Chapter 17
The Relationship Between the Online Consumer's Profile and the Type of Service Encounter in the Online Travel Agencies

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Abstract In the context of B2C electronic commerce, two different service encounters can take place: (1) service encounters without incidents during which customers get the service for themselves and without the presence of employees and (2) service encounters with incidents with interpersonal and non-interpersonal interactions. Taking the sector of travel agencies as a reference, the results of our study shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between the sociodemographic profile of the online consumer and the type of service encounter. In this sense, our research suggests that sociodemographic variables have a statistically significant influence on the type of service encounter. On the other hand, the evaluation of the service quality by online shoppers is quite homogeneous in each service encounter. At least, we have not found great differences according to gender, age, educational level, or frequency of Internet use.

17.1 Introduction

Internet has revolutionized commerce and business (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) and one of the most significant indicators of this transformation has been the adoption of the online retail channel. Specifically, 40 % of the population of the EU27 has purchased goods or services through the Internet (Eurostat, 2014). 14 % of the total turnover of companies in these countries is accounted for by the business volume generated by B2C e-commerce. In addition, 70 % of households and 85 % of companies in the EU27 are connected to the Web (Eurostat, 2014). In Spain, the estimated figure of the total volume of B2C e-commerce is 12,383 million euros and the products most in demand are related to the tourist sector: the purchase of travel tickets and accommodation booking (Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicaciones y de la Sociedad de la Información, 2013).

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The number of travel-related Web sites has grown rapidly over the past decade, and competition has become ever more intense (Ho & Lee, 2007). In this situation, it is generally not easy for online retailers to gain competitive advantages based solely on a cost leadership strategy (Jun, Yang, & Kim, 2004). Many researchers point out that to deliver a superior service quality is one of the key determinants of online retailers' success (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005) and it is a major driving force on the route to long-term success (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006).

In the context of electronic services, many works have analyzed whether the Internet user's sociodemographic profile is related to their purchasing behavior on the Internet. Amongst the variables most used, those which stand out are gender, age, educational level, and the frequency of Internet use. In this sense, previous research suggests that online consumers, unlike non-buyers, are mostly male and younger, have a higher educational level and use Internet more frequently (Allred, Smith, & Swinyard, 2006; Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004; Chang & Samuel, 2004; Donthu & García, 1999; Fuentes & Gil, 2011; Ruiz & Sanz, 2006; Swinyard & Smith, 2003; Vrechopoulos, Siomkos, & Doukidis, 2001). In line with previous works, our research analyzes two issues. Firstly, if there is some kind of relationship between the sociodemographic variables of online buyers and if they have had any problem or doubt during the service provision. Secondly, the usefulness of these variables to examine whether there are differences in the consumer's electronic service quality perceptions. To carry out the aims of our research, we take as a reference the purchase of travel tickets and accommodation booking, as they are the Internet services most in demand in Spain (Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicaciones y de la Sociedad de la Información, 2013).

To achieve the objectives proposed, the article is structured as follows. First, we review the most relevant research to help us identify the dimensions of e-service quality. We describe the sample and measures used in the study. Then, we show the results of the empirical research. Finally, we discuss the conclusions and implications for management, the limitations, and future research lines.

17.2   Theoretical Background

Since the pioneering work of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2002), the quality of online services has been explored in some depth. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) suggest that service quality is an abstract and elusive construct because of three features that are unique to services: the intangibility, heterogeneity, and inseparability of production and consumption. The best-known approach for measuring service quality is the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The original five dimensions of SERVQUAL are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Some academic researchers have extended the SERVQUAL dimensions to the online context (Kaynama & Black, 2000; Sánchez-Franco & Villarejo Ramos, 2004). However, traditional theories and concepts about service quality cannot be directly applied to the online context due to the important

differences between the two settings. First, the service quality literature is dominated by people-delivered services, while in online services, human-to-human interactions are substituted by customer-to-Web site interactions (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Therefore, responsiveness and empathy dimensions can be evaluated only when the online customer contacts a member of the organization. Second, although reliability and security dimensions may be useful, tangibles are irrelevant as the customer only interacts with the Web site. Third, new dimensions are relevant, such as Web site design or information quality. Fourth, if the evaluation of the quality of a traditional service is going to depend especially on the personnel in charge of the service provision, the quality of the services which are offered through Internet are going to largely depend on the consumers themselves and their interaction with the Web site (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006). Fifth, compared to the traditional quality of service, the e-service quality is an evaluation which is more cognitive than emotional (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000). In this way, these authors state that negative emotions such as annoyance and frustration are less strongly shown than in the quality of the traditional service, while positive feelings of affection or attachment which exist in traditional services do not appear in the Internet context.

Various conclusions can be inferred from reviewing the literature: (1) e-service quality is a multidimensional construct (Zeithaml et al., 2000) whose measurement must gather the evaluation of the interaction with the Web site, the evaluation carried out by the customer of the product or service received and, if any problem arises, how the Web site of the online firm handles it (Collier & Bienstock, 2006). Although most researchers are in favor of the evaluation of this latter aspect, Fassnacht and Koese (2006) state that we should not evaluate the human interaction which can take place in the electronic services provisions, given their self-service nature. (2) There are basically two approaches when tackling the conceptualization and measurement of e-service quality. The epicenter of the first approach is the technical characteristics of the Web site (technical quality). The first studies about Internet service quality belong to this first group (e.g., Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Liu & Arnett, 2000). They centered uniquely on the interaction that takes place between the customer and the Web site. None of this research gathers all the aspects of the online purchasing process, and therefore, they do not carry out a complete evaluation of e-service quality. The main proposal of these measurement instruments is to generate information for the site designers, more than measuring the quality of the service which customers perceive (Parasuraman et al., 2005). This weakness is the main motive for the appearance of a second approach (service quality) which offers a more complete vision of the field of the e-service quality construct (e.g., Collier & Bienstock, 2006; Parasuraman et al., 2005). The dimensions and the measurement instruments gather not only the technical aspects of the Web site, but also how the customers perceive the quality of the product or service received and how their problems or doubts were solved during the service provision. (3) The researchers do not agree when identifying the dimensions of the quality of an electronic service. Moreover, the meaning, the importance, and the items of the same dimension vary from one study to another. These differences are partly due to the scales being focused on one service in particular. (4) The evaluation of e-service quality is carried out at different levels of abstraction depending on the

study. Most researchers offer a set of dimensions (first-order constructs) and a series of indicators to measure each of them (e.g., Ho & Lee, 2007). However, other authors propose second-order hierarchical models (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003), or even third-order models (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006). (5) Some authors propose scales in which problem solving does not appear (e.g., Liu, Du, & Tsai, 2009) or is evaluated for the whole sample (e.g., Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). However, this last aspect must only be evaluated by those people who had problems during the transaction (Collier & Bienstock, 2006; Parasuraman et al., 2005).

If we set out from the conceptualization proposed by Collier and Bienstock (2006, p. 263), the domain of the service quality construct should gather the evaluation of the quality of the process of online interaction (technical aspects), the result of how the service or the product is delivered (result) and the way in which the service failures (if they occur) are managed (service recovery). The technical characteristics of the Web site must consider: (1) the design (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), also called appearance (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002), the visual aspect (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2002), or aesthetics (Zeithaml et al., 2000); (2) the functionality (Collier & Bienstock, 2006), also called technical adequacy (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002), efficiency (Parasuraman et al., 2005), or ease of use (Janda, Trocchia, & Gwinner, 2002); and (3) privacy (Collier & Bienstock, 2006) or the security that the Web site offers (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). Secondly, the evaluation of the product or service delivery has been carried out with a single dimension generally called reliability (Fassnacht & Koese, 2006; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003; Yang & Jun, 2002) or performance (Janda et al., 2002; Parasuraman et al., 2005). Thirdly, if we take as a reference the works of Parasuraman et al. (2005) and Collier and Bienstock (2006), the evaluation of the quality of the e-service recovery responds to two aspects: the possibility of getting into touch with the firm (access or contact), and the effectiveness of problem solving (usually called response capacity). Following some works published in the tourist sector (Chen & Kao, 2010; Ho & Lee, 2007; Kaynama & Black, 2000; Tsang, Lai, & Law, 2010), the dimensions proposed to evaluate e-service quality are: design, functionality, privacy, reliability, and recovery. These dimensions are herewith defined and explained.

17.3 Dimensions of Service Quality in the Online Travel Agencies

Design The design of a Web site plays an important role in attracting, sustaining, and retaining the interest of a customer in a site (Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002). Numerous studies in the literature consider the Web site design as a dimension of e-service quality (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Liu et al., 2009; Loiacono et al., 2002; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; etc.). The literature review about the key factors of a Web site design highlights three important issues: attractiveness, proper fonts and proper colors. Although it has sometimes been regarded as a purely aesthetic element, prior studies

have demonstrated the influence of Web site design on site revisit intention (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), customer satisfaction (Tsang et al., 2010), and loyalty intentions (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003).

Functionality Functionality refers to the correct technical functioning of the Web site. It is one of the most basic requirements for any kind of Web site and its meaning is closely related to the dimensions of the system availability (Parasuraman et al., 2005), or technical adequacy (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002). The five items of functionality that we considered were: always up and available, has valid links, loads quickly, enables us to get on to it quickly, and makes it easy and fast to get anywhere on the site. Its impact on online customers' higher-order evaluations pertaining to Web sites has also been observed. For example, Tsang et al. (2010) conducted an investigation in the travel online context in which functionality was found to be the most important dimension in increasing customer satisfaction.

Privacy Web sites are usually collecting and storing large amounts of data concerning their users' activities, user evaluations of online questionnaires and personal data. As a result, one of the aspects that most concerns online consumers is the privacy of personal information (Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicaciones y de la Sociedad de la Información, 2013). In our study, privacy refers to the degree to which the customer believes that the site is safe from intrusion and personal information is protected (Parasuraman et al., 2005; p. 219). The privacy of a Web site should be reflected through symbols and messages to ensure the security of payment and the customer's personal information not being shared with other companies or Internet sites. As such, there appears to be a high degree of support for privacy as an important e-service quality dimension and it was found to be one of the most significant dimensions in increasing customer satisfaction (Janda et al., 2002).

Reliability The evaluation of service delivered quality has been carried out with the dimensions of: fulfillment/reliability (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003), reliability (Yang & Jun, 2002), performance (Janda et al., 2002), fulfillment (Parasuraman et al., 2005), etc. Congruent with these articles, our study considers reliability as an important dimension of e-service quality. Moreover, in the context of online services, the information made available by the Web sites is an important component of the service delivered. Therefore, reliability refers to the accuracy of the service delivered by the company, the billing process being correct and the information that appears on the Web site being clear, current, and complete. The service delivered quality or reliability has been empirically shown to have a strong impact on customer satisfaction and quality, and the second strongest predictor of loyalty intentions and attitude toward the Web site (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003).

Recovery An essential aspect in the evaluation of the quality of an electronic service is the way in which the company solves problems or doubts which may arise during its provision. There is no doubt that errors in the electronic service provision cause the loss of customers in many cases and a negative word of mouth. What is more, the physical separation between the customer and the supplier and the fact that customers can choose another company with a simple click accentuates even more

the importance of solving these mistakes (Collier & Bienstock, 2006). Different dimensions have been proposed in the literature to evaluate this aspect: responsiveness (Zeithaml et al., 2000), customer attention (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003), communication (Cai & Jun, 2003), access (Yang & Jun, 2002), etc. In our study, service recovery refers to the customer's capacity to communicate with the organization and how any problem or doubt that may arise is solved. Thus, the Web site should show its street, e-mail, phone or fax numbers, the customer service must be available 24 h a day/7 days a week and the response to the customer's inquiries must be quick and satisfactory. Moreover, this latter measure should only be evaluated by individuals who needed help or the solving of a problem.

17.4 Data Collection

Data collection was obtained from a convenience sample of online shoppers (Table 17.1). We surveyed purchasers who had already completed online transactions and who had sufficient online shopping experience. The respondents were asked to evaluate a particular Web site of their choice, through which they had recently made a purchase of the selected services. We followed a quota sampling approach, with the intention of reproducing the sociodemographic profile of the population of Spanish online shoppers. The respondents were able to access the Web site where the online questionnaire was posted and they received a small incentive for participating. The field work took place from April to June 2012, and 915 questionnaires were received. 718 of them were valid questionnaires and this sample is divided in two groups: 451 participants said that the service delivery was carried out without any problem

Table 17.1 Profile of the respondents per service encounter

	Service encounter without incidents		Service encounter with incidents	
	(451 participants)		(267 participants)	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*
Gender				
Men	266	37.05 %	134	18.66 %
Women	185	25.77 %	133	18.52 %
Age				
24 years or less	106	14.76 %	127	17.69 %
25 years or more	345	48.05 %	140	19.50 %
Level of education				
Without a university degree	248	34.54 %	171	23.82 %
With a university degree	203	28.27 %	96	13.37 %
Frequency of Internet use				
Everyday	229	31.89 %	195	27.16 %
Not every day	222	30.92 %	72	10.03 %

Source: Authors' own data

(service encounter without incidents) and 267 respondents said that they had a problem or doubt during the online service delivery (service encounter with incidents). Regarding the type of service, most respondents chose the purchase of online travel reservations (417), followed by accommodation booking (301).

17.5 Results

17.5.1 Assessment of the Profile of the Respondents and the Type of Service Encounter

Next we use the Chi-square test and corrected typified residuals to analyze if there is dependence between the categorical variables related to the sociodemographic profiles of the respondents and the type of service encounter. As can be observed in Table 17.2, the type of service encounter (without incidents vs. with incidents) significantly depends on gender, age, and the frequency of Internet use. In this sense, the analysis of the typified residuals shows that the proportions of people who have had a problem or doubt during the service provision are significantly greater in women, people who are 24 years old or less and people who use the Internet on a daily basis (Table 17.3).

Table 17.2 Chi-square test in contingency tables

	χ^2	d.f.	Sig. Asynt. (bilateral)
Gender	5.255*	1	0.022
Age	44.298**	1	0.000
Level of education	5.660	1	0.017
Frequency of Internet use	34.360**	1	0.000

$*p<0.05$; $**p<0.01$
Source: Authors' own data

Table 17.3 Analysis of adjusted residuals in contingency tables

	Service encounter without incidents	Service encounter with incidents
Gender		
Men	2.292**	−2.292**
Women	−2.292**	2.292**
Age		
24 years or less	−6.656**	6.656**
25 years or more	6.656**	−6.656**
Frequency of Internet use		
Every day	−5.862**	5.862**
Not every day	5.862**	−5.862**

Note: $*p<0.05$ (Adjusted residuals greater than 1.96); $**p<0.01$ (Adjusted residuals greater than 2.58)
Source: Authors' own data

17.5.2 Comparison of Means

Next, we carried out the Student *t*-test and the Mann-Whitney test to analyze if the perceived quality assessment differed according to the type of service encounter (Tables 17.4 and 17.5). The results show that the mean scores of the e-service quality are significantly greater for the service encounter without incidents. Therefore, the consumers who did not have any problem or doubt during the service encounter have a significantly greater valuation of the Web site's service quality than those who had an incident during the service provision. With respect to the comparative analysis according to the Internet users' sociodemographic variables in the service

Table 17.4 Student *t*-test and Mann-Whitney test (Service encounter without incidents)

	Mean	Mean	Levene's test		T-test		Mann–Whitney test	
			F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Z	Asym. Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	*Men*	*Women*						
Design	4.850	4.930	0.437	0.509	−0.792	0.429		
Functionality	5.442	5.264	2.297	0.130	1.668	0.096		
Privacy	4.957	4.982	0.621	0.431	−0.217	0.829		
Reliability	5.643	5.800	8.200	0.004			−1.330	0.184
Age	*24 years or less*	*25 years or more*						
Design	4.950	4.830	1.193	0.275	1.952	0.051		
Functionality	5.325	5.261	2.274	0.132	1.021	0.307		
Privacy	5.003	4.961	0.063	0.801	0.585	0.559		
Reliability	5.595	5.653	0.364	0.546	−1.034	0.301		
Level of education	*Without a university degree*	*With a university degree*						
Design	4.879	4.887	0.030	0.862	−0.077	0.939		
Functionality	5.337	5.408	1.231	0.268	−0.670	0.503		
Privacy	4.980	4.952	1.324	0.250	0.245	0.807		
Reliability	5.713	5.701	0.855	0.356	0.134	0.894		
Frequency of Internet use	*Every day*	*Not every day*						
Design	4.868	4.898	2.370	0.124	−0.305	0.761		
Functionality	5.367	5.370	0.549	0.459	−0.035	0.972		
Privacy	4.911	5.026	0.010	0.920	−1.025	0.306		
Reliability	5.745	5.669	1.280	0.258	0.851	0.395		

Source: Authors' own data

Table 17.5 Student *t*-test and Mann-Whitney test (Service encounter with incidents)

	Mean	Mean	Levene's test		T-test		Mann–Whitney test	
			F	Sig.	T	Sig. (2-tailed)	Z	Asym. Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	*Men*	*Women*						
Design	4.600	4.842	2.822	0.094	−1.839	0.067		
Functionality	5.030	5.060	0.144	0.704	−0.195	0.846		
Privacy	4.751	4.662	0.138	0.710	0.564	0.573		
Reliability	5.174	5.350	2.409	0.122	−1.280	0.202		
Recovery	4.469	4.556	1.890	0.170	−0.504	0.615		
Age	*24 years or less*	*25 years or more*						
Design	4.801	4.648	0.548	0.460	1.153	0.250		
Functionality	5.219	4.888	4.930	0.027			−1.717	0.086
Privacy	4.832	4.593	0.960	0.328	1.509	0.133		
Reliability	5.191	5.325	0.998	0.319	−0.972	0.332		
Recovery	4.513	4.512	0.003	0.957	0.004	0.997		
Level of education	*Without a university degree*	*With a university degree*						
Design	4.789	4.597	3.488	0.063	1.395	0.164		
Functionality	5.127	4.898	3.923	0.049			−0.957	0.339
Privacy	4.770	4.594	1.312	0.253	1.066	0.287		
Reliability	5.249	5.284	0.005	0.944	−0.246	0.806		
Recovery	4.528	4.485	0.203	0.652	0.237	0.813		
Frequency of Internet use	*Every day*	*Not every day*						
Design	4.697	4.782	0.514	0.474	−0.568	0.570		
Functionality	4.988	5.198	0.049	0.825	−1.199	0.232		
Privacy	4.643	4.880	0.025	0.875	−1.327	0.186		
Reliability	5.255	5.278	1.833	0.177	−0.146	0.884		
Recovery	4.538	4.442	0.028	0.868	0.492	0.623		

Source: Authors' own data

encounter without incidents, the results only show significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between men (5.643) and women (5.800) in the Web site reliability dimension. With respect to the service encounter with incidents, significant differences appear between people under 24 (5.219) and those over 24 (4.888) and between people without a university degree (5.127) and people with a university degree (4.898) in the Web site functionality dimension.

17.6 Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

The tourist industry is strongly influenced by the development of new technologies and, more specifically, by e-commerce. Online travel agencies face intense competition, and thus have a great need to evaluate the electronic service quality of their Web sites to succeed or even just to survive. Firstly, the present study explores the underlying dimensions used by online customers to evaluate the electronic service quality of online travel agencies. Secondly, we focus on the relationship between the online consumer's sociodemographic variables and if he or she has had some problems or doubts during the service delivery. Thirdly, we consider the usefulness of these variables to examine whether there are differences in the consumer's electronic service quality perceptions. As far as we know, no article has until now dealt with these issues. This work therefore covers an important research gap and the main conclusions of this study are now shown.

Firstly, the results obtained show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the online consumer's sociodemographic profile and the type of service encounter (without incidents vs. with incidents). In this sense, our research suggests that women, people who are 24 years old or less and people who use the Internet on a daily basis show greater rates of having some problems or doubts during the Internet purchase.

Secondly, from the literature review, the evaluation of the electronic service quality has been carried out with five key dimensions: design, functionality, privacy, reliability, and recovery. Furthermore, this last aspect must only be evaluated by those people who had problems during the transaction. Moreover, the consumers who did not have any problem or doubt during the service encounter have a significantly greater valuation of the Web site's service quality than those who had an incident during the service provision.

Thirdly, although in the area of traditional services the literature shows that the service quality perception varies significantly depending on the customer (e.g., McDougall & Levesque, 1994), our study shows that the evaluation of the service quality by online shoppers is quite homogeneous in each service encounter. At least, we have not found great differences according to gender, age, educational level, or frequency of Internet use.

These results have the following implications from the management point of view. Firstly, although the sociodemographic variables are losing importance in the defining of the online buyer as the use of the Internet and Internet purchasing becomes more widespread, these variables are closely related to the type of online service encounter. In other words, there are segments of the population which appear more vulnerable to having problems or doubts during the Internet purchase. Secondly, unlike traditional services which are characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity (Kotler, 2000), the delivery of an electronic service is quite homogeneous and the evaluation which consumers make of the service quality received in

each service encounter is also very similar according to the sociodemographic variables which we have taken into account in this study.

Some limitations of this research should be acknowledged and directions for future studies ought also to be suggested. Convenience sampling does not permit results to be generalized to a larger population. A future study should try to validate and generalize the findings of this study by using a wider sample. The sample sizes of respondents who needed help are small. It is necessary to conduct future analysis that has a higher incidence of encountering problems. Finally, the results of this research are linked to the services chosen: the purchase of travel tickets and accommodation booking through Internet. It is necessary to carry out new research in other sectors to validate these conclusions.

17.7 Electronic Service Quality

Design

DES1: The Web site looks attractive
DIS2: The Web site uses fonts properly
DIS3: The Web site uses colors properly

Adapted from Liu et al. (2009)

Functionality

FUN1: This Web site is always up and available
FUN2: This Web site has valid links
FUN3: This Web site loads quickly
FUN4: This Web site enables me to get on to it quickly
FUN5: This Web site makes it easy and fast to get anywhere on the site

Adapted from Aladwani and Palvia (2002), Parasuraman et al. (2005) and Collier and Bienstock (2006)

Privacy

PRI1: In the Web site appear symbols and messages that signal the site is secure
PRI2: The Web site assures me that personal information is protected
PRI3: The Web site assures me that personal information will not be shared with other parties

Adapted from Janda et al. (2002), Collier and Bienstock (2006) and Parasuraman et al. (2005)

Reliability

REL1: The service received was exactly the same as what I ordered
REL2: The billing process was done without mistakes
REL3: Web site information is clear
REL4: Web site information is current
REL5: Web site information is complete

Adapted from Parasuraman et al. (2005), Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) and Aladwani and Palvia (2002)

Recovery

REC1: The Web site shows its street, e-mail phone or fax numbers
REC2: The Web site has customer service representatives
REC3: If I wanted to, I could easily contact a customer service representative
REC4: The Web site responds to my inquiries
REC5: The Web site gives me a satisfactory response
REC6: When I have a problem the Web site shows a sincere interest in solving it
REC7: The Web site responds quickly to my inquiries

Adapted from Collier and Bienstock (2006) and Parasuraman et al. (2005)

Note: All items are measured with a seven-point Likert scale, anchored at 1 "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree".

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