

# Review and future directions of cross-cultural consumer services research

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## Abstract

It is widely recognized that an increasing number of service firms are expanding into international markets. Many studies in the services marketing literature have focused on the identification and discussion of similarities and/or differences in consumer service experiences across nations and cultures. In this paper we review the relevant literature, address conceptual and methodological issues associated with extant cross-cultural consumer services research and suggest theories and approaches in regards to future research in the area. In addition, we introduce and discuss the concept of “cultural service personality” as a potential new theoretical perspective.

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**Keywords:** Cross-cultural; Services research; Service expectations; Evaluations of service; Reactions to service

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## 1. Introduction

Services are increasingly important worldwide. In the U.S., the service sector accounted for more than 79% of the GDP in 2006 (US Central Intelligence Agency, 2007) and 80% of its workforce come from the service sector (Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2002). As

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Table 1  
Journals included in the review

Name of journal	Number of articles located
Journal of Service Research (JSR)	8
Journal of Services Marketing (JSM)	6
International Journal of Service Industry Management (IJSIM)	5
Journal of Business Research (JBR)	5
International Marketing Review (IMR)	4
Journal of Retailing (JR)	4
Journal of Consumer Marketing (JCM)	2
Service Industries Journal	2
European Journal of Marketing (EJM)	1
Journal of Marketing	1
Journal of Marketing Theory & Practice (JMTP)	1
International Journal of Research in Marketing (IJRM)	1
Journal of Consumer Psychology (JCP)	0
Journal of Consumer Research (JCR)	0
Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)	0
Journal of International Marketing (JIM)	0
Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)	0
Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (JAMS)	0
Marketing Science (MS)	0
Psychology & Marketing (P&M)	0

the economic significance of the service industry grows, so does the interest in services research, as demonstrated by the fast-growing body of services marketing literature in the past decade, especially in the consumer services area. In fact, [Vargo and Lusch \(2004\)](#) recently suggested that the marketing discipline is going through a paradigmatic change, shifting its focus from exchanges of “goods” to service-centered exchanges.

An increasing number of service providers are marketing services internationally and it is the fastest-growing area of international trade ([Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007](#)). American firms have experienced dramatic growth in service exports over the past decade, generating a \$65 billion balance of payments surplus in services in 2003, helping to offset the country’s \$483 billion deficit in goods ([US Department of Commerce, 2005](#)). This growth creates opportunities as well as challenges for businesses, especially when firms attempt to globally standardize their service delivery ([Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004](#)). One reason for such challenges is that consumers’ perceptions of service are culturally bound ([Zeithaml et al., 2002](#)). [de Ruyter et al. \(1998, p. 189\)](#) argue that “[i]n order to market services effectively to international consumers, service providers must have a thorough knowledge of their target group(s)”. A solid understanding of the role of culture in the service delivery process is more crucial than ever for service firms operating globally.

Despite growing research in consumer service experiences, relatively little research has examined the role of culture in regards to these experiences, with little attempt aimed at synthesizing it. As [Maheswaran and Shavitt \(2000\)](#) point out in regard to global consumer psychology research, systematic research in consumer services is in its infancy. In this article, we attempt to review cross-cultural services research that focuses on the consumer. First, we introduce our conceptual framework and its components. Second, we review existing studies using our framework and suggest

future research directions. Third, we discuss overall conceptual issues in the literature and introduce the concept of “cultural service personality”, developed from our review, as a potential new theoretical perspective. Finally, we address overall methodological issues and point to future research directions.

## 2. Article selection method

Our goal was to locate academic cross-cultural services research focusing on consumers and published in major journals. We used three criteria in choosing articles to include.

1. It should be empirical cross-cultural or cross-national comparative studies for two or more cultures/countries.
2. Studies need to involve consumer services, i.e., be related to the service experience.
3. Studies need to have investigated the topic from a consumer behavior perspective, rather than a more general focus on international services marketing, from a firm perspective (cf. [Knight, 1999](#)).

We focused our search in a set of leading and influential academic journals that we felt would cover the topics of interest here. We also conducted a search in major electronic databases including ABI Inform and EBSCO using keywords such as “cross-cultural”, “cross-national” and “services”. A total of 40 relevant articles were located, covering 11 years of research published from 1996 to 2006. Earlier [Knight \(1999\)](#) reviewed international services marketing studies from a firm’s perspective (1990–1998), focusing, for example, on issues like mode of entry. Our review covers cross-cultural services from a different perspective—from the perspective of the consumer and only overlaps with Knight by 3 years. A summary of the journals reviewed and the number of relevant articles found per journal are shown in [Table 1](#). We note that our focus on journals leaves out a number of conference or book articles on this topic. However, we focused on journal articles due to their wide availability across countries.

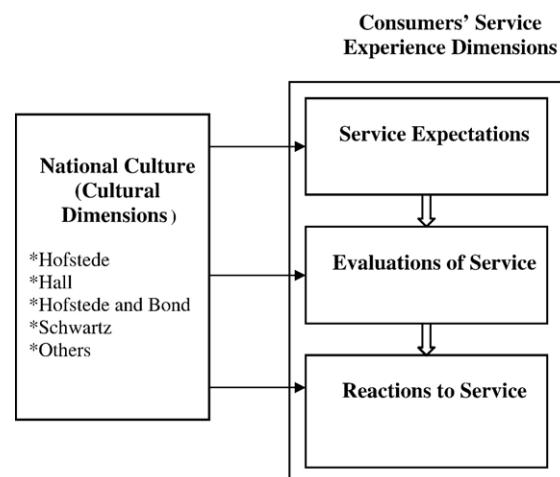


Fig. 1. A framework of the role of culture in consumers’ service experiences.

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