

**Models of Satisfaction Antecedents: a brief review
An integrative literature review of the most discussed
satisfaction models in marketing studies**

Fernando Macieira* e Tiago Oliveira

NOVA Information Management School (NOVA IMS), Campus de

Campolide, 1070-312 Lisboa, Portugal

Email: fernandomacieira@gmail.com

Email: toliveira@novaims.unl.pt

*Corresponding author

Mitsuru Yanaze

Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo

Prédio 3, Av. Prof. Lúcio Martins Rodrigues, 443 – Butantã

São Paulo - SP, Brasil 05508-020

Email: mitsuruyanaze@uol.com.br

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Fernando Macieira* e Tiago Oliveira

NOVA Information Management School (NOVA IMS)

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Email: fernandomacieira@gmail.com

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*Corresponding author

Mitsuru Yanaze

Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo

Prédio 3, Av. Prof. Lúcio Martins Rodrigues, 443 – Butantã

São Paulo - SP, Brasil 05508-020

Email: mitsuruyanaze@uol.com.br

Abstract: This article is an integrative review on satisfaction models. Its main purpose is to bring back the discussion on consumer satisfaction and loyalty – topics that are currently not receiving adequate attention by service management researchers. As a field grows, integrative review addresses the need to aggregate, critique and re-conceptualize the knowledge, as it continues to develop, this being particularly appropriate when contradictory evidence appears (Torraco 2005). Nevertheless, this article summarizes comments and integrates the most important models and theories concerning consumer satisfaction models, and adds suggestions for future research.

Keywords: service quality; satisfaction models; satisfaction antecedents; integrative review; loyalty; service management; SERVQUAL; RSQ; service quality model; quality dimensions;

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Biographical notes: Fernando Macieira holds a Master in Business Administration at COPPEAD/Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro and is currently a PhD Student at NOVA IMS. His research interests include marketing research, service

management and operations, service quality and design.

Tiago Oliveira is Associate Professor at the NOVA Information Management School (NOVA IMS) and Coordinator of the degree in Information Management. His research interests include technology adoption, digital divide and privacy.

Mitsuru Yanaze is Full Professor of Advertising, Public Relations and Tourism at the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo. He is coordinator of CEACOM (Center for Studies on Evaluation and Measurement in Communication and Marketing) of ECA-USP and international academic. His research topics include business communications, marketing planning and ROI.

1. Introduction

Is customer satisfaction a good predictor of loyalty? This question resonates amongst researchers and practitioners alike. By answering this question – and identifying the aspects of service design that should be improved to increase loyalty – managers could be able to allocate their resources better, thus earning more revenue and optimizing productivity. This is true especially in service industries, a segment accounting for the majority of the world's GDP that still receives less attention compared to tangible goods. (Mastrogiacomo and Franceschini 2018).

Especially in low margin and high competition markets, usually with scarce budgets, managers must have better knowledge about which aspect of their service design is capable of bringing more revenue and how much investment on quality should be made (Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham 1995). Managers therefore face investment decisions, asking themselves which aspects of business they should invest in to improve quality and consumer experience, which has seen its importance growing at the competitive battlefield of marketing (Gupta 2016).

To address these issues, we produced this integrative review in order to bring back to the table the discussion on consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Vasumathi and Subashini 2015) – once highly researched, but recently forgotten topics. As proposed by Webster and Watson (2002) a compelling review could create a foundation for scientific advancement through theory development, uncovering areas where research is needed

or “closing areas where a plethora of research exists” (Webster and Watson 2002, p. xiii).

2. Why write a literature review on consumer satisfaction?

Service quality and customer satisfaction might be two of the most researched topics in business literature, given the importance of the satisfaction construct in marketing (Suhaniya and Thusyanthy 2016). As a field grows, integrative review addresses the need to aggregate, critique and re-conceptualize the knowledge as it continues to develop; being particularly appropriate when contradictory evidence appears (Torraco 2005).

In consonance with Sternberg (1991), our review aims to make a point; it consists not only of a summary of theories, but presents an integrative approach of competing models, offering a point of view about the discussion (Bem 1995) and motivating researchers to close the gaps in the current matter.

In the service quality literature, there is evidence that when firms provide high quality goods and services, it enhances profitability, improves productivity, increases market share and return on investment, and reduces costs (Finn and Lamb 1991). Zeithaml (2000) suggests that the link between service quality and purchase intentions has been most often researched and confirmed.

Studies that link satisfaction with performance have found that consumer satisfaction is strongly related to marketing performance, explaining more than seventy percent of the variation (Pleshko and Cronin 1997). Hence, if a manager could design the service to achieve high levels of satisfaction, he could – in theory – bring more revenue to his business. In literature, customer satisfaction is closely linked to financial performance, profitability, shareholder value, return on investment, price sensitivity, customer loyalty, consumer-based retailer equity, firm-based brand equity, word-of-mouth, purchase intention, repeat-purchase intention and customer retention (Thusyanthy and Tharanikaran 2017).

Nevertheless, this is the reason for bringing back the study and discussion of satisfaction among practitioners and theoreticians.

3. A Review of Service Quality Antecedents

There has been a lot of discussion in literature about customer perceptions of service quality. Since Miller (1976 *apud* Dabholkar, Shepherd, and Thorpe 2000), a lot has been discussed on how to measure customer satisfaction in service environments. However, early propositions were mere adaptations of physical goods quality literature, mainly based on the disconfirmation paradigm (Brady and Cronin Jr 2001). The disconfirmation paradigm brings the expectation in the game, proposing that satisfaction is a result of what you perceive minus what you expect; the customer's expectations play an important role, along with perception, in satisfaction evaluation (Oliver 1977, 1980). Despite the differences between products and services – services being considered as performances, rather than objects (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988) due to its intrinsic characteristics – researchers began to apply the disconfirmation paradigm to conceptualize service quality evaluation models (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1994; Gronroos 1982 *apud* Brady and Cronin Jr 2001) when measuring customer satisfaction.

One of the first majorly accepted service quality models was proposed by Grönroos (1984). In addition to adapting the disconfirmation paradigm to the measurement of service quality, suggesting that perceived service quality was a product of the received service minus the expected service, Grönroos also proposed that the perceived service quality could be measured by two dimensions: one functional (how) and the other technical (what).

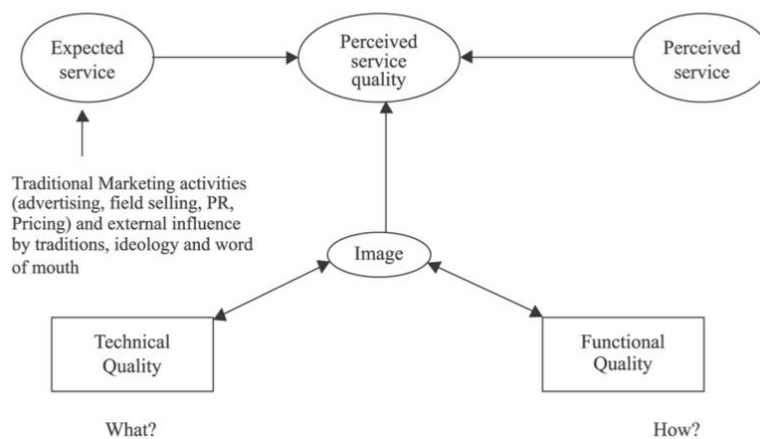


Figure 1 – Grönroos (1984) service quality model AKA The Nordic Model (Brady and Cronin Jr 2001)

Grönroos proposes that (1) “technical quality” is the quality of what the consumer actually receives as a result of the interaction with the service, i.e., the outcome; and (2) “functional quality” is how he/she gets the result, i.e., the way the service outcome is delivered. It represents customers’ perception of the interactions that take place during the service encounter (Brady and Cronin Jr 2001; Seth, Deshmukh, and Vrat 2005).

It is also important to emphasize that Grönroos incorporated the image as a second level construct leading to (and influencing the) perceived service quality. Since services are intangible (Lovelock 1983) – being processes and performances, rather than physical goods (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988) – and their consumption generally occurs simultaneously with production (Grönroos 1978), it is harder to have the outcomes of services evaluated by the customer (Zeithaml 1981), vis-a-vis tangible products. Subsequently, many authors seem to agree that perceived service quality is not a product just from technical or functional aspects of the service encounter *per se*, but influenced by firm image in some degree as well (Lehtinen and Lehtinen 1982; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985).

“A favorable and well-known image is an asset for any firm because image has an impact on customer perceptions of the communication and operations of the firm in many respects. If a service provider has a positive image in the minds of customers, minor mistakes will be forgiven. If mistakes often occur, however, the image will be damaged. If a provider’s image is negative, the impact of any mistake will often be magnified in the consumer’s mind. In a word, image can be viewed as a filter in terms of a consumer’s perception of quality.” (Kang and James 2004, p. 267)

Highly influenced by the European perspective, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) focused on service delivery process and conducted an extensive qualitative research to conceptualize a model, suggesting crucial points where the discrepancy between expectation and perception could generate service gaps, thus, impacting satisfaction. They postulate that knowledge about product quality is insufficient to understand service quality, due to the intrinsically different characteristics of services – intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability. Because of differences between services and products, service quality is more difficult to evaluate than goods quality;

it should result from a comparison of expectation with performance and, consequently, is not based solely on the outcome of a given service encounter; the service process has impact on the service evaluation as well.

Claiming that the service literature was not rich enough to provide the basis for a model development supported only by past research, they undertook an exploratory research to investigate deeper the concept and foundation of service quality. So, they conducted in-depth interviews with executives of four nationally-recognized service firms (retail banking, credit card, securities brokerage and product repair and maintenance) and a set of focus group interviews with consumers.

Based on the collected data, they proposed that regardless of the service type, consumers used similar criteria to evaluate service quality; mainly based on ten key categories: reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, tangibles and understanding/knowing the customer. Based on the focus groups as well, they proposed that the gap number five (perceived service x expected service) is really a function of the four other gaps. For instance, GAP3 will be favorable when actual service delivery exceeds specifications: it will be unfavorable when service specifications are not met (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985).

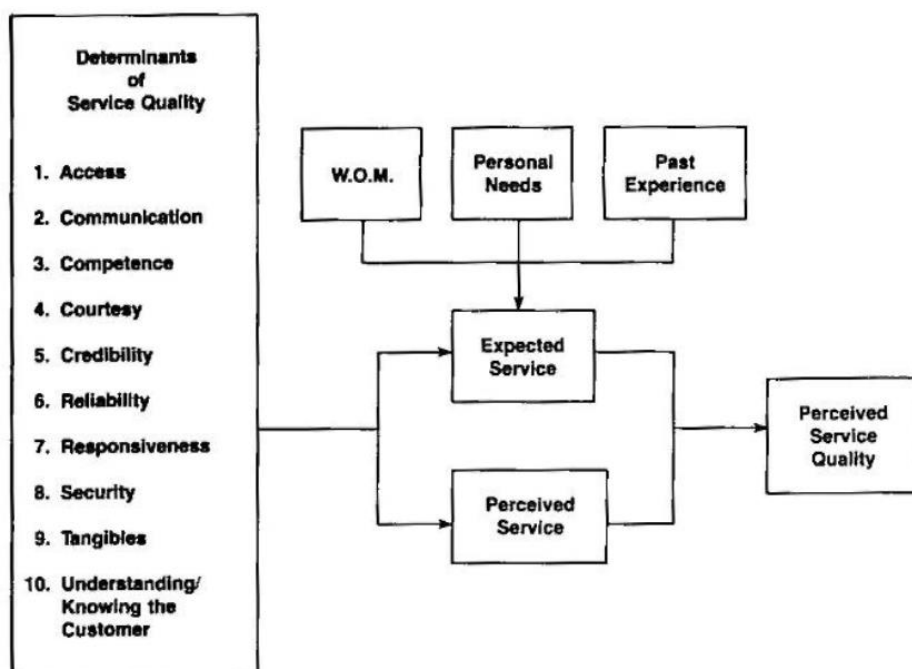


Figure 2 – Determinants of Perceived Service Quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985)

This exploratory research later became a survey aimed at measuring gap number 5, i.e. the distance between the customer's service expectations and his perceptions of the service. First, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), generated 97 items, each with a seven-point scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" (7) to "Strongly Disagree" (1), to form the initial SERVQUAL. Each item was then replicated into two statements, one measuring the expectations and the other measuring the perception about a given firm whose service quality was being measured. Data was collected and the scale was purified, condensing the instrument and establishing its reliability. For more information about the method used to purify and condense the SERVQUAL scale, please refer to Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). This procedure resulted in a new instrument containing five dimensions (reduced from the first ten) with 22 items to measure expectation and 22 more to measure performance, thus consisting of a 44-item survey, developed to better understand the service expectations and perceptions of consumers and improve service as a result. As Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) highlighted, one potential application of SERVQUAL is to determine the relative weight of each dimension in influencing customers' overall quality perceptions.

Tangibles	Physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel
Reliability	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately
Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service
Assurance	Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence
Empathy	Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers

Table 1 – SERVQUAL Five Dimensions and descriptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988)

The SERVQUAL instrument would still be subject to further refinement (Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1994b). Despite being one of the most tested and important service quality models, still used as a foundation for many scales and studies, SERVQUAL has been the subject of much criticism.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) directly suggested that the SERVQUAL approach was inadequate. They question the use of the disconfirmation paradigm, claiming that little or no empirical or theoretical evidence supported the relevance of the performance-minus-expectation gap as the basis for measuring service quality. Teas (1993) also questioned the validity of the performance-expectation approach. Cronin and Taylor (1992) also cited the superiority of simple performance-based measures over the first, developing and testing a performance-only model of the SERVQUAL instrument, which they called SERVPERF. Another criticism is aimed at the approach satisfaction → service quality proposed by SERVQUAL conceptualization. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) propose that satisfaction is a transactional concept and precedes service quality. The better the outcomes customers get from each service encounter (satisfaction), the better they will evaluate overall the firm's service quality. Cronin and Taylor (1992) reject this causality, proposing successfully in their model that service quality has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and is hence its antecedent. This finding is later backed by Brady and Robertson (2001), supporting the satisfaction → service quality direction in a cross national study in US and Ecuador.

Using SERVPERF, Cronin and Taylor (1992) suggest that a performance-only instrument may be an improved means of measuring the service quality construct and prove the significance of the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction and purchase intentions, suggesting that satisfaction has a significant impact on purchase intentions, more than service quality. Much of the criticism Cronin and Taylor (1992) and Teas (1993) directed at SERVQUAL, concerning the use of performance-expectation approach, was countered later by Parasuram, Zeithaml and Berry (1994a). Babakus and Boller (1992) also raised questions about SERVQUAL's dimensionality, when they tried to apply the instrument in diverse service settings – as proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1991; 1988) – proving that SERVQUAL had no discriminant or convergence validity, with its factor forming only two dimensions when applied to customers of a service utility company.

SERVQUAL also attracted criticism when applied to retail settings. Finn and Lamb (1991) applied the SERVQUAL instrument to department store customers, concluding that the model would not capture the essence of retail service quality, because it was not a product of the five dimensions proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). Following the issues found when trying to adapt and apply SERVQUAL in retail settings, Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996) state that retail store experience involves more pure-services experiences, where SERVQUAL was applied. Hence, service quality in retail should cover customers negotiating their way through the store, finding the merchandise they want, interacting with several store personnel along the way, and returning merchandise – all of which would influence customers' evaluations of service quality. They employed an exploratory qualitative research to develop a new model that could be used to measure service quality in retail. Combining findings from their qualitative research with the review of the retail literature and of SERVQUAL, they proposed the RSQ (Retail Service Quality) model.

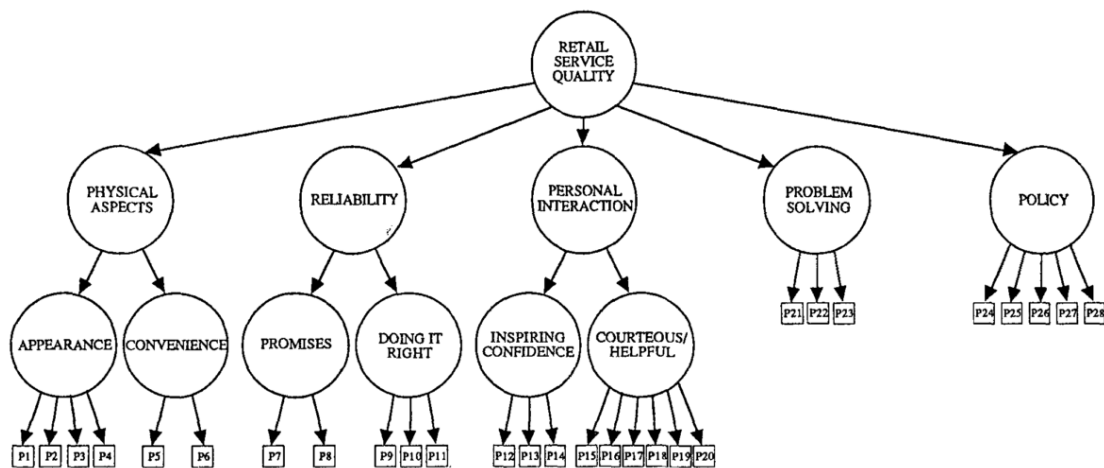


Figure 3 – Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996) Retail Service Quality Model

The RSQ model consists of a 28-item scale, 17 items of them from SERVQUAL and 11 items developed from their literature review and qualitative research, and – although using performance-only measures in their original paper – the scale can be applied using the disconfirmation paradigm approach. Also, the 7-point rating scale used in SERVQUAL was reduced to a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz 1996).

Another conceptualization of the service quality dimensions, very similar to Grönroos (1984), was proposed by Rust and Oliver (1994). Although they have not tested their model empirically, they proposed a three-component model, composed by service product (technical quality), service delivery (functional or process quality) and service environment.

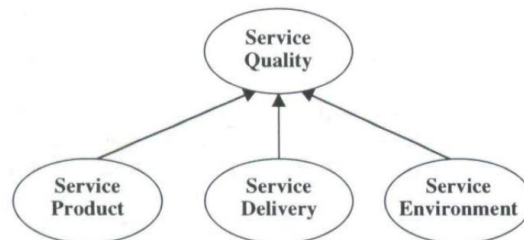


Figure 4 – Rust and Oliver (1994) model, reproduced from Brady and Cronin (2001)

A more recent proposition comes from Brady and Cronin (2001). After a comprehensive literature review and qualitative research, they proposed a model with three dimensions – as conceptualized by Rust and Oliver (1994) – and 9 sub-dimensions, based on consumers’ opinion gathered by open-ended surveys collected across eight industries (amusement parks, full-service restaurants, health care facilities, hair salons, automobile care facilities, dry cleaning, jewelry repair, and photograph developing). The answers used to conceptualize the 9 sub-dimensions had one exception: price. Even though the respondent cited price as a relevant factor, and authors acknowledge that price may have impact on perceived value, they chose not to use price in the model, following earlier studies on service quality scales (Dabholkar, Thorpe, and Rentz 1996).

To account for the alleged dimensionality issues of the SERVQUAL scale, Brady and Cronin (2001) repositioned the SERVQUAL factors as modifiers of their sub-dimensions, with reliability, empathy and responsiveness (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988) being related to each aspect of the service encounter.

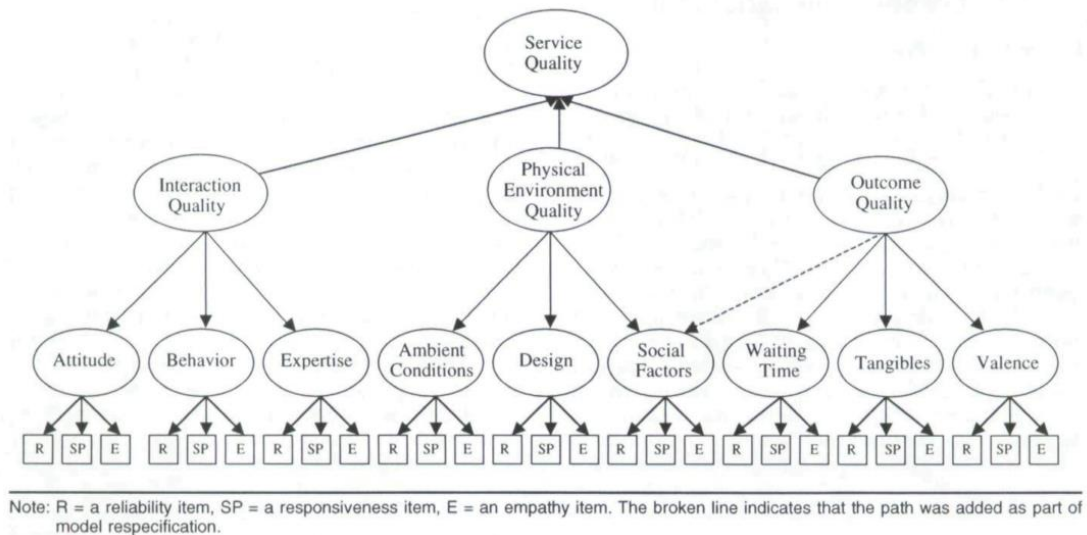


Figure 5 – Brady and Cronin (2001) Service Quality Model

For more on service quality measurement, an excellent review of scales and models is provided by Seth, Deshmukh, and Vrat (2005), in a presentation and brief discussion of the 19 models used to predict service satisfaction.

In Brazil, researchers like Lopes, Hernandez, and Nohara (2009), Carvalho and Leite (2001, 1997) and Tureta, Rosa, and Oliveira (2007) had already conducted some studies with application and comparison of the scales. Miguel and Salomi (2004) made an extensive review of service quality measurement as well.

After analyzing the state-of-the-art in consumer service quality perception models, we agree with Brady and Cronin (2001) when they say that the overall findings are, at the least, divergent and more studies are needed.

4. Conclusions and further research

As pointed by Torraco (2005) and highlighted by Webster and Watson (2002) as well, writing a meaningful literature review means not only an examination of the past, but also making a chart for future research. Integrative reviews should provocatively drive researchers to generate new ideas on the topic.

Thus, through our review, we showed that there is a vast support for the positive correlation between satisfaction and loyalty, being one of the most discussed and confirmed topics in business literature (Zeithaml 2000). Although consistent with this

proposal, other authors (Kumar, Pozza, and Ganesh 2013) suggest that satisfaction alone may not be the best of loyalty predictors, being just one of the many variables that contribute to this intention or behavior. To better assess the explained variance, other variables should be introduced as moderators, mediators or other predictors. However, literature seems to agree that satisfaction is often necessary, but not sufficient to predict customer loyalty, intentional or behavioral, and clearly, there is need for more research on this subject (Gupta and Zeithaml 2006). Still, according to Kumar, Pozza and Ganesh (2013) researchers should focus on a more holistic view of this relationship, using moderators, mediators and antecedent variables, such as perceived value, switching costs (Baumann, Elliott, and Burton 2012), involvement (Olsen 2007) and trust (Zboja and Voorhees 2006).

However, the discussion does not stop with the scope of the satisfaction-loyalty relationship. Even though researchers seem not to agree as to the way satisfaction relates to loyalty, it seems even harder to reach an agreement concerning the ways to measure satisfaction. State of the art appears to have some unanimity on the multi-dimensional concept of satisfaction, although researchers disagree on their quantity and antecedents, with results still being divergent, despite 20 or more years of studies (Brady and Cronin Jr 2001). Since studies suggest that the quest for service quality could generate competitive edge for firms (i.e., Lopes, Hernandez, and Nohara 2009), companies could benefit from understanding consumers' expectations better. This applies especially to Brazil in the current times, with the country being hit by an economic recession and with more and more companies struggling to survive.

Having said this, researchers should take into consideration the following: (1) proposing a new integrative model of consumers' satisfaction that could reveal to managers the key elements to improve their service offers – i.e., where to put their investments and (2) test new satisfaction-loyalty models that could introduce more variables (as stated above) and test this correlation empirically, focusing on behavioral loyalty.

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