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Effects of positive customer-to-customer service interaction

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how positive Customer-to-Customer (C-to-C) interactions affect customers' perceived roles in service environments, and the effect such role perceptions have on willingness to participate in service processes, perceived quality, and satisfaction. Further, the study examines the moderation effects of interactional justice on relationships between C-to-C and role clarity and role conflict. 427 customers of a Korean hospital were surveyed. Results indicate customer role perceptions mediate C-to-C interactions and customer participation, while customer perceptions of service provider interactional justice affect the relationship between C-to-C interaction and role variables by weakening the positive effect of C-to-C interaction on role clarity. Customer role perceptions directly and indirectly affect customer satisfaction through participation and perceived quality, respectively.

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1. Introduction

For over 20 years, customer interactions within service settings has been noted in the literature as an important aspect of the service experience and a driver of a customer's feelings of satisfaction and loyalty with service firms (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Langeard, Bateson, Lovelock, and Eiglier (1981) model service delivery as a system of customer interactions in service encounters. In such encounters, interactions potentially occur in three key areas: 1) between customers and service personnel, 2) between customers and service environments, and 3) among customers (Wu, 2008). A majority of previous service research concentrates on understanding both interactions between service providers and customers or customers and service environments because such interactions are potentially controllable by firms. However, researchers have focused less attention on customer-to-customer (C-to-C) interactions, especially empirically (Rosenbaum, 2008).

The lack of empirical analysis of C-to-C interactions is unfortunate, given that customers may patronize service firms such as hair salons or coffee shops in part because of other customers who congregate there (Rosenbaum, 2008). Moore, Moore, and Capella (2005) argue such interpersonal encounters in service environments affect firm evaluations and influence patronage. Thus, it is important for service firms to pay attention to the role of C-to-C interactions and how they affect important outcomes. For example, C-to-C interactions may promote brand knowledge or user identity (Muñiz & Schau, 2005), value creation perceptions (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2007), or service satisfaction (Martin, 1996).

The purpose of this research is to develop a deeper understanding about the role played by customers when interacting with other customers in service exchange contexts. Specifically, the study examines *why* positive C-to-C interaction is important, *when* customers may rely on interactions with other customers, and *what* process might trigger customer willingness to participate in service delivery.

Role theory is applied to clarify patterns of social exchange that might develop among customers in service contexts. As role theory has been used to understand the employee–customer interaction, it seems an appropriate framework to examine C-to-C interactions (Parker & Ward, 2000). Further, work by both McGrath and Otnes (1995) and Wu (2008) has applied role theory to a C-to-C context. In the present context, role theory is presented as a research framework for understanding C-to-C interactions and how these interactions affect customer perceptions of their role in service delivery. The moderating effects of interactional justice are then explained in the relationship between positive C-to-C interaction and role. Finally, both direct and indirect relationships between role perceptions and customer satisfaction are investigated.

2. Theory

2.1. Customer-to-customer interaction

Research focusing on C-to-C interaction has viewed other customers as either a service context characteristic (Eroglu, Machleit, & Barr, 2005), or as an independent part of the service experience (Grove & Fisk, 1997). However, an emerging stream of research examines the effects of individuals engaging other customers in the

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service process and how it contributes to the overall experience in the service environment (Davies, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Martin, 1996).

This stream of research that recognizes the presence of others in a service encounter has the potential to affect customer evaluations (Grove & Fisk, 1997). For example, in a negative light, sometimes customers sharing the service environment have different needs or wants, a situation that can contribute to parties becoming dissatisfied with the organization's effort to manage the conflict that often occurs. Conversely, communion with others created in service encounters emerged as a positive theme of C-to-C study (Grove & Fisk, 1997). Price, Arnould, and Tierney (1995) suggest that friendships between customers are not uncommon due to frequently extended and intimate experiences during service delivery. Davies et al. (1999) suggest that positive C-to-C interactions may occur even while one waits in line to pay, such as through impromptu banter, thereby highlighting a shared positive experience.

2.2. Customer role perception

Role theory is used in a wide range of fields to understand interactions between individuals and their life roles (Biddle, 1979). The theory contends that individuals hold certain life roles that motivate their situational actions and emotional responses suggesting a dramaturgical metaphor. The study of roles investigates conduct associated with certain socially defined positions, rather than the conduct of particular individuals who occupy these positions (Biddle, 1979). Thus, role theory is the study of the degree to which a particular part is acted appropriately as determined by the reactions of fellow actors and observers (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985).

The study of roles is commonly linked with a study of roles as stressors. Role stress research in marketing shares its conceptualization with the seminal work by Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, and Snoek (1964). The focus of much of the research on role stressors in marketing involves conflict and ambiguity. Role conflict reflects an actor's feeling that the expectations of some role requirements are incompatible with the expectations of other role requirements, while role ambiguity reflects an actor's uncertainty as to which behaviors are most appropriate in a given situation (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role ambiguity is the reverse concept of role clarity, with clarity being the focus of the research presented here.

The relevance of role theory to understanding customer behaviors in marketing emerges from the focus on social exchange in marketing encounters (Broderick, 1998). Role theory recognizes that many social exchanges follow certain patterns due to participants' adoption of roles. For example, Grove and Fisk (1983) saw service encounters as performance, within certain arenas, and identify customers as members of the service's audience. Schneider and Bowen (1995) go further arguing that service organizations should use customer talents for role enactment by treating customers as human resources, or as substitutes for leadership and as organizational consultants. This perspective views customers as co-producers of service encounters.

In this case, roles are established that allow each participant to understand when/how they may contribute to the service encounter (Solomon et al., 1985). Because C-to-C interactions might also follow accepted scripts and norms (Parker & Ward, 2000), role theory offers an appropriate framework to examine C-to-C interactions. Each customer has a role to play from which the script is often strictly defined. Indeed, McGrath and Otnes (1995, p.263) find that customers, "…engaging others in retail settings often appeared to be portraying specific roles." Three specific roles were identified, which include a *helpseeker, proactive helper,* and *reactive helper*. The helpseeker actively seeks information from others within the service environment to aid in their own accomplishment of service goals. Proactive helpers prefer to give advice to others, while reactive helpers will offer advice when asked by another. Subsequent work by Parker and Ward (2000) affirmed the existence of such roles in a C-to-C context, while Wu (2008) demonstrates the ability of such roles to affect customer satisfaction.

Here, role theory is applied to help create a clearer lens to see customer roles in service delivery. Role theory clearly applies as customers in a service context may be expected to perform the roles highlighted by McGrath and Otnes (1995), or to enact such roles as co-producer (Lovelock & Young, 1979) or partial employee (Mills & Morris, 1986). However, when customers lack role readiness for service delivery, they may promote inappropriate role behaviors and potentially deteriorate service output (Mills & Morris, 1986). Thus, various role provision elements may contribute positively or negatively to overall service.

3. Model and hypotheses

3.1. C-to-C interactions and customer role perception

A key tenet of role theory suggests that the role-making process forms partly through exchange (Graen, 1975). Based on the premise that customers will possess role perceptions when entering a service environment (Solomon et al., 1985), this article suggests research hypotheses from the customer's perspective of role.

The article focuses on two key elements of role perceptions, namely role conflict and role clarity (see Fig. 1). Role conflict is defined as an

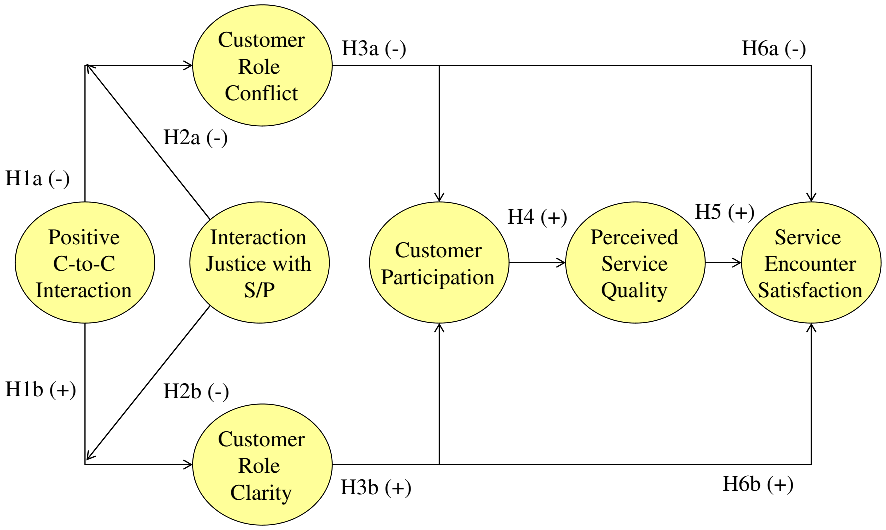

Fig. 1. Research model and hypotheses.

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