Too Busy to Help: Antecedents and Outcomes of Interactional Justice in Web-Based Service Encounters

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ABSTRACT

Web-based live-chat support services are one promising means toward improving customer service. However, such services and their success factors have been rarely studied. This study bridges this gap. It builds on justice and service marketing theories, and examines key factors that drive intentions to continue using web-based live-chat support services and to provide positive word-of-mouth. The study suggests that these outcomes are increased through interactional justice perceptions, which are diminished by the perceived busyness of the service provider. It is also suggested that the latter effect is moderated by the duration of live-chat session; when the session is long the effect is stronger. Data collected from 86 users of a library web-based live-chat service were analyzed with SEM techniques and support this view. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Web-based services, live-chat, justice, service encounters.

INTRODUCTION

Delivering high quality customer service is vital for companies that wish to remain competitive. It can produce a wide range of positive outcomes, such as increased customer loyalty, reduced complaining behavior, stronger positive word of mouth, stronger repeat purchase intentions, and increased market share (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree and Bitner, 2000). Thus, many companies allocate significant resources to ensure that their customers receive high quality customer service.

One key means toward this end is the provision of customer support services throughout the life of a product or service; including the pre-purchase stage when a customer identifies his or her requirements, during the actual acquisition of the product or service, throughout the ownership of the product or the receipt of the service, and disposal (Lightner, 2004). Typically, customer support services allow current or potential customers to contact a service representative over the phone or in person, or to employ self-service technologies (e.g., kiosks) in order to inquire about transactions, product uses and features, and to resolve problems (Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom and Brown, 2005).

Recent advances in technology now allow the provisioning of over-the-web live-chat customer support services. These services permit users to seek service-related information from a company via web-based synchronous media (typically chat facilities), and a human service representative that provides answers via the same media. While many companies (e.g., major banks, airlines and retailers in the USA) have started to offer such services, little is known about what makes these advances successful. Such insights would be valuable because web-based support services are relatively inexpensive to provide, easy to access (Hibbard, Dalton and Thyfault, 1998), and have the ability to enhance customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Negash, Ryan and Igbaria, 2003). Thus, this study seeks to examine some of the key mechanism through which continued use and positive word of mouth intentions toward web-based live-chat customer support services are developed.

One key factor that has been shown to affect customer service evaluations and behaviors in other contexts is interactional justice (Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002). This perception captures people's perceptions regarding the fairness of the interpersonal treatment and information (politeness, empathy, truthfulness, etc.) they received from the service agent during the service experience (Blodgett, Hill and Tax, 1997). People learn to expect to be treated in a polite, truthful and empathic manner through previous service experiences (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel and Gutman, 1985). When these expectations are met (i.e., people perceive high interactional justice), they develop positive cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions toward the source of justice (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001). Using this fairness theory perspective (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001) as applied to service research (Martinez-Tur, Peiro, Ramos and Moliner, 2006) we argue that the interactional justice perceptions of users of a web-based customer support service increase their continuance and positive word of mouth intentions.

Given the potential importance of interactional justice in web-based service encounters, it is also desirable to validate some of its antecedents. Interactional justice perceptions are typically formed, in part, on the basis of structural attributes of the service encounter and the cues they provide (Rupp and Spencer, 2006). Two such structural attributes that can be apparent in live-chat service encounters, are the perceived busyness of the service provider (i.e., the belief that he or she is busy with other users or tasks) and the session length (i.e., the duration of the service encounter).

Based on interactional justice theories (Blodgett et al., 1997), we first contend that the perceived busyness of the service provider can be interpreted as disrespectfulness and apathy toward user needs, and that it therefore decreases users' interactional justice assessments of these services. We then argue that this effect is moderated by the session length, such that the abovementioned negative effect is strengthened when the session becomes longer. When the service provider seems to be busy with other tasks and the session becomes unnecessarily long (i.e., an interaction effect exists), users are exposed to more and longer episodes of treatment that they perceive to be disrespectful, which can further reduce interactional justice perceptions (Carr, 2007). Thus, the perceived business of the service provider and its interaction with the length of the service encounter can indirectly reduce positive intentions toward web-based support services.

RESEARCH MODEL

In face-to-face service encounters, customers can, and often do, assess various aspects of the service, such as whether they get the service representative's full attention, and whether he or she seems to care about their situation (Goodwin and Gremler, 1996). Such assessments may not be so obvious in the case of web-based services given the relatively lean-medium they rely on for communications (Daft and Lengel, 1986). As a result, users of live-chat services lack facial-cues and voice-tones which are often used for judging others' emotions and intents (Barnes and Sternberg, 1989). Moreover, they are unable to observe the actions of the service provider. For example, with no additional information, a long pause between one's question and the service provider's response may be interpreted by some as if the service provider is also busy with other tasks and/or helping other users simultaneously. Thus, users of web-based live-chat services may rightfully so wonder whether they are being treated in a caring and respectful manner, and whether they are receiving the attention they deserve from the service provider.

Even with no information regarding the service provider's actions, intentions and emotions during the time between posting a statement and receiving the response, users of live-chat customer support services are expected to make judgments regarding such issues, possibly based on heuristics, or textual cues such as the use of emoticons (Derks, Bos and von Grumbkow, 2008). This is in line with role-theory (Solomon et al., 1985), which posits that users learn the role of service-receivers through the many service encounters they had (probably mostly face-to-face). Using these experiences, service receivers develop the ability to pinpoint important service norms and post-service reflections that they should focus on (Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988). In essence, their repeated service experiences teach them what to expect and what to assess when their role in a social exchange is that of a service receiver, either offline or online. These evaluations are similar to other web-based assessments that users have learned to develop through extrapolations (role learning) from the offline environment. For example, trust is a key element in commerce, which people have learnt to also expect and assess in e-commerce environments even though they must use a more limited set of available cues (Gefen, Karahanna and Straub, 2003).

As mentioned above, one of the unique attributes of web-based support services is that their users do not know what the service provider is doing while they wait, in between messages. In face-to-face service encounters this information is conveyed through direct observations, and in phone-based service encounters this information is conveyed via voice. In phone- and face-to-face- based services, also, the responses during a conversation are generally expected to be immediate and with no long pauses (there is no need to type, and there is an inability to repeatedly edit what is being said before the information is conveyed). Nevertheless, service users have learned to expect to have the full attention of their service providers and will possibly interpret deviations from this expectation as rudeness (Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988). Users of web-based customer support services are therefore likely to form an impression (accurate or not) regarding whether the service provider is busy with other tasks or users, and does not give them the attention and level-of-service they deserve. This assessment can serve as the basis for judging the interactional fairness of the service provider because when the service receiver does not get the expected attention from the service provider, feels that the service provider is not really concerned about him or her, and does not put the needed effort toward serving him or her, perceived interactional justice diminishes (Bies and Moag, 1986). Hence:

H1: The perceived busyness of the service provider reduces users' perceptions of interactional justice

The temporal duration of the service encounter is also something users would pay attention to in typical service settings (Price, Arnould and Tierney, 1995). Longer encounters are often not a bad thing; it could be that service receivers want to continue the service encounter (e.g., on a cruise) or that the encounter involves useful information and emotion exchanges (e.g., the service provider could provide additional useful information, joke with the customer, and build enjoyable relationships). However, this all changes when the service encounter becomes unnecessarily long due to the busyness of the service provider with other tasks. In such cases the duration of the encounter is extended against the will or expectation of the service receiver, and does not provide added utilitarian or hedonic value. It also implies that waiting times for responses are likely to be longer, and this may reduce users' positive reactions to the service (Thompson, Yarnold, Williams and Adams, 1996).

It is argued that when web-based support sessions become unnecessarily long due to the busyness of the service provider, the negative effect of busyness perceptions on interactional justice should become stronger. In one extreme, when the service provider is perceived to be fully occupied with the service receiver, and the session is short, the service provider's low busyness may not be an important source of information for judging his or her interactional fairness. In such cases, users may use heuristics or more obvious cues such as the politeness of the service provider's brief communications to assess his or her interactional fairness. In essence, in such situations the busyness of the service provider matters to a lesser extent because the user managed to achieve his or her goals in an effective fashion. In contrast, when the session is overly long due to the high busyness of the service provider, users have more opportunities to observe and feel the rudeness and apathy of the service provider. They experience more and longer disrespectful treatment, and can use these repeated cues as an important basis for assessing the interactional fairness of the service provider. Hence:

H2: Session length moderates the effect of perceived busyness of the service provider on perceptions of interactional justice, such that when sessions are unnecessarily long due to high levels of service provider busyness, the effect of busyness on interactional justice is stronger.

Justice perceptions, and particularly interactional justice, can drive post-encounter behavioral attitudes and intentions (Martinez-Tur et al., 2006). Two such intentions include continued use (re-patronage of the service) and positive or negative word-of-mouth (Wirtz and Mattila, 2004). Continued use intentions in the context of this study capture users' behavioral intentions to continue using the live-chat services in the future, when needed (Bhattacherjee, 2001); and positive word-of-mouth intentions capture users' intentions to say positive things about the service and recommend the service to others (Reichheld, 2003).

Consistent with prior studies, it is argued that interactional justice can increase future use and positive word-of-mouth intentions. These effects could be indirect, through the increase of positive assessments such as satisfaction, or directly through the signals provided by fair treatment (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011). Because interactionaly fair treatment is a common expectation of service users (Carr, 2007), it is reasonable to believe that when these expectations are met (i.e., the users have been treated in a respectful and attentive manner), users are more likely to use the service in the future when needed as opposed to using alternative customer service channels. Hence:

H3: Users' perceptions of interactional justice increase their continuance intentions

Given the satisfaction associated with interactionaly fair treatment (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011), users are also more likely to provide positive word-of-mouth and recommend the service to their friends when they perceive the service to be interactionaly fair. Referring friends or family to the service can damage the user's social image if the service does not meet their expected standards (Reichheld, 2003), and presumably also their interactional justice expectation. Thus, positive-word-of-mouth will be given when users are confident regarding the interactional treatment their referral would get. This assessment is often based on their recent service encounter experience (Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011). Hence:

H4: Users' perceptions of interactional justice increase their positive word-of-mouth intentions

The research model is depicted in Figure 1.

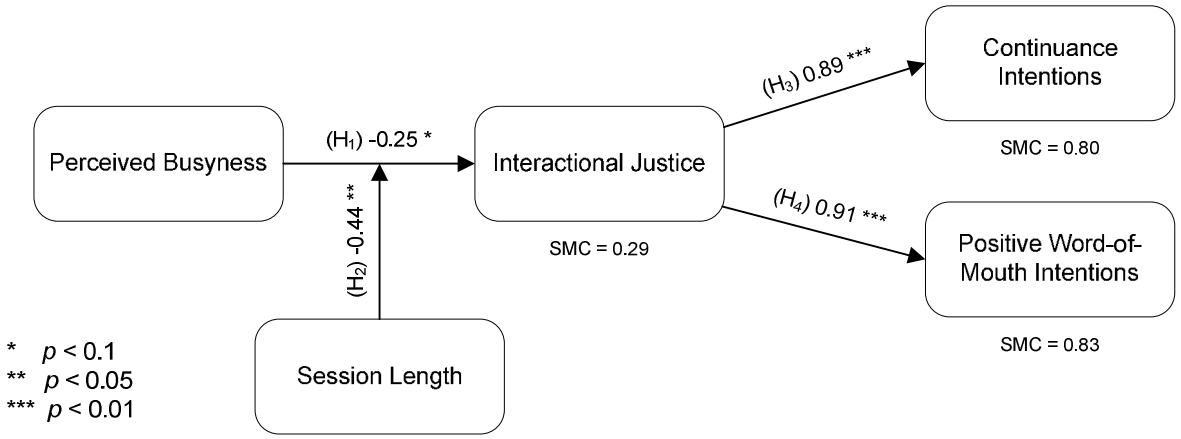

Figure 1: Research Model

METHOD

This study focused on the live-chat services provided by the libraries of two North American universities. These services allowed users (students, faculty, and members of the community) to initiate and participate in instant-messaging sessions via a web-based live-chat platform with a trained librarian (the service provider). In these sessions, the users typically asked for help in finding library materials, citing published works appropriately, and using library technologies.

The two libraries that were the focus of this study provided some training to the service providers (i.e., librarians). Nevertheless, they used different technologies for providing live-chat support services. One service provided a single interface to common instant messaging applications (e.g., MSN Messenger, Google Talk, Skype). In this case users had to have their own instant messaging account and add the library to their "friends list." The second service was embedded in the library website. In this case users did not have to have an instant messaging account. It is later tested whether this difference influences user perceptions and behaviors.

Procedures and Sample

At the end of each live-chat session, users were asked by the service provider who facilitated their sessions to voluntarily complete an online survey. This process continued over a period of 12 months, and yielded valid responses from 86 users (a response rate of 16%). The sample was slightly female dominant (67%), and was comprised of users from different age groups (18 to 66, with an average age of about 30). Respondents were graduate students (58%), faculty members (32%), undergraduate students (5%), and members of the local community (5%). The participants were, on average, fairly knowledgeable instant messaging users and library users. They reported, on average, on using instant messaging two times per week, and face-to-face library services once a week. The majority (58%) had used the live-chat service at least once before. Their recent use included questions related to research (68%) or library information and services (32%).

Survey Instrument

The scales used in the current study were adapted from established existing measures from the domains of face-to-face service encounters and IS use. All survey items, except for session length, were reported on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree. Example item capturing Interactional Justice was "The librarian did not put the proper effort into resolving my problem (reversed). Session length was self-reported. The survey is available upon request.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Several analyses were performed before estimating the research model. First, we tested for the potential influences of three control variables, namely the technology used by the two universities, age, and gender, on user responses by using Multivariate Analysis of Variance. The results indicated that there were no omnibus differences in participant responses

across universities and genders, after controlling for age. Thus, no control variables were included in the SEM models in order to economize on parameters to be assessed. Second, scale reliabilities, descriptive statistics, and correlations for the model's variables were calculated (see Table 1). The numbers indicate that the scales were reliable. Third, the potentially biasing effects of common method variance were examined using two techniques. The results (available upon request) indicated that CMV is unlikely to be a significant limitation.

	Mean (Std. Div.)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Session Length	9.25 (7.7)	NA						
(2) Perceived Busyness	2.55 (2.0)	0.17	NA					
(3) Interactional Justice	5.86 (1.5)	-0.20	-0.55**	*0.83 (0.81) [0.52]*				
(4) Continuance Intentions	5.67 (1.6)	-0.18	-0.32**	0.74**	*0.91 (0.91) [0.78]*			
(5) Positive Word-of-Mouth Intentions	6.00 (1.7)	-0.18	-0.38**	0.81**	0.93**	*0.98 (0.98) [0.96]*		
(6) Age	29.47 (11.8)	-0.03	0.07	-0.06	-0.17	-0.14	NA	
(7) Gender	NA	-0.01	0.09	-0.22*	-0.08	-0.02	0.02	NA

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Construct Correlations†

† Cronbach α, (Composite Reliability), and [Average Variance Extracted] scores are reported on the diagonal for multi-item scales.
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Model Estimation

The structural model was assessed in two steps (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) facilities of AMOS 18. In the first step a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model was specified and estimated. The fit statistics for this model were good [$\chi^2(52) = 77.0$; IFI = 0.98; TLI=0.97; CFI = 0.98; SRMR=0.072; RMSEA = 0.075 (p-close > 0.13)]. Thus, we proceeded to the second step which involved the specification and estimation of the hypothesized structural model. We first estimated this model without the interaction term which is the basis for the moderation analysis. The fit statistics for this model were adequate [$\chi^2(49) = 73.7$; IFI = 0.98; TLI=0.97; CFI = 0.98; SRMR=0.067; RMSEA = 0.077 (p-close > 0.12)]. The first hypothesis was supported, showing that perceived busyness reduces one's perceptions of interactional justice ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < 0.001$). Next, we estimated the structural model with the interaction term. The fit indices were satisfactory [$\chi^2(58) = 84.8$; IFI = 0.98; TLI=0.97; CFI = 0.98; SRMR=0.078; RMSEA = 0.074 (p-close > 0.13)], and the path coefficients supported H_2 to H_4. Session length moderated (strengthened) the negative effect of perceived busyness on interactional justice (H_2, $\beta = -0.44$, $p < 0.001$). Interactional justice, in turn, reduced continuance and positive word-of-mouth intentions (H_3 and H_4, $\beta = 0.89$ and $\beta = 0.91$ respectively, both with $p < 0.001$). Standardized path coefficients and SMCs are depicted in Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

Employees in customer service roles are, by necessity, busy. They typically deal with high volumes of comments and questions, and are evaluated on the basis of how many calls they can "close" per hour. In order to cope with this high volume, many organizations have instituted alternative ways to deal with customers, such as instant messaging or "live chat" customer service. The implications of the use of this technology, however, have yet to be examined empirically. This study has made important strides in this area. We show that a customer's perceptions of the busyness of the customer service representative interact with the length of the service encounter, to predict their perceptions of interpersonal justice. These perceptions then predict their continuance intentions as well as their positive word-of-mouth intentions. They can therefore be detrimental to the success of web-based live-chat customer support services.

At the heart of our findings is a paradox: busy representatives appear to provide inferior customer service, at least from an interactional justice perspective. However, spending more time with the customer (i.e., rushing less), and thereby increasing the length of the session, does not necessarily improve the customers' experiences. Instead, customers who believe that their representative is busy have a worse experience when their session is unnecessarily longer, presumably due to more and longer perceived to be deficient behaviors of the service provider. The reasons for this are not yet clear; it is possible that a busy service provider becomes increasingly frustrated as time goes on, and hence becomes less polite and caring. Alternatively, the customer may be exposed to a greater quantity of perceived to be improper service behaviors (e.g., having

to wait for responses without knowing what the service provider is busy with) when the session is long, and the service provider is busy with other tasks. Either way, in these instances, as demonstrated in this study, customers feel lower interactional justice, and ultimately reduce their intentions to continue using the service in the future or to recommend the service to others.

Theoretical Implications

Several theoretical implications should be emphasized. First, our findings extend the growing body of knowledge regarding web-based services which involve human service representatives (e.g., online learning, e-health, etc.). They specifically highlight the roles of service provider busyness and session length, which have not been studied in information systems contexts. Much of the research on busyness and time pressure has focused on how these perceptions affect the employee who experiences them. For example, there are significant literatures that examine how time pressure can affect the quality of people's decisions (e.g., Betsch, Haberstroh, Molter and Glockner, 2004) and performance (e.g., Baer and Oldham, 2006). Some related literature has also examined how subordinates' perceptions of their leaders' busyness affects their relationship quality with their leader (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006). However, this study is the first to examine the consequences of customer service representatives' busyness on a customer's perceptions of interpersonal justice. It therefore implies that marketing service research as well as MIS research should better integrate service provider busyness and session length with existing models and theories.

Second, our findings, in line with those of many studies in service marketing (e.g., Gelbrich and Roschk, 2011, Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002) suggest that interactional justice is an important driver of service success. Interactional justice, however, has not been a key theme in MIS research. Presumably, it is a less important determinant of user behaviors in the cases where there is no human service provider. However, many new information systems allow users to have service encounters with a service provider. Examples include e-tutoring and e-health applications. Thus, future research may consider the interactional aspects of computer mediated service encounters for better understanding user reactions to the technologies that facilitate these encounters.

Practical Contributions

Organizations that try to improve their customer service may endeavor to do so by increasing the amount of time that their representatives spend with each customer. For example, an online shoe company, Zappos, publicizes the fact that all its representatives can spend as much time as necessary to satisfy the needs of every customer, no matter how ridiculous. As noted above, however, such a strategy may backfire, if it leads to unrealistic expectations and unreasonable workloads for the customer service representative, who will in turn present less interactionaly fair behaviors. Firms that adopt this strategy may need to increase their staffing levels accordingly, and find ways to increase the interactional justice that service providers convey.

Our findings suggest that one key for improving interactional justice perceptions is the reduction of perceptions of service provider busyness. Thus, several ways for reducing actual or perceived service are suggested. First, actual busyness could be reduced through increased staffing. Second, it could also be reduced through training. Service providers can be trained to avoid long wait times between responses, even when they work on multiple live-chat sessions simultaneously. The information system could also include indicators (e.g., red-flag) that would show the service provider that a user has been waiting too long. Third, actual busyness can also be reduced through the use of previously developed (i.e., "canned") responses to typical questions and access to other resources (e.g., searchable databases). Such mechanisms may help service providers to accelerate the session without appearing to do so. Fourth, it is similarly important for firms to consider online communications skills in their recruitment and selection strategies for live-chat support positions; (i.e., hire skilled communicators, not just people who are knowledgeable about the product or service and who know how to type quickly). Lastly, busyness impressions can be reduced by training service providers to use verbal cues such as "please bear with me while I look up for the needed information; this may take 5 minutes". Such sentences can signal to users that the service provider is working on their issue, and is not busy with other tasks. This mechanism could also be automated by implementing context sensitive automatic sentence generators that would post filler sentences when the wait time is above a predefined threshold.

CONCLUSION

Providing good customer service has been a key challenge for many companies. While technology can help companies in this regard, it can also present new challenges. This study has demonstrated that when companies use web-based live-chat support services, the perceived busyness of the service provider and the duration of the service encounter interact and reduce perceptions of interactional fairness. These factors therefore diminish continued use and positive word-of-mouth intentions.

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