Searching for a consensus on the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction: an exploratory cross-national study

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Abstract

This study employs a cross-cultural perspective to explore the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction in the development of service customers’ behavioral intentions. Specifically, due in large part to the differing theories offered in the literature as to the relationship between service quality and satisfaction and their effects on behavioral intentions, we examine the extent to which the causal order of service quality and satisfaction is robust across national borders. The overriding objective is to determine whether the effects of service quality and satisfaction on such behavioral outcomes as repurchase intentions, loyalty, and word of mouth are context-specific or uniform across varying service environments. Competing theories are tested and the results indicate that the effect of service quality on behavioral intentions is mediated by a consumer’s level of satisfaction and that this relationship is consistent across cultures. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

As both foreign and domestic economies continue to evolve, the significance of service industries to economic well-being increases in turn. Strong evidence supporting this industrial transition can be witnessed in the US, where more than two-thirds of its Gross National Product and four-fifths of its jobs now stem from service industries (Shugan, 1994; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1996). As a result, never before has firm performance been tied so closely to our understanding of the strategies necessary to create favorable customer service perceptions. Service managers who are well versed in the intricacies of how customers develop service perceptions can therefore derive a clear advantage from this knowledge. Consistent with this direction, notable scholarly effort has been devoted to improve our practical understanding of such important services constructs as service quality and satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson et al., 1994; Taylor and Baker, 1994). Indeed, researchers have given considerable time and effort in modeling service quality and satisfaction and also in investigating the interrelationships which ultimately end in some form of purchase behavior (i.e. loyalty, word of mouth, behavioral intentions).

One such relationship that has attracted considerable attention in the literature concerns the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction. However, despite these endeavors, there remains some ambiguity as to whether a consumer’s service quality evaluation directly influences their behavioral intentions or whether satisfaction is appropriately modeled as the direct antecedent. More specifically, while a consensus of empirical results identifies satisfaction as the superordinate construct (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Anderson et al., 1994), a recent view suggests that the relationship is situation-specific and therefore depends on the context of the service encounter (Dabholkar, 1995). Under this scenario, the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction would vary depending on such factors as the nature of the service experience and the consumers’ rational predispositions. This contingency approach might explain the conflicting reports in the literature relative to the ordering of these constructs.
The resolution of this relationship has particular managerial relevance in that it offers insights into the cognitive and emotional processes which ultimately lead to purchase behavior. That is, while both constructs are global service evaluations, there are apparent distinctions in their cognitive and affective attributes (Oliver, 1997). Service quality is primarily a cognitively oriented construct where three (Rust and Oliver, 1994) or more (Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988) factors are evaluated resulting in an overall service quality perception. Conversely, the satisfaction construct is primarily an affective reaction to a service encounter (cf. Oliver, 1997). A more clearly defined view of the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction will not only allow managers to prioritize these variables as decision-making objectives but also to better understand the strategic ramifications of affect vs. cognition in the development of consumer behavioral intentions.

1.1. International significance

In addition to exploring the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction in a sample of US consumers, a further consideration of the current study is an investigation of the extent to which the empirical results found in the US are robust and generalizable across cultural boundaries. A cross-cultural analysis of this relationship appears particularly intriguing in view of the recent theory (e.g. Dabholkar, 1995) suggesting that the intrinsic characteristics of a population determine the nature of the service quality—satisfaction link. Specifically, Dabholkar (1995) predicts that the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction is largely dependent on the cognitive vs. affective predisposition of the service customer. For those consumers characterized as cognitively oriented, the service quality evaluation is said to precede the satisfaction judgment (see Fig. 1a). Alternatively, more emotional consumers are expected to experience satisfaction with the service provider, which then leads to an evaluation of service quality (Dabholkar, 1995; see Fig. 1b). In the current study, a direct comparison is conducted of two structural models, which differ only in the causal order specified for service quality and satisfaction.

The two models are tested on service customers in the US and Ecuador who, according to Trompenaars (1994), are on the polar extremes of cognition (US) and emotion (Ecuador). Service industries dominate the economic growth in the US and are becoming increasingly important in Latin American countries where trade agreements such as MERCOSUR and NAFTA have advanced economies. Evidence of this trend is apparent in the willingness of large, multinational service corporations such as McDonald’s to commit 1 billion dollars to the region (Casper, 1998). The progression to service-producing industries is particularly apparent in Ecuador where the service sector dominates the economy. Such an emphasis on services is considered atypical for developing countries (Hanratty, 1991).

The overall objective of this study is to test the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in order to determine whether service quality should universally be considered an antecedent of satisfaction or whether the causal order is context-specific. The results will not only improve our understanding of the interrela-

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2 It should be noted that the study was conducted in Ecuador—a nation with its own economic, cultural, and marketing patterns, which may not accurately represent all Latin American nations.
tionships which take place during a service encounter but will also determine whether these effects are consistent across national borders for consumers with markedly different cognitive orientations.

The paper is presented in five additional sections. First, conceptual foundation of the relationship between service quality and satisfaction is reviewed. Next, cultural differences and intrinsic distinctions across customers are assessed. This results in our two exploratory research questions. Third, the research methodology is identified including a description of the samples and measures. In the fourth section, the results are presented and evaluated. Finally, a discussion of research and managerial implications is provided.

2. Conceptual foundations

While there is invariable agreement that the provision of superior service quality and customer satisfaction are two of the cornerstones to effective services management (cf. Rust and Oliver, 1994), there has been doubt concerning the ordering of these two constructs (Bitner, 1990; Bittner and Hubbert, 1994; Taylor and Baker, 1994). More simply stated, the debate rests on whether managers (1) should focus on providing quality service and its various components (i.e. technical, functional, and environmental factors; see Rust and Oliver, 1994) as a means of creating favorable behavioral intentions or (2) would be better served to underscore the significance of the more emotional satisfaction assessment. It has been suggested that at the heart of this debate seems to be the many studies which only consider the effect of either service quality or satisfaction on behavioral intentions, yet do not test models that include both of these constructs (Gotlieb et al., 1994). Such studies may lead to biased results, which potentially overstate the importance of one or both of these variables in the development of behavioral intentions and therefore, confound the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction. Moreover, prior studies of this phenomenon have been from an ethnocentric, US, perspective resulting in the inability to make cross-cultural generalizations.

The result of these conflicting and potentially biased results is three competing theories as to the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. First, several studies (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson et al., 1994; Gotlieb et al., 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994) offer both theoretical justification and empirical evidence which supports the service quality → satisfaction link. The basis of this effect is the appraisal–emotional response–coping framework suggested by Lazarus (1991) and Bagozzi (1992). When applied to service encounters, the framework infers that the more cognitive service quality evaluation (i.e. appraisal) leads to a primarily emotive satisfaction assessment, which, in turn, drives behavioral intentions. That is, service quality is modeled as an antecedent of satisfaction based on its cognitive orientation (cf. Parasuraman et al., 1988) and satisfaction is expected to directly affect behavioral intentions due to its more emotive nature (Gotlieb et al., 1994; Oliver, 1997). In addition to the theoretical framework, empirical evidence also supports the mediating role of satisfaction (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson et al., 1994; Gotlieb et al., 1994; Rust and Oliver, 1994).

Second, a more recent perspective indicates that the effect may be situation-specific (Dabholkar, 1995). In this case, a non-recursive path between the two constructs is hypothesized (see McAlexander et al., 1994; Taylor and Cronin, 1994) and the temporal sequence would depend on transaction-specific variables. In other words, the nature of the service context drives the service quality–satisfaction link. Despite the noted efforts to study the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction, few studies endeavor to test the relationship with a consideration for these contingencies.

One such contingency which Dabholkar (1995) identifies is that the type of customer will impact the causal sequence of service quality and satisfaction. For example, consumers who can be generally characterized as cognitively oriented are more likely to evaluate the quality of the service first followed by the development of a satisfaction judgment. For these evaluative consumers, the causal sequence is expected to be service quality → satisfaction (Dabholkar, 1995). Alternatively, service customers who are emotionally driven are more prone to affective-oriented assessments so that the satisfaction judgment precedes the service quality evaluation and the causal order is expected to be satisfaction → service quality.

The contingency approach appears to have merit based on the variation in results reported in the literature for the antecedent role of service quality–satisfaction relationship and also the lack of discriminant validity which has been reported for the two constructs. For example, reported correlations for service quality and satisfaction are 0.73 (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996; de Ruyter et al., 1997), 0.87 (Gotlieb et al., 1994), 0.92 (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Taylor and Baker, 1994), and as high as 0.94 (Bittner and Hubbert, 1994). Such an approach supports a flexible model of the service quality–satisfaction relationship whereby intrinsic characteristics alter the means by which service customers develop behavioral intentions. Service practitioners would then need to evaluate the type of customers that they serve in order to determine whether the weight of their efforts should be directed toward either maximizing service quality or appealing to the more emotive satisfaction assessment.

A third and final theory evident in the literature (e.g. Bittner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Mohr and Bittner, 1995) suggests a direct link between service quality and behavioral intentions whereby satisfaction acts as an antecedent of service quality (i.e. satisfaction → service quality). The basis of this theory is the definition of service...
quality as the “overall excellence or superiority” of a service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Defining service quality in cumulative terms infers a global construct, which should be directly related to behavioral intentions based on its more general, attitudinal origin (Bittner, 1990; Rust and Oliver, 1994).

2.1. Cultural differences and intrinsically distinct customers

Dabholkar’s (1995) contingency framework posits that the service quality–satisfaction relationship is at least partially dependent upon the service customer’s predisposition for cognition vs. affect. Similarly, Trompenaars (1994) evaluates cultural differences and finds that a useful cultural distinction is between affective and neutral orientations. Individuals in affect-oriented cultures tend to exhibit their emotions quite freely while neutrality is indicative of a more informed, rational approach to decision-making. According to ‘Trompenaars’ (1994) research, the US is characterized by a neutral orientation where Americans are expected to exhibit emotion “yet separate it from rational decisions” (Trompenaars 1994, p. 72). Alternatively, Trompenaars found that in Latin American countries, affect appears to be the dominant orientation, thus, suggesting that decisions are more likely associated with an emotional context. These findings are consistent with a dimension identified in an earlier study by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) called activity orientation in which the US was classified as a doing culture (with an emphasis on action, achievement, and working) and Latin American nations were considered Being Cultures (with an emphasis on enjoying life and living for the moment).

Considering Dabholkar’s (1995) contingency framework, these findings indicate that the effect of service quality and satisfaction on purchase behavior may vary across national borders. For countries whose consumers are more affectively dominated (i.e. Latin America), one would expect the causal order to be satisfaction → service quality (Dabholkar, 1995). In effect, these consumers experience the service at an emotional level and then evaluate the quality of the service based on this emotion. Conversely, for neutral countries (i.e. the US), satisfaction would be the superordinate construct such that the causal order is service quality → satisfaction. These customers tend to evaluate the quality of the service first and then judge whether they are satisfied. Indeed, the empirical evidence reported for American consumers supports this effect.

Considering the potential for differing cognitive processes across cultural boundaries, the current research compares the performance of two competing models (as evidenced by model fit and their abilities to explain variance in behavioral intentions; see Gotlieb et al., 1994) of the process by which service consumers use their service quality and satisfaction perceptions to form behavioral intentions. If, as in the US, satisfaction mediates the effect of service quality on behavioral intentions, international service practitioners should consider the management of customer satisfaction a priority. This strategy requires specific attention to the emotional content of a service experience. Alternatively, if this relationship is dependent upon the cognitive vs. affective predisposition of the consumer per Dabholkar’s (1995) contingency framework, then perhaps international firms should alter their strategies such that primary attention would be directed to the management of the more cognitively-oriented service quality evaluation.

Despite competing theories, overall, the service quality → satisfaction causal order has received the strongest support in the literature as well as the most empirical validation (Gotlieb et al., 1994). However, the extent to which this relationship holds up in a cross-cultural context is unknown. This leads to our first exploratory research question.

Research question #1: Will Model 1a (SQ → SAT) fit the data better than Model 1b (SAT → SQ) regardless of varying cultural backgrounds?

In addition to model fit, Jöreskog and Sörbom (1989) suggest that a more stringent test of two competing models entails a comparison of their ability to explain variance in the dependent variable. Based on the dominant theory from prior studies (i.e. service quality → satisfaction), Model 1a should explain more of the variance in behavioral intentions than Model 1b. However, again the extent to which this holds across cultures is a topic worthy of investigation. This leads to our second exploratory research question.

Research question #2: Will Model 1a (SQ → SAT) explain more variance in behavioral intentions than Model 1b (SAT → SQ) regardless of varying cultural backgrounds?

3. Methods

3.1. The data

Due to its familiarity to the consumers of both nations and to the growing presence of large, international fast food corporations in Latin America, fast food was selected as the service industry of interest. To promote generalizability, the sample was limited to fast food corporations with a large presence in both the US and Ecuador. Moreover, an effort was made to ensure that nearly identical services were offered in both countries.

3.1.1. The US sample

The US data were obtained by trained interviewers in a medium-sized city in the southeastern US. Data collection took place over a period of 2 weeks and resulted in a sample of 309 fast food customers. In both samples, over 50% of those approached agreed to participate in the study. In the interest of generalizability, the sample was roughly evenly divided between multiple large, international fast food competitors. In order to verify the accuracy of the
data, approximately 20% of the respondents were later contacted and asked to confirm selected responses. This process resulted in the elimination of less than 1% of the total sample.

3.1.2. The Ecuadorian data
In a similar fashion, the Ecuadorian data were gathered by a group of Ecuadorian assistants who underwent a training session conducted by one of the authors. In addition to receiving detailed instructions about data collection procedures, the assistants also performed a final check on the translated survey. Any and all necessary adaptations to the local language and idioms were implemented at this time. The data were collected over a 2-week period in a major city in central Ecuador. As in the US sample, the Ecuadorian data were divided between similar international fast food outlets. In a further effort to maintain consistency with the procedures followed for the US sample, a small group of respondents were contacted and any inconsistencies in the data were explored and corrected. After data analysis and purging, the final sample for the Ecuadorian data consisted of 116 usable surveys.

3.2. The measures

Identical measures were used in both country samples. The indicators were selected due to their similarity to those found in the literature (e.g. Westbrook and Oliver, 1991; Gotlieb et al., 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1996). All of the items were measured with a nine-point scale. The first construct, service quality, was measured by three items similar to those used by Gotlieb et al. (1994). Specifically, a nine-point semantic differential scale was employed with adjectives ranging from “poor” to “excellent,” “inferior” to “superior,” and “low standards” to “high standards.” The reliability of the items as measured by the construct reliability estimate (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) reported in Table 1 was 0.87. The parameter estimates ranged from 0.75–0.88.

Satisfaction was assessed with four emotion-laden items derived from Westbrook and Oliver’s (1991) satisfaction measure. The items were as follows: “I am satisfied with my decision to visit this service provider”; “My choice to purchase this service was a wise one”; “I think I did the right thing when I purchased this service”; “I feel that my experience with this service provider has been enjoyable.” The construct reliability estimate for the satisfaction scale was 0.84. The parameter estimates ranged from 0.56–0.87.

Behavioral intentions was measured with three items which were developed based on Zeithaml et al.’s (1996) suggestion that such service outcomes as repurchase intentions, word of mouth, and price premiums are the likely outcome of a service encounter. The items were measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from “Very Low” to “Very High” and were worded to mirror the domains suggested by Zeithaml et al. (1996). The scale items were as follows: “The probability that I will use this facility’s services again is”; “The likelihood that I would recommend this facility’s services to a friend is”; “If I had to do it over again, the chance that I would make the same choice is.” The construct reliability estimate for the behavioral intentions’ scale was 0.82. The parameter estimates ranged from 0.69 to 0.88.

3.3. Assessment of the measures

One inherent difficulty in conducting cross-national research is showing evidence of measurement equivalence. Due to translation difficulties and cultural differences, the challenge is to ensure that the scales have neither lost meaning due to translation nor lack metric equivalence. Mullen (1995) suggests a two-part process designed to address these potential problems. The ultimate objective is to eliminate doubt as to whether the results obtained in the analyses are due to the manipulated variables or whether they are simply measurement artifacts.

The first step in Mullen’s (1995) process is to maximize “translation equivalence” by translating the items into the foreign language and then back-translating them to identify any discrepancies in meaning or syntax. In the current study, a similar iterative process was used whereby the items were developed in English, translated to Spanish, and then back translated to verify proper interpretation. Moreover, subsequent to data collection, the items were checked twice for face validity by an Ecuadorian national.

The second step in Mullen’s (1995) process is to verify metric equivalence. In our study, this means that the data collected from both the US and Ecuadorian samples exhibit similar psychometric structures. To test for metric equivalence, we employed the method of multiple group LISREL analysis (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993). This technique simultaneously tests the items from both samples in one confirmatory factor model and requires a three-part analysis where the factor structure, parameter estimates, and error variances are tested for congruity. The results of the group analysis are presented in Table 1.

The CFI, RNI (McDonald and Marsh, 1990), and DELTA2 (Bollen, 1989) estimates reported in Table 1 were used to analyze the confirmatory model as these have been shown to be the most stable fit indices (Gerbing and Anderson, 1992). The GFI and $\chi^2$ statistics were also reported for comparison purposes. The results reported in Table 1 indicate a good fit to the data as the CFI, RNI, and DELTA2 estimates were 0.95 and the GFI was 0.90. The $\chi^2$ statistic was significant ($p = 0.0$) but may have been inflated due to its sensitivity to sample size (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

The validity of the scales was assessed by the method outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Convergent validity was assessed by analyzing the $t$-values corresponding to the path between the items and their respective factors for significance. Referring to Table 1, the $t$-values were significant ($p \leq 0.01$) with estimates ranging from 12.01 to
Discriminant validity was analyzed by comparing the shared variances to the average variances extracted by the construct indicators (see Table 1). Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that discriminant validity is evident if the average variances extracted for the individual dimensions exceed the shared variance between the construct and the other variables in the model. The average variance extracted estimates were 0.70 for service quality, 0.56 for satisfaction, and 0.61 for behavioral intentions compared to shared variances which ranged from 0.29 to 0.59 (see Table 1). Hence, each of the scales exceeded this standard with the exception of the satisfaction scale, which fell slightly below Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) criterion.

### 4. Results

Testing of the competing structural models and the specific relationships within the models was accomplished through LISREL. For both samples, the items were averaged to form indices of the three constructs. The results of the model tests are reported in Table 2. Again, owing to their relative stability, emphasis is placed on the CFI, RNI, and DELTA2 estimates (Gerbing and Anderson, 1992).

The first research question queried whether Model 1a (SQ → SAT) will fit the data better than Model 1b (SAT → SQ) in both samples. The findings reported in Table 2 show that Model 1a (SQ → SAT) provides an excellent fit to the data in both the US and Ecuadorian samples, while the fit for Model 1b is sub-par. Specifically, in the US sample, the estimates reported for the SQ → SAT model indicate an insign significant $\chi^2$ statistic ($p = 0.55$) with corresponding CFI, RNI, and DELTA2 estimates of 0.99. In the Ecuadorian sample for Model 1a, the $\chi^2$ statistic is again insignificant ($p = 0.67$) with fit indices of 0.99. Alternatively, the fit for Model 1b was poor for both national groups. A significant $\chi^2$ ($p \leq 0.01$) is reported for Model 1b (SAT → SQ) for both samples, with CFI, RNI, and DELTA2 estimates of 0.80, 0.79, and 0.80, for the US sample and 0.74, 0.73, and 0.74 for the Ecuadorian sample. Thus, it appears that the SQ → SAT relationship is strong in both cultures.

Our second research question pertained to whether Model 1a (SQ → SAT) will explain more variance in behavioral intentions than Model 1b (SAT → SQ) regardless of varying cultural backgrounds. The relative ability of the two models to explain variation in the dependent variable ($R^2$) is reported in Table 2. Referring to Table 2, it appears that Model 1a (SQ → SAT) is again the superior model. Model 1a explains 85% of the variance in behavioral intentions in the American sample compared to only 69% for Model 1b. In the Ecuadorian sample, the $R^2$ estimate is 0.61 for Model 1a compared to 0.38 for Model 1b (see Table 2).

### Table 1

**Measurement analysis results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CFA results</th>
<th>$\chi^2/df$</th>
<th>$p$-Value</th>
<th>GFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>RNI</th>
<th>DELTA2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>192.20/74</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Construct reliability</th>
<th>Shared variance</th>
<th>Average variance extracted (%)</th>
<th>Parameter estimates</th>
<th>t-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service quality (SQ)</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.29–0.59</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.75–0.88</td>
<td>17.12–21.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction (SAT)</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.39–0.59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0.56–0.87</td>
<td>12.01–22.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral intentions (BI)</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.29–0.39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.69–0.88</td>
<td>15.36–22.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Results of the comparative model tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Parameter estimate</th>
<th>t-Value</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Fit statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>US (n = 309)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a: SQ → SAT</td>
<td>SQ → SAT</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>9.69</td>
<td>0.62 (SAT)</td>
<td>$p = 0.55$, CFI = 0.99, RNI = 0.99, DELTA2 = 0.99, GFI = 0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAT → BI</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>0.85 (BI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b: SAT → SQ</td>
<td>SAT → SQ</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>0.74 (SQ)</td>
<td>$p = 0.0$, CFI = 0.80, RNI = 0.79, DELTA2 = 0.80, GFI = 0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SQ → BI</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>0.69 (BI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ecuador (n = 116)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a: SQ → SAT</td>
<td>SQ → SAT</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>0.47 (SAT)</td>
<td>$p = 0.67$, CFI = 0.99, RNI = 0.99, DELTA2 = 0.99, GFI = 0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAT → BI</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>0.61 (BI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b: SAT → SQ</td>
<td>SAT → SQ</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>0.52 (SQ)</td>
<td>$p = 0.0$, CFI = 0.74, RNI = 0.73, DELTA2 = 0.75, GFI = 0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SQ → BI</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>0.38 (BI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Discussion

The overall objective of this study was to test the relationship between service quality and satisfaction in order to investigate whether service quality should universally be considered an antecedent of satisfaction or whether the causal order is context-specific. The results suggest that the service quality → satisfaction causal order holds up well across diverse cultures and leads to an improvement in the ability of the model to explain variance in a service customer's behavioral intentions. That is, research questions 1 and 2 indicate that the process by which service consumers develop behavioral intentions is uniform across the two samples. This supports the dominant theory in the literature (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Gottlieb et al., 1994) and indicates that the relationship is robust across national boundaries.

The findings reported here present a number of practitioner and scholarly implications. For practitioners, our results stress the significance of managing the emotional level of service customers. Specifically, considering the emotive nature of the satisfaction assessment, these findings indicate that prudent practitioners should manage their customers' service quality appraisal as a means of controlling the affective assessment of a service encounter. This suggests that service practitioners should provide service quality as a means of improving satisfaction judgments. In so doing, it appears that this is the most effective method of creating favorable behavioral intentions.

The direct link between satisfaction and behavioral intentions might also enlighten a practitioner as to the best method of appealing to potential customers. Our results suggest that emphasizing the emotional reaction to a service encounter is the preferred option over a more cognitively based agenda. In other words, given the superordinance of the more emotive satisfaction construct, strategies that develop and reinforce positive satisfaction assessments may be the best method of generating favorable behavioral intentions. Nonetheless, these findings corroborate the attention given to promoting such ideals as total customer satisfaction and customer delight.

The results presented here also offer insight into the purchase behavior of US and Ecuadorian service customers. This is particularly relevant for practitioners with an interest in the growing Latin American markets. Specifically, despite intrinsic differences in the cognitive and emotive predispositions of US and Ecuadorian fast food customers (Trompenaars, 1994), our results indicate that there are distinct similarities in their development of behavioral intentions. Fast food customers from both nations appear to stress satisfaction over service quality. Additional research is clearly needed to further explore this interest.

To assist fast food managers in developing cross-cultural strategies, future research should also examine the roles that other key service constructs play in a customer's decision process. For example, the role of service value in models of consumer purchase behavior is an understudied pursuit. Zeithaml (1988) defines service value as the difference between the benefits derived from a service encounter and the sacrifices necessary to acquire the service. Given the emphasis on creating value for US fast food customers, a fruitful area of inquiry would be to investigate this strategy from a cross-national perspective. Practitioners would benefit from an improved understanding of the cost–benefit trade-offs, which ultimately end in some form of purchase decision.

From a scholarly perspective, these findings indicate that while service quality is an important determinant of behavioral intentions in both samples, its effect is indirect through satisfaction. These results add weight to Oliver's (1997) cognitive → affective → conative causal sequence and Bagotz's (1992) evaluative → response → coping framework as the cognitively-oriented service quality evaluation is identified as an antecedent of the primarily affective-oriented satisfaction judgment in both samples. The findings also substantiate the empirical results reported in the literature (e.g. Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Anderson et al., 1994; Gottlieb et al., 1994) which suggest that satisfaction mediates the link between service quality and behavioral intentions.

However, the current study adds a cross-cultural perspective to the ongoing discussion. Dabholkar (1995) theorizes that the antecedent role of service quality and satisfaction may shift depending on such transient factors as the service context and the emotional or cognitive nature of the consumers. The results of our study indicate otherwise in that service quality is identified as an antecedent variable in both country samples. However, these findings pertain to only one of Dabholkar's (1995) contingencies and we stress the need for additional inquiries across various contexts and using consumers with different cultural backgrounds.

With respect to cultural differences, there are several research implications which appear noteworthy. The recent findings by Geletkanycz (1997) that cultural values such as individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance related to individual orientations toward change may be related to our current findings. Fast food as it is known in the US is still a very new phenomenon in Latin America and individual perceptions of change and newness may add to the interpretation of quality and service. The level of national development may also be worthy of investigation by future researchers. Perhaps in Chile or Argentina, more developed Latin nations, the novelty of dining at a fast food restaurant is viewed less from an emotional perspective and more emphasis is placed on the price of a meal.

6. Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge some of the limitations of this study. First, the study is limited to fast food restaurants such that generalizing the results to other industries may be
ill advised. Second, the US and Latin American respondents clearly have differences in fast food restaurant choices. This may have played a role in their interpretation of such issues as quality and service. Despite these differences, every attempt was made to have the Ecuadorian consumers focus on major international fast food restaurants (such as Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell). There is currently an abundance of these restaurants in Latin America. Finally, the economic diversity of the subjects from Ecuador may be viewed as a limitation. Many Latin American nations have an almost non-existent middle class (Dominiguez and Brenes, 1997). Thus, fast food customers tend to come from the upper echelons of society since pricing schemes are typically out of reach for members of the struggling lower classes.

References

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