E-quality and e-service equality

Service discrimination has been a major social concern in the face-to-face environment and reports on discrimination in public accommodation are not rare. According to the exiting body of literature, e-service may increase or decrease the quality of service received. This study analyzes the level of service received by different genders and ethnic groups when public librarians answer online reference queries (e.g., Sproull & Keisler, 1986; Daily & Steiner, 1998; Daily, Whatley, Ash, & Steiner, 1996; Glaser & Kahn, 2005; Douglas & McGarty, 2001; Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Shachaf, 2005b).

Thus, the current study tries to examine if online discrimination exists in the services that are provided to the general public by librarians. This study assumes that while it is possible that unequal services will increase in the virtual environment, it is also possible that e-service providers may be able to offer unbiased service. This paper is designed to address the following question: Do e-services provide equitable online services to the public?

Specifically, the study focuses on race and gender bias in public libraries. This study evaluates the equality of online mediated e-services interactions between service providers and users. Over the past three decades researchers have made efforts to uncover the most important dimensions of perceived service quality (e.g., Parasuraman, 1985); lately these efforts have also focused on e-services quality (e.g., Yang, Jun, & Peterson, 2004). Specific guidelines for the quality of direct e-services of information professionals and librarians have been published by professional associations such as the International Federation of Library Association (IFLA) and the American Library Association - Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) (IFLA, 2005a; 31, 32). Using these guidelines for direct services and Yang, Jun and Peterson’s (2004) dimensions of e-services, this study focuses on the following three quality dimensions:

1. Responsiveness: Acknowledgements of user email questions in a timely manner, providing patrons with responses as quickly as possible, and adherence to stated turnaround policy (IFLA, 2005b; RUSA, 2004a; Yang, Jun, & Peterson, 2004).
2. Reliability: Answering the query efficiently and correctly and providing a signature that contains the librarian’s name or initials, title, and institution (IFLA, 2005b; Yang, Jun, & Peterson, 2004).

The quality of e-service is high when the service is provided at a high level on all three dimensions and inferior e-service quality is provided when any (or all) of these dimension are performed at a lower level. This study focuses on the equality of e-service among user groups as evaluated on these three quality dimensions. Service equality is defined as the equal level of quality of services provided to all users, without discrimination on the ground of race or gender. Thus, we examined the following hypotheses:

H1. All user groups will receive a response in a timely manner.
H2. All user groups will receive the same level of efficient and reliable service.
H3. All user groups will receive equal quality of access and courtesy from e-services.

An experiment using scenarios of information needs was conducted among public libraries in the United States that provide online reference services. The experimental feature of the study is that the requests have four different versions which differed only in the implicit ethnicity of the user, indicated by the users’ names. The use of names perceived to be of a particular ethnicity is a common method to examine possible bias (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). We used names that have been rigorously verified to be names that most people would assume African-American ethnicity for certain names and Caucasian ethnicity for other names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004).

The current study was limited to only public libraries that provided a mailto link or a web form specifically for reference questions that users can complete were included in the sample list (Stacy-Bates, 2003). Four reference queries were used which represented questions likely to be directed to public libraries. Each e-service received one request per week during four consecutive weeks. After the data was received, a coding scheme was developed based on Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) and International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) guidelines (IFLA, 2005a; RUSA, 2004a). All 352 transactions were uploaded into Nvivo 2.0 to facilitate content analysis and the search for frequencies and co-occurrences of codes and attributes. After all transactions were coded, inter-coder reliability was calculated and resulted in 100% intercoder reliability, which is an extremely high level of reliability. Using SPSS 13.0, one-way ANOVA and cross tabulations were conducted to identify
differences among user groups. Our study found that differences in quality of e-services in public libraries among user groups exist, but these are not statistically significant. Thus, all three hypotheses were supported.

Does E-quality equal equality? Yes. This study found no significant differences based on race or gender in the quality of e-services that libraries provide to the public on all three indicators of e-service quality. The quality of service to all user groups was equal in terms of access and courtesy, reliability, and responsiveness. We conclude that the virtual environment has the potential to enable better and equal services to all users without bias on the ground of age, disability, race, gender, ethnicity, and country of origin. However, service discrimination is an understudied research domain in librarianship. This study provides an initial analysis of service equality in public libraries.

References


