



Employee Adaptive Behavior in Service Enactments



Alexander Leischnig^{a,*}, Kati Kasper-Brauer^{b,1}

^a Department of Marketing, University of Bamberg, Feldkirchenstr. 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany

^b Department of Marketing, Freiberg University of Technology, Lessingstr. 45, 09599 Freiberg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 March 2014

Received in revised form 18 July 2014

Accepted 21 July 2014

Available online 7 August 2014

Keywords:

employee adaptive behavior

work perception

personal attributes

fsQCA

ABSTRACT

This study deepens understanding of the causal patterns of factors stimulating employees to perform adaptive behaviors in service encounter situations. Drawing on motivation literature and configuration theory, this study develops and tests research propositions based on a sample of 228 employees from the insurance industry. Findings from fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis indicate three configurations of employee personal characteristics and work perceptions explain employee adaptive behavior. This article contributes to the literature by providing new insights into the causal pattern of factors stimulating customization approaches in service situations. Based on these findings, this article discusses implications for service management.

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1. Introduction

Customization approaches that aim to provide customers with individually tailored goods and services are increasingly relevant for marketing and management. Extant literature notes that for services in particular, customers request and expect flexibility and customization (Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, & Kumar, 2005). To achieve individualized services, service employees need to perform adaptive behaviors to adjust the service offering and the delivery mode to the respective needs of the customer (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996; Gwinner et al., 2005). These adaptive behaviors consist of both a process-related (i.e., interpersonal) and an outcome-related (i.e., offering) component (Gwinner et al., 2005).

Prior studies contribute to elucidating customization approaches and their consequences for customers' satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., Coelho & Henseler, 2012). Less clear, however, is what factors drive employees to perform interpersonal and service-offering adaptive behaviors in service encounter situations. Answers to this question have important implications for many types of services as they relate to the implementation of customization at the customer–contact level. Existing studies on the antecedents of employee adaptive behavior in services either are conceptual in nature (e.g., Kelley, 1993) or concentrate exclusively on the main or “net effects” of specific predictors, such as employees' individual predisposition on adaptive behaviors (e.g., Gwinner et al., 2005).

Drawing on motivation literature (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000) and configuration theory (Meyer, Tsui, & Hinings, 1993), this article aims

to unravel the causal pattern of factors underlying employee adaptive behavior in service encounter situations. Specifically, this article analyzes how employees' personal characteristics and work perceptions combine to form constellations of workplace conditions that stimulate the execution of adaptive behavior at the customer–contact level. Rather than analyzing the (main) effects of particular antecedents, the focus of this article is on detecting *configurations* (i.e., constellations of causal factors) that explain employee adaptive behavior. The question that arises is: What do such configurations look like? Knowledge of these constellations would help managers identify relevant patterns of factors stimulating customization in service encounter situations and provide guidance on the definition of workplace designs and the development of employment strategies. To achieve these goals, this article employs fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA; Ragin, 2008), a novel analytic method that has received only limited attention in extant services research (e.g., Chang, Tseng, & Woodside, 2013; Ordanini, Parasuraman, & Rubera, 2014; Wu, Yeh, Huan, & Woodside, 2014).

2. Conceptual model and research propositions

2.1. Conceptual model

Fig. 1 depicts the proposed model—a Venn diagram illustrating three sets of constructs and their intersections. The three sets of constructs reflect employee adaptive behavior (i.e., interpersonal adaptive behavior and service-offering adaptive behavior), which is the outcome of interest in this study, and two sets of causal conditions to predict the outcome (i.e., employees' work perceptions and personal characteristics). The intersections represent configurations of factors, which, from a statistical point of view, are higher-level interactions.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 951 863 2970; fax: +49 951 863 2975.

E-mail addresses: alexander.leischnig@uni-bamberg.de (A. Leischnig),

kati.kasper-brauer@bwl.tu-freiberg.de (K. Kasper-Brauer).

¹ Tel.: +49 3731 393552; fax: +49 3731 394006.

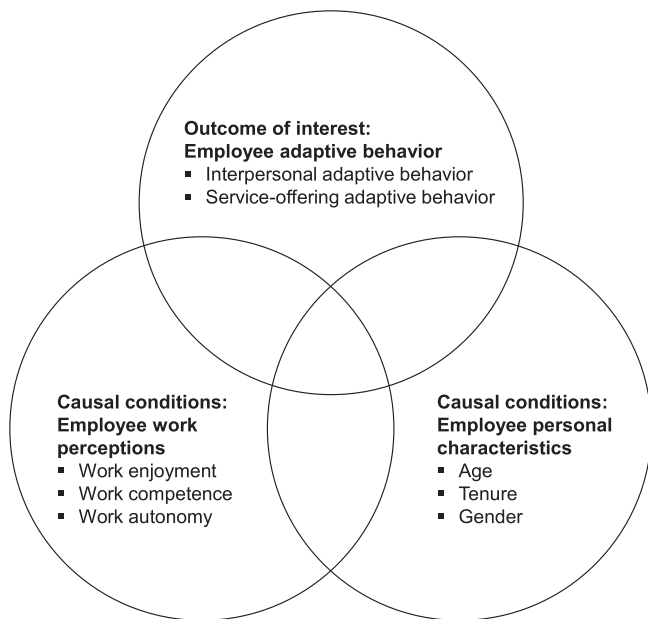


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

Prior research examines the role and nature of adaptive selling and customization and, in doing so, deepens understanding of the concept and its underlying dimensions (e.g., Gwinner et al., 2005; Kelley, 1993; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, and Gutman (1985) and Surprenant and Solomon (1987) both systematically discuss the role of so-called personalization of services. They suggest a tripartite approach that covers option personalization, programmed personalization, and customized personalization. Kelley (1993) emphasizes the concept of discretion and distinguishes routine, creative, and deviant discretion. Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996) and Gwinner et al. (2005) highlight the concept of employee adaptiveness. These authors suggest that employee adaptive behavior comprises both an interpersonal component, which pertains to how the service is delivered, and a service-offering component, which involves the service outcome. In line with these notions, this article suggests that service employees' adaptive behavior includes two primary dimensions encompassing (1) the alteration of the actual service offering and (2) the alteration of the interpersonal interaction between employee and customer. Following Gwinner et al. (2005, p. 135), this article defines employee adaptive behavior as "the deliberate modification of the service offering and/or the employee's interpersonal behavior in a situationally appropriate manner in response to meeting perceived consumer needs."

To explain employee adaptive behavior, the elements that constitute the configurations need to be specified. Existing studies develop integrative models, including several antecedents, and test these models using correlation-based methods, such as regression or structural equation analysis, to put the antecedents in order based on their contributions to employee adaptive behavior (e.g., Gwinner et al., 2005; Román & Iacobucci, 2010). These analyses provide valuable insights into the "net effects" of particular predictors and make significant contributions to the literature by identifying the most important facilitators (or inhibitors) of adaptive behavior. However, knowledge about patterns of factors that encourage employees to perform adaptive behaviors in service encounter situations and help characterize adaptive-prone and adaptive-reluctant employees remains limited. Such knowledge would contribute to a deeper understanding of how factors interact and strengthen or weaken each other in terms of determining employee adaptive behavior. In addition, knowledge of the configurations of factors underlying employee adaptive behavior would

help managers "profile" service personnel and develop employment strategies.

To address this gap, this article aims to examine employee adaptive behavior by unraveling configurations that reflect causally interrelated structures of sets of factors. Drawing on motivation literature (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000) and occupational research (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2008, 2010; Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001; Spreitzer, 1995), this study adopts a work environmental perspective and suggests that (1) service employees' personal characteristics (i.e., age, organizational tenure, and gender) and (2) service employees' work perceptions (i.e., work enjoyment, work competence, and work autonomy) are critical factors that can explain employee adaptive behavior in service situations. Rather than asking whether employees' age matters, this article raises the question of how employees' personal characteristics combine with work perceptions to matter.

Extant research highlights the critical role of employees' age and organizational tenure to predict work behaviors and job performance (e.g., Avolio, Waldman, & McDaniel, 1990). Although age and organizational tenure are dependent variables that co-vary with each other, prior research shows that these variables are distinct and result in different outcomes (Bedeian, Ferris, & Kacmar, 1992). Regarding age, prior studies reveal mixed results and sometimes even contradictory findings. While one stream of research indicates that age relates negatively to work productivity and employees' motivation to adapt quickly in volatile environments, due to loss of cognitive and physical abilities (e.g., Avolio & Waldman, 1994; Isaksson & Johansson, 2000), another stream of research challenges these findings (or age-related stereotypes) and suggests neutral and positive effects of age on employees' work behaviors and performance (e.g., Greller & Simpson, 1999). The basic rationale underlying these neutral or positive effects is that older employees substitute work experience and greater expertise for speed of information acquisition, processing, and recall (Ng & Feldman, 2008). The experience and expertise accumulated over time in a lengthy relationship with a company may compensate for productivity losses due to changes in cognitive and physical abilities (Ng & Feldman, 2008).

In this vein, organizational tenure, which functions as an indicator of work experience, has a positive effect on employees' work behaviors and performance (e.g., Avolio et al., 1990). Previous studies suggest that as the relationship with a company increases, employees' understanding of company-internal policies and work procedures improves (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). That is, employees in a lengthy relationship with a company attain a better understanding of work characteristics and processes, which results in better job performance (Wagner, Ferris, Fandt, & Wayne, 1987). This rationale, however, may not be relevant in every context. In a meta-analysis, Ng and Feldman (2010) find that though organizational tenure relates positively to beneficial work behaviors and task performance in general, the strength of the association decreases as organizational tenure increases, thus providing support for a curvilinear relationship between tenure and task performance.

Focusing on employees' gender, prior research indicates that male and female service employees react differently to service encounter situations (Babin & Boles, 1998). These differences arise from female tendencies to be more communal and socially oriented and male tendencies to show stronger agentic approaches in terms of goal-oriented behaviors (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). Gilligan (1982) notes that women are better listeners and better at developing relational qualities than men. In addition, female employees tend to behave more supportively, practice higher interpersonal-oriented behavior (Neu, Graham, & Gilly, 1988), and even over-nurture their customers (Goolsby, Lagace, & Boorum, 1992). In contrast, men show greater assertiveness, task mastery, and individualism (Babin & Boles, 1998). Despite these gender differences, previous work does not reveal a consistent pattern of effects when attempting to explain adaptive selling approaches. For example, Levy and Sharma (1994) demonstrate that gender has no direct effect on the practice of adaptive selling but moderates the relationship between salesperson age and the practice of adaptive selling. In addition, in their

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