



# Interpersonal service quality, self-service technology (SST) service quality, and retail patronage

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to examine how two components of interactive service quality (interpersonal service quality and self-service technology service quality) are related to retail patronage. This study also aims to identify the moderating effects of individual characteristics. The results indicate that two components of interactive quality are greatly related to retail patronage intentions. The moderating effects of technology anxiety, need for interaction, and age are also partially supported. To increase retail patronage, it is very important to focus on improving self-service technology service quality as well as interpersonal service quality. The results from this study also provide retail managers with a detailed understanding of how individual characteristics influence retail patronage intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

Advances in technology enable new ways of doing business and revolutionize the interaction between consumers and companies. The important role of technology in the marketing process is well illustrated in the pyramid model (Colby and Parasuraman, 2003; Parasuraman, 2000). Technology, positioned at the center of the model, is added as a fourth dimension along with company, customers, and employees, and plays a critical role in changing the conventional marketing structure. To go along with this current trend, many retailers have incorporated a variety of technological applications. Retail technology tools are used to offer consumer better access to services via various channels and to better meet consumer demand and increase consumer satisfaction (Bitner et al., 2002). Due to retailers' increasing use of technological tools, the traditional modes of service delivery (e.g., service by store employees) have been substituted or enlarged by technology (Colby and Parasuraman, 2003).

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) suggest two interactive elements in the service production process: interactive persons and interactive equipment. That is, service is delivered by either a contact person or a technology system in interacting with consumers. For example, in grocery stores, consumers can pay goods by interacting with either a retailer's employee or a self-checkout system. Linking their conceptualization, this study focuses on two components of interactive

quality and its role as a determinant of retail patronage. The aim of this study is two-fold: (1) to examine the effect of perceived service quality of interactive elements on retail patronage intentions, which in turn result in retail patronage behavior and (2) to explore the moderating effects of individual characteristics in the relationship between perceived service quality of interactive elements and retail patronage intentions. In particular, among various retail technologies, the focus of this study is on a retail self-checkout system because of its widespread acceptance over recent decades in the retail industry, especially grocery retailing areas. According to the findings of a study by Food Marketing Institute in 2008, 62.8% of grocery retailers have installed self-checkouts in at least one store location. On average, self-checkout lanes make up 25% of total checkout lanes and 25% of the total transactions go through self-checkout lanes (Amato-McCoy, 2008). More recently, one survey shows that a top-ranked technology is a self-checkout in enhancing consumers' overall shopping experience (Tarnowski, 2011).

However, there have been growing arguments that the pervasive installation of self-service technologies, such as self-checkout systems, results in a reduction in customer service and the depersonalized atmosphere (Alpert, 2008). While some consumers may consider self-service technologies to be easy to use or more convenient, others tend to be uncomfortable with the technologies and prefer to contact with a person (Dabholkar et al., 2003). Therefore, how perceived service quality of interactive elements influences retail patronage will differ by consumers' individual characteristics. For this reason, a deeper understanding of consumers' individual characteristics is necessary in order to justify the costs of self-service technologies implementation.

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## 2. Literature review

Due to unique features of service including intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability of production and consumption, service quality has been identified as an abstract and elusive construct (Parasuraman et al., 1985). These distinctive features make the quality of personal interactions one of the key elements in the conceptualization of service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Dabholkar, 1996; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). According to Lehtinen and Lehtinen's view, the perception of service quality is formed by consumers' evaluation of three dimensions of the service production process: physical quality, interactive quality, and corporate quality. Physical quality results from the physical elements of service and physical elements are related to physical products and physical support (physical instrument and environment). Interactive quality pertains to interaction between interactive elements of the service provider and the consumer and interactive elements include both interactive persons and interactive equipment (e.g., self-service). Corporate quality reflects how the corporate entity, company, or its image is seen by consumers. Through in-depth interviews, strong evidence for physical and interactive quality is found while corporate quality is less obvious (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991).

Our conceptual framework, shown in Fig. 1, is based upon Lehtinen and Lehtinen's (1991) conceptualization of interactive quality. Interpersonal service quality and self-service technology (SST) service quality are suggested as two components of interactive quality; interpersonal service quality represents the human element of interactive quality whereas SST service quality pertains to the non-human element of interactive quality. The overall sequence of effects in our model is that two elements of interactive quality influence consumers' retail patronage intentions, which in turn lead to retail patronage behavior. As relevant individual characteristics pertaining to interactive elements (e.g., persons and self-checkout systems) in retail settings, technology anxiety, need for interaction, and age are incorporated into the conceptual model and these variables play key moderating roles in the relationship between service quality of interactive elements and retail patronage intentions. The linkage of these variables to adoption and use of self-service technologies has been brought to attention by several researchers (e.g., Eastlick et al., 2012; Gelderman et al., 2011; Simon and Usunier, 2007).

### 2.1. Interpersonal service quality, self-service technology (SST) service quality, and retail patronage

There have been numerous studies that substantiate a direct relationship between service quality and patronage intentions

(e.g., Baker et al., 2002; Sirohi et al., 1998; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Also, the importance of service quality as a key to achieving retail patronage is found in a recent study that synthesizes previous studies using a meta-analytical approach (Pan and Zinkhan, 2006). Furthermore, the significant effect of interpersonal service quality on retail patronage intentions is captured in the literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2002; Sirohi et al., 1998). Therefore,

H1 Interpersonal service quality is positively related to retail patronage intentions.

Little attention has been afforded to service quality perceptions originating in interactive equipment (non-human service). The conceptualization of interactive quality recognizes two interactive elements (interactive persons and interactive equipment) in service production yet a lack of empirical evidence of interactive equipment (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). More recently, the non-human element of service delivery has been addressed. Sureshchandar et al. (2002) propose systematization of service delivery as one of the factors of customer service quality. Associated with the non-human element, systematization of service delivery refers to the processes, systems, and technology of a service. In their study, the human element and the non-human element, as two separate factors, are empirically identified as being significant.

In the current market, one of the increasingly used technologies for the delivery of service is self-service technologies (Verhoef et al., 2009). However, there has been limited empirical work examining how self-service technology (SST) service quality is related to retail patronage intentions. A study by Marzocchi and Zammit (2006) on self-scanning technologies identifies that increasing satisfaction with self-scanning technologies contributes to store repatronage intentions. Also, the evidence shows that more positive assessment of SST service quality results in more increased patronage intentions toward a retailer (Lee et al., 2009). Therefore,

H2 Self-service technology (SST) service quality is positively related to retail patronage intentions.

Literature in consumer behavior has have recourse to Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action (TRA) to understand the behavioral intention—actual behavior link. According to TRA, a person's performance of behavior is drawn from the person's intention to perform the behavior. However, some of the researchers have suggested that intention may not be a suitable proxy for actual behavior (Miniard et al., 1982; Young et al., 1998). In particular, it is discussed that intentions to purchase non-durable goods and

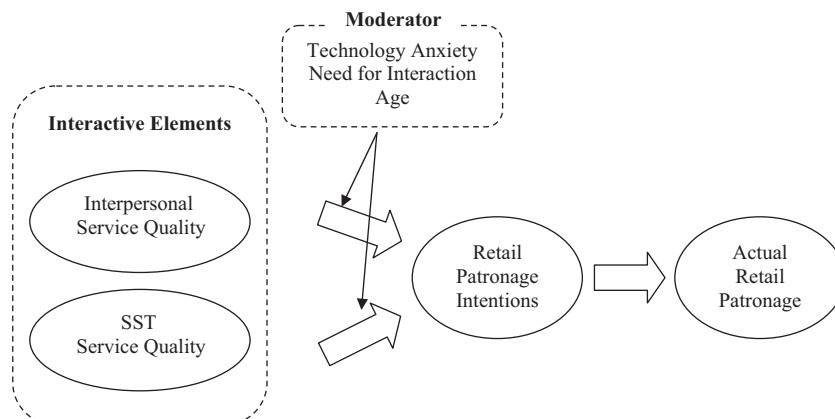


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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