The consumer experience: The impact of supplier effort and consumer effort on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on experiential offers often examines the impact of such offers on consumers’ evaluations (e.g., customer satisfaction). Yet existing research has neglected that experiential offers typically involve effort from both the supplier and the consumer – and neglected that effort can influence evaluations. To address this gap, the present study examines the impact of supplier effort and the consumer’s own effort on the consumer’s evaluation of experiential offers in terms of customer satisfaction. Two experiments, comprising two different experiential offers, were carried out. In both experiments, supplier effort (low vs. high) and consumer effort (low vs. high) were manipulated. Customer satisfaction was the dependent variable. The results show that high supplier effort boosts customer satisfaction, and that the effects of consumer effort are either absent or indirect with a negative impact. Moreover, the results indicate that a supplier effort-consumer effort gap (i.e., the consumer perceives that the supplier has expended more effort than the consumer) contributes positively to customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Authors in fields such as retailing, tourism, and services have argued that firms should provide consumers with experiential offers, in the sense that the offer should be personal, engaging, compelling, memorable, and create intense positive reactions (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013; Iglesias et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Lemke et al., 2011; Manthiou et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). One main reason is that services are becoming increasingly commoditized (Lemke et al., 2011), and experiential offers are seen as an option to make services more differentiated (Walls et al., 2011). Experiential offers are also likely to produce several other benefits for the firm – such as increased consumer satisfaction, affective commitment, loyalty, and word-of-mouth (Brakus et al., 2009; Dubé et al., 2003; Iglesias et al., 2011; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Manthiou et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015).

The experience construct is holistic and multi-dimensional (Brakus et al., 2009; Carli and Cova, 2008; Gentile et al., 2007; Lemke et al., 2011; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009), which means that many elements of an offer have to be considered by firms wishing to create experiential offers. Indeed, several such elements have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013; Dong and Siou, 2013; Lemke et al., 2011; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Yet we believe that (a) the existing experience literature has overlooked one general element, the extent to which an offer involves effort, and that (b) effort is likely to contribute to consumers’ overall evaluations of experiential offers. More specifically, we believe that effort, which we define here as the amount of energy or force put into a behavior or a series of behavior (Mohr and Bitner, 1995), is typically involved from both the consumer’s and the supplier’s point of view when it comes to experiential offers. This is particularly the case for experiential offers with a non-routine and extraordinary character. Consider, for example, river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993), skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993), baseball games (Holt, 1995), and Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002); they demand more effort from both those who consume the offer and from the employees who produce it compared to non-experiential offers. Yet both supplier and customer effort, we argue, are at hand also for more mundane experiential offers.

We assume that the effort aspect is likely to play a role in consumers’ evaluations of experiential offers, because psychologists have since long acknowledged that effort is a fundamental aspect of human behavior – with implications for many responses (Eisenberger, 1992). Some marketing-related studies, particularly in advertising, have examined consumers’ reactions to suppliers’ efforts in producing an offer, and a main pattern from such studies is that there is a positive link between consumers’ perceptions of the supplier’s effort and consumers’ evaluations of the offer (Kirmani and Wright, 1997; Mohr and Bitner, 1995; Söderlund et al., 2017). Research on consumers’ own effort is sparse (Sweeney et al., 2015), yet some studies imply that consumer...
effort in relation to an offer can boost evaluations of the offer (Cardozo, 1965; Norton et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2015). The literature on consumer effort, however, comprises considerable ambiguity with respect to the impact of consumers’ own effort on their evaluations, because other studies imply that consumers are lazy misers who appreciate suppliers who make life easy for them and thus that consumers would punish effort-demanding offers with lower evaluations (Berry et al., 2002; Srivastava and Kaul, 2014). Moreover, some theories, particularly equity theory (Adams, 1963), imply that the levels of the two types of effort (sometimes referred to as “other-effort” and “own-effort”) are likely to be compared by the consumer, and that the resulting outcome, in terms of a gap, influences evaluations. This particular aspect, however, has hitherto not been addressed in a consumer setting.

Taken together, existing theory and empirical research dealing with effort indicate that an explicit account of this variable may add to the understanding of consumers’ evaluations.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine the potential for an impact of both supplier effort and consumer effort on the consumer’s evaluation of experiential offers. The type of offer we focus on is service offers with a hedonic and non-routine character, which have the potential to produce personal, engaging, compelling, memorable, and intense positive reactions (Bharwani and Jauhari, 2013; Iglesias et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Lemke et al., 2011; Manthiou et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). In terms of existing experience typologies, then, the offers in focus here are likely to generate extraordinary experiences rather than ordinary experiences for the consumer (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014).

The main evaluation variable in the present study is customer satisfaction; we assume that it represents an important aspect of the consumer’s overall evaluation of an offer (Anderson et al., 1994; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991), and that it has implications for several other variables of both theoretical and managerial concern (Seymansi and Henard, 2001). It has also been used frequently in previous research to capture consumers’ overall evaluations of experiential offers (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009; Carlson et al., 2016; Dong and Siu, 2013). Two experiments, comprising two separate experiential offers, were carried out to examine the impact of the two effort types on customer satisfaction.

Our examination, we argue, contributes to the academic experience literature and its attempts to identify links between attributes of experiential offers and consumer evaluations, given that effort is often involved in both production and consumption of experiential offers (and given the existing experience literature’s neglect of effort). The examination also serves the purpose of highlighting the effort aspect for managers; creating a strong customer experience is now a leading management objective (Carlson et al., 2016; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), and if effort is indeed related to outcomes such as customer satisfaction, effort aspects call for managerial attention in an experience context. Moreover, few human activities in the marketplace (and indeed on our planet) take place without effort, so the examination underscores the potential of effort to contribute also to the understanding of consumers’ evaluations in general. It should also be noted that existing studies have dealt with effort consequences in terms of either supplier effort (e.g., Kirmani and Wright, 1997; Mohr and Bitner, 1995) or consumer effort (e.g., Cardozo, 1965; Norton et al., 2012), yet the present study is an attempt to examine the impact of both types of effort on consumers’ evaluations within the frame of the same study.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Given a service offer that produces a memorable and positively charged experience for the consumer, the thesis in the present study is that both (a) supplier effort in producing the offer and (b) the consumer’s own effort in consuming the offer are likely to have an impact on customer satisfaction. We treat both effort variables in perceptual terms from the consumer’s point of view; that is to say, effort is defined in terms of consumer perceptions. In the case of the impact of supplier effort on customer satisfaction, we assume a mediating role for perceived quality; in the case of consumer effort, it is assumed that perceived value is a main mediator.

2.1. Supplier effort

In general, effort is the amount of energy or force put into a behavior or a series of behavior, while perceived effort is the amount of energy an observer believes an actor has invested in a behavior (Mohr and Bitner, 1995). In existing consumer behavior-related research dealing with consumers’ reactions to suppliers’ offers, focus has been on perceived effort. It is this focus that we adopt here, and within this frame supplier effort has been conceptualized as the consumer’s perception of how much money, managerial time, and hard work that lies behind the supplier’s activities (Kirmani and Wright, 1997; Modig et al., 2014, Söderlund et al., 2017).

With respect to the consequences of such effort perceptions, several authors have stressed that there is a positive link between perceived supplier effort and consumers’ quality perceptions (Ambler and Hollier, 2004; Kirmani, 1997; Kirmani and Rao, 2000; Kirmani and Wright, 1989; Kruger et al., 2004). One reason is that perceived supplier effort signals confidence and commitment (Kirmani and Wright, 1997; Modig et al., 2014), and these factors can have a positive impact on consumers’ quality perceptions. An additional reason behind the effort-quality link is that high supplier effort signals high supplier motivation (Mohr and Bitner, 1995), and the level of perceived motivation is likely to go hand in hand with quality perceptions. Another possible underlying mechanism is suggested by Morales (2005); she assumes that we humans in general feel that others have a moral responsibility to work hard, and that we reward those who indeed do so with positive emotions. And such emotions could color quality perceptions in a valence-congruent way (Forgas, 1995). Empirical indications of a perceived effort-positive emotions-quality chain are provided by the measurement items used by Buell and Norton (2011). Moreover, a perceived effort-quality link has also been observed in leader-subordinate dyads in organizations, in the sense the level of perceived effort of the other party goes hand in hand with the level of the perceived quality of the interpersonal relationship (Mai lyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001).

In the next step of the consumer’s information processing activities, it is expected that perceived quality would be positively related to overall evaluations; several studies suggest that perceived quality and overall evaluations are two discrete constructs, that quality perceptions are antecedents to overall evaluations, and that there is a positive link between perceived quality and overall evaluations (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Carlson et al., 2016; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; de Ruyter et al., 1997). It should also be noted that some service encounter studies have identified a positive association between consumer perceptions of the service person’s effort and customer satisfaction (Mohr and Bitner, 1995; Specht et al., 2007). Here, given a supplier effort-perceived quality link and a perceived quality-satisfaction link, we assume that perceived quality is likely to be a mediating variable. With respect to the impact of perceived supplier effort on customer satisfaction, then, the following is hypothesized:

H1. Perceived supplier effort in producing an experiential offer is positively associated with customer satisfaction

H2. Perceived service quality mediates the perceived supplier effort-customer satisfaction association

2.2. Consumer effort

Consumer effort has been defined as the physical, mental, and financial resources expended by the consumer to obtain a product
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