrument: The ServQual. This instrument originated in the services marketing discipline (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988) and was appropriated by information systems researchers before the advent of the internet (Pitt, Watson and Kavan 1995; 1997). It has since become the normal standard for service quality measurement.

Various arguments have been proposed as to why the seemingly well-established constructs of an academic discipline may need to be extensively reconceptualised (Burton-Jones and Straub 2006). These include lack of an accepted definition, theoretical support, validation or an accepted approach for selecting a definition and measure that is relevant to the context at hand. There have been some questions raised about the validity of IS-ServQual measures (Tate and Evermann 2010; Sylvester et al., 2013; Tate et al., 2014). In line with this critique, it is more than fair to observe that there is an absence of an accepted definition of digital service quality in the voluminous archives, and that defining the nature of service has been a serious challenge to researchers. The meaning of “service” in academia and practice has been changing and is increasingly broad and unclear (Edvardsson et al., 2005; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Furtmueller, Wilderom and van Dick 2010). The current scales fail short in competently integrating the new internet services concepts and entirely fail to integrate the requirements of digital consumers and changing digital technologies such as mobile services (Tate and Evermann 2009). The increasing diversity of disciplines engaged in service quality research calls for a comprehensive synthesis of the chief insights in the scattered studies. To advance knowledge in this crisis, integrative and cross-disciplinary thinking, along with building on insights from theories in services, marketing, psychology information systems, internet research and the human computer interaction literatures are needed (Furtmueller, 2012).

Historic definitions of services have concentrated on the differences between services and products. Two leading definitions of service are the “IHIP” definitions (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1985) and the “Nordic” definition (Grönroos 1984). The “IHIP” definition concentrates on the process of service delivery. Leading services scholars argued “...the concept of service and service characteristics shows that the definitions are too narrow and the characteristics are outdated as generic service characteristics” (Edvardsson, Gustafsson and Roos 2005, p. 107). Half of the interviewed services experts reported claimed that the IHIP characteristics do not portray the essence of a service in a meaningful, generic way and therefore “should not be used” (p. 115). They further stated there was a possibility they were going to stop using the IHIP when teaching. Services marketing scholars at the 2003 American Marketing Academy Serv-Sig conference in Reims expressed disappointment with the development of the service research discipline, questioning whether or not existing service concepts are applicable to internet services and other self-service technologies. It has been argued that the “IHIP” definition is inappropriate for digital services (Tate and Evermann 2009). Digital services are in fact typically standardised, not heterogeneous; tangible; developed independently of their consumption, and non-perishable.

We believe that Lovelock and Gummerson’s (2004) call to discard services as a general category of research and focus on specific service categories, in combination with a search for new and more defensible characteristics of service; is salient to advance digital services research. This requires a fresh, grounded and inductive approach and the development of a relevant context-sensitive taxonomy. Several methodologies could be used independently, or in concert. Among these the most promising are metaphor analysis, repertory grid technique, and grounded literature analysis techniques. Techniques exist in the social sciences for using metaphor as a research tool (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Schmidt summarizes a 25 year old research tradition showing that metaphors “provide preconceptional orientation with respect to thought and experience that is hardly accessible, or accessible only with analytical aids, in rational discussion. Qualitative research needs an approach that allows a systematic reflection of the metaphors in which, and through which, we perceive, speak, think, and act”(2005). Further, structured qualitative techniques such as repertory grid technique have been shown to be effective for eliciting understanding of cognition about information systems phenomena (Tan and Hunter 2002). This framework could be used in conjunction with metaphor analysis, or independently, to elucidate the similarities and differences in the ways people think about different digital services offerings. Repertory grid technique is based on personal construct theory (Kelly 1955). Kelly argues that individuals use their own “personal constructs” to understand, interpret and anticipate events that occur around them. In addition, literature analysis and “literature as data” techniques (Sylvester et al., 2011; Wolfswinkel et al., 2013) can be used to harmonize heterogeneous literature from multi-disciplines and to identify under-researched areas. The literature review method outlined by Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) draws on grounded theory to analyze and code research literature. This could be applied to leading, highly cited (but incommensurate) conceptual articles and definitions of services and service quality.

A well-grounded taxonomy of digital service types, developed inductively, and based on people’s cognition about the digital services they use or are involved with can drive a new research agenda for digital services research. This will include better quality measures and instrumentation, continuously updated and upgraded understanding of value and quality drivers, along with an improved ability to carry out targeted literature analysis from the large corpus of research literature. Expectations are rising steadily, especially in top-tier journals, about the quality of conceptualization and theorizing prior to developing models or survey instruments. Further attempts to carry out empirical research on digital services in the absence of these clear conceptual definitions are most likely to be of limited value.
REFERENCES


