The Influence of Service Culture on Customer Service Quality: Local vs. Foreign Service Firms in Emerging Markets

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Abstract

Antecedents of service quality continue to attract significant interests from both academics and practitioners. However, the role of one of such antecedents, service culture, has received limited attention in the services marketing literature, especially in the context of emerging markets. Our research, based on relevant theoretical foundations and previous empirical inquiries, seeks to explain and propose a conceptual framework of the influence of service culture on customer service quality via the mediation of employee attitudes. It also conceptualises the role of potential moderators such as cultural differences, personal relationships towards service employee attitudes and customer service quality. The paper concludes with anticipated contributions and future research directions.

Key words: service culture, service quality, service providers, emerging markets

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Introduction

The service industries make significant contributions to economic and social development worldwide (Daniel and Harrington, 2007). Most advanced economies are dominated by services, which account for more than 70 per cent of their gross domestic product (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010). Emerging markets have also accomplished significant growth in the service sector. For instance, approximately 40% of the GDP in Vietnam was attributed to service industries in 2008 and 2009 (Vietnamese General Statistics Office, 2010).

Service organisations worldwide are also shifting their focus to service quality as a priority in the current competitive environment (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996). High service quality allows service providers to differentiate themselves from their competitors and thus gain sustainable competitive advantages in the global market place (Gounaris, Stathakopoulos and Athanassopoulos, 2003). As such, service scholars have investigated various antecedents of customer perceived service quality, such as human resource practices (Irfan, Mohsin and Yousaf, 2009; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Tzafrir and Gur, 2007; Yoo and Park, 2007), employee attributes (e.g. employee job satisfaction, loyalty) (Yee, Yeung and Cheng, 2008, 2009), service climate (Gracia, Cifre and Grau, 2010; Hui *et al.*, 2007; Little and Dean, 2006; Schneider, Salvaggio and Subirats, 2002; Schneider, White and Paul, 1998), organisational culture types (Trivellas and Dargenidou, 2009), managerial attitudes and service encounter stress (Dean and Rainnie, 2009), and market orientation (Gounaris*, et al.*, 2003). However, there is some confusion in the literature on the definition of one of such antecedents, service culture, and the extent to which it is related to service quality, especially in the context of emerging markets.

Indeed, emerging markets offer a fertile ground to conceptualise and develop new construct and framework for marketing theorists (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006). As several emerging markets are being transformed from state ownership and management to more market-driven, more and more service companies from advanced economies relocate their operations to emerging markets to take advantage of their endowments, local lower labour costs and expand markets for their services (Lenartowicz and Johnson, 2007). Nevertheless, little is known about how foreign service providers transfer service culture from their headquarters in their home country to differentiate their service culture and service quality from that of their local counterparts and how they adapt such service culture to local emerging market conditions. More specifically, service scholars have not investigated the issues associated with how service culture and customer perceived service quality differ in local and foreign service providers in emerging markets. The primary objective of this paper, therefore, is to explore the role of service culture in both local and foreign owned service firms, particularly its linkage with customer's perceived service quality.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. First, it will provide a brief literature review on service culture with emphasis on how it differ from some of the related constructs such as service climate and service orientation. A theoretical framework is then proposed and anticipated contributions are discussed before implications for future research are drawn.

Service Culture Defined

The concept of service culture first appeared in Grönroos' (1990) work 20 years ago. As a specialized culture within the broader concept of organisational culture, service culture is defined as "a culture where an appreciation for good service exists, and where giving good service to internal as well as ultimate, external customers is considered by everyone a natural way of life and one of the most important values" (Grönroos, 2007, p.418). Based on this definition, service culture not only refers to organisational practices but also relates to manner, values, and behaviour of both the organisation and its employees. If an organisation has a strong service culture, it will develop employees' positive attitudes toward giving service to their customers (Grönroos, 2007). Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009) further point out that this very rich definition has three main implications for employee service providers. First, service culture exists when there is an appreciation for good service. Second, good service is given to both internal and external customers. Indeed, not only do organisations need to care for their external customers but they are also required to pay more attention to their service employees (internal customers) who play a crucial role in service delivery. Finally, within service culture, good service is a way of life and provided naturally as it is a crucial norm of the organisation. It is like a glue to tick to employees' attitudes, behaviour and commitment toward giving good services to their customers (Zeithaml, *et al.*, 2009). However, there is some confusion in the literature between service culture, service climate and service orientation.

Service Climate, Service Orientation and Service Culture

Service climate refers to "employee perceptions of the practices, procedures, and behaviours that get rewarded, supported, and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality" (Schneider *et al.*, 1998, p.151). Compared to service culture, service climate is more tangible and directly related to managerial observable policies, procedures and human resource practices. Service climate is also considered as a tangible surface layer of service culture (Bowen, cf. Ostrom *et al.*, 2010, p.12-13). When these tangibles of service climate evolve over time, a sharing of basic values, beliefs and assumptions of service culture will be reinforced (Bowen, Schneider and Kim, 2000; Schneider, cf. Ostrom, *et al.*, 2010, p.14). In other words, although both service culture and service climate focus on the social-psychological context, the basic distinction between service culture and service climate lies in the layer or level of analysis. While service culture is found in the deep layer of organisations in giving customer service in the forms of beliefs, values and assumptions, service climate is referred to perceptions of service environment, considered as relatively temporary and subject to direct control (Denison, 1996).

The existing literature considers service orientation as a part of organisational climate (Urban, 2009). Some researchers have even used the dimensions of service orientation to measure service climate (Solnet and Paulsen, 2006). Service orientation has been studied both at individual and organisational levels. The former illustrates how service providers and customers respond to the service process (Frei and McDaniel, 1998). At this level, service orientation is seen as personal characteristics, traits, and behaviour determinants of employee service providers needed to deliver services (Chait, Carraher and Buckley, 2000; Vella, Gountas and Walker, 2009). The latter, organisational level describes "the set of organizational activities designed to create and deliver an excellent service" (Gonzalez and Garazo, 2006, p.27).

At the organisational level, Homburg, Hoyer and Fassnacht (2002) offers two perspectives on service orientation, namely organisational elements or parameters (i.e. organisational structure, climate) and business strategy. Since Homburg *et al.*'s (2002) work, some authors have measured constructs of service orientation of business strategy and service orientation of organisational structure (Gebauer *et al.*, 2009). For instance, Lytle, Hom and Mokwa (1998) focused on organisational practices and policies regarding giving good service to customers. In their study, four dimensions of service orientation include service leadership practices, human resource management practices, service encounter practices and service systems practices. However, none of them reflect organisational norms, beliefs and values that are crucial part of culture.

Linking Service Culture to Service Quality

Services marketing theorists have proposed that service culture functions as an organisational resource that is difficult to imitate (Homburg, Fassnacht and Guenther, 2003). Ooncharoen and Ussahawanitchakit (2008) and Gebauer, Edvardsson and Bjurko (2010) argue that service culture is a prerequisite for organizational excellence and business performance. To date, research on service culture has mainly sought to conceptualise the relationships between service culture and business performance, the linkage between service culture and customer outcomes such as customer perceived service quality has not been fully explored and empirically tested.

In the last two decades, service quality has attracted significant attention from researchers, practitioners due to its close relationship with customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, positive word of mouth and business performance (Gonzalez, Comesana and Brea, 2007; Hallowell, 1996; Ladhari, 2009; Lassar, Manolis and Winsor, 2000; Yee, *et al.*, 2009). As services are intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable and perishable, the measurement of service quality is more difficult and different compared to that of to product quality (Sureshchandar, Rajendran and Kamalanabhan, 2001). The conceptualization, measurement and modelling of service quality, therefore have received considerable attention in the services marketing literature.

Several perspectives can be used to explain why service culture may lead to better service quality and how differences of service culture between local and foreign service firms in emerging markets. First, based on the resource-based view theory of the firm (Barney, 2001; Barney, Wright and Ketchen, 2001; Yang, 2008), service culture is regarded as a crucial firm resource that is valuable and inimitable by competitors, thus is likely to lead to positive outcomes. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1968; Sierra and McQuitty, 2005) provides further insights into how service culture may influence customer based service quality evaluation. A supportive service culture encourages service employees to go extra mile to serve the customers' needs which in turn affect customers' perception of service quality (Sierra and McQuitty, 2005). Further, service-profit chain theory (Heskett and Schlesinger, 1994; Homburg, Wieseke and Hoyer, 2009) suggests that organisational performance is derived from customer satisfaction and loyalty created by employee performance of service delivery, which in turn is influenced by employee satisfaction and commitment (Heskett and Schlesinger, 1994). Employee job satisfaction and commitment result primarily from high-quality supports and practices from organisations.

Some empirical studies have indicated that employee service attitudes are consequences of service culture (Nelson, 2007; Zerbe, Dobni and Harel, 1998). Indeed, as important interfaces

between the organisations with their customers (Beatson, Lings and Gudergan, 2008), employees' attitudes such as job satisfaction and commitment are crucial for providing good services (Payne and Webber, 2006). Employee job satisfaction is defined as employee's pleasurable emotional response toward their organisation and their employment (Yee, *et al.*, 2009). Affective commitment is referred to employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organisation (Meyer *et al.*, 2002).

In addition, the literature has asserted that employee attitudes significantly affect customer perceptions of service quality (Snipes *et al.*, 2005; Yee, *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Yoon, Beatty and Suh, 2001). Therefore, we argue that employee attitudes such as employee job satisfaction and affective commitment mediate the relationship between service culture and customer perceived service quality (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
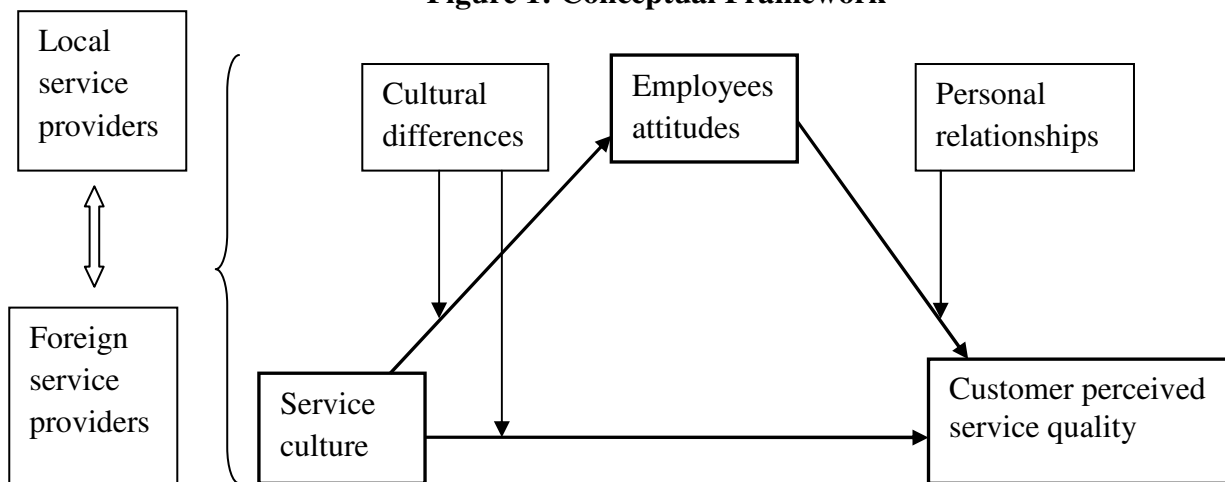
The eclectic paradigm (Dunning, 1988, 1989, 2001) explains that foreign firms possess three specific advantages, namely ownership-specific advantages, location-specific advantages and internalisation advantages. Ownership-specific advantages consist of knowledge, capability, managerial skills, relationships, processes and physical assets that are specific to the firm. Location-specific advantages relate to comparative advantages that are available in individual foreign countries. Meanwhile, internalisation advantages are those that the enterprise derives from internalizing its value chain. Although this theory is often used to explain the internationalisation of services in literature, the perspectives of ownership and internalisation advantages can enhance to explain how foreign service providers use these specific advantages and transfer the practices of creating service culture from their parent firm's home country to differentiate their service culture to local service providers and hence may gain higher perceived service quality in emerging markets. For instance, Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) argued that the parent firm's values and practices are transmitted to the overseas subsidiaries, especially through expatriates who act as carriers of its culture. Firms with a larger proportion of expatriates are likely to adapt the organisational practices from home office to their foreign ones.

In addition to the relationships outlined above, cultural differences may in fact moderate the impact of service culture on employee attitude and customer perceived service quality. The similarity of parent and affiliate practices will be reduced if there is higher cultural distance between home and host countries (Gamble, 2003). As foreign service firms "export" the practices of creating service culture from their home country, their values and beliefs may not fit with those of local service employees and local customers. For instance, Fu and Liu (2005)

found that cultural differences can significantly affect the transfer of corporate culture and service culture across national borders. Firms with certain cultural values are able to adapt their service culture to certain local people in some countries (Ngo *et al.*, 1998). For instance, when Disney opened Disneyland in Europe, the highly structured and customer-oriented approach of the company did not fit with local French employees and waiting in long lines are seen as uncomfortable to European customers (Milbank, 1994). Cultural differences, therefore, may affect the role of service culture in determining both employee attitudes and customer perceptions of service quality.

Further, personal relationships between service employees and customers may impact employee service attitudes influences on customer perceived service quality, especially in emerging markets (Gounaris*, et al.*, 2003). This is because personal relationships between employees and customer could enhance authentic understanding and avoid uncooperative behaviour between the two parties (Bitner, Booms and Mohr, 1994; Price, Arnould and Tierney, 1995). The relationship between employee attitudes and customer perceived service quality, therefore, will be stronger under condition of higher level of personal relationships (Figure 1).

Contributions and Future Research

Our research attempts to make some contributions to the theoretical development of the service marketing literature. It expands the current understanding of service culture in a cross-national context. As several authors have noted that the practices of a firm are influenced by "culture free" factors (i.e. firm size, firm experience/age) and "culture bound" factors (i.e. national culture and institutions) (Easterby-Smith, Malina and Yuan, 1995), the comparison of local and foreign service providers in emerging markets will enhance knowledge of how culture free and culture bound can impact service culture in cross-national contexts. This is particularly important when several emerging markets have liberalised and opened for foreign direct investment in various service areas (Budhwar and Khatri, 2001) and foreign direct investment has played a crucial role in promoting economic development in many emerging markets (Lawler *et al.*, 1995). Yet, prior cross-national studies of service culture have not been conducted, which our study has identified as a gap both empirically and theoretically. Another contribution of this paper is the development of a conceptual framework on the relationship between service culture and perceived service quality in the context of local versus foreign service providers in emerging markets. Future research can use this proposed framework for empirically testing in various service settings. The conceptual model could also include other variables such as employee wellbeing and other customer outcomes. It should also be tested across different service industries/service types via a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. As the dimensions of service culture have not been well defined and constructed in the literature, the qualitative methods should be used first to build and test the reliability of the dimensions. It should be followed by quantitative methods to test the resulting conceptual framework.

The comparisons of service culture and perceived service quality of local and foreign service providers in emerging markets will provide managers of service firms with a better understanding of how service culture and service quality are perceived by their employees and customers. In addition, the framework of relationships between service culture and perceived service quality will help service managers to see which dimensions of service culture have more impacts on various dimensions of service quality, thus offers insights into dimensions of service culture they should focus on and improve. This is important not only to

service companies operating in emerging markets but also to international companies that want to invest in emerging markets.

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