Triadic relationships in the context of services for animal companions

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ABSTRACT

Triadic service relationships comprise complex relationships in which not only the customer and provider are involved as partners but also other individuals with caregiving relationships with the customer. A triadic constellation may arise in the context of services for animal companions, for example, when veterinarians provide counsel and treatment to the animal companion and its owner. Through interviews with both owners of animal companions and providers of services for animal companions, this study explores typical constellations and characteristics of the three relationships in this service triad. In line with balance theory, the results show that four distinct types of triadic relationships exist in services for animal companions: the harmonious, the dysfunctional, the challenging, and the doubtful triad. The study highlights the potential conflicts and dynamics in the triads to advise providers on how to address customers depending on the types of triads to which they belong.

1. Introduction

Animal companions are important for society. Even beyond professional purposes, such as rescue and seeing-eye dogs or animal physical therapists (Griffin, McCune, Maholmes, & Hurley, 2011), people value and treat pets as "animal-companions with needs, wants, and rights comparable to those of other family members" (Holbrook, 2008, p. 549) and build close relationships with them. The number of households with animal companions is steadily increasing in many countries (Blouin, 2012). For example, approximately 68% of all U.S. households host an animal companion: 47.1 million households host at least one cat, and 60.2 million households host at least one dog (American Pet Products Association, 2017).

Together with rising disposable incomes, this development results in an increasing demand for premium products and specialty services for animal companions (Brough, 2013), thus generating an entire industry around these animals. Service businesses for animal companions include grooming, boarding, veterinarian services, insurance, cremation and funeral services, and more (Brough, 2013).

A common denominator of offerings for animal companions is their complex relational setting that is distinct from typical dyadic customer-provider relationships (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). Typically, three entities are involved that together determine the value creation process in services for animal companions: the service provider, the customer (typically, the caregiving owner of the animal companion), and the animal companion itself. Thus, three dyadic relationships constitute a triad in the setting of services for animal companions.

While research mainly examines triads of equally enabled partners in business relationships, such as within supply chain or property maintenance contexts (e.g., Nätti, Pekkarinen, Hartikka, & Holappa, 2014), only a few studies address triads that involve providers, vulnerable customers, and caregiving decision makers (Rötzmeier-Keuper & Wünderlich, 2014). Furthermore, studies on services for animal companions explore multiple dimensions of the dyadic relationships separately (e.g., Cavannaugh, Leonard, & Scammon, 2008), but so far, no research has examined the interplay of the dyadic relationships or identified typical characteristics of triads. Relying on balance theory (Heider, 1946), this study employs an exploratory approach to identify typical constellations of triadic relationships and poses the following research questions:

- Which emotions, attitudes, and relational behaviors of each entity in the triad describe the nature of the dyadic relationships between

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owner and provider, owner and animal companion, and provider and animal companion?

- Which constellations and interdependencies between the three dyadic relationships represent typical triadic relationships in services for animal companions?

As such, this research contributes to studies that explore complex relationships with more than two involved parties in at least three ways. First, through our exploratory interview study, we identify four types of triadic relationships (service triads) that are in either balanced or unbalanced states, thereby empirically validating balance theory (Heider, 1946, 1958). Second, we empirically extend research on triads (Carson, Carson, Knouse, & Roe, 1997) with an in-depth exploration of triads that involve different relationship pre-requisites—namely, a professional relationship between provider and owner, an intimate relationship between owner and animal companion, and a service-accomplishing relationship between provider and animal companion.

Third, although this research focuses on services for animal companions, our findings contribute to the understanding of the complex nature of all relationships in which, next to the provider and customer, a third vulnerable entity is involved, who enters the service exchange with some type of disadvantage (Rosenbaum, Seger-Guttmann, & Giraldo, 2017). These situations include educational services, in which educators offer services to children and their parents, and health care services, in which caregiving family members need to make decisions for unconscious or incapable loved ones. Providers can benefit from our generalizable insights into relationship triads, which pinpoint interdependencies and subsequent challenges and allow providers to be proactive in addressing customers’ needs adequately. Understanding customers’ expectations of business relationships is important especially in health care services, in which the traditional expert model has come under fire because customers are now more informed than in the past and want to be included in the choice of treatment and therapy (Tian et al., 2014).

2. Characteristics of the dyadic relationships in the context of services for animal companions

2.1. The owner–animal companion dyad

Research focuses on different roles of animal companions to explain relationships between humans and their animal companions. Hirschman (1994) differentiates two roles of animals in people’s lives: animals as companions and animals as objects. Thus, animals can provide aesthetic value and pleasure to people or function as a status symbol. In their role as companions, animals mediate between nature and culture, provide opportunities for learning and inspiration (Holbrook, Stephens, Day, Holbrook, & Strazar, 2001), and act as social facilitators, friends, or family members (Mosteller, 2008). Beverland, Farrelly, and Lim (2008) identify two types of ownership motivation: owners with intrinsic motivation, who value the animal companion as an individual being and want to provide a happy life for it, and owners with extrinsic motivation, who seek control in animal companion ownership and view it as a status symbol.

Attachment is an important factor in human–animal companion relationships, as animal companions may serve as attachment figures for their owners (Amiot, Bastian, & Martens, 2016), comparable to human attachment figures such as parents, siblings, or friends (Kurdek, 2008). Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2011b) find evidence that owners view their animal companions as safe havens in times of psychological distress, as well as secure bases from which to explore. However, owners with high pet-attachment anxiety are more likely to express unresolved grief when the animal companion dies (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011a).

Studies show that animal companion–related attachment is a driver of human well-being (Cavanaugh et al., 2008), self-identity (Syrjälä, 2016), and decision making (Brockman, Taylor, & Brockman, 2008). Moreover, owners with close relationships with their animal companion tend to purchase innovative services for it, such as pet insurance (Kaartinen, Nuutinen, & Autio, 2015).

2.2. The customer–provider dyad

Relationship marketing literature identifies trust and commitment as key relational benefits in customer–provider relationships that foster customer loyalty and cooperation between partners (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). To develop relationship trust and commitment, customer–provider communication and shared values are crucial antecedents (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Attachment is another relational characteristic that helps explain customers’ relational preferences and behavior in customer–provider relationships. Mende and Bolton (2011) show that customers’ attachment styles result from the internalization of a particular history of attachment experiences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and have significant influences on satisfaction with, trust in, and affective commitment to the company. In addition, Mende, Bolton, and Bitner (2013) provide empirical evidence of the influence of customers’ attachment styles and preferences for closeness on loyalty intentions and behavior. Beyond that, attachment also reflects a relationship-based construct that captures the emotional bond between an individual and a consumption entity (e.g., a brand, person, place) or with a specific target (Jiménez & Voss, 2014).

2.3. The provider–animal companion dyad

Research on the provider–animal companion dyad predominately stems from the area of veterinary services. Veterinary research investigates communication and interaction behaviors predominantly between owner and veterinarian (McArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013). However, studies provide hints about communication and interaction behaviors between animal companion and veterinarian, as the veterinarian must pay attention not only to the medical needs of the animal companion but also to the relationship with the owner (Colombo, Crippa, Calderari, & Prato-Previde, 2017). In comparing the veterinarian–owner–animal companion relationship to the pediatrician–parent–infant relationship, Shaw, Adams, Bonnett, Larson, and Roter (2004) analyze communication in animal companion practice. They show that 8% of veterinarian talk was directed to the animal companion. Rhetorical questions were also quite common during the appointment, and the veterinarians used orientation statements to provide guidance or instructions to the owner. In showing empathy toward animal companions, the veterinarian explicitly expresses regulation of the animal companion’s emotion (i.e., soothing tone) (Suchman, Markakis, Beckman, & Frankel, 1997).

Literature on attachment and bonding in human–animal companion relationships also provides information on the animal companion’s reactions to its environment, such as other humans (Payne, Bennett, & McGreevy, 2015). Animal companions can develop attached relationships with humans, which allow them to interact securely with their environment in the presence of the owner and to show less distress in response to threatening events (Horn, Huber, & Range, 2013).

3. Triadic relationships

3.1. Triadic relationships in service settings

Research explores relationships in triadic settings, such as in supply chain contexts, which typically involve organizations, suppliers, and customers (Wynstra, Spring, & Schoenherr, 2015). Triads can also involve a provider, a customer, and an intermediary (Nätti et al., 2014) or a customer and two organizational entities (Modi, Wiles, & Mishra, 2015).

Triadic relationships between a provider and two customers who
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