Service Perceptions in China

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Abstract
This study investigates customer-based views of generic services from a Chinese consumer perspective. The data for the study are collected using students in a university setting as surrogates for Chinese consumers and are analyzed using a multidimensional scaling technique. The study indicates that only two dimensions, customization/standardization and person/object are responsible for most of the variance in the classifications. The paper discusses the implications of the findings in both the context of theory and for service businesses operating in the Chinese environment. The study is limited by the use of university students as surrogates for consumer and the limitations of multi-dimensional scaling. Despite these limitations, the study is useful to Chinese managers of service organization because it provides information on how Chinese consumers view generic services in general and in relation to each other in the Chinese environment. Chinese managers may gain insight into the possible ways that these managers may reposition their service in relation to other services. For Chinese service managers, this information may lead to the formulation of better strategy especially in the area of non-technical services.

Keywords: Services, services marketing, China services

Introduction
Services have received increasing attention in recent years in both developed and developing economies because of their increasing importance in all stages of economic development (Keegan & Schlegelmilch, 2001; Mühlbacher, Dahringer, & Leihs, 1999). Services account for an increasing share of gross domestic product (GDP) and continue to disproportionally contribute to economic growth in many countries of the world. They account for over 60% of the world output today (Kotabe & Helsen, 2004) and this trend is likely to accelerate in the foreseeable future.

Services also represent a major driving force in international trade. Service exports account for US $ 1.7 trillion (in 2004) or some 22% of total exports of goods and services for all the OECD member countries (OECD, 2007). The share of services in total cross-border exports continues to rise by 5% in the U.S., 22% in China, 33% in India, and 12% in Asia between 2000 and 2005 (World Trade Organization, 2006). Services occupy a major role in some of the fastest growing economies in the world today. For example, the latest five year plan for the People's Republic of China suggests that services will grow to 47% of the economy from approximately 34% of the economy in 2005 (Zarit, 2011).

Research in the internationalization of service businesses traditionally focuses on major globalization drivers and different modes of internationalization of service businesses (Williams, 1992; Brun, 2001; Johansson, 2009). However, managers of service businesses often require more sophisticated tools and methodologies to develop successful strategies for penetrating services markets around the world.

Service classification is one methodology that provides important insights into how consumers see multiple services in relation to other services. Service classification studies contribute to academic theory especially in services research areas as well as provide insights to managers because of their ability to group services and then examine services on similarities and differences (Hunt, 1983;Lovelock, 1983; Bowen, 1990). Researchers further implicitly suggest the need for such tools when they state that examining services on an industry by industry basis would be a mistake (Erramilli & Rao, 1993; Knight, 1999; Lovelock & Yip, 1996). Researchers typically feel that there is no magic bullet strategy to understand or market different or diverse service industries.

Both managers of service firms and academics require an understanding of how consumers perceive and classify services in order to compete in today's global environment. Unfortunately, the classification and perceptions of these

services are influenced by and are susceptible to cultural influences and variations (Clark, Rajaratnam, & Smith, 1996; Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Furrer & Sudharshan, 2001; Knight, 1999; Mattila, 1999; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2008). Researchers who fail to develop an understanding of service classification especially in the international environment risk arriving at generalized conclusions to when engaging in global marketing.

The services marketing literature provides a growing body of research on service classification. A careful review of the existing literature in this area reveals that traditionally most of the service taxonomies are normative (Bateson, 1995), and only a few services classifications actually focus on how customers view services. Moreover, most of the empirical studies in the services marketing area focus on a single or, at most, a few industries, and few examine this issue from a cross cultural or a developing country perspective.

This study seeks to develop a service classification scheme for a number of different generic services in a less developed service economy; The People's Republic of China (PRC). These services are generic in nature but also representative of generic services in the PRC.

The study consists of four sections. First, the study reviews the service classification and services taxonomies, presents key findings and identifies the gaps in the literature. The second section describes the methodology for the study and the basis for selection of the Chinese generic services studied in the paper. The third section explains the results of how Chinese consumers perceive and classify generic services used in the paper. Finally, the paper offers a discussion of results, limitations of the study and conclusions.

Literature review
Classification schemes serve as the basis for developing general theories and formulating marketing strategies. Therefore, scholars study service classification as a recurring theme in the development of services marketing literature (Cook, Goh, & Chung, 1999; Grönroos, 2000; Kasper, Van Helsdingen, & De Vries, 1999; Lovelock, 1980, 1983; Lovelock & Yip, 1996; Palmer, 1994; Sasser & Arbeit, 1978; Shostack, 1977; Silpakit & Fisk, 1985). Lovelock (1983) provides some meaningful strategic guidelines for different types of services based on his classifications. Other researchers focus on the classification of international services (Boddewyn, Halbrich, & Perry, 1986; Clark et al., 1996; Knight, 1999; Nicoulaud, 1989; Patterson & Cicic, 1995).

However, most classification schemes represent conceptual and normative efforts (Rathmall, 1974). Further, these schemes usually consist of only a few classification dimensions, which do not cover the wide range of qualities that differentiate one service from another (Grove & Fisk, 1983; Langeard & Eiglier, 1983). Moreover, the schemes represent the service provider's standpoint and not a consumer perspective (Patterson & Cicic, 1995). It is important to utilize consumer taxonomies based on dimensions from the actual consumers.

Some researchers develop service classifications from customer perceptions (Bowen, 1990; Cunningham et al., 1997; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996; Licata & Mowen, 1997) One interesting study used criteria from prior classification studies to classify ten services from a variety of service industries (Bowen 1990).

Using multidimensional scaling (MDS), Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) classify services on the basis of nine dimensions such as ease/difficulty of quality evaluation, ease/difficulty of purchase, degree of intangibility, level of standardization, and level of interaction between the service provider and the client. Cunningham, et al., (1997) also use MDS to classify eleven services on the seven dimensions developed from several studies (Bell, 1981; Bowen, 1990; Lovelock, 1980, 1983). Few studies have sought to develop service taxonomies from the perspective of consumers in developing countries especially in countries where both first world and third world economies seem to coexist at the same time (Cunningham, Young and Hu, 2013). Further, there are few if any studies that examine the issue of service classification and service taxonomies relative to generic service for a rapidly developing service economy such as China. The current study seeks to add to this evolving body of knowledge by investigating service perceptions of consumers in the PRC.

Methodology
This section of the paper describes the service dimensions, selection of services, research methodology, sample selection, questionnaire administration, sample characteristics and analytical technique.

Service Dimensions

Past research suggests several key dimensions useful in classifying services (e.g., Bell, 1981; Bowen, 1990; Lovelock, 1980, 1983). This study uses eleven dimensions that follow very closely the dimensions proposed by Lovelock (1983). The proposed dimensions represent the basis for managerial classification of services, although they remain largely untested in a Chinese consumer environment. The classifications include the perceptions of (1) physical product component, (2) customer-employee contact, (3) the separability of production and consumption, (4) the risk in selecting a provider of service (5) the effort to switch service providers, (6) the degree to which the service is performed to a person or an object (7) the formality of the relationship between the service provider and the customer, (8) the continuity of the service delivery, (9) the degree of the customization of the service, (10) the convenience level of the service.

Selection of Services

This study uses three criteria in the selection of services. First, the total set of services represents the different types of services cited in the literature. Second, the selected services represent a wide range of variations on the classifying dimensions. Third, respondents exhibit a high probability of extensive experience with the selected services. This study used as its base set of services thirteen services originally developed for a U.S. study (Cunningham et al., 1997).

The final selection of services in China is more difficult because the Chinese economy is at a different stage of development. The study used a small series of surveys at the Chinese educational institution to determine whether Chinese business students had familiarity with the services used in the U.S. questionnaire. As a result of this analysis, seven services remain the same in the Chinese survey; commercial airlines, hospitals, university education, banking, fast food restaurants, movie theaters, and public transit. The Chinese questionnaire does not contain spectator sports, plumbing, legal services, fine restaurants, and appliance repair. Chinese business students display limited experience with these services. Laundry is substituted for dry cleaning to fit more closely with the Chinese experience. Finally, the Chinese questionnaire contains six additional services based on the pretest surveys; computer repair, shoe repair, concerts, counseling, express mail, and barber.

This study uses back translation and decentering as recommended in the literature (Sood, 1990; Johansson 2009) to translate the original U.S. questionnaire into mandarin. Subsequently, translated the questionnaire and then conducted a pretesting process with a preliminary sample of bilingual subjects at the Chinese university.

The researchers then conducted personal interviews with these respondents. The researchers wished to determine the similarity of constructs, as well as their underlying dimensions, and the social setting of product and service consumption for each of the eleven service dimensions and thirteen services in both countries. The purpose was to evaluate and establish conceptual and functional equivalence of the questions asked in different countries.

Sample Selection

This study uses judgment samples for China. Respondents are undergraduate and graduate business students. The respondents are in various stages of their respective business programs. All students, however, are adult consumers of the set of services in their culture and as such are legitimate Chinese consumers. They are judgment samples of highly educated individuals from their culture. Participants can read, understand, and evaluate a sophisticated questionnaire on consumer issues. Many studies have found student samples to be useful and meansingful. (Beatson, Lee & Coote, 2007; Van Riel, Lemmink & Ouwersloot, 2001).

Questionnaire Administration

This study uses a printed questionnaire for each sample. The questionnaire explains to the students that they are part of a study about their perceptions of services. The questionnaire provides completes directions.

The questionnaire explains each classification method. After explaining the method and anchors for each classification (formal - informal, high – low) the respondent is asked to assess his or her perception of the service along the specified classification. The respondent is asked to do this assessment for each of the services. Finally, demographic information is collected.

Sample Characteristics

Chinese respondents are roughly split between the sexes and predominantly single. Their median education level is also more undergraduate than graduate, their median household income is greater than US $15K, and their mean age is 23.2.

Analytical Technique

The technique used for analysis was Multidimensional Scaling. This enabled us to identify underlying dimensions of the respondents' evaluations of objects. The analysis used in this study was a specific MDS approach known as MDPREF, or multidimensional preference scaling (Carroll, 1972). The data are collected specifically to allow the use of this approach. For this study the researchers calculated means aggregated over respondents for each service on each classification method. They then used this matrix of means as input to MDPREF. MDPREF constructs a factor-analytic representation of the set of classifications in multidimensional space. It then maps the set of services to that same multidimensional space. MDPREF uniquely presents results for two sets of information, classifications and services, on the same multidimensional space. The researchers were then able to use the map of classification descriptions to provide a good description of the nature of the multidimensional space for the services rather than just using the similarity of data of services as typical in other methods.

For the current research, either the service classifications or the set of services themselves is the basis for the initial representation onto which the other is mapped. In previous studies, the analyses proceed first by representing the classifications and mapping the services, then by representing the services and mapping the classifications. Lovelock gave priority to the classifications in order to make generalizations about services. Consistent with this focus, the analysis first factors the classification and then maps the services on the classification. After performing MDS, the analysis produces a pictorial representation of each classification result with its accompanying mapping of services.

The individual classification and service points in space are the same as the actual factors. In other words, the analysis pictorially represents a factor analysis solution as underlying dimensions and vectors.

Results

The first two factors extract 80% for the Chinese data. Figure 1 presents the pictorial results of the MDS analysis of the Chinese data. The points with lines drawn from the origin are the classifications from which the primary two factors are extracted. The individual points are the services mapped onto the classification factors in the same dimensional space.

Discussion

The results of the MDS demonstrate that two dimensions explain a large percentage of the overall variance in classifications of generic services. Additional dimensions in the analysis results explain the remaining variance but provide little useful explanation. The two primary dimensions for the classification of services are the basis for a pictorial representation. Presenting the two primary dimensions in a perceptual map is consistent with techniques use in most MDS studies. In the authors' judgment, the analysis results in two dimensions. The horizontal dimension is one of customization vs. standardization. The vertical dimension is one of person vs. object.

The left side of the horizontal axis represents customization and embodies the classifications of high riskiness and customization. Services representing this dimension include university education, hospital services, banking and counseling.

Customized services for China often reflect whether the service is performed on a person or object. For example, university, banking, hospital and counseling are somewhat customized services often performed for people while some customized and standardized services are performed on an object. For example, computer repair, laundry and shoe repair are standardized services typically done on an object. Standardized services on objects are expected in the upper right quadrant. At the same time, standardized services such as fast food and public transit have less of an object component and more of a people component and appear in the lower right quadrant. Standardized services such as movie and concerts are standardized but are people experiences. Such services appear lower in the lower right hand quadrant.

The study suggests several research directions. The MDS produces a dominant dimension of customization/standardization both within and across cultures. This dimension was originally suggested by Kelley, Donnelly, & Skinner (1990) although Kelley's analysis was limited in the number of classifications and services included. In this study, customization/standardization accounts for 45 percent of the variance.

The second or vertical dimension seems to vary largely with the type of services e.g. generic vs. non-generic studied rather than with culture. In previous studies of more generic services, the vertical dimension appeared to be more associated with a service to a person or object. This is again consistent with Kelley's original findings for generic services. However, in pure self-service technology (SST) studies, the vertical dimension seems related to separability or inseparability. The authors believe that replications and extensions of such techniques and methodologies in the services area will produce stability along customization/standardization dimension with high variability in the vertical dimension.

The consistency of the horizontal dimension and seeming predictability of classifications and services offer the potential to managers of service firms for repositioning their brands in international markets. Based on this study and previous studies, this seems to be the case for generic services in similar types of segments across cultures. Managers may use these service categories to see where their category is in relation to the other categories in Chinese culture as well as their home culture. With additional data regarding their brand and the brands of competitors, managers may also reposition their brand in relation to other brands inside the service category. For example, university education and banking services seem to be consistently positioned as a customized service category performed for people in China and elsewhere. Management can change the nature of this service by incorporating more customization through more employee interaction and more personalized product alternatives. Managers may create more standardization through less customer-employee interaction and less personalized product offerings. The positioning or repositioning of the service and brand is a consumer perception but is largely within the control of management. This tool and market segmentation information allow management to position their service in a way to take advantage of highly beneficial segmentation and poor positioning on the part of competitors.

Limitations

It is possible that classifications in Lovelock's original work influenced the MDS results. However, these classifications are, in reality, criteria for developing classifications. The authors contend that despite the number of classifications, two dimensions appear to represent consumer perceptions. It is highly unlikely that the results of the analysis will change with additional classifications.

There is a need for additional research in the same geographic regions of China with more representative samples or in other areas of China where consumer experience with services is more limited.

MDS and classifications provide only a surface structure of services and their dimensions. It does not include the underlying benefits that consumers may perceive with the services.

Alternative MDS methods may also influence the results. For example, in this study the MDPREF method offers certain specific advantages, for example, identifying the dimensions of the categories and mapping the services on the resulting dimensions. The questionnaire was specifically developed to take advantage of the unique characteristics of this method. However, other MDS methods offer alternative approaches to complete the study.

Conclusions

Lovelock proposed normative based classifications for consumers for generic services. Cunningham et al. (1997) extends Lovelock's original work on customer based perceptions of generic services in an empirically based study focused on the U.S. This study suggests consumers see services in two basic dimensions. This most recent survey also reinforces the point that consumers see services in this simple way. Researchers when using a normative approach to classifying services often think that consumers see services in a very complex way. In reality, as the number of consumer based classification studies have increased, researchers realize that consumers may see generic services in a very simple two dimensional fashion.

Further, the study provides evidence that the concept of two dimensions seems to work not only in the context of a developed country but also in the context of a rapidly developing country, the PRC, when using a select, young and very educated sample. There is a need to extend this analysis to other fast growing developing countries that fall in categories of emerging and new growth markets (Johansson, 2009).

This paper presents the results of the first effort to classifying generic services for China. The results are consistent with prior studies in their dimensionality. The horizontal axis is also consistent with prior studies representing customization vs. standardization. The results do diverge somewhat in the vertical axis. Further research is needed to determine if service classifications of generic services in other emerging and new growth markets with varying types of samples produce consistency of results in the horizontal dimension. Further, there is a need to examine study results for the vertical dimension in both emerging, new growth and mature growth markets with different types of services and samples.

Two final observations are worth noting. One is that there is great consistency in the predominate dimension in service classification irrespective of the nature of the services considered, the culture or the stage of economic development. The other crucial observation is that well educated Chinese consumers in affluent urban areas, when education and age are adjusted, perceive and classify generic services in many similar ways to U.S. consumers.

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Figure 1
MDS Results: China Service Dimensions
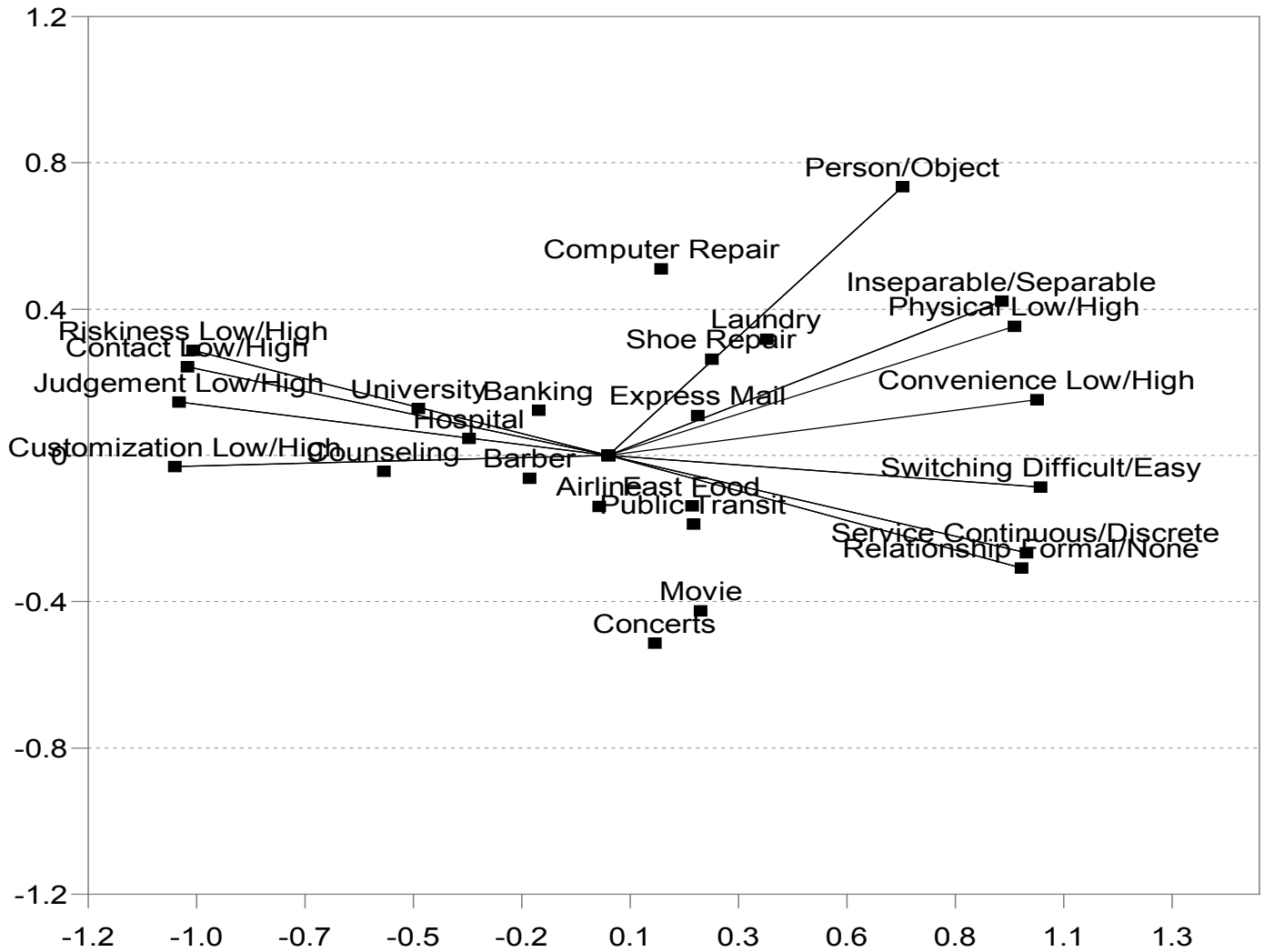
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