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Short-term and long-term quality of service

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to introduce concepts for understanding and managing short- and long-term development of customer satisfaction related to service quality.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on empirical qualitative research in professional business-to-business services. The data were collected from in-depth interviews of highly experienced consultants and analyzed in terms of the content of the qualitative data.

Findings – This study empirically identifies situations where the level of customer satisfaction with a single service rendered changes over time and is different in short and long term. It finds different short- and long-term quality levels both during a service process and in the post-purchase evaluation period. It finds that sometimes long-term quality can be provided only at the expense of short-term quality and vice versa.

Research limitations/implications – The concepts of short- and long-term quality provide a simple and effective conceptual tool for understanding potential short- and long-term differences in customer satisfaction as well as the reasons for it.

Practical implications – The study highlights the importance of considering quality dynamics at the level of a service rendered, both during the service process and in the post-purchase period. It helps in developing effective ways to understand and manage changes in customer satisfaction in the short and long term. It helps in developing strategies for communicating the overall value of a service to customers in “no pain, no gain” cases.

Social implications – This study provides concepts for analyzing wicked problems.

Originality/value – Dynamics of quality and satisfaction in services have received very little attention in research studies although the existence and relevance of the phenomenon was recognized long ago. This study introduces new concepts for understanding this phenomenon further by focusing on the short- and long-term effects of the service quality.

Keywords Quality management, Professional services, Services management, Customer satisfaction, Customer value, Service quality, B-to-B service, Short-term quality, Long-term quality

Paper type Research paper

For many kinds of product and service, the consumer's judgment may require a year or even several years of formation.

(Deming, 1986, p. 168)

Introduction

The knowledge of short- and long-term dynamics of service quality is scarce so far. This knowledge gap is identified by [Gijzenberg *et al.* \(2015\)](#), who highlight the lack of studies that consider the short- and long-term effects of service-related incidents on perceived service quality. This is despite the fact that several studies have analyzed longitudinal customer satisfaction and service quality data ([Bolton and Drew, 1991](#); [Mittal *et al.*, 1999](#); [Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2008](#)). Very little knowledge exists of perceived service quality and satisfaction as dynamic phenomena evolving over time although the existence of this knowledge gap

has been recognized long ago (Nicosia, 1966; Tse *et al.*, 1990; Patterson *et al.*, 1998; Ojasalo, 1999). The concepts relevant for understanding short- and long-term aspects of perceived service quality are lacking. The evident knowledge gap calls for research on the short- and long-term effects of quality. The current research study addresses this knowledge gap. The purpose of this article is to introduce concepts for understanding and managing short- and long-term development of customer satisfaction related to service quality. They are called short- and long-term quality.

This study understands quality as a subjective customer or user-perceived phenomenon; it is something in a service or product that generates customer/user satisfaction (Grönroos, 1983; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Rust *et al.*, 1996; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Amorim and Saghezchi, 2014). In this study, it is assumed that quality is an antecedent of satisfaction (Odekerken-Schröder *et al.*, 2000; de Ruyter *et al.*, 1997). However, this study does not assume satisfaction to be an “immediate” response to consumption as defined by Oliver (1997, p. 188), instead the time aspect and related potential dynamics are considered. This study focuses on quality and satisfaction related to a single service rendered or solution provided to the customer. It rules out the examination of quality and satisfaction related to a relationship consisting of a series of services rendered by the service provider, which is often called relationship quality.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. First, it reviews and discusses the literature on service quality, short- and long-term aspects of service quality, customer satisfaction and perceived value. Second, it explains the empirical method. Third, it describes the empirical results. This includes the introduction of the concepts of short- and long-term quality and description of situations where long-term quality is provided at the expense of short-term quality and vice versa. Fourth, the article explains the theoretical and managerial implications. Finally, it draws the conclusions and offers directions for further research.

Literature review

This section briefly discusses three concepts: service quality, consumer satisfaction and perceived value. It is relevant to review the literature on all these concepts because they overlap to a large extent. They are also interconnected and complex.

Service quality

The service research has mostly understood quality as a subjective customer perception of the service (Grönroos, 1983, 1984; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). Based on the Profit Impact of Marketing Strategy (PIMS) program database, Buzzel and Gale (1987, p. 111) conclude that “Quality is whatever the customer says it is, and the quality of a particular product or service is whatever the customer perceives it to be.” According to Grönroos (1990, p. 37), “it should be remembered that what accounts is quality as it is perceived by the customers.” Similarly, Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) argue that only customers judge quality, and all other judgments are essentially irrelevant. According to Rust *et al.* (1996), customer service is all about perceptions.

Customer perceived service quality is usually understood to result from how well customer expectations are met by actual experiences. This is referred as disconfirmation and is accepted by several service quality researchers (Grönroos, 1982; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Gummesson, 1991; Oliver, 1993). The principle of disconfirmation has its roots in the adaptation-level theory (Helson, 1948, 1964).

Short- and long-term aspects of service quality

The literature includes very few direct references to “short-term quality” or “long-term quality.” Examples of such include articles by [Ollin \(1996\)](#) and [Yeo \(2008\)](#) in the context of education and by [English \(1990\)](#) in the context of public services.

The difference between customer and sales orientation has been defined in terms of short- and long-term customer satisfaction. Customer orientation refers to selling behavior in which salespeople assist customers to satisfy their long-term wants, whereas sales orientation places selling organization and/or salespersons before the customers ([Jones et al., 2003](#); [Michaels and Day, 1985](#); [Saxe and Weitz, 1982](#)). According to [Jones et al. \(2003\)](#), sales people should place the “right” amount of emphasis on the long-term horizon while attaining necessary, short-term goals.

Some studies have examined service quality and satisfaction as dynamic longitudinal phenomena and emphasize the need for research in this area. [Patterson et al. \(1998\)](#) conducted a longitudinal empirical study in educational service and found changes in different quality dimensions short-term versus long-term. [Gijzenberg et al. \(2015\)](#) examined the impact of service crises on perceived service quality over time and identified several short- and long-term effects in perceived service quality caused by negative or positive objective service quality.

Few references to short- and long-term solutions of services can be found. [Hays and Hill \(2006\)](#) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate if a service guarantee program is a short-term fix or a long-term solution and found that guarantees have a positive effect on customer loyalty and employee motivation. [AlSaidi and Mo \(2013\)](#) emphasize the need to develop approaches that practitioners in the industry can apply to help in support system design for operating assets as a long-term service solution to maintain optimized performance and obtain the best return on investments. [Solana \(2014\)](#) refers to a long-term solution in public service delivery in the context of public private partnership.

Indeed, the knowledge of short- and long-term effects of service quality is almost non-existent. Similarly, concepts for understanding short- and long-term effects of quality are lacking.

Consumer satisfaction

Several definitions for “consumer satisfaction” exist ([Giese and Cote, 2000](#)). It has been characterized with notions such as feeling of the use experience ([Swan et al., 1982](#); [Oliver, 1981](#); [Cadotte et al., 1987](#)), emotion ([Oliver, 1992](#)), psychological state ([Oliver, 1981](#)), fulfillment ([Oliver, 1997](#)), affective response ([Halstead et al., 1994](#)), surprise ([LaBarbera and Mazursky, 1983](#)), cognitive state ([Howard and Sheth, 1969](#)), cognitive evaluation ([Swan et al., 1982](#)), conscious evaluation ([Swan et al., 1982](#)), conscious comparison ([Churchill and Carol, 1982](#); [Halstead et al., 1994](#)), evaluative judgment ([Mano and Oliver, 1993](#)), response to evaluation ([Halstead et al., 1994](#)), attitude ([Mano and Oliver, 1993](#)), overall post-purchase evaluation ([Fornell, 1992](#)) and “hell/nirvana”-state ([Tse et al., 1990](#), p. 178).

Definitions of consumer satisfaction and service quality are similar to a large extent since most of them are based on the disconfirmation paradigm – the fit between customer’s prior expectations and actual experiences. However, many researchers point out that service quality and satisfaction are distinct constructs; the former draws on expectations toward the “ideal” service and the latter on predictions of what “will” happen ([Bitner, 1990](#); [Bitner and Hubbert, 1994](#); [Boulding et al., 1993](#); [Parasuraman et al., 1988](#); [Taylor and Baker, 1994](#); [Caruana et al., 2000](#)).

The research literature includes hardly any knowledge of the dynamics of satisfaction at the level of a single service rendered. However, the practical literature of service design has

pointed out the importance of managing the customer journey, in other words the service process (Rawson *et al.*, 2013; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010, 2011; Følstad and Kvale, 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2018). This includes understanding, measuring and managing customer satisfaction throughout the customer journey (Trischler and Zehrer, 2012, p. 65). Customer journey refers to methods and practices where the service process is analyzed, modeled, managed or (re)designed applying a customer journey perspective (Følstad and Kvale, 2018).

Value of service

Monroe (1991) defined customer-perceived value as the ratio between perceived benefits and perceived sacrifice. According to Ravald and Grönroos (1996), the perceived sacrifice includes all the costs the buyer faces when making a purchase: purchase price, acquisition costs, transportation, installation, order handling, repairs and maintenance, risk of failure or poor performance. The perceived benefits are a combination of physical attributes, service attributes and technical support available in relation to the particular use of the product, and the purchase price and other indicators of perceived quality (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996, pp. 21-22).

The basic construct of perceived customer value is understood to be the following ratio (Figure 1).

According to Zeithaml (1988, p. 14), customer-perceived value refers to “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on a perception of what is received and what is given.” Ravald and Grönroos (1996) explain value in the context of a service firm’s offering and conclude that the offering should be seen as a value-carrier and that value is based on the customer’s own value chain and is highly situation specific. Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) extend the “give-versus-get” model by conceptualizing perceived value as a dynamic phenomenon consisting of four types of value that emerge in different points of time and for different reasons during the purchase and consumption of a service. These are acquisition value, transaction value, in-use value and redemption value. Acquisition value refers to the benefits (relative to the monetary costs) buyers believe they are getting by acquiring a product/service. Perceived value is understood as a dynamic construct in that the relative emphasis of each component may change over time. The service-dominant logic theory (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) has emphasized the difference between value-in-exchange (price) and value-in-use (perceived benefits of use) and considers the latter most important.

The literature review shows that the research on the closely related concepts of perceived service quality, satisfaction and value have recognized their dynamic nature. However, the knowledge of the short- and long-term aspects related to a single service rendered or solution provided to the customer is very scarce. Moreover, concepts helpful in understanding short- and long-term aspects of service quality are lacking. This study responds to the knowledge gap by proposing the concepts of short- and long-term quality.

Method

This article is based on a larger empirical study in the context of business-to-business professional services in which various quality-dynamics related phenomena were found and examined, one of them dealing with variation of satisfaction related to a service rendered

Figure 1.
Customer-perceived
value

$$\text{Customer-perceived value} = \frac{\text{Perceived benefits}}{\text{Perceived sacrifices}} = \frac{\text{"All what you get"}}{\text{"All what you give"}}$$

(Ojasalo, 1999, 2000). The study was based on in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis (Gummesson, 2000; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

The examined business-to-business companies are management consultancies, namely, recruitment/executive search services. This service is used in situations where a problem is solved by recruiting. The service consists of diagnosis, designing the optimal solution, executing the solution and follow-up. These main elements of the service process may overlap in terms of time during the service process and the timing may vary in different cases or they may recur. The optimal solution is not necessarily the ideal solution but rather the best compromise given practical constraints such as urgency and salary level. The examined service includes both the executive search (i.e. direct search or "head hunting") and advertised search. In executive search, the candidates are sought and contacted directly by the service provider and in advertised search this happens via newspapers or the internet. Although this study had a special focus on recruitment services, the companies examined provided several other management consulting services and had extensive experience in professional services in general. All the selected companies, except one, provided other management consulting services, such as organizational research and development, the development of the working atmosphere, career management, outplacement, psychological testing, total quality management, individual managerial development, group analysis, managing resignation situations, business partner search and management audit. This study focused only on recruitment. The clients of the examined companies were typically organizations, which need help with finding new managers, executives and experts.

Seven highly experienced senior consultants from five different companies in Finland, their professional careers varying from 6 to 18 years, were interviewed in extensive multi-hour, in-depth interviews, which were tape recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed both between each interview and after they had all been conducted. The data were analyzed in terms of systematic coding and categorization of descriptions and statements given by the interviewees and the formation of a synthesis, which grasps these empirical evidences (Wolcott, 1994; Alasuutari, 1995; Silverman, 1995; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). A theory developed in terms of qualitative/case-study methodology is never proven, it is always a hypothesis or "an integrated set of hypotheses" (Glaser, 1978, p. 134). The general pros and cons of a qualitative/case-study (Gummesson, 2000; Yin, 1994) apply to this research study.

Empirical conceptualization and findings

This section describes the empirical results of the study. It introduces the concepts of short- and long-term quality and explains situations where long-term quality is provided at the expense of short-term quality and visa versa.

Short-term quality and long-term quality

Several empirical cases were found in this study where the level of customer satisfaction altered during the service process or in the post-purchase period. In many of such cases, when the satisfaction changed from one level to another there was first a shorter period of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which after a while turned into a different or totally opposite level that lasted longer. In other words, the customer experiences first a shorter dissatisfying period, which turns into a longer satisfying period or the customer first experiences a shorter satisfying period, which turns into a longer dissatisfying period. In a certain sense, the customer changes his opinion on the service as a whole or some element of it, during or after the service delivery over time. For example, the solution received from the service first

seemed to be good but after a while turned out to be bad. Often the new opinion was long-lasting or “final” in nature. To explain such situations, two different concepts are introduced: short- and long-term quality.

Short-term quality causes a certain level of customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction immediately but this level does not hold long. Long-term quality causes customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which does not emerge immediately, but after certain time, and then holds long. The concepts of short- and long-term quality can be used with different features and quality dimensions of a service as well as at the overall quality level. They can also be used during the service delivery process, during the post-purchase period or any other relevant period. Thus, the concepts are flexible because they enable understanding and analyzing both total (overall quality) and partial satisfaction (a single quality dimension or quality item) as well as any relevant time period (e.g. during the service process, after the service process, during the problem definition phase, during the solution development phase, during the solution implementation and during follow-up).

A simple model illustrates the concepts of short- and long-term quality, which were developed on the basis of the empirical study (Figure 2).

F2

Case example: schedule of service process

The examined service is management consulting related to personnel recruitment, namely, executive and advertised search. The length of the service process is typically several months, even a year or more in rare cases. The empirical data show that the schedule and timelines of the service process are often extremely important to the customer. They are so important that if they do not hold, the customer may stop dealing with the service provider. Moreover, customers often have unrealistic expectations regarding the speed of the service. Unrealistic customer expectations are a typical reason for a situation where short-term quality is provided at the expense of long-term quality (Ojasalo, 2001). The following illustrates short- and long-term quality of service process.

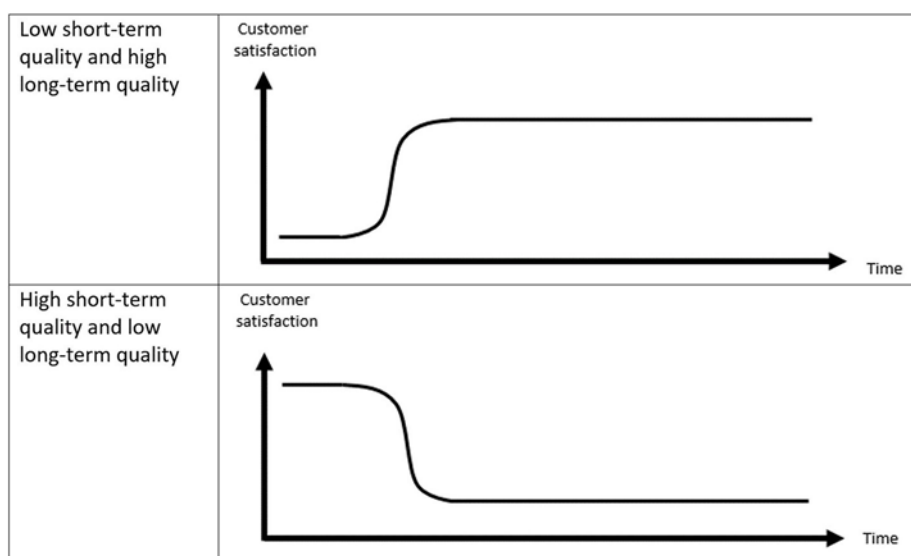


Figure 2. Short- and long-term quality: a simple model of different levels

The customer expects the service provider to find the candidates within a certain period and tells the expectation to the service provider. When the recruitment process begins, the customer is relieved and satisfied with the schedule because he expects a new, qualified person to start soon in his organization corresponding to his urgent need. At the beginning of the process the customer does not know if the service provider is too optimistic, or perhaps just ignorant of the schedule. The service provider may, unintentionally or intentionally, fall into over-promising.

The process starts with a schedule, which satisfies the customer. However, at some point it turns out that the schedule is unrealistic. It becomes obvious that it will take longer than expected to find the person to fulfill the requirements of the position. When the customer hears this from the service provider, or realizes it by herself or himself, the satisfaction towards the schedule changes significantly, from a high to a low level. Because nothing changes the fact that the schedule does not hold, the reason for the low satisfaction remains during the rest of the service process.

Thus, in this case, the customer is satisfied with the schedule at the beginning of the service process but becomes dissatisfied with the schedule after a while and remains so ever after. Correspondingly, the schedule of the service represents high short-term quality and low long-term quality (Figure 3).

Long-term quality at the expense of short-term quality

The trade-off between short-and long-term quality often occurs because treating the symptoms calls for a certain treatment and removing the more fundamental root cause, calls for another. If only the symptoms are treated, they come back after a certain period because the root cause has not disappeared. In this case, treating the symptoms stands for short-term quality and removing the root cause represents long-term quality. The trade-off between the two becomes visible and problematic if the solution to the root cause of the problem is different from the solution to the symptoms, if they are mutually exclusive or if curing the root cause problem turns out to be painful for the customer.

Customers may perceive a service provider who questions their view on how to define and solve the problem at hand as irritating. They may also perceive this as criticism even though the service provider's purpose is not to make judgments. Calling the customer's view into question and finding out the root cause of the problem may instantly decrease customer satisfaction and cause low short-term quality. The following illustrates a trade-off between short- and long-term quality in the examined service.

A key person in a customer company has not succeeded in his job. The CEO wants to replace him with someone else and approaches an executive or advertised search professional. The

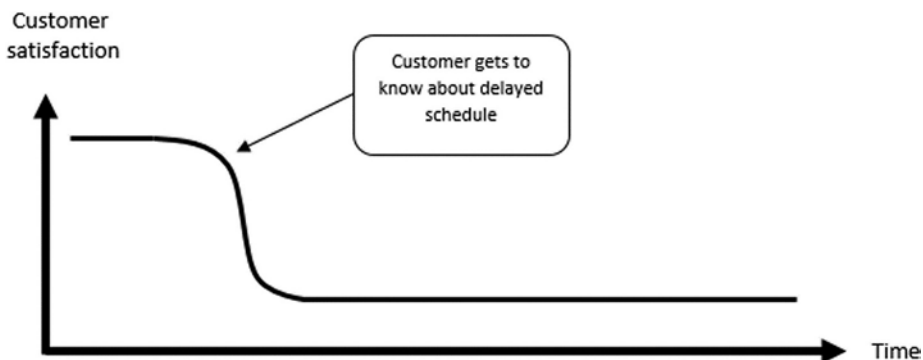


Figure 3.
High short-term
quality and low long-
term quality of
schedule of the
service process

professional finds that the fact that the current key person has not succeeded is only a symptom. In his or her diagnosis of the situation, it turns out that the reason is mostly the CEO himself. His leadership skills are low. If a new person is recruited, he or she would obviously not succeed either and quite possibly quit soon. This indicates that the root cause of the problem can be solved only by changing the CEO's way of treating subordinates in the customer company. However, doing this requires sacrificing time, effort and concentration. Facing the fact that one's own poor leadership ability is the root cause of the problem is painful in itself. This causes low satisfaction in the short term. However, if the CEO's leadership skills improve, it makes it easier for employees to achieve results. Consequently, once the root cause is removed, there is an increased likelihood of long-lasting satisfaction. Thus, high long-term quality can only be achieved at the expense of low short-term quality.

If the short-term quality of the whole service is not low enough for the customer to cease tolerating it and remain a customer, but the long-term quality is high, the overall satisfaction is often eventually higher. This may lead to more cooperation and strengthen the relationship. If a trade-off situation between short- and long-term quality cannot be avoided, providing long-term rather than short-term quality better serves building long-lasting relationships and a high-quality brand.

Service providers sometimes refuse to take on an assignment where high short-term quality will inevitably lead to low long-term quality. Refusing to accept an assignment may result in losing a customer. However, providing short-term quality at the expense of long-term quality may result in bad word-of-mouth and worsen the image and the brand of the company, consequently leading to the loss of several existing and potential customers.

Short-term quality at the expense of long-term quality

The concepts of short- and long-term quality facilitate the understanding of how service can relate to a possible underlying and more fundamental problem and its visible symptoms. It was found that short-term quality may relate to symptoms and long-term quality to the underlying problem. If the customer wants a solution, which corresponds to some visible symptoms and the service provider provides such a solution, then the customer is satisfied immediately and remains satisfied for a certain period of time. This represents high short-term quality. However, after some time, if the root cause of the problem is not solved, the symptoms emerge again and the customer's satisfaction moves down to a lower level. Because the service has already been provided and nothing can change the fact that it did not solve the root cause of the problem, obviously the change in satisfaction level is permanent. Thus, it is a question of low long-term quality. The following illustrates long-term quality at the expense of short-term quality in the examined service:

In the beginning, when the new person starts his job, the customer organization is satisfied with him. This represents high short-term quality. The customer has several expectations towards a new person, and there are several reasons for high short-term quality. As the customer expects that recruiting a new person will solve their problem, already the appearance of the new person in the organization corresponds to this expectation. Also, in the beginning, during the first 6–12 months, the customer company does not expect any significant achievements from the new person. Decreased sales, which was the symptom in the first place and the reason for using the service, is not expected to make a turn immediately. Even though the symptoms do not disappear, they are tolerated. But they are expected to disappear later. Moreover, only some quality dimensions can be evaluated at first, and some only after a longer time. The former represents high and the latter low quality. Personality is easy to evaluate in the short term, and the organization is happy with the new person's personality. However, in the long term, after a year, it turns out that he cannot increase sales and make profits. At first, it is possible to judge whether the person is starting to work on the right things but not whether he can achieve his goals. All

these reasons are behind the high short-term quality. When enough time passes, one year for example, the satisfaction level changes. The symptoms, which were possibly tolerated during the “honeymoon,” are no longer tolerated. Moreover, it is now possible to evaluate quality dimensions, which could not be evaluated at the beginning of the employment period. A person’s ability to make a profit can only be evaluated after one fiscal year. High short-term quality changes into low long-term quality.

However, there does not have to be any trade-off between short- and long-term quality. The ideal situation is naturally the one in which both are high. As suggested earlier, situations in which the root cause behind the symptoms is unknown to the customer or possibly the symptoms are unpleasant to deal with, are more likely to lead to a trade-off. However, it is sometimes possible to smooth over the symptoms and at the same time solve the underlying root cause of the problem. This represents high short-term as well as long-term quality.

Discussion and implications

Theoretical implications

Very little knowledge exists of short- and long-term aspects of quality. Similarly, very little research on the changes and evolution of customer satisfaction during the service process and the post-purchase period is available. Most studies have understood service quality and satisfaction as a static rather than dynamic phenomenon. Similarly, most measurement instruments measure satisfaction at a single point of time, which is typically the point in time immediately following the act of purchase (Churchill and Carol, 1982). However, Tse *et al.* (1990) argue that it is important to measure extended usage over time, especially for high-involvement, durable products and many services.

The research of consumer’s post-purchase evaluation first realized the process nature and time aspect of consumer satisfaction. Nicosia (1966), Howard and Sheth (1969) and Hansen (1972) first saw that the life of a consumer does not end with the act of purchase, instead life continues as the consumer experiences the purchased good over time (Nicosia, 1966). According to Tse *et al.* (1990), “consumer satisfaction should be conceptualized as a dynamic, multidimensional, subjective process following the act of purchase” (p. 178). When satisfaction is conceptualized as a process, time becomes an independent variable, both by itself and through its interaction with other dimensions. Day (1977) proposed that satisfaction is a post-purchase process rather than a mental state. This may be because of the dynamics of customer expectations (Nguyen, 2016; Cadotte *et al.*, 1987; Westbrook and Reilly, 1983). Still, conceptualizations of short- and long-term considerations of satisfaction are lacking.

The recent studies of service design have paid attention to evolving customer experience throughout a service process and introduced various design-thinking based methods for analyzing and improving experience (Erlhoff *et al.*, 1997; Han, 2010; Wetter-Edman, 2011, 2014; Gloppen, 2012; Clatworthy, 2013; Segelström, 2013; Blomkvist, 2014; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2015). The most popular service-design method for this purpose is called “customer journey” (Rawson *et al.*, 2013; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010, 2011; Følstad and Kvale, 2018). However, these studies have not attempted to conceptualize or develop any theories based on short- and long-term variation of satisfaction.

The main contribution of this study is that it offers general concepts for analyzing and managing short- and long-term effects of service quality. The earlier studies dealing with short- and long-term effects of service quality have not attempted to offer any general concepts for understanding this phenomenon. The concepts of short- and long-term quality can be used to explore and understand potential short- and long-term dynamics of quality and its particular nature in any research and managerial context. The scope and application

of these concepts is flexible and adaptable to the context. Context dependency and adaptability, in general, is paramount in both research and management of service. Several service researchers support this. [Ravald and Grönroos \(1996, p. 22\)](#) argue that perceived value of service is “highly situation specific.” According to service-dominant logic ([Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2016](#)), value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary (i.e. the customer or user). In other words, value is idiosyncratic, experimental, contextual and laden with meaning. Similarly, [Edvardsson and Tronvoll \(2013\)](#) point out the importance of understanding and adapting to the particular social context where service innovation takes place. The general nature and flexible context specific application of the concepts is represented as follows:

- Overall/partial satisfaction. The concepts of short- and long-term quality allow free choice as to whether the development of satisfaction is analyzed or managed at the total or partial satisfaction level. Overall satisfaction refers to satisfaction resulting from the service as a whole. Partial satisfaction refers to certain components of that satisfaction. Thus, it is possible to analyze the development of satisfaction related to a single quality dimension or item of the service. This allows different kinds of measures to be addressed to the right “targets” in the service management.
- Temporal flexibility. The above concepts allow free and context specific choice of any relevant time period over which the development of satisfaction is analyzed or managed. For example, the service organization may want to know why customers who seem satisfied at the beginning of the service process are often less satisfied or downright dissatisfied at the end of the process. Alternatively, the customers may wish to know why the solution, which first did not seem to correspond to their ideal expectations eventually, in the long-term, turned out to be excellent. Potential short- and long-term quality (overall or partial) can be considered, for example, during a single face-to-face service encounter (e.g. check-in to flight) or during certain logical entities of the service process (e.g. navigation from one airplane to another at the airport as a transit passenger) or the whole services process (e.g. from entering an airport terminal at the point of departure to leaving the terminal at the final point of arrival). It can also be applied to the period after the process is over (e.g. the point at which the solution of a medical operation is supposed to fulfill its expectations).

Despite the fact that research has long acknowledged the dynamic nature of both service quality ([Ojasalo, 1999](#)) and consumer satisfaction ([Tse et al., 1990](#)), very little knowledge exists in this area in general, particularly concerning short- and long-term aspects of service quality. This study contributes to the literature by introducing conceptual tools and extending understanding in short- and long-term dynamics of quality related to a service rendered:

- Although there is a large amount of literature concerning the quality of a service, short-term and long-term effects of service have received little attention. The concepts of short- and long-term quality highlight the importance of considering quality dynamics related to a service rendered.
- Both the duration of the service process and the period during, which the service outcome “exists” or has an impact on the customer are relatively long in many services. This represents potential ground for the occurrence of many kinds of quality dynamics. The concepts of short- and long-term quality provide simple and effective conceptual tools for detecting, analyzing and understanding potential

short- and long-term differences of customer satisfaction as well as the reasons for it.

- Sometimes it is simply impossible to provide a service, which generates only high satisfaction over time. Periods of lower satisfaction or even dissatisfaction may be inevitable. To identify, minimize and remove them, it is particularly valuable to understand the logic of short- and long-term quality. The concepts of short- and long-term quality help in designing a service that gives optimal satisfaction to a customer over time in an unavoidable “no pain, no gain” setting.
- Traditionally service quality research has pointed out the importance of customer interaction for achieving high-perceived quality. Vast amount of research studies exist on moments of truth, service encounters and touch points, which may be face-to-face, voice-to-voice, technology based or high touch or high tech. The present study highlights the importance of considering customer satisfaction outside customer interaction during the service process and in the post-purchase evaluation period.

Service research has hardly paid any attention to situations where there is a trade-off between short- and long-term satisfaction. Management consulting the literature, however, refers to this phenomenon. The International Labour Office publication (Kubr, 1996) supports the identification and relevance of understanding the trade-off situations between short- and long-term quality by noting that there is often conflict between customers' short-term and long-term interests in management consulting.

Managerial implications

Deming (1986, p. 97) identified seven “deadly diseases” that companies suffer from in the Western world and one of these is the emphasis on short-term thinking and short-term performance as opposed to constancy of purpose to stay in business. The concepts of short- and long-term quality are useful as they are easy to understand and applicable across industries. They are particularly useful when the “evaluative process over time” (Patterson *et al.*, 1998, p. 152) is long either during or/and after the service process. This is the case in many professional, business-to-business services, medical services and public services.

The following managerial implication and recommendations are given based on the present study:

- Customer perceived quality, value and satisfaction are not static; they change. They may change rapidly or slowly, during and after the service process. When the service providers are alert to it, they can develop preventive approaches for avoiding potential pitfalls. Similarly, they can proactively develop effective service recovery strategies to ensure high-quality service.
- Both the short- and long-term effects of a service and its various key elements should be considered. This becomes particularly important with services that have a long service process and have a long-lasting impact on the customer during the post-purchase period.
- Customer satisfaction should also be considered outside customer interaction moments, i.e. outside of “moments of truth” or “service encounters.” This is important during the service process if it consists of interactive and non-interactive times. Moreover, the development of customer satisfaction in the post-purchase evaluation period is very important as well. It greatly affects customer loyalty and word-of-mouth.

Measuring customer satisfaction at the single point of time may not provide a holistic picture of the service quality. Extending points of measurement may help to achieve long-lasting relationships. Moreover, in addition to visible measurement operations, “light-version” methods could be developed for front-line service employees to receive instant information on the level of customer satisfaction. This might include simply “sounding” the feelings and perceptions of a customer during the service process. Moreover, methods for follow-up measurement of customer satisfaction during the post-purchase evaluation are needed. Technology and automation make this easier. Also, in some services contacting customers personally, for example, after one year, can be very useful. On one hand, it gives information of the customer satisfaction; on the other hand, it is an opportunity for selling the service.

- The concepts of short- and long-term quality help in communication and expectations management with customers. In many cases, the service inevitably includes less satisfactory moments or periods. When customers are informed about them and when they know that they are necessary to achieve long-lasting satisfaction, they are more willing to accept them.
- Management of long-term quality is particularly important to increase customer loyalty, favorable word-of-mouth, possibility to use service guarantees and build strong brands in the marketplace.
- Management of short-term quality is important for winning new customers, in selling customers with low expertise as a buyer and in cases where customers willingly and consciously prefer short-term satisfaction to long-term satisfaction.
- If short- and long-term quality is in a trade-off position, from a customer relationship and brand-building point of view, it is a better alternative to provide long-term quality at the expense of short-term quality than vice versa. As [Gummesson \(1978, p. 4\)](#) points out, “There is no sense in solving the wrong problem in an excellent way.”

The managerial challenge is to persuade the customer first to accept low short-term quality to achieve high long-term quality. In the classic article on professional services marketing, [Wittreich \(1966\)](#) mentions three methods of persuasion: persuasion by method, persuasion by personnel and persuasion by success story. This study suggests that instead of expressing direct advice to the customer on what to do, it is often more reasonable to ask the right questions to the customer to make him realize the root cause behind the symptoms and thus provide a solution with long-term quality. This is supported by [Strudy \(1997\)](#), who claims that the “listening” includes and is followed by more direction or guiding to bring the client to an appropriate choice or course of action as if it was their own idea. Similarly, [Alvesson \(2001\)](#) explains the nature and operation of knowledge-intensive companies and refers to “persuasive talk” (p. 883) and “persuasion in marketing and interactions with customers” (p. 882). Co-creation with different internal stakeholders within the client company is an effective way in persuasion in knowledge-intensive services. As noted by [Bettencourt et al. \(2002, pp. 110-111\)](#), “shared problem solving is critical because the complex and customized nature of many knowledge-based projects means that problems and adjustments are unavoidable”.

Limitations and transferability

The concepts of short- and long-term quality deserve the following criticism and notes. Naturally, not every service rendered includes short- and long-term variations in customer

satisfaction. Once it does, the pattern of development does not have to follow a clear short- and long-term distinction. The development of satisfaction level may be more complex, thus forcing the thinking in short- and long-term dualism may oversimplify the reality. Alternatively, the satisfaction may remain at a constant level. Thus, sometimes the concepts of short- and long-term quality may help in understanding the over-time development of satisfaction related to a service, sometimes not. When it does, there is clearly the potential to obtain rich information not only about the dynamic development of satisfaction in a certain period but also about the reasons behind it. Service design in any industry can benefit from these concepts, in particular. The overall limitation of these quality concepts is that they cannot capture the quality dynamics if the satisfaction simply does not include a consistent short-term or long-term satisfaction entity. However, the concepts are not proposed as a general rule but rather offered on the basis of the empirical material, to facilitate a meaningful understanding and management of certain situations. Such situations may be crucial to both customers and service providers.

Another limitation is the distinction between short- and long-term quality. There is not necessarily a sharp time point after which the short-term quality period is over and the long-term quality period starts. Still, such inaccuracy is typical in service research as noted by [Gummesson \(1993, p. 223\)](#):

One way of defining phenomena in society is to accept that they have vague and formless contours [...]. Apart from services, companies, markets, customers, and competitors are all very distinct concepts. Nevertheless, they have a core of something essential, which experience and intuition enable us to perceive.

The generalizability and transferability of the results of this study refer to the generality of situations where the concepts of short- and long-term quality help in identifying, understanding and managing service. As noted earlier, generalizations cannot be made based on a qualitative study ([Gummesson, 2000](#); [Yin, 1994](#)). However, it is likely that the results of this study can be relevant and applicable in the following research and management contexts:

- Services where the service process is long, includes several phases or is complex.
- Services where the impact of the service outcome is long lasting or significant.
- Services aiming at solving consumers' and organizations' problems where the connections between visible symptoms and the root cause are complex.
- Services where knowledge asymmetry exists between a service provider and customer, such as services, which cover professional services, medical and health care services, management consulting and industrial services.
- Services for solving wicked problems. Such problems are complex societal problems ([Churchman, 1967](#); [Rittel and Webber, 1973](#)) such as global climate change ([Levin et al., 2012](#)) and services attempting to solve or alleviate them always require short- and long-term considerations of both the process and outcome of the service.
- Services where simple concepts are required to communicate a complex problem situation and the nature of the solution to customers and own employees. The reality may not always be as simple as the concepts of short- and long-term quality may suggest, however, they enable communicating the "big picture" of the problem effectively. This may lead to a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the problem and consequently to better scientific theories or managerial approaches. Both in theory development and pragmatic management, the ability to make constant "zoom-in-zoom-out" movement between the fragmented details and the big

picture and eventually to come from complexity to simplicity is often most valuable. According to [Gummesson \(2017, p. 16\)](#), “When complexity is better understood, boil it down to actionable simplicity in the form of mid-range theory.”

- Everyday quick and “simple” consumer services, which have a significant impact or side effect on the customer through frequent use. Consumers may prefer using organic food restaurants to avoid potential negative long-term effects to their health caused by synthetic accessory substances.
- Consumer services that have long-term impact beyond the customer himself. If the consumption of the service causes long-term harm to the environment, society, people in other countries or future generations, this may cause feelings of guilt and dissatisfaction in the long-term.
- Tangible goods, which are long lasting or have a long-lasting impact on the user or customer. Indeed, service-dominant logic ([Vargo and Lusch, 2004](#)) considers tangible goods as carriers of service.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to introduce concepts for understanding and managing short- and long-term development of customer satisfaction related to service quality. It responded to an evident knowledge gap related to the quality dynamics of service. The article was based on an empirical qualitative research in professional business-to-business services. As a result, it developed and proposed the concepts of short- and long-term quality.

Quality dynamics and satisfaction dynamics have long been mostly an unexplored research field with potential for both scientific and managerial impact. The following opportunities for further research emerge from the present study. First, the present study is based on qualitative research. It would be interesting for further research to conduct a quantitative study to draw conclusions on generalizability with statistical reliability. Second, the service-dominant logic paradigm ([Vargo and Lusch, 2016](#)) could benefit from examining the dynamic aspects of quality, satisfaction and value of service. Since customer value is one of the most important research areas of service-dominant logic, it could benefit from lending the ideas of short- and long-term quality to the exploration of the dynamics of customer value. Third, the service design literature has recognized the dynamics and management of customer satisfaction throughout the service process, i.e. customer journey. The post-purchase period deserves similar attention. Fourth, service design research could examine short- and long-term quality in the context of lean service innovation and business model development ([Ojasalo and Ojasalo, 2018a, 2018b](#)). Fifth, customer expertise may affect the understanding of the optimum balance between short- and long-term quality. Customer expertise and over-time development of customer satisfaction needs more research.

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Further reading

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