

INTERACTION QUALITY IN THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER: SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION

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Abstract

This paper describes the development and validation of a 24-item scale which aims to measure interaction quality of service exchange in the hospitality industry. The new scale operationalises the quality of interaction as a function of both cognitive and social aspects of service encounter. Following traditional methods of scale development, the study starts with reviewing the literature, evaluating current measures, and identifying limitations of the existing scale. This is followed by a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews to clarify concept and to ensure the new scale captures all aspects of interaction quality. The scale is then validated using a sample from UK population. The scale was found to be valid and reliable measure of interaction quality. The importance of such a scale for the service exchange is discussed

Key Words: interaction quality; service encounter; task-related aspects; social aspects; personal connection

Literature Review

Over the past decades, there have been several attempts to conceptualize and model interaction quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Grönroos; 1984; Price, 1995; Schneider, 1980; Sheth, 1975; Surprenant and Solomon, 1987). Interaction quality refers to a customer's experience as a result of the interaction with the human element of the service organization (Alexandris et al, 2006; Brady and Cronin, 2001). While reliability of service provision was identified as the most important in meeting customer expectations, elements related to personal interaction were the most important in enabling companies to excel and potentially to “dominate the competition” (Parasuraman et al, 1991, p 47)

Interaction Quality

The various definitions of interaction quality, however, explain the dynamic nature of this construct and the challenge of its conceptualization. Sheth (1976), for example, defined interaction quality in terms of two dimensions; the style and the content of the communication. He suggested that the style – “the format, ritual or mannerism which the buyer and the seller adopt in their interaction” (p.382-383) – determines the continuity of the interaction process and shapes the outcomes of the buyer-seller interaction. Schneider (1980) conducted an empirical study on customer perception of service provider performance. He found that customer evaluation of service provider performance is based on three dimensions; provider’s courtesy, competence and attitude

The Nordic Model of service quality also highlighted the importance of the interaction in the overall quality of service. It conceptualised service quality as consisting of two dimensions; functional

(process/interaction) and technical (outcomes) dimensions (Grönroos, 1982; 1984). The functional dimension refers to customer perceptions of the interactions that take place during service delivery, while the technical dimension is what customers receive in the service encounter (the outcomes). As such, functional quality focuses on “how” the service is provided, and considers issues such as the behaviour of customer-contact staff and the speed of service. Grönroos’ (1984) conceptualization of interaction quality employed the disconfirmation paradigm, where the perceived interaction was evaluated against expectations

From the North American School, Parasuraman et al’s (1985) five gap model and the subsequent SERVQUAL scale ascribed the main role in the customer evaluation of service to interactional aspects; reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. These four dimensions along with the fifth dimension of tangibles formed the “SERVQUAL” conceptualisation and instrument of service quality. A close look at the SERVQUAL items used to measure quality dimensions shows that many relate to the human interaction (Bitner et al, 1990). Surprenant and Solomon (1987) identified three main dimensions that customers assigned to their service providers in their evaluation of the quality of the interaction namely; competence, helpfulness, sociability. A competent employee was described as capable, efficient, organized, thorough, and responsible, while helpfulness refers to the sincere, caring, and considerate behaviours shown by the service employee. Finally, sociability was defined as employee’s informality, talkativeness, and friendliness

More recently, Brady and Cronin (2001) proposed a model of service quality by integrating the two schools of thought into one multidimensional-hierarchical-model. The new hierarchical model consists of three primary dimensions: interaction quality, outcome quality and quality of physical environments. Each of these primary dimensions is further composed of various sub-dimensions. The interaction quality is comprised of the attitude, behaviour, and expertise of the service provider. Pollack (2009) endorsed this model as it synthesized prior conceptualizations of service quality

From the service provider perspective, Price et al (1995) identified five key dimensions of service provider performance namely; mutual understanding, authenticity, extra attention, competence, meeting minimum standards. Interestingly, Price et al (1995) suggested that two elements of the service encounter are likely to influence the relative level and importance of these performance dimensions

These are the duration of the encounter and the spatial proximity of the service provider and client during the encounter. Goodwin and Gremler (1996) identified two main dimensions of interaction: functional (style of delivery of the technical service) and communal behaviours (other social behaviours). However, they argued that the former is required by the core service, while the latter is not essential to service delivery

By undertaking a dyadic face-to-face survey, Chandon et al (1997) identified a set of dimensions that measure the interactive nature of encounters as perceived by both customers and personnel. These are; perceived competence, listening behaviours, dedication, and effectiveness. They found that perceived competence, listening and dedication contribute to the evaluation of the encounter more than the effectiveness of the service does. They also ascertained that these three dimensions are the predominant criteria used by clients in assessing encounter quality. Winsted (2000) examined service provider behaviours that influence customer evaluation of service encounters (medical centre and restaurant). Based on the findings, he developed a three-dimensional scale to assess

service encounters that encompassed concern, civility and congeniality. The first dimension (concern) combines the elements of empathy, assurance, and responsiveness, and the concept of authenticity. It also captures three of four service encounter dimensions identified by Chandon et al (1997): perceived competence, listening, and dedication. The second (civility) dimension focuses on “not negative” behaviour, It suggests that there is a variety of behaviours that service providers must avoid in order to provide “adequate” service (Parasuraman et al, 1991) and to protect against customer dissatisfaction

The last dimension (congeniality) consists of things related to the service person’s positive attitude, sunny temperament, and warm personality (Winsted, 2000)

#### Interaction Quality Operationalization

Empirical studies in hotels provide evidence that customers cannot distinguish some of the existing dimensions. For example, Getty and Thompson’s (1994) examination of SERVQUAL in the hotel industry indicates that assurance, responsiveness, and empathy merge in a single dimension called “contact”. Similarly, Ekinci, et al (1998) found that perception of service quality in resort hotels is a two-dimensional structure, named as “tangibles” and “intangibles”. This was also confirmed by Saleh and Ryan’s (1991) research which indicates that whereas tangibles and assurance are generic, the dimensions of empathy, assurance, and reliability cannot be replicated. All of these studies suggest that some of the dimensions proposed by the existing models may not be generic for the evaluation of hospitality service encounter. A review of the existing literature on interaction quality reveals that prior studies did not adequately capture the social nature of interaction quality. It has been argued that service encounters are first and foremost social encounters and a useful understanding of service encounters must therefore proceed from a conceptualization of these structural and dynamic factors that affect social interaction in general (McCallum and Harrison, 1985). According to Williams et al (1999), when measures focus only on specific transactions, they may fail to take into account the ongoing nature of service relationships that are based upon repeated encounters. This view was supported by Gutek (1995) who distinguished between two types of services: *the encounter* and *the relationship*

Gutek argued that the encounter (exchanges between strangers) and the relationship (exchanges between people who know each other) are the two basic forms of any social interaction in a service context. The relationship – in Gutek’s opinion – is built up through several social encounters with the same providers, whereas the encounter is one single social interaction with no expectation of future interaction between the two parties. Gutek found that, in a service relationship, customer and provider are committed to each other and are willing to spend much more time compared to a single encounter

This is because both of them have predicted exchanges and developed personal friendships over their past interaction(s) (Gutek et al, 2000). Gutek concluded that the distinction between these two types of service must be a social rather than a technological mechanism. Arguing from Gutek’s perspective, it can be concluded that global measure of interaction quality cannot distinguish between the two identified types of service (the encounter and the relationship) and therefore may not provide the details necessary to assess the strength and weakness of a relationship. In particular, they may fail to take account of the uniqueness and the realities of specific relationships (Rosen and Supernant, 1998). The measurement of interaction quality in service encounter therefore needs to

reflect the social nature of such interaction and to distinguish between the two types of the service exchange. Hence, this paper attempts to fill this gap in literature by presenting a new model and instrument that captures the cognitive and the social aspects of the service encounter. The instrument is developed based on a social mechanism rather than a technological (Guttek, 1995), and does take into account the distinction between the types of service exchange; the encounter and the relationship

#### Scale Development Process

The current study employed three stages to generate a pool of scale items: literature reviews, in-depth qualitative interviews, and quantitative survey (Churchill, 1979)

##### a. Items generated from literature

#### The social aspects of interaction quality

Service encounters are first and foremost social encounters (McCallum and Harrison, 1985) The existence of social interaction as an important motive for customers was highlighted in marketing literature almost five decades ago (Stone, 1954; Webster, 1968). A review of the literature showed that many research have highlighted the importance of the social aspects in service delivery process (e.g

Butcher et al, 2001; Butcher, 2005; Ford, 1995; Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; Hester et al, 1985; Koermer et al, 2003; Koermer, 2005; Price et al, 1995). The first proposed dimension for interaction quality therefore is the *sociality communication* which was derived from the Service Provider Sociality Scale (Koermer et al, 2000; 2003). Sociality refers to “the performance that encourages a cooperative, social smoothness, void of intense interactions with others” (Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). The sociality communication has two-sub dimensions: personal connection and courteous expressions. Personal connection was defined as the provider’s ability to show pleasant and sociable behaviours, and courtesy expressions as those expressions that encompass greeting, thanking, using good manners, and other displays of politeness (Koermer et al, 1996). The two dimensions of sociality communication (personal connection and courteous expressions) imply that the two actors (provider and customer) are connected as individuals. It indicates that both actors managed to perform a type of communication in which they felt “cooperative interaction” and “social smoothness” with each other (Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). Empirical research on sociality communication found that both; courteous expressions and personal connection were significantly related to customer satisfaction (Koermer et al, 2005), customer loyalty toward the provider and the service organization (Koermer and McCroskey, 2006), and patient satisfaction (Koermer and Kilbane, 2008)

#### Competence

The second dimension of interaction quality is proposed to be employee competence. It is suggested that for a quality interaction, social aspects will be insufficient if the service employee does not deliver the core element of service (Hausman, 2003). This refers here to an employee’s capability of successfully performing a task (Spreitzer, 1995), and it defines the extent to which the individual provider can affect the outcome of the interaction through his/her skills (Dolen et al, 2004). Employee competence is known as the knowledge and skills that employees must have in order to

effectively deliver customer service. The competent employee understands customers' needs, knows the products and services offered, delivers the services/the products efficiently, and can communicate effectively with customers. A competent employee is also expected to provide prompt service, to know how to solve problems, and to handle customer complaints efficiently (Herling, 2000)

When assessing the service encounter, customers will often attribute some level of competence to the service provider and they are more likely to be satisfied with service providers that they perceive as competent. Empirical research by Hausman (2003) found that the main determinant of customer satisfaction in the context of social workers is the core service (the competence). Customer satisfaction is also an antecedent of repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth communication (Bitner, 1990); thus, perceived competence may serve as an indicator of the consistency with which future services are likely to be rendered. Johnson et al (1998) found that the likelihood that the service provider will be recommended is clearly subject to the customer's evaluation of the provider's perceived competence. According to Dabholkar et al (1996) employee competence can be captured by measuring customer perception of service provider ability to provide the necessary information, keep promises, solve problems, and correctly perform services. Therefore, items that measure employee competence in this study were adopted from the Retail Service Quality Scale (RSQS) which is a performance based measure of service quality by Dabholkar et al (1996)

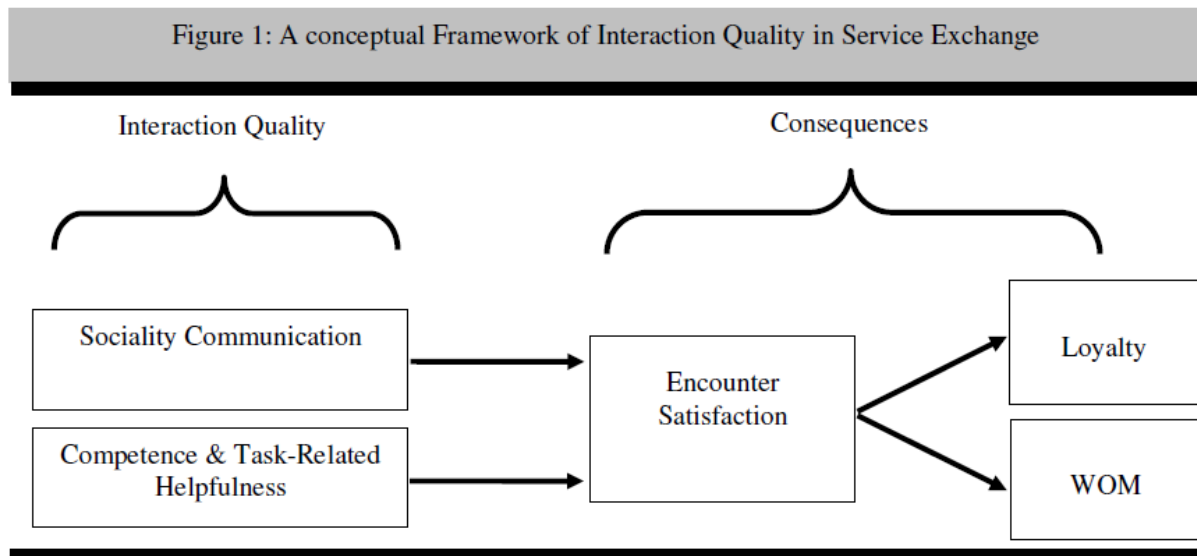
#### b. Semi-structured Interviews

Interviewing of individuals has been recognized as a sound methodology for obtaining data on social aspects of the service encounter and other behaviors that result in dis/satisfaction (e.g. Bitner et al, 1990; Goodwin and Gremler, 1996). After the previous studies on interaction quality were reviewed to identify relevant conceptualization of the construct, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of ten candidates to validate and clarify the concept and what it involves. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate the dimensions and the attributes on which customers rely in evaluating the interaction quality during a service encounter. The aim was to maximise the content validity of the scale to be developed as well as establish the "vertical correspondence" between the construct at the conceptual level as developed from the literature and its "purported measure" at the operational level (Peter, 1981, p. 134)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten respondents from different nationalities and age categories. Interviewees were asked to think of a service experience when they had a particularly satisfying (dissatisfying) interaction with an employee of a hotel, or a restaurant". After recalling a specific interaction, interviewees were asked a series of questions to try and delineate how they developed their perception of the service employee, what facilitated or hindered the interaction, and what elements of the interaction with the employee led them to feel the interaction was satisfying or dissatisfying.

The interviews were audio-recorded to provide accurate data (Flick, 2002; Yin, 1994). Interviews lasted between 20-40 minutes each, after which all interviews were transcribed. The data were coded guided by the theorised dimensions of interaction quality and then analysed. As reported by Alotaibi et al (2010), the findings of the qualitative interviews suggest that the dimensions identified in the literature review were highlighted by the interviewees. Moreover, the findings of these interviews revealed that customers valued not only the employees' competence and courtesy, but

also their helpfulness during the service interaction. Respondents used words like; *helpful, attentive, want to please us...* etc., when describing employees positive behaviours. Therefore, another dimension was added to the model. The new dimension captures employee’s helpfulness and was labelled as *task related helpfulness*. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of interaction quality in the service exchange



### c. Quantitative Survey

The final questionnaire was generated based on the review of the literature and the findings from the qualitative interviews. It has three parts. Part one measures interaction quality, part two measures encounter satisfaction, and part three measures the behavioural intentions. 30 items were used to measure aspects of interaction quality which include courteous expressions, personal connection, competence and task related helpfulness. Items that measure interaction quality were adopted from Service Provider Sociality Scale (Koermer, et al, 2000), The Retail Service Quality Scale (Dabholkar et al, 1996), and other items developed based on the extensive literature review and the preliminary qualitative study. In total, the interaction quality scale consisted of 30 items. All items used a seven point Likert-type scale, where 1= strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree

Data were collected using a personally administered questionnaire. The final questionnaire was distributed to 4500 respondents representing general UK population from a purchased mailing list

Criteria for inclusion on the list were those with frequent travel patterns and those who have two or more breaks during the year. 1500 questionnaires were sent by post and the remaining 3000 were sent via email. A total of 319 usable questionnaires were returned either online or by post. The respondents’ age ranged between 60 and above (32.5%), 50-59 age group (24.6 %), 40-49 (18%), and 30-39 (16.1%). The sample comprised of 55% female and 45% male. Almost 50% of the respondents hold a university degree with a wide range of occupations.

## Data Analysis and Findings

### Factor analysis and scale reliability

Exploratory factor analysis was carried out to assess the construct validity of the interaction quality scale. Principal components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was employed using SPSS version 18 in order to “identify the latent dimensions” (Hair et al, 2006, p. 107) of the 30 items of the interaction quality scale. The initial PCA with Varimax rotation extracted two factors. Cross-loaded items were deleted one at a time, and the analysis conducted again in a series of iterations to purify the factors and the loaded items. The final rotated solution revealed the presence of two factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 65.8% of the variance. Items loading on the first factor ranged from 0.60 to 0.93 and explain 42.7% of the variance. This factor consists of items that are related to the core task, and therefore it was labelled as “*task-related aspects*”. The second factor is made up of all the nine items of the personal connection dimension and therefore it was labelled as the *personal connection*. Items loading on this factor range from 0.63 to 0.85 and explain 23.1% of the variance. The final factor analysis solution is presented in Table 1

Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix of Interaction Quality Scale

	Varimax-Rotated Loading		Communality
	1	2	
<b>Task-related aspects</b>			
Typically, the service employees of this hotel ...			
1	0.93		.87
2	0.93		.86
3	0.91		.87
4	0.89		.83
5	0.88		.82
6	0.87		.78
7	0.87		.76
8	0.85		.78
9	0.84		.75
10	0.75		.61
11	0.75		.56
12	0.75		.59
13	0.70		.60
14	0.66		.47
15	0.60		.41
<b>Personal Connection</b>			
Typically, the service employees of this hotel ...			
1		0.85	.72
2		0.83	.72
3		0.81	.68
4		0.77	.65
5		0.76	.61
6		0.71	.51
7		0.69	.50
8		0.65	.44
9		0.63	.42
Eigenvalue	11.79	4.00	
Variance Explained %	42.7 %	23.1 %	
Total Variance Explained	65.8%		

Cronbach alpha coefficients were then computed to estimate the scale reliability of the two identified factor. Table 2 shows the reliability of the scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.97 for



task-related aspects and was 0.91 for personal connection; therefore exceeding the minimum recommended internal consistency threshold (alpha coefficient  $\geq 0.70$ ) and were therefore deemed reliable (Churchill, 1979; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). An inspection of the alpha-if-item-deleted column reveal there was no need to eliminate any items from the scale to further improve the reliability coefficient

Table 2: Interaction Quality Scale Reliability

Scale components	Cronbach's Alpha	Item-Total Correlation
<b>Task-related aspects</b>	.97	
Typically, the service employees of this hotel ...		
1 had the knowledge to answer your questions		.61
2 were never too busy to respond to your requests		.74
3 had the necessary skills to perform their job		.86
4 used good manners in your presence		.90
5 directly answered your questions		.82
6 seemed appreciative/thankful		.86
7 listened carefully to what you had to say		.91
8 were efficient in doing their job		.91
9 talked to you		.75
10 acknowledged your presence		.84
11 were sympathetic to you about a problem with a product or service		.66
12 were able to handle your complaints directly and immediately		.71
13 asked if your needs had been met		.75
14 were always willing to help you		.89
15 gave you prompt service		.90
<b>Personal Connection</b>	.91	
Typically, the service employees of this hotel ...		
1 discussed your personal likes and dislikes		.73
2 told you something personal about themselves		.75
3 discussed matters pertaining to you personally		.62
4 encouraged you to say something personal about yourself		.77
5 told you a joke		.62
6 discussed what you do for work		.60
7 discussed your state of health		.57
8 talked to you about how their day had been		.78
9 told you about their personal experience with a product or service		.70
<b>Overall Scale</b>	.95	

Discussion and Conclusion

This study deepens understanding of interaction quality in services. The paper developed and tested a new scale that measures interaction quality of hospitality services. Unlike previous research that has identified general, abstract dimensions of service encounter, this study identifies specific behaviours that result in encounter dis/satisfaction and consequently affect the behavioural intentions

The results presented show strong support to the validity and reliability of the scale. The scale is therefore a useful measure of the interaction elements in hospitality context

The literature review showed some limitations with current measures of service encounter quality. These limitations are related to the dimensionality of the service encounter (Ekinçi et al, 1998), the ability of current measures to capture the ongoing nature of service relationships that are based upon repeated encounters (Williams et al, 1999), and to differentiate between the various type of services (Gutek, 1995). Therefore, the current study contributes toward filling these gaps in literature in many ways. First, this study confirmed the multidimensionality of interaction quality in service encounters. Task-related aspects and personal connection were the two identified dimensions of interaction quality in the service encounter. Second, the study provided a valid and reliable measurement that takes into account the on-going social nature of the service encounter (the relational aspects) as an important element of interaction quality alongside the cognitive aspects (the task-related aspects). The new scale can distinguish between the different types of interaction (the encounter and the relationship) and, therefore, it provides the detail necessary to assess the strength and weakness of a relationship. Third, this study showed that courteous expressions, which were seen as being part of the social aspects of service interaction (e.g. Koermer, 2005; Koermer et al., 1996; Koermer et al., 2000; Koermer et al., 2003; Koermer and Kilbane, 2008; Koermer and McCroskey, 2006), are more related to the task aspects rather than to the social aspects. The factor analysis revealed that the courteous expressions' dimension (which was a dimension of sociality communication) merged with competence and task-related helpfulness to form the new dimension called 'task-related aspects'. The Interaction Quality Scale therefore can serve as a tool to assess the relationship. It is suggested that further research should be conducted not only to further test the validity of the scale in various contexts, but also to investigate the antecedents and consequences of interaction quality which can now be captured using the validated scale

The current study supports the idea that hospitality businesses can achieve competitive advantage through interaction management (Kokko and Moilanen, 1997). Given the two distinct dimensions of interaction quality, a database manager can target customers using different relational strategies. For instance, task-related aspects (that include courteous expressions) appear to be important in the first encounter, whereas personal connection or the 'relational aspect' becomes important in a service relationship (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). It has been argued that not all customers want to have a connection or relationship with a service provider (see Gutek, 1995, 2000; Gutek et al., 1999; Nikolich and Sparks, 1995). Therefore, if the service encounter (a single interaction with no expectation of future interaction or relationship) is the desired strategy for hospitality managers, then the focus should be on the delivery of a speedy, efficient and courteous service (the task-related aspects), but if relationship building is the desired strategic approach through establishing a personal connection with customers, then a new operational focus is required that should include

recruiting employees with high social skills, intensive training and careful management of the frontline staff

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