

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION IN CUSTOMER-TO-CUSTOMER ENCOUNTER SITUATIONS

Chun-Ming Yang, Ming Chuan University, Taiwan
I-Ling Ling, National Chia-Yi University, Taiwan
Chih-Yun Yang, National Kaohsiung Hospitality College, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

With the prosperity of service industries in past decades, service organizations devoted themselves to provide customers with better service experience. Numerous researches and reports have indicated that social interactions between customers and frontline employees play a critical role in determining customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty. In fact, many service encounters consist of more than one customer, but only a relatively small portion of studies has explored encounters between customers. Scholars have demonstrated that, like customer-employee encounters, customer-customer encounters also affect a customer's overall service evaluation. However, practitioners and academicians still lack the knowledge on how to develop better customer-to-customer experience.

Insights from business practices provide an intuitive answer toward fixing this knowledge gap. All relevant evidence suggests that the act of liking, or to use the more precise term, interpersonal attraction, serves as the key foundation for initiating social interactions. In this current study, the authors try to connect the customer-to-customer encounter with the concept of interpersonal attraction, which has a solid ground in social psychology, and demonstrate its importance and applicability in designing better service experience and initiating interactions among customers through an empirical study.

Based on the similarity-attraction paradigm in social psychology, the authors developed several hypotheses. One-hundred non-student participants completed a two-staged experiment. In the first stage, participants were asked to provide their background data and self-image descriptions. In the second stage, after viewing a dummy's information, participants had to evaluate their interpersonal attraction toward the dummy, their interaction willingness, and service experience expectation. The authors applied hierarchical multiple regression to test hypotheses. The findings suggest that background similarity and the similarity between the participant's ideal-self and the dummy's actual-self are critical factors in determining a participant's interaction willingness and experience expectation. Both factors interact with the other and produce highest positive effects on dependent variables under high-high situations. Moreover, interpersonal attraction serves as a significant mediator in these relationships. The authors also found that the similarity between a participant's actual-self and the dummy's actual-self brings interpersonal attraction, while – and only while – an individual's actual-self and ideal-self are similar.

This current study contributes to service and marketing literature in two ways. First, this study echoes the call for integrating social aspects into service consumption and experience design. This study also responds to the long-existing call for interpersonal attraction applications into the marketing field. Although social psychologists have dedicated more than half a century studying interpersonal attraction, it is only until very recently that scholars have started to understand its role in the marketing field. This research lays one of the earliest cornerstones to bridge interpersonal attraction and the field of service marketing. The authors of this current study argue that the role of interpersonal attraction in the marketing field is worth further exploration. Second, this research provides a new perspective for academicians to study customer-to-customer interactions. Service scholars have accumulated plenty of knowledge on the consequences and typologies of customer-to-customer interactions, but few of them have examined their psychological mechanisms. Thus, this study enriches customer-to-customer interaction research by introducing the concept of interpersonal attraction.

Results from this study also shed light on managerial practices by answering this question: How can a service organization enhance its offering's value by providing better customer-to-customer encounters? Empirical evidences from this study clearly suggest that interpersonal attraction could be a good starting point, especially for organizations whose offerings have inevitable customer-to-customer encounters. For practitioners, the insights obtained from this study urge service businesses to exploit the fruitful potential of interpersonal attraction in developing better customer-to-customer experience. The authors also discussed current study's limitations and future research directions. The authors call for more efforts in understanding the effects of interpersonal attraction in the service and marketing fields. References available on request.

References available upon request