

Understanding the Influence of Cues from Other Customers in the Service Experience: A Scale Development and Validation

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Abstract

During most consumer exchanges, particularly in service and retailing settings, customers are “in the factory” and, as a result, the presence of other customers can have a profound impact on customer experiences. Despite studies demonstrating the importance of managing the customer experience and customer portfolios, the marketing literature lacks a comprehensive scale that can be used to assess individuals’ perceptions of other customers during commercial transactions. This study conceptualizes a three-dimension, Other Customer Perception (OCP) scale to address this gap. Using a seven-step scale development process, the multi-dimensional conceptualization is supported and validated and the research demonstrates the impact of the OCP dimensions on consumers’ approach and avoidance intentions. The findings provide a clearer understanding of how other customers can indirectly influence assessments of a customer exchange and can assist in the measurement of other customer perceptions in future research efforts.

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Bricks and mortar retail service experiences are largely social activities. This is true because in these settings the experience has a necessary human component due to the inseparability of the service delivery. As such, the behavior of individuals in commercial settings cannot be adequately understood without examining the social influences that occur (Prus 1989; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy 2003). An important, but largely overlooked, social influence that is present in many retail service environments is the other customers who simultaneously occupy a facility with a focal customer. Perceptions of these “other customers,” who are often strangers, have the potential to enhance or detract from an individual’s evaluations of, and experience with, an organization (Mourali 2003). Martin (1996) suggested that consumers impact one another in a commercial context directly through interpersonal encounters or indirectly by being part of the environment. It is on the latter type of other customer influence that we focus our research. When other customers are analyzed as a part of the

environment, their influence is manifested through an individual’s perceptions about them based on observed characteristics.

Initial interest in the role of other customers in a service environment began with Baker’s (1987) introduction of social cues as a component of the physical environment. Since this conceptualization, managerial and academic interest has grown in how customers influence each other (e.g., Grove and Fisk 1997; Martin 1996; McGrath and Otnes 1995). Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) went so far as to argue that the presence and behaviors of other customers may have a stronger impact on influencing an individual’s perception of service quality than contact with service personnel.

Building on these notions, the effects of some aspects of other customer influence on increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty have been demonstrated (Bitner 1990; Martin and Pranter 1989). Despite this interest, the marketing literature offers little guidance on what observable characteristics of other customers might influence an individual’s evaluations about and behaviors towards a service firm. This is an important topic for two primary reasons.

First, the increased attention on other customers in the academic literature has provided support for emerging managerial initiatives focused on customer portfolio management

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and more explicit segmentation of service consumers (Martin and Pranter 1989). Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) have discussed the necessity of managing the customer portfolio of customers' observable characteristics such as appearance, behavior, and age. Due to the inherent inseparability in many service transactions, managers need to actively manage the composition of their customer base to enhance the service experience. In fact, Gummesson (1993, p. 99) suggested that "recruiting the right customers is as important as recruiting the right personnel." For example, many entertainment venues explicitly manage the appearance of their customer base in an effort to reflect the desired image of their target market. Similarly, Abercrombie and Fitch recently offered cast members of the show *Jersey Shore* payment to stop wearing their clothing as they felt it was alienating their core customers (Horovitz 2011). While this notion may seem intuitive, the marketing literature has not offered researchers or managers a framework or way to measure the perceptions that current and potential consumers have of other customers.

Second, we argue that other customer perceptions are the building blocks upon which managers can encourage customer-to-customer interactions. An individual would be more likely to interact with other customers if their perceptions of these customers are positive. Silpakit and Fisk (1985) argued that the right customers can enhance the comfort of being among other people and may affect customers' willingness to participate in the service production. Managers who want to encourage and enhance interactions between their customers should have a better chance of success if they understand whether their customers view each other positively, and, if not, what characteristics might be at issue.

In order to advance research on the customer-based component of the social environment and the practice of managing the customer mix, it is necessary to have a comprehensive, parsimonious way to assess a set of other customer characteristics that influence consumer perceptions of, and behaviors towards, service organizations. More specifically, a valid, reliable scale that measures individuals' perceptions of other customers could fill this gap and provide important insights to marketing scholars and managers about the nature of this critical aspect of service experiences. Accordingly, our research has four major objectives: (1) to provide a conceptual definition and foundation for the dimensions of other customer perceptions (OCPs); (2) to develop and validate scales to measure the various dimensions of OCP through a series of studies addressing the latent structure, reliability, and validity of the constructs; (3) to build the OCP framework within a nomological network by specifying and testing its effects on behavioral constructs; and (4) to determine whether the OCP dimensions increase explained variance in behavioral constructs above and beyond a measure of service quality. In order to complete these objectives, we first review the theory and literature that relates to other customer perceptions. Then, we report results of a qualitative study that we used to identify the dimensions of OCP. Finally, we detail the results of a seven-step scale development process that was executed to create a parsimonious, reliable, and valid OCP scale.

Research background

The context of our study is commercial social exchanges where other customers within the exchange venue are observable. We define "other customers" as customers who are in the service facility simultaneously with – and who are unacquainted with – a focal customer. The focal customer and other customers do not need to interact. This definition is consistent with prior research that shows people can be present together in a commercial facility, but not engage or involve with each other (Argo, Dahl, and Manchanda 2005; McGrath and Otnes 1995).

Overall, only a few studies have focused on the behaviors of other customers during the service experience. Interested in how others interact to facilitate interpersonal exchange, Grove and Fisk (1997) identified both positive and negative critical incidents caused by other customers within a theme park setting. Positive incidents included good deeds and generous acts performed by other customers, while many of the negative incidents included behaviors that occurred while standing in line. This study also found that an individual's evaluations of other customers' behaviors were based on easily observable characteristics, such as age or nationality. Martin (1996) examined to what extent people perceived other customers behaviors as satisfying or dissatisfying. Similarly, Martin and Pranter (1989) investigated the issues of customer compatibility and customer behavior, finding that the classification of compatible and incompatible behaviors is often situation-specific.

Other studies have focused on the types of customer-to-customer interaction, and the resulting outcomes to the firm. Using a qualitative method in retail settings, McGrath and Otnes (1995) discovered eleven distinct forms of interpersonal behaviors between unacquainted shoppers resulting from customer-to-customer interaction. Extending this research, Moore, Moore, and Capella (2005) empirically established the positive impact that customer-to-customer interaction had on loyalty to the firm and word of mouth in a high personal contact service setting. More recently, marketing scholars have started to examine how to facilitate customer-to-customer interactions within a service setting. For example, Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski (2007) found that motivation, opportunity, and ability influenced customer to customer interaction, and that interaction enhanced service value perceptions and customer loyalty.

The review of the literature suggests that the academic attention paid to the social effects of other customers in retail service settings has been scarce and scattered. There have been no attempts of which we are aware to develop a comprehensive, parsimonious, conceptual framework and measures with which scholars can begin to further understand how observable characteristics of other customers influence retail experiences. Our study attempts to begin to fill this gap by identifying the dimensions of other customer perceptions (OCPs), and developing a reliable and valid scale to measure OCP.

We use social impact theory to inform our investigation. Social impact theory suggests that people are influenced by the mere presence of another person or group of people (Latané 1981). Research on social impact theory has focused on the

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