Journal of Business Research 92 (2018) 9–24

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

# Customer value co-creation behavior: A dyadic exploration of the influence of salesperson emotional intelligence on customer participation and citizenship behavior

Duleeep Delpechitre[a,*], Lisa L. Beeler-Connelly[b], Nawar Chaker[c]

[a] Department of Marketing, College of Business, Illinois State University, PO Box 5590, Normal, IL 61790, United States
[b] Department of Marketing, Ralph and Luci Schey Sales Centre, College of Business, Ohio University, Copeland Hall, Athens, OH 45701, United States
[c] Department of Marketing and International Business, Martha and Spencer Love School of Business, Koury Business Center, office 304, 2075 Campus Box, Elon, NC 27244, United States

ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:*
Sales
Customer co-creation of value
Emotional intelligence
Dyads
Empathy

ABSTRACT

Co-creation is often considered a significant process firms use to sustain a competitive advantage. However, the literature contains limited information about the role salespeople play in regard to customer value co-creation behaviors. Building on social exchange theory and data from a sample of 224 business-to-business salespeople and their customers, this study posits that salesperson emotional intelligence and empathy are key influencers of customer participation, customer citizenship behavior, and commitment to the salesperson. In addition, the findings reveal the salesperson's ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions affects customer value co-creation behaviors differently. The findings of this study thus highlight the increasing perception of salespeople as crucial boundary spanners that greatly influence customer value co-creation behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Past research highlights the customer as the co-creator of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), suggesting that the process of value co-creation will not succeed without the customer's engagement, involvement, and commitment to collaborate with the salesperson. Customer co-creation of value is defined as the joint creation of value by the firm and the customer (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). In addition, customer co-creation of value is critical in helping firms achieve a competitive advantage due to its influence on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Navarro, Llinares, & Garzon, 2016). While anecdotal evidence generally affirms the wisdom inherent in encouraging customers to participate in value creation, little research has explored how salespeople influence customer co-creation at the individual, micro-level. More specifically, value co-creation is highly contingent on personal interactions between buyers and sellers, which serve as the “locus of value creation” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Therefore, much opportunity exists to further explore which factors might influence the buyer-seller interaction in the process of value co-creation and how this process may unfold (Kohtamäki & Partanen, 2016).

Generally, researchers have examined value co-creation in inter-organizational or inter-departmental contexts (e.g., Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016), which neglects to consider the personal interactions between external buyers and sellers in the co-creation process (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). Examining interpersonal interactions between the buyer and the seller is paramount for any sales organization because boundary spanning salespeople are believed to possess critical customer insights, to have greater amounts of interactions with customers, and to be presented with the best opportunities to develop value co-creation with customers (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012).

Research on social exchange theory can be used to help explain and predict the intricate interplay of interdependent transactions that exist between salespeople and their customers in the co-creation of value process (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to social exchange theory, salespeople initiate personal interactions with customers by employing various tangible or intangible resources, such as information and services (see Foa & Foa, 1974), in hopes of providing benefits to customers and beginning a process of social exchange that results in economic and social outcomes for both parties involved (Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001). As positive exchange episodes persist over time, salespeople are able to increase customer trust and to gain customer commitment (Håkansson, 1982). Social exchange theory would suggest salespeople leverage personal resources, such as abilities,

* Corresponding author.
*E-mail addresses:* dsdelpe@ilstu.edu (D. Delpechitre), beelerl@ohio.edu (L.L. Beeler-Connelly), nchaker@elon.edu (N. Chaker).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.05.007
Received 21 July 2017; Received in revised form 1 May 2018; Accepted 5 May 2018

to entice customer behavior. The continuous interchange then results in customer commitment to the salesperson, primarily due to a collaborative effort through co-creation and increased trust in the salesperson. Thus, it is evident that salespeople play a central role in the value co-creation process (Blocker et al., 2012), making it important to examine which individual abilities are necessary for success (Terho, Haas, Eggert, & Ulaga, 2012).

Salesperson abilities, such as emotional intelligence and empathy, have been explored as moderators of critical salesperson-performance relationships (e.g., Chen & Jaramillo, 2014) and have also been noted as keys to salesperson success; however, much remains unknown about the direct effects of emotional intelligence and empathy on customer outcomes. Accordingly, we explore two common, well-established salesperson constructs—emotional intelligence and empathy—and their impact on customer value co-creation behaviors to understand how critical these abilities truly are and their effects on customer behaviors and to use commonly tested constructs as a foundation to explore a more novel construct (i.e., customer value co-creation).

The following research questions therefore guide our research: 1) What is the effect of salesperson emotional intelligence on customer value co-creation and salesperson commitment, and 2) What is the moderating role of salesperson empathy? Building on previous findings and leveraging social exchange theory, the objective of this study is to understand how salesperson emotional intelligence and empathetic ability influence customer value co-creation behavior and the customer's commitment to a salesperson. More specifically, we examine how dimensions of salesperson emotional intelligence influence various customer value co-creation behaviors and the moderating effect of salesperson's empathy. To examine these relationships, we use dyadic data from salespeople and customers involved in business-to-business sales. Our findings suggest that dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., understanding of emotions and perceiving emotions) have a positive significant relationship with customer value co-creation behaviors.

This study makes three contributions to the sales and customer co-creation of value literature. First, no known research explores how salesperson emotional intelligence influences customer co-creation dimensions. Prior research establishes that co-creation is a positive influencer of customer outcomes (O'Cass & Ngo, 2012), but little is known about the individual salesperson's impact on customer co-creation of value. In this study, we show emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of customer co-creation value and customer commitment to salesperson using a customer value co-creation behavior scale initially proposed by Yi and Gong (2013), which has seldom been explored since its initial conception.

Second, this study also provides insights regarding salesperson empathy, which remains underexplored in the sales domain (Franke & Park, 2006) but is anecdotally accepted as a key aspect of sales interactions. In particular, this study examines how salesperson empathetic ability influences customer co-creation outcomes, demonstrating that salesperson empathy is a critical boundary condition in reference to the link between emotional intelligence and customer value co-creation behavior.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on salesperson emotional intelligence. Due to numerous definitions and operationalizations, conflicting findings have emerged regarding salesperson emotional intelligence and the effect it has on customers. Whereas most emotional intelligence studies combine its dimensions into a second order construct, this study explores all three dimensions individually. As such, this study contributes to the understanding of salesperson emotional intelligence by focusing on a more granular, three-dimensional view of emotional intelligence, allowing for a more precise understanding of how the elements of emotional intelligence each influence customer value co-creation behaviors differently.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized as follows. We begin with a brief overview of the social exchange theory—the theoretical lens that guides our work. Next, we review the relevant literature to support the development of the study's hypotheses. Then we provide a description of the procedures and processes used to address the study's research questions. We then present the study's findings and conclude with an extensive discussion of our study's contribution to theory and the implications of our findings.

## 2. Theoretical foundation and relevant literature

### 2.1. Social exchange theory

Broadly speaking, marketing is predicated on an exchange between parties (Hunt, 1976). Each exchange consists of an interaction between individuals. In sales contexts, interactions between buyers and sellers are essential to relational exchanges. Social exchange theory (SET) is an appropriate and valuable lens to better explain exchanges between salespeople and their customers (Lee & Cadogan, 2009). The significance of the dyad when exploring interpersonal relationships was first considered in seminal work by Thibaut and Kelly (1959), which stresses exchange is characterized by social behaviors between individuals. SET considers the transfer of resources (tangible or intangible) in exchange relationships.

According to SET, social exchanges are comprised of multiple interactions between parties and should not be viewed as occurring in singularity (Muthusamy & White, 2005). Over time, exchange relationships consist of a series of discrete exchange episodes that result in economic, information, product, and/or social exchange (Håkansson, 1982). Correspondingly, individuals enter into new relationships and maintain existing ones when they believe doing so will provide them with meaningful rewards (Macneil, 1980). As relationships develop, parties incorporate past outcomes to anticipate future costs and benefits of continued commitment to a particular relationship (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As a result, SET implies parties will remain in a relationship as long as adequate outcomes continue.

Another vital aspect of SET is the role of satisfaction in relationships (Blau, 1964). Building on the idea of comparison levels, partners that obtain benefits that meet or exceed their expectations and are equivalent to or better than alternative outcomes will consider their relationships satisfactory. As a byproduct, partners that are pleased with these relationships will be more inclined to remain committed to and expand individual relationships (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). However, if an alternative partner can provide greater benefits, the disadvantaged partner will terminate the relationship and switch to a new partner.

The essence of SET suggests a relational contract develops between two exchange partners through interactions and interdependency over time (Hallen, Johanson, & Seyed-Mohamed, 1991). We posit that emotional intelligence is an ability that salespeople utilize as a type of socioeconomic resource (Lambe et al., 2001). This socioeconomic resource is deliberately "exchanged" with the hopes of reciprocation from the customer. Research suggests positive exchanges lead a customer to reciprocation and a want to maintain the relationship by enacting particular behaviors (Lambe et al., 2001), such as participation behaviors and citizenship behaviors. These positive interactions eventually increase the want to maintain the relationship and the interdependency of the two exchange partners, ultimately increasing commitment to the salesperson (Håkansson, 1982).

Therefore, we argue a salesperson's emotional intelligence is an ability that positively influences the customer's willingness to participate in value co-creation. This exchange increases the dependency and willingness of exchange partners to participate in a future exchange, which increases the customer's commitment to the salesperson. Although some authors suggest constructs tangential to commitment ultimately lead to cooperation behaviors (e.g. Morgan & Hunt, 1994), other authors have found the opposite (e.g. Anderson & Narus, 1990). The casual ordering of behaviors and commitment has long been a point of contention regarding the basic assumptions of SET (Cropanzano &