



Service recommendations and customer evaluations in the international marketplace: Cultural and situational contingencies

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ABSTRACT

As the international service market continues its phenomenal growth, understanding the nature of effective interpersonal interactions between service providers and their customers is increasingly important. However, cross-national theory and research on this topic remain limited. In response, the following study employs data from China and the United States to test whether the cultural congruency of benefits emphasized by the service provider interacts with the customer's value orientation and/or consumption objective to affect evaluations of service quality. Results indicate that the cultural congruency of provider recommendations affects evaluations. Preliminary evidence also suggests that this effect is moderated by consumption objective.

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1. Introduction

As the world shrinks with rapid technological advances and growth in international trade, increasing numbers of companies are expanding their international operations. However, enduring cultural differences remain major challenges to effectiveness (McCort and Malhotra, 1993; Peng and Nisbett, 1999). In response, scholars have produced numerous cross-national studies on decision making, marketing communications and consumption behavior (e.g., Aaker, 2000; Briley et al., 2000; Peñaloza and Gilly, 1999; Kacen and Lee, 2002; Bao et al., 2003; Hu and Jasper, 2008).

Despite such progress, research is lacking on whether the cultural content of service providers' recommendations can affect customer evaluations of service quality. This fundamental gap increases the challenge of global service management and salesperson training. In response, the present study analyzes experimental data from China and the U.S. to test hypothesized interactions between the cultural content of the service provider's recommendation and the customer's cultural value orientation. We also test for moderating effects on service evaluation of a situational construct, "consumption objective," which is defined as the consumer's proximal reason for seeking the service (Punj and Steward, 1983).

2. Service evaluation literature

In the service evaluation and customer satisfaction literatures, the "expectancy disconfirmation" model (Oliver, 1997) posits that satisfaction depends on whether the service provider meets, exceeds, or falls below the customer's expectations. The model's global generalizability has been confirmed in numerous empirical studies (e.g., Keillor et al., 2004; Laroche et al., 2004; Tam, 2005; Ueltschy et al., 2004). Cross-national relationships between key service evaluation constructs (expectations, performance, satisfaction and behavior intentions) have also been investigated (e.g., Brady and Robertson, 2001; Brady et al., 2005) along with the effects of culture on the relative importance of the five dimensions of service quality (Raajpoot, 2004; Furrer et al., 2000).

To date, the cross-national service literature has focused on extending service evaluation models such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Even though all human interactions are "governed by culture-social rules" (Gallois and Callan, 1997, p. 86), the influence of cultural value orientation on the evaluation of service provider recommendations remains unstudied. According to Birgelen et al. (2002), cultural values are linked to subjective attitudes and preferences, which in turn are used to evaluate service experiences. As Ekinci and Riley (2003) observe, consumers are even more likely to draw on their cultural value systems to evaluate service interactions as opposed to tangible goods as they are active, social players in the service delivery process. Both the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1997) and incongruity theory (Alden et al., 1994) suggest that the congruity of provider recommendations with consumers' cultural value orientations will have important effects on customer evaluations of the service interaction.

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3. Cultural value orientation

Culture consists of “learned systems of meaning, communicated by means of national language and other symbol systems, having representational, directive, and affective functions, and capable of creating culture identities and particular sense of reality” (D’Andrade, 1984, p. 116). Individuals are known to vary along certain value dimensions within and across cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1994). For this reason, as well as to avoid the well-known “ecological fallacy” problem that occurs when country serves as a proxy variable for culture (Smith, 2004), cultural values are increasingly operationalized as individual-difference constructs (Taylor, 2005). One such construct with important consumer behavior consequences is self-construal. Self-construal, defined as “a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning the relation of the self to others and the self as distinct from others” (Singelis et al., 1999, p. 316), is modeled as a two-dimensional construct that describes distinct aspects within one individual (Singelis, 1994; Bearden et al., 2006).

Interdependent self-construal emphasizes the self as inseparable from others and social contexts. Individuals with strong interdependent self-construal suppress their own hedonic desires in order to satisfy common interests of the group. They are relatively more interested in fitting-in with others and emphasize harmony and commonality to a greater degree than those with an individualist orientation. In addition, they tend to be motivated by other-serving goals. Finally, their personal attributes change more easily in response to situational demands (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, independent self-construal emphasizes individual uniqueness and self-expression (Hofstede, 1980; Kim et al., 1994; Triandis, 1995).

In this study, we examine the effects of having a high versus low interdependent cultural value orientation. As noted earlier, high versus low interdependent individuals appear to be more sensitive to situational factors (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Furthermore, interdependence implies an underlying desire for social harmony, group affiliation, fitting-in and in-group success (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Our focus on interdependence is appropriate as we are testing consumption objectives that involve family and peer use as opposed to everyday use (Hardin et al., 2004; Brewer and Gardner, 1996).

4. Consumption objective as a moderator

In addition to employing interdependent self-concept to tap an individual's cultural value orientation, we also examine ways in which interdependent self-concept is moderated by contextual factors. According to Markus and Kunda (1986) and Aaker (1999), an individual's self-concept may become accessible due to contextual factors such as the physical environment, the social environment (Aaker, 1999), task definition (Belk, 1975) and task-related characteristics (Punj and Steward, 1983).

This dynamic nature of culture has been noted in a number of prior studies. For instance, Aaker (1999) found that when a person enters or anticipates entering a social situation, situational cues are made salient and thereby increase accessibility of specific personality dimensions. For example, “a homey dinner during the holidays with the whole family and grandparents” evoked the personality dimension – “sincerity.” Furthermore, Cantor et al. (1982) found that subjects judged individuals at a family dinner (versus bar) to have higher levels of interpersonal responsibility and lower risk-taking tendencies.

The fact that contextual factors often moderate outcomes related to self-concept has led to the term, “malleable self-concept” (Markus and Kunda, 1986). In the present study, we examine one such contextual factor, consumption objective, and its role as a moderator of cultural value orientation effects on service evaluation.

Three consumption objectives are employed in this study. The first represents the most general condition in which non-specific schema

priming occurs. That objective is “getting a haircut for everyday wear.” The other primed-objectives are more specific and relate to socially-oriented schema. These are “getting a haircut for a reunion with family” and “getting a haircut for a party with friends.” These social consumption objectives are likely to enhance the interaction effects of service provider recommendation and consumer value orientation. Furthermore, given the centrality of family to social interdependence, the effects of this consumption objective may be stronger than those observed for the peer context.

5. Hypotheses

5.1. Congruency between cultural value orientation and provider recommendations

According to self-congruity theory, a match between a consumer's self-concept and product or store image results in favorable attitudes towards the product or the store (Sirgy, 1982, 1983; Sirgy et al., 2000). Self-concept is believed to have two components – the actual self-concept and the ideal self-concept (e.g., Belch, 2000). The actual self is defined as the person consumers think they really are, their day-to-day identity. The ideal self is defined as the person the consumer would like to be, that is, their desired self (Sirgy, 1982).

To date, research involving self-congruity theory in a cross-cultural context is very limited. For this reason, we examine the effects of congruity between a consumer's self-concept and a service provider's recommendations. However, rather than using “self-concept” per se, we employ a related construct that specifically addresses cultural value orientation – interdependent self-construal. We limit ourselves to the case of interdependent self-construal as this construct appears to be a reasonable proxy for actual self-concept. This is the case because interdependent self-construal emphasizes an individual's perceived self in terms of relationships with others and is likely to be closer to the actual self rather than the ideal self (Singelis et al., 1999).

In addition, several studies have examined the link between actual self-concept and service evaluation. Ekinci and Riley (2003) suggest that service interactions that affirm actual self-concept are more favorably evaluated. Hence, alignment between actual self-concept and the service recommendation may affect the perceived value of the overall service experience (Ekinci and Riley, 2003; Overby et al., 2004). Such outcomes have been referred to as the social consequences of service (Overby et al., 2004). Following this rationale, we expect that benefits conveyed by the service provider that are consistent (inconsistent) with the customer's cultural value orientation will produce more (less) favorable service evaluations. However, we expect this effect only for individuals who are high interdependents. Given lower concern about “fitting-in” versus “standing-out,” low interdependents should also care less about the social implications of the service provider's recommendations. As a result, the importance of congruity is likely to be low and have little or no impact on low interdependents' service quality evaluations. With these thoughts in mind we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. High interdependent consumers will more (less) positively evaluate service quality when the service provider emphasizes benefits that are congruent (incongruent) with their interdependent value orientation. For low interdependent consumers, congruency of benefits emphasized by the service provider will not influence evaluations of service quality.

5.2. The moderating influence of consumption objective

Concerns about “fitting-in” versus “standing-out” are unlikely to shift for high interdependents in response to a social (family/friends party) versus non-social consumption (everyday wear) context. For high interdependents, “fitting-in” is always likely to be a strong value

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