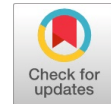# Influence of Social Media Expressions on Service Quality Perceptions

Tarun Kumar Singhal, Anubha Vashisht

*Abstract***:** *The customers are increasingly engaging with organizations to assess the service quality being offered. Generally, the engagements through customer support helplines, in-store interactions, and emails remain hidden from the customers as this data is seldom made public. In contrast, engagement through social media predominantly through social media expressions has a reaching effect due to its viral nature. The customers use social media expressions from either organizations (organization-generated) or from existing users (user-generated) to make decisions. Social media expressions representing expectations, experiences, suggestions, interactions, product/service behaviors, etc. are taken into consideration by the prospective/existing customers in creating perceptions about service quality. In a modern context, social media expressions have assumed a more considerable significance due to their quick and far-reaching impact on customers. These expressions predominantly influence the perceptions of service quality as the services are generally perceived after the delivery of the service.*

This paper has attempted to understand the categories of Expressions on Social Media (organization-generated and user-generated) and their subsequent influence on service quality perceptions, which would either enable a customer to engage with the organization or move away. This paper has also stressed for the need to positively stimulating social media expressions at each stage of service delivery to ensure that the perceptions of the service quality remain in the positive domain.

*Keywords***:** *Social Media, Social Media Expressions, Service Quality, Customer Perception, e-Service.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has assumed the role of a most popular communication tool for organizations as well as customers. Using social media, organizations have increased the level of engagement with the customers (existing and prospective). The organizations are leveraging the potential of social media in creating attractive campaigns, competitions, and posting offers as well as updates. These are becoming viral and are reaching millions almost instantly. The customers are using the same media to post expectations, experiences, suggestions, interactions, product/service behaviors, etc.

This two-way communication medium has created a self-sustainable ecosystem for both organizations and customers alike, which is enabling them both to engage with each other mutually beneficially. One of the most significant outcomes of this ecosystem is the perception of service quality.

The organizations delivering expected service experience have been able to create a positive perception among the customers. On the other hand, the organizations falling short in providing the expected customer experience are running the risks of losing existing customers and turning away prospective customers. Social media expressions are playing a dominant role in influencing service quality perceptions.

II. SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality takes into consideration the expectations of the customers before the delivery of the service and then examines the perceptions of the customers after they have received the service [1]. The service quality is considered low if the service experience fails to meet the expectations.

The expectations of the customers are considered as a benchmark on which the quality of service is evaluated. With a better quality of the service, customer satisfaction, and the intentions of the customers regarding the use/reuse of the service increase [1].

A most accepted model of service quality (SERVQUAL) encompasses tangibles, reliability, responsibility, assurance, and empathy as dimensions [2].

The SERVQUAL model is used for assessing service quality in different organized settings such as retail chain, fast food restaurant, tire store, dental clinic, hospital, etc. [3] [4] [5] [6].

The SERVQUAL model has also experienced a few contentious issues regarding the linkage of service quality and customer satisfaction [7].

Also, the applicability of one scale for the assessment of service quality in all industrial and environmental settings has been questioned as well [1] [5] [8].

Three characteristics (services intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability) help in developing a thorough understanding of the service quality [9].

Another model visualizes two dimensions of service performance, which impact the perceived service quality [10].

Technical quality dimension, as the first dimension, describes a tangible outcome received by the customer after interaction with a service. This dimension, however, may not account for total quality because the customer gets influenced as the technical quality is delivered to the customer functionally. This limitation necessitates the inclusion of functional quality dimension that explains the method used for providing the technical outcome of the service process to the customer [10].

The online services are characterized by features that are not demonstrated by the offline services (problems of server, experiencing outages during the backup of the information, and last connectivity issues) [11]. Further, it is suggested that the existing service quality models shouldn't be applied to assess e-service quality. With this understanding, the focus has shifted to research in the e-service. E-service accounts for all the interactions that take place before, during, and after the transactions [12].

III. CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA EXPRESSIONS

The customers are engaging in social media for creating opinions regarding unfamiliar brands [13]. This increased usage of social media is influencing other customers with positive and negative experiences [14]. Organizations, worldwide, are using social media for creating additional connections with existing and prospective customers. However, this progressive initiative is causing difficulties for the organizations as the existing customers are engaging on such platforms to spread their dissatisfaction regarding services. Such expressions are turning away prospective customers because of the negative perceptions developed about services [15]. During a global survey of salespeople, an increase of 50% in the buying volume was reported with the help of social media. The purchase behaviors are influenced by the comments on products and services in social media [17]. Organizations are increasingly engaging prospective customers for building relationships with them using social media platforms [18]. Another research has revealed that the organizations respond to 68% customers who have posted negative comments on social media. Due to this, 18% customers become loyal to the organizations and indulge in repeat purchases. Also, 33% customers replace their original negative comments with positive ones, while 34% customers delete the original negative comments [19]. The customers perceive benefits under the constructs of product, service, and relationship. Responsiveness, flexibility, reliability, and technical competence govern service-related benefits. Whereas, image, trust, and solidarity govern relationship-related benefits [20]. In Social Media Expressions Value Cycle Model, a tripartite arrangement has been suggested among organizations, existing customers, and prospective customers [15].
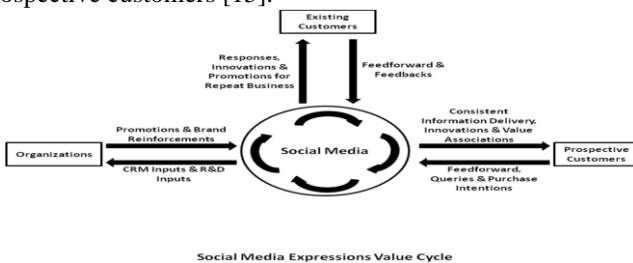

Fig. 1.Social Media Expressions Value Cycle

Prospective customers feed-forward queries as well as purchase intentions on social media platforms while receiving consistent information, innovations, and value associations from the organizations.

Existing customers feed-forward feedback on social media platforms while receiving responses, innovations, and promotions from the organizations.

The organizations feed-forward promotions and brand reinforcements on social media platforms while receiving customer relationship management (CRM) and research & development (R&D) inputs to facilitate relationships and new product design and development [15].

The "one-way" propagation mechanism of traditional media is deemed as an ineffective way of engaging customers and creating trust. Therefore, organizations are now aggressively integrating social media strategy with the overall promotion strategy. A few organizations have even gone ahead and have established the social media strategy as the only strategy for engaging with the customers (prospective and existing). Social Media has productively offered numerous opportunities to customers for engaging and creating a trust for services [21]. The organizations have leveraged comprehensive usage of social media in three areas - within the organization, outside for collaborating with the customers and in interaction with the suppliers, partners, and various stakeholders. Though these organizations are using this new technology for furthering their reach, the underlying needs (such as interaction and socialization) of the customer remain the same [22]. The organizations have immensely benefited from the engagement of the customers (existing and prospective) on social media platforms. The expressions posted on social media platforms have provided valuable insights to the organizations for innovation in the products and services offered. At the same time, these social media expressions have given credible inputs to the organizations for facilitating new product development [23]. A research study conducted on 186 organizations emphasized the importance of social media engagements on the new product development process. This research study positively attributed social media activities to the innovation performance of the organization. Also, open innovation is significantly facilitated with market-related information as well as technology-related information leading to a positive impact on new product development [24]. Another research study suggested that a customer-oriented organization should consider new product ideas being promoted through social media expressions for new product development. The customers need to be treated as co-creators of a new product by their participation in the process of new product development [16].

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA EXPRESSIONS AND SERVICE QUALITY

Social media expressions entail two categories of content – user-generated content and organization-generated content. Primarily, user-generated content is used to create perceptions of the delivery of the service. The organization-generated content is used to understand the effectiveness of the delivery mechanism and responsiveness to the usage mechanism. Collectively, these Social media expressions (user-generated and organization-generated) help the customers in creating perceptions of the service quality. Research studies have demonstrated that user-generated content is seen as trustworthy and credible as compared to organization generated content [26].

Social media expressions consider two dimensions originating from customers and the organizations adopting social media. The first dimension known as electronic customer voluntary performance has three primary activities: (1) promotion of firm (word-of-mouth, recommendations, etc.), (2) provision for improvement and innovation (feedback, reviews, suggestions, etc.), and (3) showing courtesy (employees and customers). The second dimension entails inter-customer support of social media and other online platforms. The customers, while encountering the service, get functional and social support from the employees of the organization, friends, and other unknown users [26].

Evaluating a service is difficult because of its intangible characteristics. Unlike products, services are evaluated after buying and consuming. However, a few services cannot be assessed due to credence attributes, even after buying and consuming.

Generally, the customers rely on the information gathered from the service provider to decide whether to consume the service or not. The reviews provided by the service provider and other customers play a significant role in deciding about a service.

The customers evaluate service in respect of its perceived quality. Past researches have attributed perceived quality for its significant influence on the performance of the organization as well as on intentions of the customer to buy again and customer satisfaction.

The perceptions regarding service quality are based initially on the available information, which is provided by the service provider or organization. However, it is to be examined further as to which of the social media expressions (user-generated or organization-generated) create accurate service perceptions that can help the customers.

The effectiveness of user-generated content has been emphasized in several research studies. These studies further elaborate that prospective customers rely on the expressions of the existing customers. This behavior may be due to the absence of knowledge with the prospective customers or due to high risk involved.

The effectiveness of user-generated content has been further supported as the existing customers or the users evaluate the service quality based on their usage experiences. Also, the customers (prospective and existing) perceive this content as more reliable because of its non-commercial nature and real usage.

V. DISCUSSIONS

With the growing population of social media users and an enormous volume of social media expressions, the customers are bound to be influenced by them. This calls for a conscientious effort on the part of service providers to anticipate favorable and unfavorable effects on users or customers.

The social media expressions consisting of user-generated content will always carry a stronger positive influence on service quality perceptions than the social media expressions carrying organization-generated content. This effect is, however, subject to service attributes as credence attributes help the users with specific service-centric information, which cannot be substituted with random experiences from unidentified users. In the absence of such specific information, the wrong perception of the quality can emerge, leading to confusions.

In such cases, the users have to rely more on organization-generated content because of its reliable nature and predictable performance of the service.

Further, anticipating the inclination of the users towards user-generated content and fine-tuning the service quality is going to be more critical than ever.

The perception of the quality of e-service needs to be examined on the assured results. The service providers need to realign the delivery frameworks to ensure that e-service being offered lives up to promised standards.

In doing so, the service providers shall not only gain from sustained competitive advantage but shall also be privy to positive perceptions of service quality. There cannot be a denial of the fact that good service quality directly results in better market performance.

User-generated content will continue to dominate in creating positive perceptions about service quality. As supported earlier, user-generated content will be read more by the users than the organization-generated content. A framework to positively reinforce the user-generated content through timely responses, satisfactory solutions, and rigorous follow-ups should be the backbone of every social media policy.

Future research studies can examine the interdependence of social media expressions and e-service quality under different verticals and segments to suggest whether service quality frameworks can be standardized.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research study has supported the facts that service quality is perceived by customers from various standpoints. Out of all these standpoints, social media expressions are considered to be the most dynamic and contextually relevant determinants of the service quality. The user-generated content (a category of social media expressions) is capable of creating relatively more accurate service perceptions due to its unbiased nature. In contrast, organization-generated content is deemed more useful in experiencing the predictable performance of services with greater reliability.

This research concludes with the suggestions that the organizations should seriously consider "credibility" of service being offered. Irrespective of the nature of social media expressions, the credibility of the service will help in creating positive perceptions about service quality. Social media expressions will be effective only when the service being offered is credible. Also, the efforts must be sincerely made to keep the organization-generated content relevant for the users. There can be several situations when the users would first see the organization-generated content for its attached service attributes.

In addition to maintaining credibility and keeping organization-generated content relevant, the organizations can mine the user-generated content to examine the differences between the expected service outcomes and the delivered service outcomes.

This will not only help in keeping the negative social media expressions under control but will also help in bringing improvements and innovations in services.

Finally, a comprehensive examination of social media expressions (mainly user-generated content) can facilitate the new product development process in the organizations.

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