# Adapting the SERVQUAL Model for East Asian Contexts: A Study of Consumer Expectations and Satisfaction

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**Abstract**

This study examines the application and adaptation of the SERVQUAL model in East Asian consumer contexts, addressing the cultural nuances that influence service quality perceptions. Through structured questionnaires administered to 328 consumers across three East Asian markets, this research investigates how traditional SERVQUAL dimensions require modification to accurately reflect regional expectations and satisfaction measurements. Statistical analysis using SPSS revealed that while reliability and assurance remain significant across cultures, the dimensions of tangibles and empathy demonstrate culturally specific interpretations. Two hypotheses were tested: (1) East Asian consumers prioritize reliability and assurance over other SERVQUAL dimensions, and (2) cultural value orientations moderate the relationship between service quality dimensions and overall satisfaction. Both hypotheses received partial support, indicating the need for a culturally calibrated service quality assessment model. The findings contribute to both theoretical understanding of cross-cultural service quality measurement and practical applications for multinational service providers operating in East Asian markets.

**Keywords:** SERVQUAL; East Asian Consumers; Service Quality Measurement; Cross-Cultural Adaptation; Consumer Satisfaction; Cultural Dimensions

## 1. Introduction

Service quality measurement has predominantly relied on Western-developed frameworks, with the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) standing as one of the most widely applied tools across industries. However, as markets globalize, the transferability of these measurement models to non-Western contexts has become increasingly questioned. East Asian markets, with their distinct cultural orientations toward collectivism, high power distance, and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001), present a particularly compelling case for examining how service quality perceptions may differ from Western norms.

This research addresses the gap in adapting standardized service quality measurements to culturally diverse contexts by specifically examining how the SERVQUAL dimensions function within East Asian consumer environments. The study investigates whether the five traditional SERVQUAL dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—maintain their relevance and relative importance in East Asian service settings, or whether cultural calibration is necessary for accurate measurement and interpretation.

The research aims to provide both theoretical insights into cross-cultural service quality measurement and practical guidance for multinational service organizations seeking to assess and improve their service delivery in East Asian markets. By developing a culturally calibrated model of service quality assessment, this study contributes to the evolving understanding of how consumer expectations are shaped by cultural contexts.

## 2. Related Work and Theoretical Support

### 2.1. Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The foundation of service quality measurement has been substantially influenced by the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which identifies five key dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. This framework operates on the premise that service quality is determined by the gap between customer expectations and perceptions of actual service delivery (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

However, researchers have increasingly questioned the universal applicability of this model across diverse cultural contexts. Mattila (1999) found that Asian consumers placed different weights on various service elements compared to Western consumers, particularly in hospitality settings. Similarly, Liu et al. (2001) demonstrated that Chinese consumers emphasized different aspects of service encounters than their American counterparts.

The theoretical underpinning for these cultural variations can be found in Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory and Hall's (1976) high-context versus low-context cultural framework. East Asian cultures typically score high on collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation dimensions (Hofstede, 2001). These cultural traits influence how service quality is perceived and evaluated.

Recent work by Zhang et al. (2008) and Wu and Cheng (2013) has begun to address the need for culturally adapted service quality models, particularly in Chinese contexts. However, comprehensive studies encompassing multiple East Asian markets with rigorous empirical testing remain scarce.

### 2.2. Variables and Theoretical Support

The primary variables examined in this study include the five SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) as independent variables, overall customer satisfaction as the dependent variable, and cultural value orientations as moderating variables.

Cultural value orientations are operationalized using Hofstede's dimensions, particularly focusing on collectivism/individualism, power distance, and long-term orientation. These dimensions have

consistently shown relevance in studies of consumer behavior across cultures (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011).

The expectation-confirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) provides additional theoretical support for this research, suggesting that satisfaction results from the comparison between expectations and perceived performance. This study extends this framework by examining how cultural factors influence both the formation of expectations and the evaluation of performance.

## 2.3. Hypotheses Development

Based on the literature review and theoretical frameworks, two primary hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: In East Asian consumer contexts, reliability and assurance dimensions of SERVQUAL will demonstrate stronger associations with overall satisfaction compared to tangibles, responsiveness, and empathy dimensions.
This hypothesis is supported by research suggesting that East Asian cultures, with their higher uncertainty avoidance tendencies, place greater emphasis on reliability and trustworthiness in service encounters (Furrer et al., 2000).

Hypothesis 2: Cultural value orientations (collectivism, power distance, and long-term orientation) will moderate the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and overall customer satisfaction.

This hypothesis builds on cross-cultural consumer behavior research indicating that cultural values shape evaluation criteria and satisfaction judgments (Patterson et al., 2006).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Sample Selection and Data Sources

Data collection was conducted across three East Asian markets: China, Japan, and South Korea. These countries were selected for their economic significance in the region while representing variations in cultural traits within the broader East Asian context. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to ensure demographic diversity and representativeness.

The total sample comprised 328 consumers distributed across the three markets (China: n=112, Japan: n=107, South Korea: n=109). Participants were recruited through a combination of online panels and intercept methods at service establishments, including retail stores, restaurants, and hotels. The sample was balanced for gender (53% female, 47% male) and included diverse age groups (18-70 years, mean age=34.6, SD=11.2).

Structured questionnaires were administered in the respective local languages following rigorous translation and back-translation procedures to ensure conceptual equivalence. Data collection occurred between March and May 2024. The response rate was 67%, and non-response bias testing revealed no significant differences between early and late respondents.

### 3.2. Model Design and Definition of Variables

The research model examines the relationships between adapted SERVQUAL dimensions and overall customer satisfaction, with cultural values serving as moderating variables. The structural

equation model tested these relationships while controlling for demographic and situational variables.

Variables were operationalized as follows:

(1) SERVQUAL Dimensions: Measured using adapted scales from Parasuraman et al. (1988) with modifications based on preliminary qualitative research in each market. Each dimension was assessed using 4-5 items on a 7-point Likert scale.

(2) Overall Customer Satisfaction: Measured using a 3-item scale adapted from Oliver (1997), capturing cognitive and affective satisfaction components.

(3) Cultural Value Orientations: Assessed using established scales for collectivism/individualism, power distance, and long-term orientation, adapted from Yoo et al. (2011).

(4) Control Variables: Demographic information (age, gender, education, income) and service encounter characteristics (frequency of use, type of service, relationship duration).

**Table 1. Measurement of Key Variables**

| Variable | Measurement Items | Scale | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tangibles | 1. Modern-looking equipment2. Visually appealing facilities3. Neat appearance of employees4. Visually appealing materials5. Aesthetically pleasing environment | 7-point Likert(1=Strongly disagree,7=Strongly agree) | Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988) with additions from cultural pre-testing |
| Reliability | 1. Keeping promises about timing2. Sincere interest in problem solving3. Performing services right the first time4. Providing services at promised time5. Error-free records | 7-point Likert | Parasuraman et al. (1988) |
| Responsiveness | 1. Telling customers when services will be performed2. Prompt service to customers3. Willingness to help customers4. Never too busy to respond to requests | 7-point Likert | Parasuraman et al. (1988) |
| Assurance | 1. Behavior instilling confidence2. Feeling safe in transactions3. Consistently courteous4. Knowledge to answer questions5. Respect for social hierarchy | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988) with addition of item 5 from cultural pre-testing |
| Empathy | 1. Individual attention2. Convenient operating hours3. Personal attention4. Having customers' best interests at heart5. Understanding specific needs6. | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1988) with addition of item 6 from |

| | Maintaining appropriate social distance | | cultural pre-testing |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overall Customer Satisfaction | 1. Overall, I am satisfied with this service provider2. My expectations were met by this service provider3. This service provider is close to my ideal service provider | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Oliver (1997) |
| Collectivism | 1. Group welfare is more important than individual rewards2. Group success is more important than individual success3. Group loyalty should be encouraged even at the cost of individual goals4. Individuals should pursue goals after considering group welfare | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Yoo et al. (2011) |
| Power Distance | 1. People in higher positions should make decisions without consulting people in lower positions2. People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently3. People in higher positions should avoid social interaction with people in lower positions4. People in lower positions should not disagree with decisions by people in higher positions | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Yoo et al. (2011) |
| Long-term Orientation | 1. Planning for the long-term is important2. Working hard for success in the future is important3. Personal steadiness and stability are valued4. Sacrificing present enjoyment for future success is worthwhile | 7-point Likert | Adapted from Yoo et al. (2011) |

## 4. Results and Findings

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Preliminary analysis of the data revealed acceptable psychometric properties for all measures. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.79 to 0.92, indicating good internal consistency reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the five-factor structure of the adapted SERVQUAL instrument, with acceptable fit indices (CFI=0.93, RMSEA=0.064, SRMR=0.057).

Descriptive statistics showed variations in mean scores across the three markets. Chinese consumers reported higher expectations for tangibles (M=5.87, SD=0.94) compared to Japanese (M=5.21, SD=1.01) and Korean consumers (M=5.43, SD=0.88). Japanese consumers placed significantly higher emphasis on reliability (M=6.32, SD=0.68) compared to the other dimensions and other markets.

Cultural value measures confirmed the expected patterns, with all three markets scoring high on collectivism and power distance compared to Western benchmarks, though with notable variations among them. Japanese respondents showed the highest long-term orientation scores (M=5.93, SD=0.72), followed by Korean (M=5.67, SD=0.81) and Chinese respondents (M=5.51, SD=0.87).

## 4.2. Correlation and Regression Analysis

Correlation analysis revealed significant associations between all SERVQUAL dimensions and overall satisfaction across the combined sample. However, the strength of correlations varied by market. Reliability showed the strongest correlation with satisfaction across all three markets (r=0.72, p<0.001), supporting Hypothesis 1 partially.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the relative influence of each SERVQUAL dimension on overall satisfaction. The results revealed that reliability ($\beta$=0.37, p<0.001) and assurance ($\beta$=0.29, p<0.001) were the strongest predictors of satisfaction across the combined sample, followed by responsiveness ($\beta$=0.22, p<0.001), empathy ($\beta$=0.18, p<0.01), and tangibles ($\beta$=0.16, p<0.01). This pattern generally supports Hypothesis 1, though the significant contribution of all dimensions suggests that a comprehensive service quality model remains relevant even with cultural adaptation.

Moderation analysis using hierarchical regression and interaction terms provided partial support for Hypothesis 2. Collectivism significantly moderated the relationship between empathy and satisfaction ($\beta$=0.17, p<0.01), with higher collectivism strengthening this relationship. Power distance moderated the relationship between assurance and satisfaction ($\beta$=0.21, p<0.001), with higher power distance strengthening this relationship. Long-term orientation moderated the relationship between reliability and satisfaction ($\beta$=0.19, p<0.01), with higher long-term orientation strengthening this relationship.

Path analysis confirmed the structural relationships in the hypothesized model, with good model fit ($\chi^2$/df=2.31, CFI=0.94, RMSEA=0.058). The final model explained 73% of the variance in overall satisfaction.

## 4.3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1: Partially supported. While reliability and assurance showed the strongest relationships with satisfaction across all markets, responsiveness also demonstrated a strong influence, particularly in the Chinese sample.

Hypothesis 1, which posited that reliability and assurance dimensions would demonstrate stronger associations with overall satisfaction compared to other SERVQUAL dimensions in East Asian consumer contexts, received partial support from the empirical findings. The regression analysis confirmed that reliability ($\beta$=0.37, p<0.001) and assurance ($\beta$=0.29, p<0.001) indeed emerged as the two most influential predictors of overall satisfaction across the aggregated sample. This finding aligns with Hofstede's (2001) characterization of East Asian cultures as uncertainty-avoiding societies, where consistency, trustworthiness, and confidence-inspiring service attributes are particularly valued.

However, several nuances in the data prevent full confirmation of the hypothesis. Most notably, responsiveness demonstrated unexpectedly strong relationships with satisfaction (β=0.22, p<0.001), particularly in the Chinese market (β=0.28, p<0.001). This finding diverges from previous cross-cultural service research by Furrer et al. (2000), who suggested that responsiveness would be less prioritized in high power distance cultures. One potential explanation lies in China's rapidly evolving service expectations, which Chen and Zhang (2020) attribute to increased exposure to global service standards and heightened consumer empowerment through digital platforms.

Market-specific analysis revealed significant variations worth noting. While Japanese consumers demonstrated the most pronounced emphasis on reliability (β=0.41, p<0.001), Korean consumers exhibited more balanced weighting across dimensions. As Hwang and Lee (2019) observed, "Korean service expectations represent a hybridized model incorporating both traditional East Asian values and Western consumer empowerment ideals" (p. 327).

The findings suggest that a more culturally nuanced refinement of the hypothesis is necessary. Rather than a universal East Asian pattern, the data indicates market-specific interpretations of service quality dimensions that reflect varying stages of economic development, historical service traditions, and degrees of Western market influence. Zhang and Kim (2023) similarly noted that "cultural values operate on a spectrum rather than as discrete categories, requiring gradient approaches to service quality adaptation" (p. 142). This underscores the need for multinational service organizations to develop market-specific measurement models rather than applying a homogeneous East Asian template.

Hypothesis 2: Partially supported. Cultural value orientations moderated specific relationships between SERVQUAL dimensions and satisfaction, but not all hypothesized moderating effects were significant. The moderating effects varied across the three markets, suggesting market-specific adaptations are necessary.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that cultural value orientations (collectivism, power distance, and long-term orientation) would moderate the relationship between SERVQUAL dimensions and overall customer satisfaction, received partial support through our moderation analysis. The empirical evidence confirmed several significant moderating effects, though not all hypothesized interactions materialized as anticipated.

Collectivism demonstrated a significant moderating effect on the relationship between empathy and satisfaction (β=0.17, p<0.01), with the association strengthening as collectivism scores increased. This finding corroborates Mattila and Patterson's (2004) assertion that collectivistic consumers place greater emphasis on relationship-oriented service elements. However, the anticipated moderating effect of collectivism on responsiveness was not statistically significant (β=0.08, p>0.05), contradicting theoretical predictions based on in-group preferences.

Power distance emerged as a significant moderator for the assurance-satisfaction relationship (β=0.21, p<0.001), with higher power distance strengthening this association. As Furrer et al. (2000) previously suggested, consumers from high power distance cultures demonstrate heightened sensitivity to status cues and authority signals in service interactions. Interestingly, the

hypothesized negative moderating effect of power distance on the empathy-satisfaction relationship was not supported (β=-0.04, p>0.05), suggesting that empathy remains important regardless of power distance orientation when properly contextualized.

Long-term orientation significantly moderated the reliability-satisfaction relationship (β=0.19, p<0.01), with more future-oriented consumers placing greater emphasis on consistent service performance. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) characterization of long-term oriented cultures as valuing persistence and sustained effort. However, its hypothesized moderating effect on tangibles was not significant (β=0.06, p>0.05).

Notably, the moderating effects exhibited significant variation across the three markets studied. Japanese consumers showed the strongest moderating effect of long-term orientation on reliability (β=0.26, p<0.001), while Chinese consumers demonstrated the most pronounced moderating effect of power distance on assurance (β=0.29, p<0.001). As Zhang et al. (2022) note, "Cultural values operate differentially across East Asian markets despite surface similarities, reflecting unique historical trajectories and contemporary economic conditions" (p. 183).

These findings underscore the necessity for market-specific adaptations of service quality models rather than a pan-East Asian approach. As Lee and Chen (2019) argue, "The heterogeneity within regional cultural clusters often exceeds the differences between regions, necessitating granular approaches to service adaptation" (p. 417). Future research should explore additional cultural dimensions and their market-specific manifestations to further refine our understanding of culturally contingent service quality perceptions.

## 5. Discussion and Implications of the Study

The findings reveal both similarities and differences in how East Asian consumers evaluate service quality compared to Western contexts. The continued significance of all five SERVQUAL dimensions confirms the fundamental relevance of the model, but the varying emphasis on specific dimensions and the moderating effects of cultural values highlight the need for adaptation.

The stronger influence of reliability and assurance across all three East Asian markets aligns with cultural tendencies toward uncertainty avoidance and risk reduction. However, the emergence of market-specific patterns—such as the heightened importance of tangibles in China and the strong emphasis on reliability in Japan—indicates that even within the East Asian region, cultural calibration is necessary.

The confirmed moderating effects of cultural values on the relationship between service quality dimensions and satisfaction provide empirical support for culturally contingent service quality models. The strengthening effect of collectivism on the empathy-satisfaction relationship suggests that service providers in collectivistic cultures should emphasize relationship-building and personalized attention, albeit with appropriate social boundaries.

## 5.1. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to service quality literature by empirically demonstrating the need for cultural calibration of established measurement models. It extends expectation-confirmation theory by incorporating cultural variables as determinants of both expectation formation and service evaluation processes. The findings support a contingency approach to service quality measurement rather than a universalist perspective.

The study also advances cross-cultural consumer behavior theory by identifying specific mechanisms through which cultural values influence service evaluations. The differential moderation effects of cultural dimensions on various service quality components provide a more nuanced understanding than previous research.

## 5.2. Practical Implications and Policy Recommendations

For multinational service organizations operating in East Asian markets, several practical implications emerge:

(1) Adaptive Measurement: Service quality assessment instruments should be adapted to incorporate cultural dimensions and emphasize reliability and assurance dimensions while maintaining comprehensive measurement.

(2) Training Priorities: Staff training programs should prioritize consistency and trustworthiness while recognizing market-specific expectations regarding tangibles and interpersonal interactions.

(3) Market-Specific Approaches: Despite regional similarities, distinct approaches are warranted for different East Asian markets, with greater emphasis on physical environment in China, procedural reliability in Japan, and balanced attention to multiple dimensions in Korea.

(4) Cultural Competence Development: Organizations should invest in developing cultural competence among customer-facing staff, particularly regarding appropriate expression of empathy within collectivistic contexts and demonstration of assurance in high power distance environments.

From a policy perspective, regional standardization efforts for service quality should acknowledge cultural variations while facilitating cross-border service delivery. Industry associations and regulatory bodies could develop culturally calibrated benchmarking frameworks that maintain core quality principles while accommodating cultural contingencies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while the SERVQUAL model maintains relevance in East Asian contexts, cultural calibration enhances its explanatory power and practical utility. The five traditional dimensions remain significant predictors of customer satisfaction, but their relative importance and interpretation vary across cultural contexts and are moderated by cultural value orientations.

The research advances both theoretical understanding of cross-cultural service quality measurement and provides actionable guidance for service organizations navigating East Asian markets. Future research should explore additional cultural dimensions, examine longitudinal changes in service expectations as markets evolve, and investigate the potential convergence or divergence of service quality perceptions in increasingly globalized economies.

The adapted SERVQUAL model proposed in this study offers a balanced approach that preserves the comprehensive assessment of service quality while acknowledging the cultural contingencies that shape consumer expectations and evaluations. This culturally sensitive approach to service quality measurement represents an important step toward more accurate and actionable insights for both researchers and practitioners in international service marketing.

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**Conflict of Interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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