



The importance of customer citizenship behaviour in the modern retail environment: Introducing and testing a social exchange model



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ABSTRACT

In the modern retail environment, customers continuously rely on other consumers for assistance when interacting with retailers' digital technologies. This study examined if technology acceptance drives affective commitment and ultimately existing users to assist potential users, as measured by direct customer citizenship behaviour (advocacy, help in using the technology) and indirect customer citizenship behaviour (tolerance and feedback to the retailer for improvement). The sample consisted of 533 electronic banking customers. All research hypotheses were supported. Practically, the research findings direct retailers on the strategies required to ensure customers engage in direct and indirect citizenship behaviour to assist fellow customers in interacting with the digital technologies, and to improve the customer retail experience. Theoretically, the study extends the extant research on technology acceptance by providing more insight into its connection with customer citizenship behaviour directed towards fellow customers and retailers in the post-consumption stage of digital technology and the extent to which affective commitment strengthens these relationships.

1. Introduction

New digital technologies are significantly changing the customer retail experience (Farah and Ramadan, 2017:54). For example, today many customers shop online, use self-service checkouts, and pay with mobile devices. Retailers are investing in these convenient self-service channels to increase their own productivity and achieve greater customer satisfaction (Demoulin and Djelassi, 2016:540). Furthermore, it is predicted that the growing digital trend will revolutionise retailing in the future and will radically impact the manner in which retailers interact with their customers (Kallweit et al., 2014:268). New wave technologies – such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality and innovative delivery systems – are expected to transform the consumer retail experience outside of traditional time and location boundaries (Parkin et al., 2018:1–2).

These retail technological developments may result in less real-time face-to-face customer interaction with a retail employee, who would ordinarily be able to provide on-the-spot advice to customers during the retail experience. Accordingly, in the modern retail environment, customers seem to rely more on the help of other consumers – that is, inter-customer helping behaviour (Yi and Kim, 2017). A unique feature of this behaviour is that it is normally voluntary and not an explicit

requirement of the retailer (Gruen, 1995). Nevertheless, this behaviour is actively supported as it may improve service delivery and enhance productivity of the retail experience (Kim and Yi, 2017:788–789). As such, in business sciences literature, this behaviour is often referred to as customer citizenship behaviour, as it exhibits many of the attributes and motivational drivers of a good social citizen (Yi and Gong, 2013:1280–1281).

However, citizenship behaviour is not restricted to customers' direct engagement with fellow consumers. It may also entail indirect citizenship behaviour, such as customers being tolerant if the service does not meet their expectation levels and providing feedback for improving the retail experience (Yi and Gong, 2013:1280–1281). This behaviour has, to a large extent, been overlooked in the retail literature involving digital technologies, but is nonetheless important, as customers who are not completely satisfied with the digital technologies are retained and their suggestions for improvement may assist in enhancing the customer retail experience for fellow consumers.

A major driving force of customer citizenship behaviour is customers' affective commitment (Curth et al., 2014:149). In a situation where a customer relies on digital technology for the retail experience and lacks access to real-time direct customer interaction with a retail employee, it is plausible to expect that a customer's attitude of affective

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commitment to the digital technology is preceded by a set of beliefs of the acceptance of the digital technology (Davis, 1989; Davis et al., 1989). As such, this research seeks to better understand the extent to which technology acceptance drives customers' emotional attachment towards the technology and so impacts on their citizenship behaviour for a retail experience. This matter is well worth investigating, considering the potential value and leverage of good customer citizenship behaviour for the customer, retailer, and broader society.

Specifically, this research investigated the relationship between technology acceptance, affective commitment, and direct and indirect customer citizenship behaviour, focusing on a service environment where customers rely on a digital technology that lacks access to a real-time service assistant during the post-consumption stage. Theories related to technology acceptance, relationship marketing and social exchange were examined to develop and test a customer citizenship behaviour model and to identify the motivational drivers. Six technology acceptance belief factors were identified that may impact on customers' affective commitment and thus their direct customer citizenship behaviour (advocacy and helping fellow customers) and indirect customer citizenship behaviour (tolerance and feedback for improving the customer retail experience). Considering the important role of affective commitment in driving customer citizenship behaviour, the extent to which affective commitment would strengthen the relationship between technology acceptance beliefs and customer citizenship behaviours was also verified.

The research findings have important implications. Theoretically, significant insight has been gained into the impact of customers' technology acceptance beliefs on their attitudes towards the digital technologies, which may contribute to customer citizenship behaviour in a retail setting. Specifically, it seems that within the retail environment, what may also be relevant in the post-consumption stage of digital usage is the sequence of positive beliefs of retailers' digital technologies, contributing to positive attitudes, and that may affect customers' technology-related behaviour (Davis, 1989; Davis et al., 1989). However, the difference is that after customers have interacted with the retailers' digital technologies and affective commitment has been gained, the behaviour may take the form of direct and indirect citizenship behaviour, as explained by the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Furthermore the findings also provide insight into the role of affective commitment in strengthening the relationships between technology acceptance beliefs and customer citizenship behaviours in a retail setting. Practically, the research findings provide direction to retailers on the strategies required for ensuring customers engage in direct and indirect citizenship behaviour to assist fellow consumers interacting with the digital technologies and to improve their overall customer retail experience. From a broader social perspective, policy-makers, advocacy groups and government agencies may also benefit from the study's findings, as it offers insight into the pathway for ensuring customers become more service literate and proficient consumer citizens.

The subsequent section presents the literature background and introduces the conceptual model and related hypotheses. Following a brief explanation of the research methodology, the research findings are examined. Next, the research's theoretical contributions to the retailing field are discussed, and the practical implications are highlighted, not only for retailers and customers, but for social at large. The research limitations and directions for further research conclude this paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. An overview of customer citizenship behaviour

Citizenship behaviour was initially introduced by Organ (1988) within an organisational/employee context and refers to 'work-related behaviours that are discretionary, not related to the formal organisational reward system, and, in the aggregate, promote the effective

functioning of the organization' (Moorman, 1991:845). Since the late nineties, the citizen concept has also received considerable attention in the marketing discipline, where helpful behaviours shown by customers to other customers as well as the retailer have become a popular area of interest among scholars. Hence, in the marketing discipline customer citizenship behaviour is often referred to as the 'helpful constructive gestures exhibited by customers that are valued or appreciated by the firm, but not related directly to enforceable or explicit requirements of the individual's role' (Gruen, 1995:461).

Insight into the similarities and differences between the helpful constructive gestures performed by customers relative to other types of organisational citizenship behaviours and customer voluntary behaviours, furthermore provides a greater perspective into the underlying nature of customer citizenship behaviour. Specifically, it seems that both the organisational and customer citizenship theories make reference to voluntary, helpful behaviours performed by individuals (customers and employees), beyond their pre-defined roles expectations. The difference, however, is that organisational citizenship behaviour relates to the helpful constructive gestures performed by employees, directed towards co-workers or the retailer (such as volunteering to carry out task activities in the retail firm), while customer citizenship behaviour concerns the helpful constructive gestures performed by customers, directed towards fellow customers or the retailer (such as volunteering to help a fellow customer in using the technology) (Moorman, 1991:845; Gruen, 1995:461; Agarwal, 2016:961; Yi and Gong, 2013). Additionally, when contrasting the citizenship behaviours performed by customers with other types of customer voluntary behaviour, it is evident that customer citizenship behaviour concerns the helpful constructive gestures performed by customers to benefit the retailer and fellow customers. This is different from prosocial behaviour, information sharing and participation that are more concerned about providing assistance to fellow customers only or to benefit the firm and oneself but not fellow customers (Wu et al., 2017:430).

2.2. The link between technology acceptance and customer citizenship behaviour

Aware of the potential benefits of customer citizenship behaviour, past research has extensively investigated the underlying motives driving this behaviour (Anaza, 2014; Balaji, 2014; Bartikowski and Walsh, 2011; Bettencourt, 1997; Cheng et al., 2016; Gruen, 1995; Nguyen et al., 2014; Shamim et al., 2015; Yi and Gong, 2008; Zhu et al., 2016). It was further noted that among the studies conducted, a number of scholars specifically seem to favour research on the impact of relationship quality and related factors, such as affective commitment, on customer citizenship behaviour (Curth et al., 2014; Xie et al., 2017; Chiu et al., 2015; Balaji, 2014; Wu et al., 2017). These studies are important, considering that affective commitment is seen as a major driving force of customer citizenship behaviour (Curth et al., 2014:149).

However, as positioned earlier, what has not yet been accounted for in extant literature, is an understanding of the extent to which customers' technology acceptance and affective attachment towards the technology impacts on their citizenship behaviours for a retail experience. The relationships are likely, considering that the rationale for providing helpful constructive gestures to both fellow customers and the retailer can be explained by the social exchange theory that serves as the main theoretical framework for predicting customer citizenship behaviour (Blau, 1964). The theory posits that when people receive benefits from others, they feel obligated to reciprocate. This behaviour may especially transpire when customers feel that they have received exceptional treatment beyond the expected norm, and which may contribute to them having greater intentions to reciprocate and be helpful to the retailer (Groth, 2005:13). For example, when customers benefited from exceptional treatment from the retailer and have

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