
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Rui Sousa holds a PhD in Operations Management from the London Business School and is currently Associate Professor at the Catholic University of Portugal at Porto. His research has won several awards and has been published in leading journals, such as the *Journal of Operations Management*, *Production and Operations Management*, *Journal of Service Research* and the *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*. He serves on several editorial review boards and teaches on the EDEN Doctoral Seminar on Research Methodology in Operations Management, organised by EIASM. His present research and consulting interests include multi-channel service operations, quality management and manufacturing strategy.

1 Introduction

I am very pleased to present this Special Issue on *Quality in Multi-Channel Services Employing Virtual Channels*. In recent years, we have witnessed a strong growth of services provided through multiple channels. This growth is closely linked to the proliferation of *virtual* channels of service delivery, i.e., means of communication using advanced telecommunications, information, and multimedia technologies through which a service is delivered to (or reaches) the customer. These channels include the Internet, phone, ATMs, hotel checkouts, interactive TV, mobile devices, etc., and in many of today's services, they typically coexist with physical channels (e.g., physical facilities). For example, the overall service provided by many banks today includes several service components offered through virtual channels (e.g., the web, phone and mobile phones), in parallel with or as an alternative to physical facilities. The trend for multi-channel environments is expected to strengthen further as internet use continues to grow and new technologies make available an increasing number of virtual channels of service delivery.

This environment creates new challenges for providing high quality service, at several levels. As an example, service providers need an increased understanding of the quality issues associated with the service components which are delivered through each of the emerging virtual channels. In fact, many of the emergent virtual channels of service delivery, and the internet in particular, eliminate human intervention and provide a large number of capabilities to deliver experience, such as visual aesthetic aspects, interactive features, video, chat, etc. These attributes demand a conceptualisation of service quality departing from existing frameworks. As another example, service providers also need an

increased understanding of the issues that arise in integrating the several service components and channels with the ultimate objective of providing customers with a seamless overall service experience.

The purpose of this special issue is to advance research on service quality in multi-channel services employing virtual channels. It comprises three very diverse research papers which address some important aspects of quality in these settings.

In the first paper, Souki and Filho look at an important type of multi-channel service, namely, mobile phone service provision. This service combines a virtual channel of service provision (telecommunications media) with traditional channels, such as physical retail shops. Specifically, this paper examines what constitutes service quality in this setting and the extent to which the relationships between perceived service quality, satisfaction and loyalty – which are widely accepted in traditional services – translate to such setting. Interestingly, the study finds that the dimensions that customers associate with the quality of these services include both virtual (e.g., quality of telephone connections) and physical (e.g., quality of shops) aspects. This provides empirical support for the notion that service quality is a more complex construct in multi-channel services when compared to traditional services and that service providers need to manage quality aspects across multiple channels of service delivery. The study also finds, albeit in an exploratory fashion, that, as in traditional services, service quality appears to impact satisfaction and customer loyalty in mobile phone service provision.

In the second paper, Malarranha, Leal and Pereira illustrate the application of quality methodologies – originally developed for the design of traditional services – to the development of a website for an online travel agency service. Hence, this study examines design quality issues associated with the virtual channel (website) of what is inherently a multi-channel service (a website complemented with the actual physical experience of the travel product). Applying Kano analysis, Quality Function Deployment and other tools, the study builds a House of Quality for a new travel agency website. This house is particularly interesting in that it provides an illustration of the different customer requirements and associated technical design characteristics that arise in designing online services. The study concludes that, although the application of QFD is particularly challenging in online services, it is nevertheless a powerful methodology for the design of these services.

In the final paper, Chevrin and Rouillard examine the mediation between interactive e-services and the channels used during interactions between users and the service provider organisation. Specifically, they examine issues related to the Quality of Service, from an Information Systems perspective. A key concept that is proposed in the paper is that the quality of service is not simply a network/infrastructure quality issue. In fact, in multi-channel services the same service (e.g., information) can be provided across heterogeneous networks and devices (e.g., telephone, a mobile device, a computer, etc.). Therefore, there should be interdependence between the management of the e-service and the channels of service delivery in order to provide relevant solutions to the user according to different contexts, tasks, user profiles, network traffic, etc. For example, the temporal composition (i.e., orchestration) of the service or the type of format used when presenting data to the user would need to vary according to the context of the interaction, in particular, the type of channel being used. The authors present a solution (called Ubi-Learn) that they have built aimed at managing the mediation between interactive e-services and channels. Again, this illustrates, now from an Information Systems

perspective, the added complexity of multi-channel service systems and some of the challenges that arise in providing high quality service in such settings.

Collectively, the three papers provide an important illustration of the diversity of issues that need to be addressed in managing multi-channel services and their interdisciplinary nature, ranging from Marketing (Souki and Filho), core Quality Management (Malarranha, Leal and Pereira) and Information Systems (Chevrin and Rouillard). They highlight some of the challenges that arise in providing high quality service in these settings and show how much more needs to be known in this area.

I believe that this special issue adds to our still limited knowledge about quality in multi-channel services. As we go forward, new research is needed to understand important issues and fill gaps in the literature. This special issue will hopefully spawn further studies in this area.

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Finally, I would like to congratulate the authors of the manuscripts, which have been accepted for publication in this issue, for their patience and cooperation.