

# **CULTURE AS A MODERATOR OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERVICE QUALITY AND THE TOURIST'S SATISFACTION WITH DIFFERENT DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS – THE TRAVEL AGENCY AND THE INTERNET**

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## **RESUMEN**

*The aim of the present research is to analyse the influence of culture on the relationship between each of the dimensions of service quality and tourists' satisfaction with the distribution channel, differentiating between travel agencies and the Internet. More specifically, the research seeks to understand the influence of the cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism on the relationship between each of the dimensions of service quality and satisfaction, depending on the medium through which the service is purchased. The sample is made up of 600 tourists (300 of whom are English, and 300 Spanish) who have acquired tourism services either via the Internet or via a travel agency. The findings indicate that there are variations in the relationships between each of the dimensions of service quality and satisfaction, and that these variations are shaped by the cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism.*

## **Palabras clave:**

*Service quality, Satisfaction, Culture, Traditional market, Electronic market.*

## 1. Introduction

Travel agencies have traditionally been the most long-standing distribution channel among tourists (Buhalis and Laws, 2001; Suárez et al., 2007). Nonetheless, in recent years, the Internet has become one of the most important sources of tourism information (Buhalis and Law, 2008, Wu, et al., 2008). The World Tourism Organization declared that the key to Internet success lies in the swift identification of customer needs and the establishment of direct contact with consumers, offering them comprehensive, personalized and up-to-date information (Vich-I-Martorell, 2003).

Increasingly consumers are using the Internet to obtain information, study commercial as well as non-commercial websites, and search for and purchase products (Buhalis, 1998). Hence in order to satisfy tourism demand and survive over the long term, one option for tourism service providers is to use information technologies and the Internet together with traditional channels (Buhalis, 1997).

The importance of the Internet in purchasing tourism services has given rise to the need to research service quality in this medium, together with the influence of quality on satisfaction with tourism websites. Service quality is extensively dealt-with in the literature (Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 2000). However, only a small number of researchers have directly analysed consumers' evaluation of online service quality, its antecedents and its consequences (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

The Internet exhibits considerable advantages relative to travel agencies such as accessibility, convenience of updating, real-time information, interactive communications, and so on (Bonn et al., 1999). On the other hand, travel agencies perform better than travel websites in terms of the human touch and personal services (Law, et al., 2004).

All things considered, both the travel agency and the Internet are essential and oft-employed tourism channels, which makes it all the more important to research the relationship between service quality dimensions and tourist satisfaction with the channel. However, this relationship is conditioned by the characteristics of the tourists in question. In this regard, Espinoza (1999) states that cultural differences affect service quality and that different cultural groups have differing levels of expectation and perception as regards service quality.

Despite different cultures and their impact on several aspects of human behaviour being well documented (Hofstede, 2001; Reisinger and Turner, 2002), only a few works look at tourist behaviour in light of cultural differences. In this context it is important to consider the defining role of national culture in shaping human interaction in all its forms, including both offline and online tourism commercialisation, given that culture can help to explain many of the patterns seen in tourist preferences and behaviours (You et al., 2001).

Cross-cultural research is particularly relevant within the tourism industry, for several reasons. First, the industry has undergone significant international growth in recent years<sup>[1]</sup>. Second, cultural characteristics are of vital importance to the actual appeal of a product. Finally, tourism is a service that is consumed by people of differing nationalities (Pizam and Fleischer, 2005).

In light of the above, then, **the aim of the present research** is to analyse the influence of culture on the relationship between each of the dimensions of service quality and satisfaction with the distribution channel, differentiating between travel agencies and the Internet.

This study makes two specific contributions to current knowledge. Firstly, in light of the competition that exists between travel agencies and the Internet, along with the importance of both for international tourism, the present study analyses the influence of service quality on satisfaction formation. It will be seen that the dimensions of service quality differ in their influence, depending on the type of distribution channel they relate to, namely physical or electronic in nature (Rayport and Sviokla, 1996, Weiber and Kollmann, 1998). Secondly, the present research sets out to explain in what ways culture accounts for patterns in tourist preferences and behaviours, and the results are intended to serve as a guide for tourism service providers faced with the dilemma of whether to make their products and marketing campaigns standard for all potential tourists regardless of their country of origin, or to adapt the product and the marketing mix to each national market (You, et al., 2001). A better understanding of cultural differences among tourists is viewed as helping to attract more international tourists in the long term (Reisinger and Turner, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Growth in international tourism has been on the rise in the last decade; however the world-wide economic crisis has meant that this growth trend has slowed in more recent years (OMT, Vol. 8, nº 1, January 2010).

## 2. Literature Review and Hypothesis

### 2.1. Dimensions of service quality: Offline vs. online channels

Despite service quality being hard to define, marketing researchers do agree that the concept is personal and subjective, and that consumers' perceptions constitute a key ingredient when it comes to creating their own concept.

In a review of the literature, numerous definitions of service quality are to be found. However, the most commonly-used approach to conceptualising and measuring service quality is that developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). According to the authors, service quality is: *"an attitude related, but not equivalent, to satisfaction, and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance"*.

In the last 20 years much research has been conducted into offline service quality (Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 2000), taking consumer satisfaction to be a key outcome of service quality and a determining factor in the long-term success of an organisation (Parasuraman et al., 1994). By contrast there are few studies looking directly at how consumers value online service quality, and its antecedents and consequences (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

Parasuraman et al. (1985) put forward one of the earliest models of service quality, SERVQUAL. This model is based on the paradigm of measuring service quality in terms of the gap between customers' expectations and experience, using ten dimensions. In their second study (Parasuraman, et al., 1988), the authors reduce this down to just five dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles), with a view to – amongst other things – reducing the length and complexity of the study. However, although SERVQUAL has been extensively used to measure service quality, its application has also been criticised by many researchers.

Amongst its critics, Cronin and Taylor (1992) submit that it is not necessary to take expectations into account when measuring service quality. Instead, they put forward a model based on that of Parasuraman et al. (1988), which looks at consumer perceptions, namely SERVPERF.

In short, despite its flaws, the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) is that which enjoys the greatest support amongst the literature on service quality, together with the SERVPERF model (Brady et al., 2002 and Cronin and Taylor, 1992) (Albacete et al., 2007).

The evaluation of service quality differs depending on the context, hence scales need to be adapted accordingly (Rayport and Sviokla, 1996). With regard to e-service in particular, Zeithaml et al. (2000) suggest that consumers' assessment of quality of a website includes – as well as their experience whilst interacting with the site – other aspects of the service post-interaction, such as fulfilment of the objective. In such a way, online service quality embraces all phases of the consumer's interaction with the website: *"the extent to which a website facilitates the act of purchasing, the purchase itself, and the development of the purchase."*

The literature covers various different works that seek to identify the dimensions that are most appropriate for measuring online service quality. Of these, the most widely-used scale is that of Parasuraman et al. (2005), known as E-S-QUAL. This is made up of four dimensions relating to: efficiency, fulfilment, system availability, and privacy.

However, one of the Internet's most defining characteristics is its potential for offering the tourist vast quantities of information. This can lead the tourism service provider to be tempted to include all possible information on the service they offer, including virtually irrelevant details – a fact which complicates the decision-making process for the tourist. It is for this reason that a further dimension is used throughout the literature that complements those outlined by Parasuraman et al. (2005). This additional dimension refers to relevant information, understood as the quality of content of information offered by a website (Bergeron, 2001; Heim and Sinha, 2001).

In the present study, given the relevance of the research undertaken by Parasuraman et al. (1988; 2005), and the importance of including 'relevance of information' in the study of the Internet, the dimensions for measuring service quality and their equivalencies with the dimensions of the SERVQUAL and E-S-QUAL scales are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
Service quality dimensions

Our dimension	Equivalence with SERVQUAL	Equivalence with E-S-QUAL	Used in travel agency?	Used in Internet?
Efficacy	<b>Reliability:</b> Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately	<b>Fulfilment:</b> The extent to which the site's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled	Used	Used
Ease of use	--	<b>Efficiency:</b> The ease and speed of accessing and using the site.	Not used	Used
Availability	--	<b>Availability:</b> The correct technical functioning of the site.	Not used	Used
Privacy	<b>Assurance:</b> Employees' ability to inspire trust and confidence	<b>Privacy:</b> The degree to which the site is safe and protects customer information.	Used	Used
Relevant information or quality of content	--	--	Used	Used
Responsiveness	<b>Responsiveness:</b> Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service	--	Used	Not used

Wherever possible, equivalence between the offline and online service quality dimensions is sought. The dimensions where this is not possible are the ease of use (efficiency) of the system, and its availability, which are not applicable in the case of travel agencies, and the responsiveness of staff, which is not applicable in the online distribution channel.

As regards the relationship between service quality dimensions and satisfaction, although satisfaction with purchases has been explored in previous studies as an antecedent of perceived service quality (Bitner, 1990; Bolton and Drew, 1991), Cronin and Taylor (1992) demonstrate that service quality is an antecedent of consumer satisfaction, with this being the most widely-accepted assertion throughout the literature (Shemwell et al., 1998). Consumer satisfaction is a key consequence of service quality and can influence the long-term success of a service company (Parasuraman et al., 1994).

## ***2.2. The tourist's culture as a moderating variable in the relationship between service quality and satisfaction.***

Culture, considered to be one of the most abstract elements affecting human behaviour, can be described and defined in many different ways (Donthu and Yoo 1998, Furrer et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2001; Voss et al., 2004). Nonetheless, Hofstede's framework is considered to be the most reliable measure of national culture (Yeniyurt and Townsend, 2003). His work provides us with a strong empirical base and numerical assessments of the position of several countries, in relation to four dimensions of culture (Kolman et al., 2003).

Although Hofstede (1980, 1991) employed a context related to the study in question, and in principle applied his framework to human resource management, in his second edition of 2001 he reviewed his line of reasoning and included a significant amount of new literature and 'replicas'. Nonetheless, is necessary to test the validity of Hofstede's framework in the particular context of the present research, as outlined in the section on Methodology.

According to Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001) there are four dimensions that differ according to each culture, these being: power distance; masculinity/femininity; individualism/collectivism; and uncertainty avoidance<sup>2</sup>. These cultural dimensions play an important role in determining how consumers expect services to be delivered (Tansik and Chase, 1988 en Tsaur et al., 2005). In particular, we propose that each of the dimensions of service quality in purchasing of tourism services makes a different contribution to the tourist's satisfaction with their purchase, depending on the culture they belong to.

<sup>2</sup> In Hofstede (1991) the dimension 'long-term orientation' is included, but various authors point out that this dimension is strongly interrelated with that of individualism/collectivism.

### **Responsiveness**

In the traditional market, the positive interaction between buyer and seller is a determining factor of perceived service quality. Hence, previous studies establish that the service delivered by staff is a determinant of perceived quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and consequently of consumer satisfaction.

In cultures with a high degree of individualism the relationships between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family (Hofstede, 1991). In these cultures, customers are more independent and self-centred than those of cultures with a high degree of collectivism (Furrer et al., 2000, Donthu and Yoo, 1998). Specifically, people from individualist cultures, due to their drive, also expect others to be efficient and are more demanding than people from more collectivist cultures (Furrer et al., 2000). Hence it can be considered that individuals from highly collectivist cultures will place a more positive value on the service provider's willingness to help customers and provide a prompt service, whilst those from highly individualist cultures prefer to maintain a distance between themselves and the service provider (Furrer et al., 2000 and Donthu and Yoo, 1998). Given all of the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H<sub>1offline</sub>. The **influence** of 'responsiveness' on satisfaction in the travel agency channel is **significant** for tourists from cultures with a high level of collectivism, and is **not significant** for tourists from cultures with a high level of individualism.*

### **Ease of use**

People from individualist cultures believe that success is the result of personal effort and that they do not require help from third parties to achieve their aims – hence greater ease of use implies greater speed and usefulness when navigating websites. Therefore, it is possible that in more collectivist cultures, ease of use does not carry the same such importance as it does in individualist cultures. The most collectivist cultures even consider that undertaking an activity such as online shopping may be regarded as doing damage to their image (Van Slyke et al., 2005). In such cultures, the use of communication media that do not allow 'face to face' interaction also makes it difficult for people to perceive the actions and behaviours that create social situations (Straub et al., 1997). Specifically, the literature review leads to the conclusion that a significant and positive relationship exists between ease of use and satisfaction for people from the USA, who are considered highly individualist (Jun et al., 2004), whereas in studies focused on a Spanish sample, which is considered collectivist, that relationship is not significant (Aldás et al., 2010, Hernández et al., 2010). In light of all these considerations, then, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H<sub>2online</sub>. The **influence** of 'ease of use' on satisfaction in the online channel is **significant** for tourists from an individualist culture and is **not significant** for tourists from collectivist cultures.*

### **Efficacy**

Tourists from cultures with a high level of individualism demand high levels of service quality, as well as having greater expectations of security in the services delivered than their collectivist counterparts (Donthu and Yoo, 1998). These greater expectations of security can be seen in the demand for a higher level of credibility in the services delivered, which translates as a higher level of service efficacy. More specifically, cultures with a high degree of individualism, due their drive and self responsibility ethic, demand that others be efficacy and therefore demand high levels of service quality (Furrer et al., 2000). Furthermore, individuals from cultures with a high level of individualism tend to be more competitive and place greater importance on the utilitarian values of their exchange with the service provider (Bhawuk and Brislín, 1992), focusing more on effectiveness than do those cultures where collectivist values predominate (Dagwell et al., 1983). Kvist and Klefsjö (2006) conclude that service reliability is a dimension of great importance for people from individualist cultures. These findings indicate that an individualist culture places greater emphasis on specific attributes of a product, whilst a collectivist culture values more highly the opinions formed by other people (Hofstede, 2001) and prefers information that is subjective and therefore largely imagined. Specifically, the literature review leads to the conclusion that a significant and positive relationship exists between efficacy and satisfaction for individuals from the USA, who are considered highly individualist (Parasuraman et al., 2005, Jun et al., 2004), whereas in studies focused on a Spanish sample, which is considered collectivist, that relationship is not significant (Ruiz et al., 2010). This argument leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>3offline</sub>. The influence of ‘efficacy’ on satisfaction in the travel agency channel is significant for tourists from individualist cultures and is not significant for tourists from collectivist cultures.*

*H<sub>3online</sub>. The influence of ‘efficacy’ on satisfaction in the online channel is significant for tourists from individualist cultures and is not significant for tourists from collectivist cultures.*

### **Privacy**

From the consumer’s point of view, the perceived risk of using the online medium for making purchases is greater than that of the traditional channel, as they must provide personal details and information relating to payment before they receive the product (Suki and Suki, 2007). In other words, purchasing over the Internet brings with it a greater degree of uncertainty than shopping in traditional, physical establishments (Suki and Suki, 2007). Furthermore, purchasing online represents a complete change in buying habits and lifestyle. Therefore it is to be expected that people from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance will be more inclined to avoid online purchasing than individuals from cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance (Lim et al., 2004). This gives cause for believing that individuals from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance and those from cultures with low uncertainty avoidance may differ also in terms of their perceptions, beliefs and use of e-commerce (Kim and Peterson, 2003). For example, to mitigate uncertainty, individuals with high uncertainty avoidance may require more security in terms of privacy, in order to increase their confidence levels when undertaking a purchase online, compared to those from cultures with low uncertainty avoidance. Specifically, the literature review leads to the conclusion that a significant and positive relationship exists between privacy and satisfaction for Spanish people, who are considered to display high uncertainty avoidance (Barrera, 2010, Castañeda et al., 2007), whereas in studies focused on a sample from the USA, which is considered to have low uncertainty avoidance, that relationship is not significant (Jun et al., 2004). Given all of the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H<sub>4offline</sub>. The influence of ‘privacy’ on satisfaction in the travel agency channel is not significant for tourists from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance, and for tourists from cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance.*

*H<sub>4online</sub>. The influence of ‘privacy’ on satisfaction in the online channel is significant for tourists from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance, and is not significant for tourists from cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance.*

### **Relevant information and availability**

Finally, attending to other dimensions of service quality, relevance of information is considered a key indicator of success in information technology systems (Mahmood et al., 2000). From a user perspective, ‘relevant information’ refers not only to the type of information offered but also its quality and accessibility (Lin, 2010). The relevant information is an important indicator of user satisfaction (Zeithaml et al., 2002; Sindhuja and Dastidar, 2009). Given the above and bearing in mind the importance placed by the literature on the influence of website content quality on tourist/user satisfaction – it seems unlikely that the relationship between relevant information and satisfaction should be moderated by culture. That is to say, it appears unfeasible that there should be differences in the degree of satisfaction that relevant information generates amongst users from different cultures, solely based on their culture of origin.

With regard to the ‘availability’ dimension, an innate characteristic of the Internet is its very availability (Bauer et al., 2002), which, despite constituting a dimension of quality, means that availability itself will not impact significantly on tourist satisfaction, as it is virtually taken for granted as a constant. In other words, availability on the Internet would constitute a ‘security and hygiene’ factor, as described by Herzberg et al. (1959), in the field of job satisfaction. Availability should be considered as an existing element of the medium per se, given that an essential requirement of operating an online business is that the web platform must be available. To reiterate, then, as availability is a constant in this medium, its presence does not influence satisfaction, although its absence can generate dissatisfaction (Cheung and Lee, 2005). For this reason, this characteristic is constant across different cultures and therefore is independent of cultural dimensions.

The models proposed in light of the literature review are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

FIGURE 1  
Travel Agency proposed model

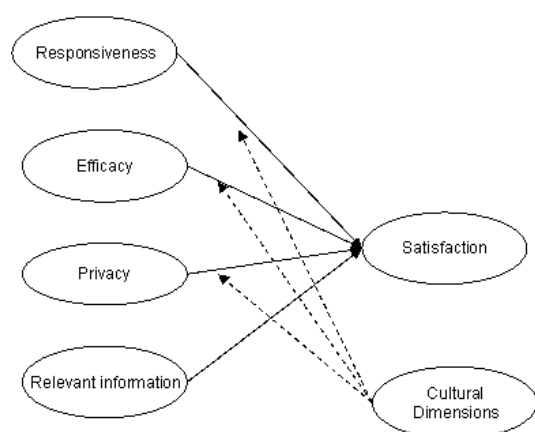
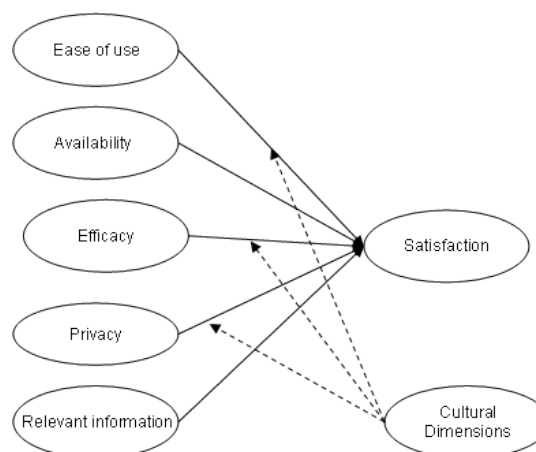


FIGURE 2  
Internet proposed model



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Sample design and data collection

A sample of tourists was chosen from two nationalities, namely English and Spanish. Spain and the United Kingdom demonstrate major differences in two of the four cultural dimensions – uncertainty avoidance (86 for the Spanish and 35 for the English) and individualism/collectivism (51 for the Spanish and 89 for the English) (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). According to the literature review undertaken, it is these dimensions that provoke differences in satisfaction formation, with regard to the dimensions of service quality. English societies demonstrate a greater tendency to believe that people as individuals are more important than the group, that success is a result of personal effort, and that one's private life is separate from work life. These beliefs derive from a high degree of individualism, accompanied by a low level of uncertainty avoidance. Meanwhile Spanish society is characterised by a high degree of collectivism, with people tending to belong to some group or other. As regards uncertainty avoidance, Spanish society is characterised by a high level of fear of the future. This gives rise to a tendency to create rules that can organise all activities, and to positively valuing the existence of experts who can offer advice, all with the aim of minimising risk.

In order to test out the hypotheses put forward, a study based on a structured questionnaire was carried out. Telephone interviews were undertaken and tourists had to fulfil three criteria in order to be included in the sample, namely: that they had undertaken a holiday trip in the 12 months preceding the interview; that they had purchased their hotel accommodation via the Internet or travel agency, and that their nationality, be it Spanish or English, matched their country of residence.

The initial stage consisted of two pre-test studies. Firstly, one pre-test study was undertaken amongst students of the Economic and Business Sciences Faculty of the University of Granada, with a subsequent sift being made in light of the results obtained, to test understanding of the questions and to refine the questionnaire accordingly. Secondly, another pre-test was undertaken amongst a representative sample of the target audience (30 Spanish and 30 English), with a dual purpose: to analyse how the scales under study worked, and to test the applicability and empirical validity of Hofstede's cultural dimensions in the sphere of tourism at the present time. In testing the differences in cultural dimensions, the items and formula used by Hofstede himself were employed (<http://stuwww.uvt.nl/~csmeets/VSMChoice.html>). The results of this pre-test were used to draw up the final questionnaire and confirm Hofstede's dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism.

On the basis of the findings from both pre-tests, the final questionnaire was drawn up. The questionnaire was written in both English and Spanish.

The sample was made up of 600 tourists. Of these: 150 were Spanish and had purchased hotel accommodation for their last holiday via a travel agency; 150 were Spanish and had purchased hotel accommodation for their last holiday via the Internet; 150 were English and had purchased hotel accommodation for their last holiday via a travel agency; and 150 were English and had purchased hotel accommodation for their last holiday via the Internet. The field work was undertaken between December

2008 and February 2009, and distributed geographically into Spain and UK. As regards the composition of the sample, 51.4% of those surveyed were men, and 48.6% were women. The majority of the tourists were over 35 years of age. Some 90% of all those surveyed were from households of two or more people. Approximately 59% had completed University-level study, and 74% had paid work.

### 3.2. Standardisation of the original data

Undertaking cross-cultural research involves dealing with people from different cultures, and, as a result, it is necessary to take into account whether the scores obtained are comparable (Van de Vijver and Leung, 2000).

Hofstede (1980) was amongst the first to defend the use of standardisation as a means of adjusting original scores from cross-cultural research in order to correct any error in the responses. The principal aim of standardization is a reduction or elimination of unwanted cross-cultural differences that are not due to variables of interest, but rather response sets and methodological artefacts (Van de Vijver and Leung, 2000).

The literature affirms that several researchers have focused on determining whether data are contaminated by response styles or not (Fischer, 2004). In order to detect extreme response styles, Cheung and Resvold (2000) propose checking the factorial invariance to detect equality of factor loading, and examining whether members of both cultures give the same weight to the indicators.

The factorial invariance will be detected by analysing the variations arising when adjusting from the CFA model, from a free multi-group model (m1), to another where factor loading is restricted to equal (m2). Thus the absence of significant differences in the Chi-squared of m1 and m2 is an indicator of factorial invariance (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
Comparison of Models 1 and 2

	Model with restriction	Model without restriction	Chi <sup>2</sup> difference
Comparison of Models 1 and 2	1706.41 d.f. = 1103	1649.62 d.f.=1079	56.79 d.f.=24 p-value< 0.0001

Significant differences can be seen between Models 1 and 2, such that invariance between the two models cannot be affirmed. This confirms the existence of bias in the extreme response styles derived from comparison of the two, culturally different, samples.

To eliminate this bias, the ‘Standardization within groups Method’ was used (adjustment between variables) (Fischer, 2004), such that each variable has the same mean and the same variance. This method assumes that the scoring in terms of overall percentage and/or the variance are comparable amongst variables, so that skewing due to the styles of response amongst and within cultures can be eliminated. The approach is based on the assumption that responses from within a particular culture may not be homogeneous either, given the possible influence of other socio-demographic characteristics. Using this procedure makes it possible to undertake a factorial analysis of the variables from the data overall, with the certainty that the resulting dimensions are ‘pure’ representations of the factors, unaffected by the positioning effect of culture, given that the average scoring of each culture for each variable is zero. Of course, even so the effect of culture on the model of variables is reflected in the data overall.

### 3.3. Measurement scales

All the measurement scales were adapted from validated instruments used in the literature (see Table 5).

**Satisfaction:** To measure satisfaction with a website, a semantic differential scale was employed – as used by Szymanski and Hise (2000) in their study on e-satisfaction.

**Service quality:** To measure the service quality, the SERVQUAL and the E-S-QUAL scales developed by Parasuraman et al., (1988; 2005) were adapted for the dimensions relating to ease of use, availability, efficacy, privacy and responsiveness. The relevant information dimension was adapted from Bergeron (2001) and Heim and Sinha (2001).

All of these dimensions are measured on a Likert scale, numbered 1-5.



#### 4. Results

Before testing out the proposed hypotheses, an exploratory factor analysis was carried out in order to determine the number of dimensions that make up service quality for a website and for a travel agency. The

five dimensions that were identified via the literature review for the online medium, and the four dimensions relating to the traditional medium, were obtained, and the measurement scale built around them, which explained in 70.33 % of variance in the online medium and 72.3% in the traditional medium (see Table 3).

TABLE 3  
Dimensions of service quality

Service quality <sup>1</sup>		Variance explained	
		Travel agency	Internet
<b>Responsiveness</b>	Service was provided reliably, consistently and dependently Service was provided in a timely manner Employees were competent (knowledgeable and skilful) Employees were approachable and easy to contact Employees were courteous, polite and respectful Employees listened to me and we understood each other Employees were trustworthy, believable and honest Employees made the effort to understand my needs Employees were neat and clean	29.60%	
<b>Ease of use</b>	It is easy to get anywhere on the site Information on this site is well organized This site is simple to use This site is well organized		16.19%
<b>Availability</b>	This site is always available This site launches and runs right away This site does not crash Pages on this site do not freeze after I enter my order information		14.70%
<b>Efficacy</b>	This site makes items available for delivery within a suitable time frame It quickly delivers what I order The confirmation sent to me by the website corresponds to the reservation It is truthful about its offers	16.60%	14.66%
<b>Privacy</b>	It protects information about my shopping behaviour It does not share my personal information with other agencies This agency protects my credit card information about my credit card	13.27%	13.03%
<b>Relevant information</b>	It has a great deal of information It has high quality information The information offered by the website is complete The information offered by the website is accurate	13.03%	11.76%
<b>Total variance explained</b>		<b>72.51%</b>	<b>70.33 %</b>

<sup>1</sup> KMO = 0.892

To measure e-service quality a multidimensional measure was used, whose goodness of fit indicators can be compared with those obtained for a one-dimensional measure of quality. Table 4 shows the goodness of fit indicators for the multidimensional quality model, via a second-order CFA, and those for a one-dimensional measure of quality.

TABLE 4  
Comparison between CFA and 2<sup>nd</sup> order CFA

	TRAVEL AGENCY		INTERNET	
	CFA	2 <sup>ND</sup> ORDER CFA	CFA	2 <sup>ND</sup> ORDER CFA
<b>Chi<sup>2</sup> (S-B)</b>	1104.58	552.65	1466.64	503.16
<b>d.f.</b>	342	338	342	337
<b>RMSEA</b>	0.12	0.06	0.15	0.05
<b>NCP</b>	762.58	214.65	1124.64	166.16
<b>SNCP</b>	2.54	0.71	3.74	0.55
<b>RMSR</b>	0.11	0.09	0.14	0.11

ECVI	3.96	2.14	5.18	1.98
PNFI	0.91	0.95	0.69	0.92
AIC	1180.58	636.65	1542.64	589.16
Critical N	110.47	217.45	83.45	238.09
	<b>Relationships 2<sup>ND</sup> ORDER CFA (T. AGENCY)</b>		<b>Relationships 2<sup>ND</sup> ORDER CFA (INTERNET)</b>	
	---		<b>quality= 0.73* x responsiveness</b>	
	<b>e-quality= 0.73* x ease of use</b>		---	
	<b>e-quality= 0.64* x availability</b>		---	
	<b>e-quality= 0.89* x efficacy</b>		<b>quality= 0.69* x efficacy</b>	
	<b>e-quality=0.58* x privacy</b>		<b>quality=0.48* x privacy</b>	
	<b>e-quality= 0.75* x relevant information</b>		<b>quality= 0.52* x relevant information</b>	

p-value < 0.05

It can be observed from these indicators that the fit of the multidimensional model is better. Furthermore, all the dimensions show significant loads on second order factor e-service quality.

There now follows an analysis and discussion of the key results arising from the research. Firstly, as regards evaluation of the measurement model it was proven that Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) is within the limits recommended by the literature. Composite reliability (CR) and variance extracted (VE) were also calculated, with favourable results – above 0.7 and 0.5 respectively (see Table 5).

TABLE 5  
Evaluation of measurement model

Dimension	Item	a		CR		VE		S. coefficients (t values)	
		TA	Int	TA	Int	TA	Int	TA	Internet
Responsiveness	Resp1	0.935	---	0.94	---	0.65	---	0.78(---)	---
	Resp2							0.74(16.50)	
	Resp3							0.82(14.03)	
	Resp4							0.87(12.47)	
	Resp5							0.86(15.60)	
	Resp6							0.83(12.52)	
	Resp7							0.80(11.42)	
	Resp8							0.72(8.81)	
Ease of use	Fac1	---	0.857	---	0.86	---	0.61	---	0.67(---)
	Fac2								0.88(11.95)
	Fac3								0.72(11.58)
	Fac4								0.84(11.89)
Availability	Disp1	---	0.826	---	0.83	---	0.54	---	0.75 (---)
	Disp2								0.81(13.00)
	Disp3								0.72(11.77)
	Disp4								0.66(11.13)
Efficacy	Efic1	0.842	0.812	0.84	0.81	0.57	0.52	0.73(---)	0.70 (---)
	Efic2							0.79 (15.21)	0.73(13.87)
	Efic3							0.71(7.68)	0.74(10.70)
	Efic4							0.80(12.25)	0.72(11.29)
Privacy	Priv1	0.824	0.815	0.83	0.82	0.62	0.61	0.87(---)	0.88 (---)
	Priv2							0.80(11.00)	0.69(11.05)
	Priv3							0.68(8.72)	0.76(12.51)
Relevant Information	Infor1	0.907	0.886	0.90	0.89	0.70	0.66	0.73(---)	0.72 (---)
	Infor2							0.79(16.51)	0.78(14.20)
	Infor3							0.92(13.67)	0.88(14.85)
	Infor4							0.89(12.75)	0.87(13.43)
Satisfaction	Sat1	0.878	0.872	0.88	0.87	0.78	0.77	0.89(---)	0.88 (---)
	Sat2							0.88(16.41)	0.88(17.33)

Following evaluation of the adequacy of the measurement model, LISREL 8.71 software is used to estimate the model. Using the asymptotic variance-covariance matrix, the multi-group model is estimated. The goodness-of-fit indicators of the multi-group structural equation model are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6  
Global Index

	Travel Agency	Internet
Chi-squared (Satorra - Bentler)	622.71	584.25
Degree of freedom	406	400
p-value	0.00	0.00
RMSEA	0.060	0.056
NFI	0.96	0.94
NNFI	0.99	0.98
CFI	0.99	0.98
IFI	0.99	0.98
RFI	0.96	0.94
Critical N	228.42	240.08

All the indicators are within the limits recommended by the literature, excepting Chi-squared which is affected by sample size.

Regarding the structural model, the standardized coefficients are shown with their corresponding t value, distinguishing between groups of Spanish and English consumers by channel, in Table 7.

TABLE 7  
Standardized coefficients (t values)

	Travel Agency		Internet	
	Spain	United Kingdom	Spain	United Kingdom
Responsiveness → Satisfaction	<b>0.60 (2.91)</b>	-0.10 (-0.46)	---	---
Ease of use → Satisfaction	---	---	0.27 (1.90)	0.16 (1.90)
Availability → Satisfaction	---	---	0.10 (0.78)	0.07 (0.90)
Efficacy → Satisfaction	0.07 (0.33)	<b>0.58 (2.62)</b>	0.06 (0.37)	<b>0.27 (2.17)</b>
Privacy → Satisfaction	0.00 (0.05)	-0.08 (-0.98)	<b>0.18 (1.97)</b>	0.14 (1.95)
Relevant information → Satisfaction	<b>0.27 (3.11)</b>	<b>0.43 (2.26)</b>	<b>0.42 (3.02)</b>	<b>0.32 (3.46)</b>

Regarding the travel agency distribution channel, the dimensions of service quality that determine the tourist's satisfaction with that channel are 'relevant information' for both cultures, 'responsiveness' for Spanish tourists and 'efficacy' for the English. For the Internet channel, the 'relevant information' dimension still significantly determines satisfaction amongst both Spanish and English tourists, whilst satisfaction for the Spanish is also determined by 'privacy', and that of the English by 'efficacy'. Therefore the moderating effect of culture on the relationship between the dimensions of service quality and satisfaction seems to find confirmation. Furthermore, this effect differs depending on the distribution channel chosen, given that the dimensions of service quality are not exactly the same for each channel (Parasuraman et al. 2005).

## 5. Discussion of findings

Empirical cross-cultural comparison is made between Spain (high uncertainty avoidance and high collectivism) and the United Kingdom (low uncertainty avoidance and high individualism), relative to the dimensions of service quality and tourist satisfaction with a travel agency and a website when purchasing a tourism service.

The results show that in the Internet channel ease of use does not influence satisfaction online, either for Spanish or English tourists, hence there is no empirical support for H2. This lack of influence may be explained by two related factors. Firstly, several studies have identified that, for more 'expert' Internet users, their opinions on the Web are based not so much on ease of use as on other elements such as perceived usefulness or confidence in a website (Gefen et al., 2003; Castañeda et al., 2007). Perceived ease of use will not shape the consumer's attitude towards electronic commerce when consumers are familiar with the Internet (Hernández et al., 2010), given that their prior experience makes navigating the website a less complex process.

Secondly, online purchasing is a behaviour mainly related to extrinsic motivations (Davis et al. 1992), which means that some of the facets that are closer to intrinsic motivations, such as ease of use (Gefen and Straub, 2003), may fall in value as regards their influence on satisfaction for the Internet user.

The results related to the influence of efficacy on satisfaction provide empirical support to H3offline and H3online. As regards the influence of efficacy on satisfaction with the travel agency, the results show that efficacy influences satisfaction amongst tourists with a high degree of individualism, however efficacy does not influence satisfaction amongst consumers with a high degree of collectivism. The same result can be observed for the online channel. These results corroborate those obtained in the study undertaken by Kvist and Klesfsjö (2006), which concludes that reliability of the service (understood as the degree of commitment and trustworthiness) is a dimension of great importance for individualist tourists (the English). These findings are in line with other studies that assert that in cultures with a high degree of individualism, customers are more independent. Individualists, due to their drive and self responsibility ethic, demand that others be efficacy and therefore demand a high level of service quality (Furrer et al., 2000).

H4online also has empirical support as the findings from this study indicate that the privacy dimension significantly influences online satisfaction only amongst tourists from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance (the Spanish). Furthermore, the finding is in line with previous studies that establish that individuals from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance tend to lack trust in the online service provider for fear of loss of privacy (Mooiji, 1998), however privacy does not influence online satisfaction amongst tourists from cultures with low uncertainty avoidance (Lee et al., 2009). Empirical verification of Hypothesis 4 reveals that online privacy influences satisfaction with a website amongst Spanish consumers but does not have this same influence amongst English consumers, meaning that this hypothesis finds empirical support. The finding is in line with previous studies that find that using the Internet to make purchases implies a greater degree of uncertainty than does using traditional, physical establishments (Suki and Suki, 2007). This corroborates other studies that affirm that privacy plays an extremely important role in online satisfaction (Szymanski and Hise, 2000). In fact, the relative lack of privacy associated with the online medium compared to the traditional medium represents a tremendous drawback for the growth of electronic commerce, given that online consumers have serious concerns about the privacy of their personal information (Madu and Madu, 2002). Furthermore, the finding is in line with previous studies that establish that individuals from cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance tend to lack trust in the online service provider for fear of loss of privacy (Mooiji, 1998), however privacy does not influence online satisfaction amongst consumers from cultures with low uncertainty avoidance (Lee et al., 2009). These findings corroborate the contributions made by earlier studies that establish that people from individualist cultures, due to their self-confidence, do not expect to be assured by service providers (Furrer et al., 2000).

The literature reveals that the availability of content and information on the website is a primary aspect of website quality (Santos, 2003). An innate characteristic of the Internet is its very availability (Bauer et al., 2002), which, despite constituting a dimension of quality, means that availability itself will not impact significantly on tourist satisfaction, as it is virtually taken for granted as a constant. In other words, availability on the Internet would constitute a 'security and hygiene' factor, as described by Herzberg et al. (1959), in the field of job satisfaction. Availability should be considered as an existing element of the medium per se, as an essential requirement of operating an online business is that the web platform must be available. To reiterate, then, as availability is a constant in this medium, its presence does not influence satisfaction, although its absence can generate dissatisfaction (Cheung and Lee, 2005).

Meanwhile responsiveness of staff (as measured exclusively for the travel agency distribution channel) influences the satisfaction with this channel of tourists from cultures with a high level of collectivism (the Spanish), while it has no such influence amongst tourists from individualist cultures (the English). These findings corroborate earlier studies that find that in cultures with a high degree of individualism, customers are more independent and self-centred and they prefer to maintain a distance between themselves and the service provider (Furrer et al., 2000 and Donthu and Yoo, 1998).

Finally, for both cultures, the relationship between relevant information and satisfaction is significant. It seems reasonable to think that any individual, regardless of their culture, will require relevant information that matches their information needs. This, then, would justify the belief that culture does not moderate the relationship between relevant information and satisfaction with any offline or online channel. In this sense, previous studies show that, when the effect of relevant information on satisfaction has been tested, disregarding the cultural context, the effect has always been greater (Taiwan, Lin, 2010; Spain, Castañeda, 2005; Greece, Gounaris et al., 2005; USA and Korea, Kim et al., 2003; consumer survey panel (NFO), Szymanski and Hise, 2000).

## 6. Conclusions

Tourism service providers require frameworks and models that enable them to understand in more detail tourist behaviours and the determining factors that shape those behaviours.

The present study offers marketing professionals in the sector a valuable tool for understanding those dimensions of service quality where greater efforts are required, and how tourists from different cultures react to different media – specifically the Internet or the traditional channel – when making their tourism service purchase.

The findings reveal the moderating effect of two cultural dimensions – individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance – on the relationship between the dimensions of service quality and satisfaction with the distribution channel used. Furthermore, unsurprisingly, the moderating effect of culture is visible in both types of channel.

The first conclusion reached by the present work is that the dimensions that make up service quality are different depending on whether they relate to the travel agency channel, or the Internet channel. As asserted by Parasuraman et al. (2005), service quality must address the context in which it is to be measured.

Secondly, the ‘relevant information’ dimension is the only one that will determine the tourist’s satisfaction regardless of which culture they come from or which channel they are assessing. Therefore in a environment that is characterized by information overload, particularly due to the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies, it is vital that tourism service providers take great care in selecting the information they will present to tourists, regardless of whether this information is delivered personally or via the Internet, and regardless of the tourists’ cultural background in terms of individualism/collectivism or uncertainty avoidance.

Thirdly, the ‘efficacy’ dimension only exercises a significant influence on satisfaction with both travel agencies and websites for tourists from individualist cultures. When tourism service providers target their offer at individualist markets they must bear in mind that, regardless of the distribution channel, tourists will be looking for a purchasing process that is as functional as possible, offering the greatest time saving and the least cognitive effort.

Fourthly, for tourists from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, the ‘privacy’ dimension of service quality will have an effect on their satisfaction but only in relation to the online channel. This is due to the fact that this channel presents a higher level of perceived uncertainty than the traditional channel of the travel agency. Therefore online tourism service providers should pay special attention to data protection when targeting tourists from markets characterised by high uncertainty avoidance, such as in the Spanish case. For example, a suitable privacy policy is required, along with the implementation of technology systems that provide assurance of safe data transmission.

Fifthly and finally, the ‘responsiveness’ dimension only has a significant effect on satisfaction in the travel agency channel for individuals from collectivist cultures. Hence tourism service providers working in this medium should devote significant efforts to sustaining close, direct contact with tourists from collectivist cultures, whilst maintaining a more distant relationship with tourists from individualist cultures.

In summary, the national culture of tourists – in this case Spanish and English – influences the relationship between service quality and tourists’ satisfaction with both their offline and online channels when purchasing a product. In this sense, the present work makes several contributions: a) the adaptation and validation of a scale for both travel agency and online service quality; b) the study of the differences between the influence of each one of the dimensions of service quality on satisfaction, by channel; and c) the analysis of the moderating effect of culture on the relationship between service quality and satisfaction.

## 7. Limitations of the work and future lines of research

Upon interpreting the findings of this research, certain limitations come to light. Given the international nature of the sample, a cautious approach should be taken with regard to generalising on the basis of the findings. Firstly, in this study just two cultures have been used to analyse the moderating effect of cultural dimensions on the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. Although the literature shows clearly that to undertake a cross-cultural analysis, comparing two cultures is quite sufficient, it would be interesting to repeat the analysis with a greater number of different cultures. Secondly, the consumers participating in the survey use different web portals and travel agencies and book different hotels, meaning that one single

website or travel agency and one specific category of hotel were not analysed. A future line of research would be to undertake an experiment in which the website or travel agency and the category of hotel are controlled. Finally, the international nature of the sample is extremely costly and this has limited the sample size.

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