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# CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	<b>ANTECEDENTS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' EFFECTIVENESS</b> <i>DR. M.S.A. MAHALINGA SHIVA, DR. DAMODAR SUAR &amp; DR. SANTANU ROY</i>	1
2.	<b>CRITICISING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SERVQUAL MODEL IN GENERIC INDUSTRIES</b> <i>TAMEEM AL BASSAM &amp; SARMA AL SHAWI</i>	9
3.	<b>TOWARDS A MODEL FOR ENHANCING CONSUMER TRUST IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT</b> <i>PRIYANKA MEHARIA, BISWAJIT PANJA &amp; JUAN HU</i>	14
4.	<b>A RESEARCH STUDY ON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN COMMERCIAL BANKS (A CASE OF SELECTED BANKS IN HAWASSA CITY OF ETHIOPIA)</b> <i>DR. BREHANU BORJI &amp; DR. ARAVIND SOUDIKAR</i>	19
5.	<b>THE IMPACT OF MICRO FACTOR OPPORTUNITY ON ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS OF SMES – A CASE STUDY ON COMMERCIAL FAST FOOD SMES</b> <i>DR. ANSIR A. RAJPUT, WASEEM AHMED, SYED JEHANZEB JAVED &amp; SEHRISH JEHANGIR</i>	25
6.	<b>ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) ADOPTION/USE FACTORS AMONG RWANDAN COMMERCIAL BANKS</b> <i>MACHOGU, M. ABIUD &amp; DR. EGWAKHE, A. JOHNSON</i>	30
7.	<b>A STUDY ON IDENTIFICATION OF CONTEXTUAL KEY FACTORS IN PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL IN PUBLIC SECTOR ENTERPRISES IN INDIA</b> <i>DR. KAIPA RAGHURAM SHASTHRY &amp; DR.VIMALA SANJEEVKUMAR</i>	35
8.	<b>GROWTH AND PERFORMANCE OF HOUSING FINANCE COMPANIES IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO HOUSING DEVELOPMENT FINANCE CORPORATION</b> <i>DR. D. GURUSWAMY</i>	40
9.	<b>TRAVEL MOTIVATIONS AND DESTINATION SELECTION: A CRITIQUE</b> <i>W.K. ATHULA GNANAPALA</i>	49
10.	<b>ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN BUSINESS</b> <i>DR. R. KARUPPASAMY &amp; C. ARUL VENKADESH</i>	54
11.	<b>ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES OF TEACHING HOSPITALS IN THE CHANGING GLOBAL SCENARIO</b> <i>ARCHANA MISHRA &amp; DR. RITU BHATTACHARYYA</i>	58
12.	<b>PROVOCATIVE SELLING TECHNIQUE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PYRAMID IN A RECESSIONARY SITUATION: STUDY ON UNIFORM MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY - IN AND AROUND KOLKATA</b> <i>BHUDHAR RANJAN CHATTERJEE &amp; SUKANYA CHATTERJEE</i>	63
13.	<b>CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SMALL CARS - A CASE STUDY OF NALGONDA DISTRICT IN A. P.</b> <i>DR. G. RAMA KRISHNA, D.K. PRATHIBHA, S. DESE NAIK &amp; A. RAMA CHANDRAIAH</i>	67
14.	<b>A STUDY ON THE BARRIERS AFFECTING THE GROWTH OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN INDIA</b> <i>DR. KRISHNAVENI MUTHIAH &amp; SUDHA VENKATESH</i>	77
15.	<b>A MEDICAL IMAGE COMPRESSION TECHNIQUE</b> <i>K. S. SELVANAYAKI &amp; DR. RM. SOMASUNDARAM</i>	82
16.	<b>HIGH ENGAGEMENT &amp; LOW ATTRITION – A STUDY OF THE TELECOM INDUSTRY IN INDIA</b> <i>LRK KRISHNAN &amp; DR. A SETHURAMASUBBIAH</i>	85
17.	<b>ANALYTICAL STUDY ON EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION [CASE STUDY OF GAMMON INDIA LTD. (T &amp; D BUSINESS), MIDC, BUTIBORI, NAGPUR]</b> <i>DR. SHINEY CHIB</i>	96
18.	<b>INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION THROUGH ICT</b> <i>J. MEENAKUMARI</i>	104
19.	<b>THE IMPACT OF WORKING CAPITAL MANAGEMENT ON PROFITABILITY: EVIDENCE FROM SUGAR INDUSTRY IN INDIA</b> <i>GOPINATHAN RADHIKA &amp; DR. RAMACHANDRAN AZHAGAIAH</i>	107
20.	<b>A STUDY ON MOBILE PAYMENT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES</b> <i>CHANDRAKANT D. PATEL</i>	113
21.	<b>SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION</b> <i>DR. NARINDER TANWAR</i>	118
22.	<b>CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR ON MOBILE PHONE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY</b> <i>ANIL KUMAR</i>	122
23.	<b>EVALUATING FINANCIAL HEALTH OF DR. REDDY'S LABORATORIES THROUGH 'Z' SCORE THEORY- A CASE STUDY</b> <i>DR. SHITAL P. VEKARIYA</i>	128
24.	<b>EFFECT OF BARRIERS IN CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE</b> <i>VIDYA L.HULKUND</i>	131
25.	<b>THE ELECTRONIC-NOSE TECHNOLOGIES IN HEALTHCARE AND BIOMEDICINE: A CASE STUDY</b> <i>M.NAVEEN KUMAR</i>	134
	<b>REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK</b>	138

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## CRITICISING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SERVQUAL MODEL IN GENERIC INDUSTRIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The survival of any organisation in a highly competitive environment depends on its ability to provide the best service quality to its existing customers as the quality of service is a key factor in the success of any organisation. It is well established that the measurement of service quality is an important procedure for the improvement of the performance of any organisation. Facts indicate that more attention is needed toward developing an industry-specific scale for measuring service quality from the end-user perspective within specific-industry contexts. The main aim of this research-in-progress paper is to review comprehensively previous and contemporary literature on service quality measurement and to discuss the key issues on the development of an industry-specific scale for measuring service quality from the customer's perspective in specific-industry contexts. This study contributes to knowledge in the field of service quality research as it suggests future research directions for academicians in related research.*

### KEYWORDS

Service Quality, SERVQUAL Model.

### INTRODUCTION

nowadays, in a severe competitive environment, the most central factor to sustainable competitive advantage is to provide the best possible service quality which will result in improved customer satisfaction, customer retention, and profitability (Sureshchandar et al., 2002; Buttle 1996). The significance of the service quality concept derives researchers and scholars to address this issue and to investigate it further across different service sectors. Thus, throughout the past two decades, service quality has become an established area in the marketing literature. There have been many research studies that have studied, examined, and investigated its nature in the traditional face-to-face service environment (see, for example, Rust and Oliver, 1994; Hallowell, 1996; Sureshchanar et al., 2002, etc.). Moreover, numerous traditional service quality models have been developed to assess and evaluate service quality performance in the traditional service environment such as the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

It appears that service quality is not a new concept; however, measuring and managing service quality from the consumers' point of view is still a developing and a challenging issue. Both from the academic community point of view, and in business practice, it is well established that measurement of service quality is an important procedure for improving the performance of service quality (Jayawardhena et al., 2004). Thus, there has been an abundance of research on the measurement issues of service quality, which have contributed to the development of a solid research foundation.

In current service literature, there are a number of key instruments available for measuring service quality performance. Though, the SERVQUAL model has been the major generic model used to measure and manage service quality across different service settings and various cultural backgrounds (Buttle, 1996). However, apart from its wide use, a number of theoretical and empirical criticisms of the measurement model have been pointed out (Ladhari, 2008). First of all, the validity of the SERVQUAL model as a generic instrument for measuring service quality across different service sectors has been raised. Also, there has been an argument that a simple revision of the SERVQUAL items is not enough for measuring service quality across different service settings.

As a result, Ladhari (2008, p. 68) stated that "It has been suggested that industry-specific measures of service quality might be more appropriate than a single generic scale". This argument was supported by Dabholkar et al. (1996, p. 14) who stated that "It appears that a measure of service quality across industries is not feasible; therefore, future research on service quality should involve the development of industry-specific measures of service quality". Ladhari (2008) reported that in recent years, more attention was paid by researchers and scholars toward the development of an alternative industry-specific research instruments for measuring service quality. Consequently, a number of industry-specific research instruments have been developed in the past several years in different service settings and various countries and cultural backgrounds.

### RESEARCH APPROACH

Saunders et al. (2007, p. 610) defined research as "the systematic collection and interpretation of information with a clear purpose, to find things out". The key issue when choosing a correct research methodology approach to examine and explore a particular research problem is the suitability of the selected method to accomplish and address the research objectives. Quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed research methodologies are the main methodological approaches used in most academic research. Each approach has its advantages and limitations and each is mainly appropriate for a particular context. This study adopts the approach that is supposed to be more suitable to achieve its research objective. It has been emphasised that the main aim of this research-in-progress paper is to review comprehensively previous and contemporary literature on service quality measurement and to discuss the key issues on the development of an industry-specific scale for measuring service quality from the customer's perspective in specific-industry contexts. In order to accomplish the main aim of this study, secondary forms of research will be conducted.

Saunders et al. (2007, p. 246) defined secondary research as "data used for a research project that were originally collected for some other purpose". The secondary data collected for this study gave the researcher the opportunity to find out useful information and data about the service quality topic in general. There are many forms through which secondary data may be presented. In this paper, the researcher applied them in the development of the literature review. There are different sources from which to obtain secondary data, including books, journal articles, and websites. Some of the advantages of secondary data lie in the time factor as they are quick to obtain and in many cases available for the public. Another advantage is cost. It is not always expensive to obtain secondary data and in many cases they are available for free to the public. However, there are some disadvantages inherent in this type of research. One of these is that in some cases that data are produced and designed for different purposes and not aimed for the specific case study the research may be concerned with.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The main aim of this section is to present a broad comprehensive and contemporary review of the literature on the service quality. The section will begin with the process of defining key terms, as it is essential to create and establish a solid foundation for this study. The importance, benefit, and significance of service quality will be discussed. This will be followed by describing the three formal models of service quality and their schools of thought, namely the Nordic School, the Holistic School, and the North American Gap School. This will then lead to a detailed review of the SERVQUAL model, including its evolution and development, potential applications, contexts of adoption, discussions, its criticisms and limitations.

## DEFINITION OF SERVICE QUALITY

In service literature, service quality is usually defined based on consumers' assessment. Parasuraman et al. (1985, p. 42) defined service quality as "a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations; delivering quality service means confirming to customer expectations on a consistent basis". Parasuraman et al. (1988, p. 16) defined perceived service quality as "a global judgment, or attitude, relating to the superiority of the service". Zeithaml (1988, p. 3) defined service quality as "the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority". It is clear that defining service quality is an important step toward the development of a solid foundation for this study. Kotler and Armstrong (1996, p. G9) defined service quality as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs". Therefore, being in line with the service literature, this study looks into service quality as the standard of excellence toward fulfilling customers' requirements, which contributes toward achieving customers' ultimate satisfaction. This, in turn, entails organisations and firms to investigate, explore, and identify customers' requirements and to try to meet them in order to provide a high standard of service quality.

## IMPORTANCE AND BENEFITS OF SERVICE QUALITY

Lewis et al. (1994) have explored and identified a number of possible benefits service organisations can look forward to when they pursue service quality. Service organisations are competing to achieve sustainable competitive advantage through providing a high-quality service to their existing customers in a severely competitive environment. This has led to a continued focus on service quality. Organisations have recognised a number of potential benefits derived from implementing service quality programs, including increasing customer satisfaction, customer retention, customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth, increasing opportunities for cross-selling, employee benefits, improved corporate image, profit gains, and financial performance.

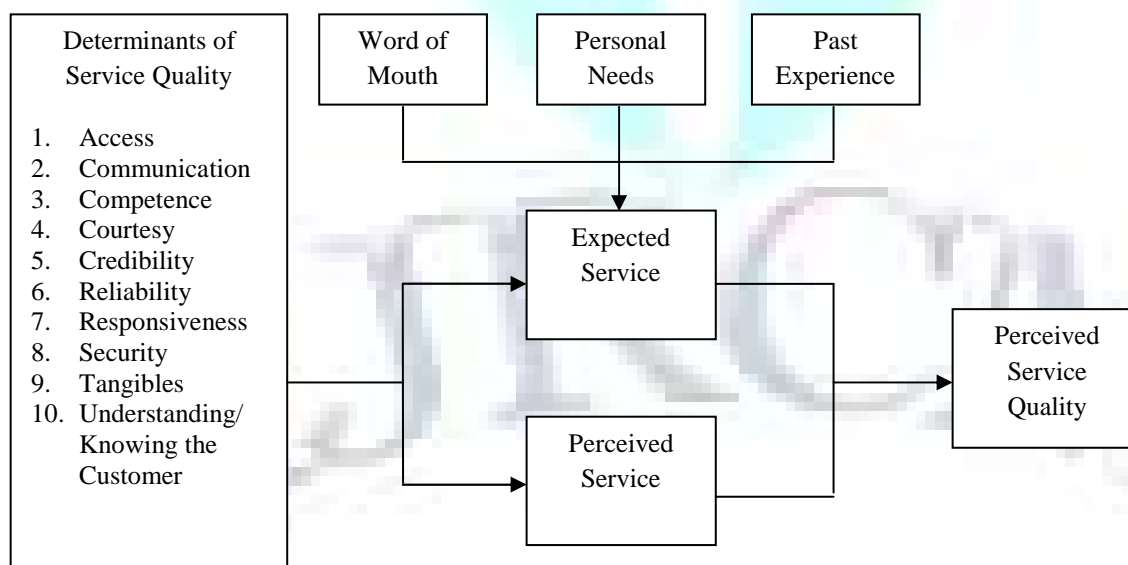
## FORMAL MODELS OF SERVICE QUALITY

There are a number of conceptual models that have been developed by various researchers and scholars world-wide to investigate the service quality concept. At the same time, these models have been aimed to be adopted by service organisations as a tool to assist in quality improvement programs. In a literature review study, Seth et al. (2005) presented a list of key service quality models including, for example, Technical-Functional Quality Model (Gronroos, 1984), Gap Model and SERVQUAL Model (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988), Service-Profit Chain Model (Heskett et al., 1994), and Satisfaction-Service Quality Model (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). These conceptual models along with other models have contributed to the development of various schools of thought of service quality. Generally, in the current service marketing literature there are three key schools of service quality modelling, namely the Nordic School, the Holistic School, and the North American School (Gap Analysis School).

## THE NORTH AMERICAN GAP SCHOOL

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) are three researchers in the service quality academic field from the United States of America. They are considered the key contributors to the North American School (Gap Analysis School) of thought concerning service quality. They have developed a research model (SERVQUAL Model) to examine the service quality concept. The model development was based on exploratory qualitative research projects including focus group interviews with consumers and in-depth interviews with firms' executives. It was developed on the bases of data collection from four service settings in the United States of America including retail banking, credit cards, securities brokerage, and product repair and maintenance. Their research findings showed that service quality as perceived by customers is a comparison of the customers' expectations with their perceptions of the performance of the actual service (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: DETERMINANTS OF PERCEIVED SERVICE QUALITY



Source: Parasuraman et al. (1985) pp. 41-50

## A GENERIC MEASURE OF SERVICE QUALITY: THE SERVQUAL SCALE

Apparently, service quality is an old concept. It was initiated in the late 1980s, grown in the 1990s, and progressed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, measuring and managing service quality from the consumer's point of view is still rather a debatable issue. In the literature, there are a number of key instruments available for measuring service quality. Nevertheless, the SERVQUAL instrument has been the major technique used to measure service quality and has been extensively implemented and valued by academics and practitioners.



Parasuraman et al. (1988) identified a number of potential applications for the SERVQUAL model, including:

1. It can be used on a regular basis to track customer perceptions of service quality of a particular firm compared to its competitors.
2. It provides the opportunity for a firm to assess its service quality performance on the basis of each dimension individually as well as the overall dimensions.
3. It allows the firm to classify its customers into different segments based on their individual SERVQUAL scores.
4. It allows multi-unit retail companies to assess the level of service quality offered by individual stores and to group them into different sectors with different quality images.

However, the main aim of the model is to be employed as a generic instrument for measuring service quality across different service sectors. Parasuraman et al. (1991b) proposed that the SERVQUAL instrument is developed for use in various service settings and provides a basic skeleton that can be adapted to fit the specific attributes of a particular organisation. It is applicable across different empirical contexts and various countries and cultural backgrounds. Parasuraman et al. (1988, p. 6) stated that "SERVQUAL instrument is designed for use in a broad set of service business and provides a basic skeleton through its expectations/perceptions format encompassing statements for each of the five service quality dimensions. The skeleton, when necessary, can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular organisation".

The SERVQUAL model was theoretically and empirically studied, examined, and discussed in several academic studies. In addition, it has been implemented to measure and assess service quality across different service, industrial, commercial, and non-profit settings (Buttle, 1996; Ladhari, 2008). This includes, for example, hospitals and health-care sector, banking and financial services sector, fast food chain, telecommunications industry, retail chain, information systems, library services, hotels and leisure services, travel and tourism, car servicing, higher education, hospitality, business-to-business channel partners, accounting firms, architectural services, recreational services, airline catering, apparel retailing, and local government (see, for example, Carman, 1990; Parasuraman et al., 1994; Johns, 1993).

In addition, it has been employed to measure service quality across different countries and various cultural backgrounds (Ladhari, 2008) including, for example, the United States of America, China, Australia, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Korea, South Africa, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom (see, for example, Babakus and Boller, 1992; Lam 2002; Pitt et al., 1995).

Moreover, there are a number of other unpublished SERVQUAL studies apart from the above-mentioned examples of empirical and cultural contexts. Additionally, a number of well-known international organisations have implemented it, such as the Midland and Abbey National Banks.

## CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS

Clearly, the SERVQUAL instrument has been extensively adopted by several academic researchers and practitioners worldwide to measure service quality. The previously mentioned academic research studies are examples of this. However, regardless of its extensive use, numerous theoretical, operational, conceptual, and empirical criticisms of the measurement instrument have been identified and mentioned (Buttle, 1996; Van Dyke et al., 1997, 1999; Ladhari, 2008). These criticisms can be summarised into two main points including the following:

### 1. DIMENSIONALITY AND CONTEXTUAL STABILITY

A number of research studies have been carried out to test SERVQUAL within different service contexts and to investigate its modified versions in a variety of service settings such as health care, education, hospitality, utility, retail clothing sector, and retail banking services (Carman 1990; Brown et al, 1993; Gagliano and Hathcote, 1994). Additionally, a number of researchers undertook cross-cultural studies to investigate SERVQUAL application in similar and different cultural contexts in developed countries such as the United States of America and New Zealand and in less developed countries such as the United Arab Emirates (Ford et al., 1993; Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2005).

Researchers have criticised SERVQUAL regarding its dimensionality and contextual stability both from empirical and cultural context sides. Dimensionality and contextual stability refers to the applicability of a particular research instrument across different empirical contexts and various countries and cultural backgrounds. Their research findings showed that SERVQUAL does not apply equally across cultures. However, the main important concern is the one related to the number of dimensions and their applicability from one specific context to another. It has been argued on the unstable dimensionality and the uncertainty of the SERVQUAL applicability as a single instrument for measuring service quality across different service industries. It has been stated that service quality may be complex in some industries and very simple and uni-dimensional in others. As a result, based on the particular service being offered, the number of service quality dimensions may vary from one context to another. Empirical evidence does not support a five-dimensional concept of service quality as it was proposed by the North American Gap School. It has been argued that managers and service providers may miss important requirements of customers when assessing service quality based on the generic SERVQUAL items. It can be concluded clearly that a simple adaptation of the SERVQUAL factors is not sufficient to capture service quality across diverse settings. This leads to the need for the development of a measure of service quality for specific-industry settings. This view is supported by the following multi-case study.

Carman (1990) undertook a research study aimed to investigate SERVQUAL within four different service settings in the United States of America including:

1. Dental school patient clinic
2. Business school placement centre
3. Tyre store
4. Acute care hospital

He indicated that an additional number of 13 items are required to be added to the SERVQUAL model in order to capture service quality sufficiently across different service industries. He adjusted and modified the original ten-factor SERVQUAL instrument to fit the four service contexts. The end result of the factor analysis recognised between five and seven original service quality dimensions. His results indicated that in all four service settings three factors - tangibles, reliability, and security - were confirmed. On the other hand, the responsiveness factor was weak in the dental school patient clinic case. Moreover, he argued that the combination of the two factors "understanding/knowing the customer" and "access" to a single factor "empathy" as SERVQUAL proposed was not proper in his case. The author originally proposed that the factor analysis would confirm the SERVQUAL dimensions in all service settings. However, this was not the case. He has concluded that the original SERVQUAL instrument is not as well fitted as was expected in the four different service sectors. He has recommended that the wording of the SERVQUAL model needed to be customised to each service setting.

### 2. EXPECTATION-MINUS-PERCEPTION SCORE

In the current service literature and besides the SERVQUAL model, there is another competing instrument for measuring service quality which is the SERVPERF. It was developed by Cronin and Taylor (1992) and aims to measure only consumers' perception of service quality. In other words, it cuts the measurement scale of the SERVQUAL by half. Researchers studied both instruments in detail and compared each to the other (Robeldo, 2001). In terms of gap analysis, there are few who support the view that customers evaluate service quality on the basis of perception-minus-expectation scores (Babakus and Boller, 1992). Conceptually, there has been criticism about using two different instruments for measuring two different concepts (perceptions and expectation) to measure a third concept (perceived service quality) (Lam, 1997). On the contrary, it has been argued that a direct measurement of perceived service quality is more reliable. Moreover, it has been argued that a vaguely defined concept resulted from the uncertain expectations constructed from different definitions and views of the concept. Additionally, and from an operational perspective, it has been stated that consumers evaluate service quality on the basis of standards other than expectations (Mehat et al., 2000). Therefore, it has been recommended that service quality is more precisely and correctly evaluated by measuring only perceptions of quality. In addition, it has been pointed out that previous research suggested using perception-only scores rather than gap scores for the overall assessment of service quality (Teas, 1994; Robeldo, 2001).

Lee et al. (2000) undertook an investigation across three service industries: entertainment parks, aerobic schools and investment consulting firms. Their research findings supported the SERVPERF as perceptions-only is a better approach than the SERVQUAL gap scores. Motoya-Weiss et al. (2003) defined service quality as the general evaluation of perceived performance of the service provider. This basic definition supports the above arguments through defining the service quality as a perception-only concept. Babakus and Boller (1992) enquired about the operation of the SERVQUAL gap analysis. Their findings from a study conducted at

an electric and gas utility company in the United States indicated that the expectations half of the SERVQUAL model did not provide any added value of information to that gained from the performance-only scores. The previous examples prove that the concept expectation is poorly defined and can be interpreted from different perspectives. Consequently, it is suggested that the gap analysis measure should not be used in consumer research.

## CONCLUSION

It appears that regardless of the extensive acceptance and adoption of SERVQUAL, there has been a severe hesitation concerning its future use as a tool for measuring service quality. This argument is supported by Robinson (1999, p. 21) who stated that "although it has probably been the best, and most popular approach available during the 1990s, it is becoming apparent that it has some significant shortcomings. It can be argued that SERVQUAL is applicable to contexts close to its original setting".

In view of the criticisms mentioned, researchers have argued that there is a doubt about the applicability of a single generic scale for measuring service quality across a range of service settings (Jabnoun and Khalifa, 2005; Akbaba, 2006; Caro and Garcia, 2007). Moreover, there is a general agreement among researchers that a simple adaptation of the SERVQUAL dimensions is unsatisfactory for measuring service quality across a variety of service settings (Carman, 1990; Brown et al., 1993; Van Dyke et al., 1997).

For these reasons, it has been suggested that developing industry-specific scales for measuring service quality can be more suitable than a single generic scale (Caro and Garcia, 2007; Ekiz and Bavik, 2008). This argument is supported by Dabholkar et al. (1996, p. 14) who stated that "It appears that a measure of service quality across industries is not feasible; therefore, future research on service quality should involve the development of industry-specific measures of service quality".

Subsequently, a number of specific-industry measures have been developed to measure service quality (Ladhari, 2008, p. 78), including, for example, restaurants, retail banks, career centres, Internet retailing, hotels, hospitals, and higher education (see, for example, Sureshchandar et al., 2002; Janda et al., 2002; Wilkins et al., 2007). In addition, the scales have been developed in different countries and various cultural backgrounds, including, for example, Turkey, Australia, Canada, Croatia, India, the United States of America, Korea, Hong Kong, Belgium, the United Arab Emirates, and Spain (see, for example, Dabholkar et al. 1996; Sureshchandar et al., 2002; Akbaba, 2006).

Ladhari (2008) stated that all of the related research studies described service quality as multi-dimensional construct. However, the number and nature of dimensions change on the bases of the service contexts. It is clear that evaluating and assessing service quality differs from one customer group to another and from one circumstance to another. Therefore, the review of previous literature has documented a need for a future work to be done in order to discover additional appropriate and suitable specific-industry measures for service quality in further service industries and sectors. Researchers are advised to describe the empirical context in which the specific model was developed and the contexts in which it can be applied.

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