A Mechanism of Mutually Beneficial Relationships between Employees and Consumers: Dyadic Analysis of Employee–Consumer Interaction

Kyungyeol Kim, Indiana University
Kevin Byon (Advisor), Indiana University

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Introduction

Sport management researchers concur with one another regarding the significance of interactions between employees and consumers in shaping the consumers’ attitudes and behaviors. This becomes particularly salient in high high-contact service where frontline employees and consumers are required to interact with each other to create service outcomes. However, the vast majority of studies conducted are largely isolated such that they take assessment exclusively from one side of the dyad—either employees or consumers. The present study sought to advance the current body of knowledge by utilizing a dyadic method that included judgments provided by employees as well as one of each employee’s consumers in a high-contact sport service context (e.g., personal training in fitness centers). As such, the purpose of the study was to examine how employee citizenship behavior (ECB) and dysfunctional behavior (EDB) influenced consumer citizenship behavior and participative behavior through consumers’ perceived service quality and satisfaction.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

ECB refers to discretionary contributions that help organizations and consumers overall but are neither explicitly required nor rewarded (Organ, 1988). ECB is defined as a voluntary behavior that contraves organizational norms and threatens the overall well-being of consumers (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). The rudiment of the associations between employee behaviors and consumers’ perceived service quality is underpinned by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The fundamental principles of norm reciprocity are: “(1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them” (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171). Taking into consideration of the concept of norm reciprocity, it is expected that consumers’ perceived service quality hinges upon employee behaviors, as an action taken by one party in an interactive dynamic will be similarly reciprocated by the other one. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1. Employee citizenship behavior will positively influence service quality.

H2. Employee dysfunctional behavior will negatively influence service quality.

In addition to the main effects of ECB and EDB, we suggest the interaction effect of the two factors (i.e., ECB x EDB) on service quality. The theoretical explanation of this can be sourced in the script theory (Schank & Abelson, 1977). The theory holds that familiar and frequently occurring situations accumulate in people’s memories as cognitive scripts, which are activated when predicting sequencing events (Lord & Kernan, 1987). While consumers might take ECB for granted, unexpected EDB deviates from their assumptions of employees always exhibiting good attitudes toward them, which is incompatible with consumers’ scripts. Thus, it is predicted that the negative effect of EDB might overshadow the positive relationship between ECB and service quality.

H3. Employee dysfunctional behavior will negatively moderate the relationship between employee citizenship behavior and service quality.

Consumer citizenship behavior is defined as a discretionary behavior, which is not required for a successful service creation but helps a service provider and organization overall (Groth, 2005). Consumer participative behavior refers to a required and expected behavior that is necessary for a successful service creation (Groth, 2005). Bagozzi’s (1992) appraisal→ emotional response → coping framework indicates that the perception of service quality (appraisal) causes an emotional reaction (satisfaction) that ultimately drives coping behaviors (citizenship and participative behaviors). Research shows that service quality is not only mediated by satisfaction but is directly associated with behavioral intention (e.g., Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000), suggesting that satisfaction plays a partial mediating role. Groth (2005) reported that satisfaction was found to be a stronger predictor of consumer citizenship behavior than of participative behavior. Based on a literature review and Bagozzi’s framework, we expected the partial effects of satisfaction on consumer citizenship behavior and participative behavior might be of different magnitudes. Therefore, the following hypothesis was postulated:

H4. Satisfaction will partially mediate the relationship between service quality and consumer citizenship behavior stronger than the relationship between service quality and consumer participative behavior.
Method and Results

A high contact sport service setting (i.e., one-to-one personal training and small group exercises) was chosen as a research context. The data were collected from instructors and consumers to whom the instructors provided service. A snowballing technique was administered to recruit consumers who took part in one of the four exercises (i.e., weight training, golf lessons, yoga, and swimming), and then the selected consumers were asked to enlist qualified sample members. In order to reduce a positive bias, we contacted consumers first because if consumers are given questionnaires from their instructors, the consumers might feel pressured to positively evaluate the instructors’ behaviors and services. Overall, this sampling approach was appropriate for the current research setting considering that the snowballing method is well established and adopted in dyadic research (e.g., Masterson, 2001; Walsh, 2014). As a result, a total of 190 consumer–employee dyadic data sets were collected and analyzed for subsequent data analyses.

CFA indicated that the hypothesized model fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 504.30/284 = 1.78$, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .06, and SRMR = .05). The SEM result showed that ECB positively influenced service quality ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), while EDB was negatively associated with service quality ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$), confirming H1 and H2. As for H3, the moderating effect of EDB in the relationship between ECB and service quality was not found to be statistically significant ($\beta = -.09, p > .05$), disconfirming H3. H4 was tested using a bootstrapping procedure, and the result indicated that the indirect effect of satisfaction between the path from service quality to consumer citizenship behavior was statistically significant ($\beta = .25, 95\%$ confidence interval (CI) = .08 to .74, $p < .05$). However, the indirect effect of satisfaction between service quality and consumer participative behavior was not statistically significant ($\beta = .22, CI = -.13$ to .74, $p > .05$). Thus, H4 was partially supported.

Discussion

This research results in several theoretical, methodological, and managerial contributions. First, this study develops a holistic conceptual model grounded in interdisciplinary theories, thereby providing valuable insights into underlying mechanisms of the interactivity between employees and consumers in a fitness context. Second, the current research makes a methodological contribution by utilizing the dual-source approach, which to the best of our knowledge has not been employed in sport management research. Such a method allows us to better understand the intricate relationships between the two parties and to avoid the threat of common method bias, resulting from an artificial covariance between the two constructs produced by a same source of responses (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). From the practical perspective, our results suggest managerial guidance to practitioners concerning the appropriate management of employees. Since the double-edged sword of employee characteristics (i.e., ECB and EDB) might be a nuisance to practitioners, we empirically demonstrate how the two types of behaviors influence consumers’ perceived service attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, the mechanism of boosting consumer citizenship behavior and participative behavior might draw special attention from service marketers due to their abilities to positively impact organizational performance, which can result in profit generation.