

Service Contagion: A Study Of Conceptual Aspects On The Road To Service Quality

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Abstract. The product marketers have started recognising the need to consider product contagion, especially while designing the arrangement of the shelves in retail sector, since a decade now. An attempt is made here to introduce a new terminology, called service contagion, to grapple with the emerging scenarios in the services sector also. It shall now be necessary to look at how the concept of service contagion is likely to emerge, taking cues from the age old concept of emotional contagion/social contagion and the relatively modern aspects of financial contagion. Service Contagion basically recognizes the disgust factor, commonly present in the minds of the service consumers. Further Service Contagion could interfere with the objective purchase evaluation of services as well as the service quality gaps. In the process, a good understanding of the various ramifications of service contagion would help us to achieve enhanced levels of Service Quality. This paper is a preliminary attempt to connect the earlier theories on Emotional Contagion, Financial Contagion, Social Contagion and Product Contagion with Service Contagion. Also, a model showing the factors impacting on Service Contagion has been designed.

Keywords: Service contagion, service quality, emotional contagion, financial contagion, social contagion, product contagion

1. Introduction

The recent research work done at Arizona State University at W.P.Carey School of Business regarding Product Contagion is of great significance. It underlines the importance of purchase evaluation of products with respect to how one product is stored adjacent to another product in a departmental store, which causes disgust in the minds of the consumer. Now research needs to be done about the impact of “disgust” factors that could interfere with ultimately achieving Service Quality Excellence. The author introduces a new term “Service Contagion” to underscore such studies and evolve thought amongst the academic fraternity.

2. Definitions

2.1. Contagion

The term contagion itself has its roots in the Latin word contagion, and quite literally means "from touch". Contagion therefore refers to a process of transmission by touch or contact. A disease that may be transmitted by direct or indirect contact is called a contagious disease or contagion.

2.2. Emotional Contagion

In psychology, the spread of a behavior pattern, attitude, or emotion from person to person or group to group through suggestion, propaganda, rumor, or imitation is called emotional contagion. For example,

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a harmful or corrupting influence could happen, by watching violence on television, affecting the young viewers.

2.3. Financial Contagion

The likelihood that significant economic changes in one country will spread to other countries. Contagion can refer to the spread of either economic booms or economic crises throughout a geographic region. Contagion has become a more prominent phenomenon as the global economy has grown and economies within certain geographic regions have become more correlated with one another. An infamous example is the "Asian Contagion", which occurred in 1997 and started in Thailand. The economic crisis in Thailand spread to bordering Southeast Asian countries and then eventually spilled over to Latin America. A situation in which a faltering economy in one country causes otherwise healthy economies in other countries to have problems. Financial contagion often becomes a large problem for the direct or regional neighbors of the troubled economy.

2.4. Social Contagion

Social scientific research has largely confirmed the thesis that affect attitudes, beliefs and behavior can indeed spread through populations as if they were somehow infectious. Simple exposure sometimes appears to be a sufficient condition for social transmission to occur. This is the social contagion thesis; that socio-cultural phenomena can spread through, and leap between, populations more like outbreaks of measles or chicken pox than through a process of rational choice. The contagion concept first became popular as both a descriptive and explanatory device for social, as opposed to biological, phenomena in the late 19th century France, notably through the work of James Mark Baldwin (1894), Gabriel Trade (1903) and Gustave Le Bon (1895). Empirical research into the phenomenon did not, however, begin until the 1950s. This more recent research has unequivocally established the fact of the social contagion phenomenon, and has identified its operation in a number of areas of social life. The implications of this social contagion research are radical: The evidence suggests that under certain circumstances, mere 'touch' or 'contact' with culture appears to be a sufficient condition for social transmission to occur. Despite this promising start, social contagion research has evolved into a field that is now unorganized, disparate and incoherent, lacking both an organizing principle and a conceptual framework (Levy and Nail 1993). Blumer expanded on these theories to convincingly establish through his Model that Normal Interpretive Interaction and Circular reaction have their strong basis. It is because of this Circular Reaction that people can be made temporarily illogical, insane or irrational within a crowd. They will return to normal as soon as they leave the situation.

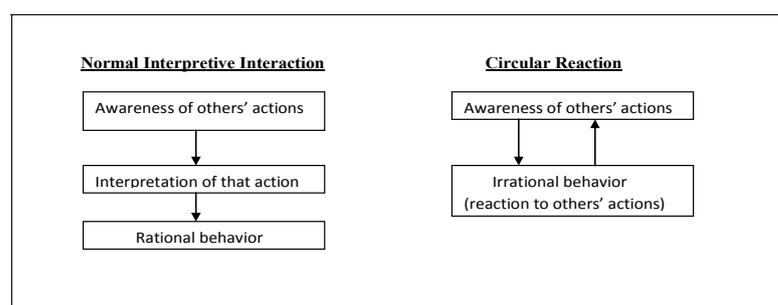


Fig. 1.1: Blumer's Interpretive Interaction versus Circular Reaction

3. The Rationale Behind Service Contagion

The presence of other service consumers, their moods, and behavior all influence the service customer. However, consider the situation in a restaurant, where one service consumer is dirty, shabbily dressed and is also eating in an uncouth manner. The service consumers around him will be affected by "disgust". It will result in the service quality perception.

4. Impact Of Service Contagion On Multifarious Aspects Of Service

As per Gaps model of service quality, the smaller the gaps, higher would be the levels of service quality. Service contagion thus could influence service failures, service recovery initiatives, impact of the service encounter and in the process help in enhancing service quality.

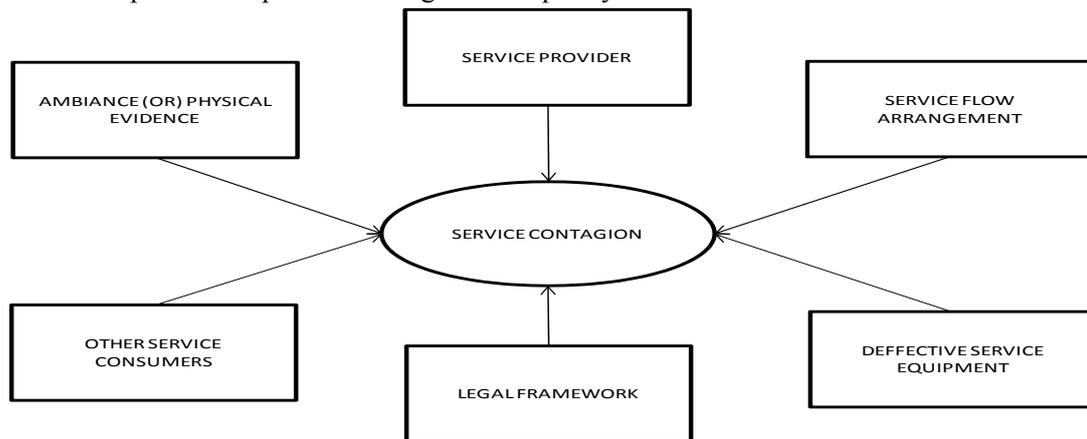


Fig. 1.2: Factors Impacting Service Contagion*

*Designed by the Researchers

5. What the future holds for Service Contagion in Indian and International scenario

The cultural context will provide a setting for identifying, as to what is disgusting and what is considered as not disgusting. For example, Jasmine flower may be associated with Tradition in South India. But, the same flower may not be looked upon favorably, to create a conducive Physical Evidence, in North India. The service industries where service contagion is likely to be important in the near future In restaurants, BFSI(Banking, Financial Services and Insurance), Hospitality, education and health care sectors, service contagion could have an impact. The national and international policy changes in future could reflect these developments.

6. Conclusion

This paper recognizes Service Contagion as a significant aspect of Service Quality. Profound opportunities could be thrown up by undertaking both qualitative as well as quantitative research. Further, the research can reveal the various aspects of Service Contagion and its repercussions on the road to achieve excellence in Service Quality in the Services sector in Indian as well as international scenario.

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