



How personal costs influence customer citizenship behaviors



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ABSTRACT

Many customers engage in customer citizenship behaviors, such as restocking unwanted items, helping other customers, or putting shopping carts back. Although previous research has investigated a variety of antecedents of customer citizenship behaviors, it has not yet considered the personal costs that might inhibit the decision to engage in those behaviors. Using social exchange theory and tested with three experimental studies, this research demonstrates that customers consider their personal cost/benefit trade-off prior to engaging in customer citizenship behaviors. Specifically, perceived self-sacrifice reduces intention to engage in customer citizenship behaviors while awareness of public self-image increases intention. Furthermore, this cost/benefit trade-off between self-sacrifice and public self-image is influenced by peer norms and perceived consequence to the firm.

1. Introduction

Customers often perform tasks for the firm, such as restocking merchandise or helping other customers (Bove et al., 2009; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995). When customers help firms, employees or other customers, it is called customer citizenship behavior (Yi and Gong, 2013). Since customer citizenship behaviors are beneficial for the firm, and are generally outside of the firm's control, prior research has explored a number of antecedents predicting customer citizenship behaviors, such as customer personality, firm and employee characteristics, and peer influence (e.g., Anaza, 2014; Bartikowski and Walsh, 2011; Yi et al., 2013). However, research on customer citizenship behaviors has not yet considered the influence of personal costs that might inhibit a customer from engaging in citizenship behaviors or the perceived social rewards of these behaviors.

Social exchange theory posits that the decision to perform a particular social behavior is motivated by a trade-off between perceived costs and benefits (Homans, 1974). For example, customers are more likely to engage in environmentally friendly activities when the social benefits offset personal self-sacrifice (Osterhus, 1997; Tyler et al., 1982). Although customer citizenship behaviors are distinct from prosocial behaviors from the perspective of firms (Bove et al., 2009), the underlying motivations for customers are likely to be similar since they both are helping behaviors. Research on prosocial behaviors has shown that prosocial behaviors require a resource sacrifice from customers, such as money or time (Brooker, 1976; Webster Jr., 1975). The resource sacrifices are likely to be different for prosocial behaviors than customer citizenship behaviors but there will still be a cost involved in the

behaviors and these costs should be considered. Regarding benefits, consistent with social exchange theory, customers only engage in prosocial behaviors when they are sufficiently motivated, for instance, by displaying altruism to others as a way to bolster self-image (Ashworth et al., 2005; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Therefore, both personal costs and benefits are likely to influence customer citizenship behaviors.

Previous literature has identified two types of external factors that influence customer citizenship behaviors, peer norms and firm related factors (Bartikowski and Walsh, 2011; Yi et al., 2013). External factors do not compel customers directly but should instead alter customers' perceived cost/benefit trade-off. The extant research has shown that peer influence increases intention to perform customer citizenship behaviors (Yi and Gong, 2013). Peer influence may be a signal of approval from other customers for citizenship behaviors; thus, making the self-image enhancement of citizenship behaviors more salient and resource sacrifices less salient. In regard to firm related factors, arguably the most salient factor is the perceived consequence of a citizenship behavior to the firm. According to Fullerton et al. (1996), customers are less likely to engage in behaviors that cause serious harms to others. It is possible that the reverse may also be true; the more beneficial a customer citizenship behavior is perceived to be, the more likely customers will be to engage in the behavior. For example, restocking ice-cream is likely to be viewed as more beneficial than restocking a coat, and thus it is likely that the salience of the self-image enhancement will increase and the salience of the resource sacrifice will decrease.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the extent to which customers consider their personal cost/benefit trade-off prior to engaging in customer citizenship behaviors and how external contextual

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factors influence this perceived trade-off. The present paper focuses on a particular customer citizenship behavior: putting unwanted items back where they belong. In the next section, the relevant literature is reviewed and the hypotheses are developed. Afterwards, a series of experiments are conducted to test the hypotheses and reported in Studies 1, 2, and 3. The findings demonstrate that perceived self-sacrifice reduces intention to engage in citizenship behaviors while public self-image awareness increases it. In addition, consequence to the firm of citizenship behaviors reduces perceived self-sacrifice and increases public self-image awareness. Contrary to our expectations, however, peer norms only influence public self-image awareness and not perceived self-sacrifice. The theoretical findings suggest four paths for encouraging customer citizenship behaviors, (1) by reducing customers' self-sacrifice, (2) by increasing the visibility of customers who do engage in citizenship behaviors, (3) by describing the consequences of desirable customer citizenship behaviors to the firm and its stakeholders, and (4) by inspiring positive peer norms.

2. Customer citizenship behaviors

Customer citizenship behaviors are voluntary, unpaid work that benefits an organization (Anaza, 2014; Bartikowski and Walsh, 2011; Yi et al., 2013). Yi and Gong (2013, p. 768) even contend that customers are doing work that “employees might otherwise perform” and so they could be viewed as “organizational members or employees.” Firms clearly benefit when customers work on the firm's behalf. For example, when customers restock unwanted items themselves, they reduce the prevalence of misplaced items on retail shelves. Misplaced products may inhibit sales because they make it harder for customers to locate them (Ton and Raman, 2004). Further, misplaced products cause the store to look disorganized and reduce employee productivity (Camdereli and Swaminathan, 2010; Ton, 2012). Due to the seriousness of the problem, prior research has suggested some solutions including applying Radio Frequency Identification Technology (RFID) as well as creating awareness among store employees (Rekik et al., 2008; Raman et al., 2001). As an alternative, managers may be able to encourage customers to restock items as a customer citizenship behavior. Given the managerial relevance, the focal customer citizenship behavior used in this paper will be restocking unwanted products in retail stores.

2.1. Motivators of customer citizenship behaviors

Previous literature has examined three categories of antecedents that predict customer citizenship behaviors: (1) firm related factors, (2) peer norms, and (3) customer characteristics. First, a number of firm related factors have been shown to shape customer citizenship behaviors. For example, commitment and loyalty encourage customers to help other customers and the firm (Bartikowski and Walsh, 2011). Customers also tend to assist firms that offer support programs (Anaza and Zhao, 2013) and seem to treat customers fairly (Yi and Gong, 2013). Employees also play an important role since they help to build customer-company identification and thus encourage customer citizenship behaviors (Ahearne et al., 2005).

Peer norms have also been shown to influence customer citizenship behavior. Specifically, when customers are aware that other customers are willing to help them, such as by providing product-related information, they tend to reciprocate by helping the firm and other customers (Yi et al., 2013). Similarly, according to Zhu et al. (2016), customers are more likely to perform citizenship behaviors if they get social support from other customers or the firm. Customer characteristics also play a role in determining customer citizenship behaviors. For example, people who have greater personal ethical values are more likely to engage in citizenship behaviors (Turnipseed, 2002). Customers who score high on agreeableness and extraversion are more likely to empathize with other customers and thus are more willing to help others (Anaza, 2014). Also, the more customers identify with their

consumption community the more likely they will be to help other customers; however, if they only identify with smaller subgroups, then the intention to assist their peers in the overall community is lower (Johnson et al., 2013). Additionally, commitment to a firm leads to greater involvement in services (Anaza and Zhao, 2013).

However, unlike research on other prosocial behaviors, such as environmentalism, research on customer citizenship behaviors has not, to our knowledge, considered the cost/benefit trade-off for engaging in citizenship behaviors. This is a significant omission because it is likely that people, when making the decision to engage in a citizenship behavior, weigh the personal costs of the behavior compared to the social benefits. If the personal costs are greater than the social benefits, then people are not likely to engage in the citizenship behavior. Thus, it is important to investigate the factors that influence perceived costs and benefits. In order to better understand the cost benefit trade-off of customer citizenship behaviors, we review social exchange theory in the next section.

2.2. Social exchange theory

According to the social exchange theory proposed by Homans (1974), a person's behavior in a relationship is driven by perceived costs and benefits. They will engage in a social behavior when their personal benefits outweigh their costs. Following the theory, considerable empirical evidence demonstrates the importance of self-consequences (i.e., personal costs and benefits) in determining customers' decision to help (e.g., Wagner and Wheeler, 1969; Weyant, 1978; Eisenberg and Shell, 1986). For example, Weyant (1978) reveals that when customers are in negative moods, they are not willing to help unless the required effort is low. Moreover, Eisenberg and Shell (1986) propose that low-cost prosocial behaviors are performed automatically whereas high cost behaviors involve cognitive reflection. In the context of environmentally-conscious behaviors, even when consumers would like to engage in a particular behavior, for instance conserving energy, they will not do so if the personal cost is excessive (Lee and Holden, 1999; Osterhus, 1997; Tyler et al., 1982).

Similar to other helping behaviors, customer citizenship behaviors involve personal costs, such as time and effort in helping other customers find products, and personal benefits, such as praises from employees. However, research on customer citizenship behaviors has focused on characteristics that motivate customer citizenship behaviors and overlooked potential factors that might inhibit it. Consistent with social exchange theory, we propose that customers face a trade-off between the benefits and personal costs of performing a citizenship behavior. Thus, even when firm, peer, and customer characteristics are favorable for customer citizenship behaviors, customer self-consequences might inhibit such behaviors. Therefore, it is imperative to examine customers' self-consequences of both engaging and not engaging in citizenship behaviors.

3. Self-consequences of customer citizenship behaviors

Both personal costs and rewards drive a social behavior. Costs are those elements that have negative value to a person and rewards refer to those elements that provide positive value to that person. Costs are typically time, money, and effort. Rewards in social exchanges can be sense of social approval and support (Blau, 1968). Customers should consider both costs and rewards when deciding to engage in citizenship behaviors. Most of customer citizenship behaviors identified in the literature tend to involve time and effort as the main costs that customers have to face (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, we will examine costs in terms of time and effort as an inhibitor of customer citizenship behaviors. Since these behaviors are voluntary, we define the costs incurred in those behaviors as self-sacrifice. In addition, social approval and avoidance of negative social judgment will be an underlying reward mechanism that reinforces customer citizenship behaviors (Fig. 1).

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