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The Moderating Role of Gender Difference in The Behaviors of Omantel Frontline Service Employees Connecting The Relationship Between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract

Omantel is a leading telecom operator in Oman, where more recently there have been calls from its customers focusing on service quality to increase customer satisfaction, and organizational profitability. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) SERVQUAL Model did not break down the gender construct into male and female ignoring the gender difference in the behaviors of Frontline Service Employees (FSEs). Therefore, the current study adds this breakdown to their theory. This study is an attempt to investigate whether the gender difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs at Omantel outlets in Muscat moderates the relationship between service quality dimensions namely: Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, Job Requirements, Rapport, and Job Satisfaction and Omantel Customer Satisfaction. The target population for this study consists of 384 subscribers who are used to visit or contact Omantel outlets in Muscat (the capital of Oman), but 328 Omantel subscribers responded to the online questionnaire adapted from SERVQUAL scale and used to reach out the respondents who have been selected using non-probability convenience sampling. Structured questionnaire data was analyzed by SPSS SEM and AMOS. This quantitative research found that the behaviors of both male and female FSEs moderated the relationships between all service quality dimensions where female FSEs moderated these relationships stronger than their counterparts.

Keywords: Behavior, Customer Satisfaction, FSE, Omantel, Servqual, Service Quality Dimensions

Introduction

According to Belwal and Amireh (2018), in the Omani telecommunications sector strong competitions have forced telecom operators to pay more attention to service quality in order to increase customer satisfaction, and earn more profits. As a leading telecom company in Oman, Omantel was boycotted in 2016, as its dis-satisfied customers claimed, for its services (Muscat daily, 2016). The outcomes of this event were the decline in its domestic subscribers, the negative growth in its sales, and the strong pressure caused by the tremendous competition in the telecom market where Omantel customers tended to subscribe with those

operators which targeted low-income customers. Hence, this research has focused on the moderating role of Omantel gender difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs representing the face of this company at its outlets all over Oman.

According to Ritson (2013), female FSEs did a better job than their male counterparts in increasing the satisfaction level of their customers and bringing more profit to the company. This research has attempted to break down the demographic construct of employee gender in the American SERVQUAL quantifying scale (widely used in the field of marketing, e.g., Wang et al., 2015; Khatlab, 2018) into male and female FSEs in order to use the Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs as a moderator linking services provided by FSEs and Customer Satisfaction.

Research Objective

This research aims at investigating whether the Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs at Omantel outlets in Muscat moderates the relationship between service quality dimensions (Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, Job Requirements, Rapport, and Job Satisfaction) and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.

Literature Review

Previous research (Sundbo et al., 2015) considered FSEs as the key to successful service. These employees played a crucial role in providing better services to satisfy customers because of their direct contact with their customers (Itani & Inyang, 2015). Not involving the FSEs in service processes led to unwanted services, which in the end dissatisfied customers.

FSEs interacted regularly with their customers and these employees were able to link them with the company. Consequently, FSEs played a certain role in order to identify their customers' needs and interpret these needs into thoughts for service innovation (Sundbo et al., 2015). FSEs would not be indulged merely in their daily duties and interacting with their customers, but they would create innovative tasks within their work practices (Engen & Magnusson, 2015). According to Martin et al (2016), FSEs' unsystematic notion creation could be important in order to find issues that led to the development of new solutions.

As per Melton and Hartline (2015), FSEs played the facilitator's role as they acted as a moderator mediating significant insights about their customers to their company, which accordingly made use of the insights for generating ideas and developing such ideas into brand new service innovations. When FSEs implemented these innovations, they became the knowledge and new service or value proposition facilitator. Omar et al (2016) stated that FSEs were important knowledge interfaces, which was described as a function that facilitated the transference of knowledge within and among companies. Therefore, telecom companies should focus on their FSEs since they have been the most important source of knowledge.

SERVQUAL has been most widely used as one of the instruments for measuring service quality (Ali & Raza, 2017). This scale was developed by Parasuraman, et al (1988) and refined by them in (1991), to explore the five gaps of the Gap Model originated by them in 1985. The gap was the discrepancy between perceptions of customers and their expectations of the service delivered. The SERVQUAL scale assessed the perceptions of customers and their expectations towards five dimensions of service quality namely: Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Reliability. This instrument has been extensively used in a wide range of service industries in diverse countries and has revealed to be highly reliable and valid (Selvabaskar et al., 2015).

Iqbal et al (2016) noted that male and female FSEs reacted differently to work environments and job characteristics. For instance, females tended to experience higher levels of role ambiguity and conflict, and experienced more mental stress and emotional labor than males. However, females were generally more satisfied with their work due to their gender-specific work expectations and understanding of their work. In light of this existing research, it has been proposed that male and female FSEs differed in their beliefs of what determined good customer service. This gender-based interpretation of their own work could be the reason why males or females may be more suitable for certain frontline service roles. The current literature on customer service perceptions, however, has strongly focused on the customers' perspective. One notable exception was Iqbal et al (2016) who found that retail staff members had different interpretations of customer service. However, little has been known about the effect of the server's gender on the interpretation of customer service.

Iqbal et al (2016) stated that in their relationships, females were socially-oriented as they were strongly subjective to personal interaction. The present study has proposed the male and female FSEs' behaviors as a new moderator related to FSEs' service dimensions and the dimensions of SERVQUAL quantifying scale.

Prior to discussing the studies related to the influence gender difference could have on customer satisfaction, an employee's behavior, according to Rouf et al (2018), was of great importance in a service company because the employee linked the company with its customers and the employee was an essential determinant in developing effective working relationships with customers.

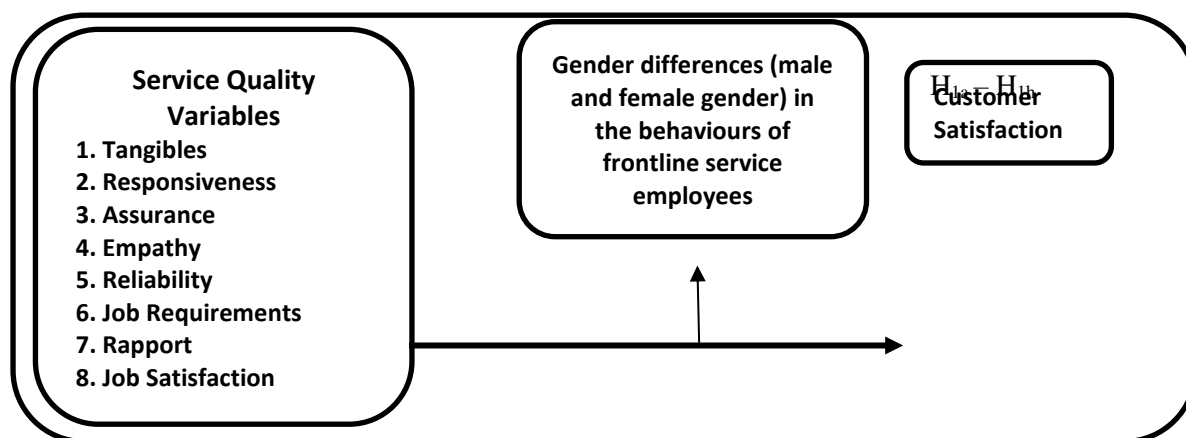
It has been believed that females were more skillful than males. In their quest to support the existence of public beliefs on gender differences stereotype, Szameitat, Hamaida, Tulley, Saylik, and Otermans (2015) stressed that people believed that females in many office works were better than males at multitasking. Cortes et al (2016) gave the evidence that since 1980 in the United States there has been a relative increase in the demand for females' skills in the high-skills labor market.

The importance of the moderating influence of male and female FSEs' behaviors on the relationship between quality of service provided by a particular male and female FSEs' behaviors and customer satisfaction has not yet been studied in the field of telecommunications, even though there was some research which focused on gender differences in the customer service understanding of FSEs. For instance, Ritson (2013) stressed that female marketers seemed to outperform their male counterparts because they were capable of combining and integrating their thinking between digesting what was important to the customer and assessing the importance of the variables. Conversely, male marketers did not succeed in generating higher marketing insight since they seemed more to make use of one approach or the other. Shukla, Adhikari, and Singh (2015) emphasized that female employees were more self-motivated and full of enthusiasm at their place of work in comparison to male employees. Starkhammar (2016) explored the roles of FSEs in the service innovation process. She found that FSEs could play the role of a facilitator, idea generator or co-creator. Chen (2018) noted that as long as FSEs were motivated and given the freedom to make decisions, they became knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the services delivered through their contact with customers.

Conceptual Framework

There has been no breakdown of the gender component of the SERVQUAL into male and female FSEs ignoring the gender difference in the behaviors of these employees. Therefore,

the current study adds this breakdown to their model. As per proposed conceptual framework of this study, there might be a moderating role of gender difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs in the relationship between these service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction. Therefore, the research hypotheses have been depicted in the conceptual framework where hypotheses H_{1a}-H_{1h}: Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of FSEs moderates the relationship between service quality dimensions and Omantel Customer Satisfaction. The conceptual framework has been depicted as per Figure 1.



Methodology

The sample size for the survey of this study is originally considered based on the following formula (Slovin's (1960)). The following formula is used for the survey to determine the sample size based on non-probability convenience sampling: $n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$ where: n: the sample size,

N: the population size, e: the margin of error, and 1: constant value. $n = \frac{10000}{1+10000(0.05)^2}$

$$n = \frac{10000}{26}$$

$n = 384$. These are 384 subscribers who are used to visit or contact

Omantel outlets in Muscat (the capital of Oman), but 328 Omantel subscribers responded to the online questionnaire adapted from SERVQUAL scale and sent via WhatsApp to reach out the respondents who have been selected using non-probability convenience sampling. Because of its speed, cost-effectiveness, not as time consuming like other sampling techniques, and ease of availability of the sample, the convenience non-probability sampling technique is considered as a very popular non-probability sampling technique (Stratton, 2021). Open questions are not chosen in the instrument of this study because they are difficult to process and they are not like close questions used in this study which generate numerically coded responses that can be interpreted into quantifiable figures and generalized to the target population (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Structured questionnaire data is analyzed by SPSS SEM and AMOS.

This study deploys the original Five-Point Likert Scale, established by Rensis Likert in 1932 (Likert, 1932), which consists of five symmetrical and balanced points where respondents choose (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). Reliability test is used to estimate the stability and consistency of the instrument. There is no other set explanation as to what is an acceptable Cronbach Alpha value (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In this study, the range of Cronbach Reliability score for the eight service quality dimensions is from acceptable to excellent.

Results

As per tables indicating values of standardized regression coefficients for causal path of the relationship between service quality dimensions and Omantel customer satisfaction for males and females, and figures showing path analysis of gender-Omantel as a moderator variable on the relationship between service quality dimensions and Omantel customer satisfaction, the Gender Difference of Omantel employee moderates the relationship between: (1) Tangibles and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.671) is more than male (0.456); (2) Responsiveness and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.687) is more than male (0.469); (3) Assurance and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.789) is more than male (0.562); (4) Empathy and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.743) is more than male (0.517); (5) Reliability and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.183) is more than male (0.101); (6) Job Requirements and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.459) is more than male (0.287); (7) Rapport and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.474) is more than male (0.292); (8) Job Satisfaction and Omantel Customer Satisfaction with female (0.393) is more than male (0.232). Therefore, these findings reinforce what has been hypothesized in this current study that Gender difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between the 8 service quality dimensions and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.

These findings also indicate that female FSEs moderate these relationships stronger than their counterparts. This is consistent with Ritson's (2013) view that female FSEs did a better job than their male counterparts in increasing the satisfaction level of their customers.

Conclusion and Discussion

The main findings of the current study are presented in the Table 1 below:

Table 1

The Main Findings of This Study

(H _{1a}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Tangibles and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.
(H _{1b}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Responsiveness and Omantel Customer Satisfaction
(H _{1c}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Assurance, and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.
(H _{1d}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Empathy and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.
(H _{1e}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimensions of Reliability and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.
(H _{1f}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Job Requirements and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.

(H _{1g}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Rapport and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.
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(H _{1h}) Gender Difference (male and female gender) in the behaviors of frontline service employees moderates the relationship between service quality dimension of Job Satisfaction and Omantel Customer Satisfaction.

The female FSEs moderated these relationships stronger than their counterparts.

Some limitations were expected in this research. Firstly, obtaining an adequate number of Omantel subscribers for data collection. Secondly, respondents facing digital issues while opening and sending the on-line questionnaire forms. Thirdly, having access to detailed information from TRA and Omantel documents. Fourthly, this study could not cover other Omantel outlets all over Oman because of the time constraints. Fifthly, using non-probability convenience sampling in this study has not enabled the researcher to generalize the findings to other Omantel outlets. Finally, a qualitative study may reveal in depth results.

Contribution to Knowledge

Theoretically, this study could contribute the knowledge on quality of services and the level of customer satisfaction, and the relationship between dimensions of quality of service (Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, Job Requirements, Rapport, and Job Satisfaction) and Customer Satisfaction in the telecommunications industry. Besides, the intention to use SERVQUAL Model with three additional dimensions contributes to the existing knowledge. This is because it includes these three more dimensions that influence quality of service at telecom companies. In such companies there is a need for research that can help the provision of relevant guidelines for the implementation of comprehensive services. This research has also added to SERVQUAL Model a significant item by suggesting a need to break down the demographic construct of employee gender in this American SERVQUAL quantifying scale into male and female employees. This study could contribute to the knowledge as its findings could be a relevant input to Omantel, and also companies which have FSEs services in identifying the existing strength and weaknesses of service quality delivery and level of customer satisfaction experienced by customers during their visit or contact to the company's service outlets.

Practically, since the Omani context has been using some factors in terms of service quality at telecom companies, the model proposed in the current study is intended to be useful for such companies in order to use more factors that influence customer satisfaction; not only the SERVQUAL five main factors namely: Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, Reliability, but also Job Requirements, Rapport, and Job Satisfaction. This model will also enable the company to better understand the challenges it faces while implementing telecom services and the implementation of these services will be more effective. This quantitative research developed a validated model based on SERVQUAL Model. This study could contribute to the knowledge as its findings could be a relevant input to Omantel, and also companies which have FSEs services in identifying the existing strength and weaknesses of service quality delivery and level of customer satisfaction experienced by customers during their visit or contact to the company's service outlets.

In addition, this study could help Omantel and researchers to focus on highly influential service dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction about FSEs by using the gender-classified version of the SERVQUAL Model proposed in this study in measuring the

services provided by its FSEs. Finally, the concept of modern FSEs service might be new particularly to Oman based on recent FSEs service literature.

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