

I Can't Get No Satisfaction? – How Different Roles in Customer Groups Influence Satisfaction with the Service

Volker G. Kuppelwieser, University of Leipzig, Germany, volker.kuppelwieser@gmx.de

Jörg Finsterwalder, University of Canterbury, joerg.fensterwalder@canterbury.ac.nz

Sven Tuzovic, Pacific Lutheran University, USA, stuzovic@plu.edu

Merlin C. Simpson, Pacific Lutheran University, USA, merlins@seanet.com

Abstract

Despite the importance and popularity of the satisfaction construct, the influence of individuals on satisfaction in a customer group remains poorly understood. Very little is known about the different roles within these groups in a service experience. In this paper, we examine the roles of formal and informal leaders, as well as the other group members as their followers, in customer group service encounters. Drawing on a sample of 235 customers who have experienced a face-to-face group service, we demonstrate that satisfaction with the formal and informal leaders has a positive effect on satisfaction with the service. Additionally, we show that satisfaction with the informal leader partially mediates the relationship between satisfaction with the formal leader and the service.

Keywords: Group experience, services, customer satisfaction, formal leader, informal leader

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Introduction

Scholars have largely aimed to explain different antecedents and outcomes of satisfaction, but the majority of the literature focuses on satisfaction on a dyadic level (e.g., Anderson, Pearo, and Widener 2008; Martin 1996). In some industries, such as tourism and leisure, services are delivered to groups of customers. Only recently has the influence of an individual group member on other customers' service perceptions found its way into the service management literature (Grove and Fisk 1997; Harris, Davies, and Baron 1997; Huang 2008; McGrath and Otnes 1995; Moore, Moore, and Capella 2005). Similarly, very little is known about the different roles within these groups in a service experience. In most group services, an assigned leader, who is usually an employee from the service company, can be recognized. In settings with multiple customers, informal leaders may emerge from the group. Furthermore, research suggests that the behaviour of other individuals influences values, norms, and perceptions as well (Bohlmann *et al.* 2006). In this paper, our purpose is to explore how satisfaction with the formal and informal leaders as well as the contribution of other group members on co-creating the experience influences satisfaction with a service.

Theoretical Background and Development of Hypotheses

Formal Leadership in Customer Groups

In the leadership literature, the influence of the formal leader on followers has been examined. Specifically, in the discussion of transformational leadership, evidence for a leadership–satisfaction link can be found (Bass 1999; Podsakoff *et al.* 1990). However, the discussion of the relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction is inconsistent in the literature. Several studies detect a positive relationship (Bono and Judge 2003; Howell and Frost 1989; Podsakoff *et al.* 1990; Ross and Offermann 1997; Yun *et al.* 2007), while other studies establish a non-positive connection (Judge and Bono 2000).

In addition, in groups, the formal leader in their boundary-spanning role acts as an authorized representative of the service company (Bowen and Schneider 1985; Hartline and Ferrell 1996) and actively shapes the service encounter as a customer contact employee. The attitudinal and behavioural responses of customer contact employees are important because of the interactive nature of services (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Heskett *et al.* (1997) show that the way service employees behave is related to customer satisfaction. A variety of reports show that leadership is a key antecedent of an organizational climate (Koene, Vogelaar, and Soeters 2002; Pirola-Merlo *et al.* 2002; Schneider *et al.* 2005), and the relationship between the organizational climate and customer satisfaction is a robust finding (Schneider *et al.* 2000).

Therefore we argue that the satisfaction of the individual group member with the entire service is based on satisfaction with the customer contact employee. The contact employee influences the general perception of the service encounter. In turn, satisfaction with the customer contact employee may have a direct impact on the customer's satisfaction with the service. In group services, the formal leader is not only part of the service creation process but also acts as the primary customer contact point. Therefore we suggest as our first hypothesis:

H1: Satisfaction with the formal leader is positively linked to customer satisfaction with the service.

Informal Leadership in Customer Groups

Schneier and Goktepe (1983) describe an informal leader as someone who exercises influence over a group although no formal authority has been vested in him or her (see also de Souza and Klein 1995; Pescosolido 2001). The informal leader takes a special role within the group, is perceived by the other group members as being in command through the process of interaction, and is willingly accepted (Hollander 1964). Informal leaders lead by influencing group processes, beliefs, and norms (Pescosolido 2002). Informal leadership is seen as being equally important for group task completion as formally designated or appointed leadership is (Stogdill 1974).

From this perspective, it is important for formal and informal leaders to coordinate and act efficiently in a group (Mehra *et al.* 2006). Based on the authority of the formal leader, it is crucial that the formal and informal leaders accept one another's leadership. This distributed leadership between formal and informal leaders within a group allows for better performance (Mehra *et al.* 2006), among other outcomes (Zaccaro, Rittman, and Marks 2001). Because the perception of other people's behaviors and characteristics influences the satisfaction of the individual (Baron, Harris, and Davies 1996; Harris, Davies, and Baron 1997; Huang 2008; Martin 1995), this permission may be part of the perception of the formal leader that group members have. It is therefore part of their evaluation of satisfaction with the service. Thus, we assert that: *H2a: Satisfaction with the formal leader is positively linked to satisfaction with the informal leader;* and *H2b: Satisfaction with the informal leader will mediate the positive relationship between satisfaction with the formal leader and satisfaction with the service.*

In light of the discussion on customer co-creation in the literature (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bettencourt 1997; Namasivayam 2003; Ramani and Kumar 2008), it can be seen that the influence of the informal leader determines the outcome of the service encounter. A growing body of research suggests that informal leaders carry influence over a group's performance and processes (de Souza and Klein 1995; Durham, Knight, and Locke 1997; Pescosolido 2001; Wheelan and Johnston 1996). Furthermore, Sy *et al.* (2005) show that the mood level of an informal leader is not only conveyed to the entire group but also influences each individual member in that group. Totterdell *et al.* (1998) reveal that a group member's mood can be predicted by the average mood displayed by the other group members. Based on the prominent role of the informal leader, we assume that the informal leader influences the mood of the group and its individual members. Additionally, informal leaders influence group processes, coordination within the group, task strategy, and the efforts of the group (de Souza and Klein 1995; Pescosolido 2001). Similarly as above, we hypothesize that: *H3: Satisfaction with the informal leader is positively linked to customer satisfaction with the service.*

Contributions of Other Members in a Customer Group

Customer co-creation describes the role of the customer in the production and delivery of a service. Kelley *et al.* (1990) state that customers must contribute, to varying degrees, to the service encounter by either becoming personally involved or providing goods, products, and/or information that are needed for the service (Berry and Lampo 2000). In group services, the involvement of the individual customer becomes more complex. Indeed, in groups, members must successfully integrate their actions because success in co-creating the service encounter relies both on individual ability and on the collective effort to coordinate and

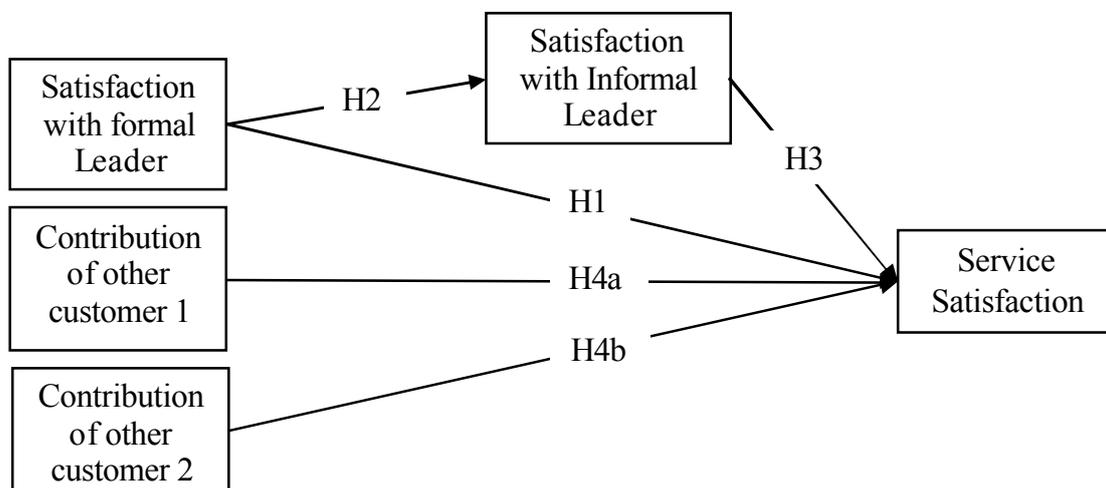
incorporate individual contributions (Zaccaro, Rittman, and Marks 2001). The customer does not produce, create, or consume the service individually; rather, other customers are simultaneously involved in the encounter. Research on individual customers and the influence that other customers or even strangers have over them during the service encounter has suggested that the role of others in the production of services has an impact on the service experience and on each individual's evaluation (Grove and Fisk 1997; Martin 1996; Martin and Pranter 1989; McGrath and Otnes 1995). Interacting with other customers has additional effects on firm loyalty, word-of-mouth (Moore, Moore, and Capella 2005), and satisfaction (Huang 2008; Martin and Pranter 1989). Therefore, we propose that:

H4a: Other group member 1's contribution to the service is positively linked to customer satisfaction with the service.

H4b: Other group member 2's contribution to the service is positively linked to customer satisfaction with the service.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the research model and hypotheses.

Figure 1: Research model and hypotheses



Methods

Research Context and Survey Procedure

To answer the research questions, we conducted a survey with ad-hoc or temporary customer groups which were physically formed for a one-time group experience. In order to reduce the impact of common method variance and to reduce the possible influence of specific service contexts (Podsakoff *et al.* 2003) we asked customer groups, across two different services, to fill out our paper-and-pencil questionnaire. We found rafting and indoor soccer group experiences to be appropriate for our study. At the end of the survey process, the data set consisted of 235 cases, of which 48 percent were from female respondents. The average age of the respondents was 26.3 years.

Measures

For the contribution scales in the survey, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they totally agreed or disagreed with a statement. In the satisfaction scales, we used

semantic differential items. All of the scales were seven-point Likert scales. In the measurement of satisfaction, it seemed unnecessary to develop new scales given the number of acceptable scales in the literature (Jones and Suh 2000). We used the same established scale, changing only the directions of the items. This strategy has previously been successful in measuring satisfaction (e.g. Crosby and Stephens 1987; Jones and Suh 2000) and commitment (Hunt and Morgan 1994). We used four items commonly used to measure satisfaction. The directions for the satisfaction items instructed respondents to rate their satisfaction with the service, with the formal leader, and with the informal leader, respectively. We used four items to measure contributions of the other customers. In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to evaluate two individuals out of the group who attracted their attention.

Results

Validity and Reliability

We chose a two-step approach to test the proposed model. First, each construct's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α . The three directions of satisfaction show a Cronbach's α of .90 for satisfaction with the service, .873 for satisfaction with the formal leader and .934 for satisfaction with the informal leader. For the two chosen group members, Cronbach's α is .863 and .914 for the first and second person's scales, respectively. All α values are $> .7$ for all of the constructs, indicating good reliability of the scales (Hair *et al.* 2010). This suggests that the scale reliabilities have adequate and stable measurement properties. Second, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. All standardized factor loadings are significant, as required for convergent validity. The lowest is .596, and all of the other indicators are $> .7$. The construct average variance extracted (AVE) is $> .5$ for all of the constructs, indicating adequate convergent validity. All of the reliabilities of the constructs are $> .7$ and indicate convergence or internal consistency. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All construct AVE estimates are larger than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlation estimates. This indicates that the measured items have more in common with the construct with which they are associated than they do with other constructs. To assess the nomological validity, we examined whether or not the correlations between the constructs in the measurement model are adequate. Therefore, the correlations between the constructs were examined. All correlations between the constructs in this study are significant. This provides support for nomological validity.

Model Analysis

Based on these results, the correlations between the constructs were examined using a structural equation model (SEM). The fit indices for the SEM are good. Specifically, for the proposed model, the $\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom}$ is 2.218, the comparative fit index (CFI) is .945, the goodness-of-fit-index (GFI) is .868, and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) is .072. The 90% confidence interval for the RMSEA is between .062 and .082. Thus, even the upper boundary is not close to .10, indicating a good fit (Hair *et al.* 2010).

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between satisfaction with the formal leader and satisfaction with the service, and Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between satisfaction with the formal leader and satisfaction with the informal leader. For the path

between satisfaction with the formal leader and service satisfaction (H1), the coefficient is .61 with significance $< .001$. For the path between satisfaction with the formal leader and satisfaction with the informal leader (H2a), the coefficient is .427 with significance $< .001$. The path coefficient for the hypothesized relationship between satisfaction with the informal leader and service satisfaction (H3) is positive and significant ($\beta = .21, p < .001$). Conversely, the two path coefficients representing Hypothesis 4 are both not significant. In addition, the contribution of either person 1 or person 2 to service satisfaction are negative ($\beta_1 = -.08, \beta_2 = -.108, p > .05$). To test Hypothesis 2b, we used the steps recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Judd and Kenny (1981). To construct confidence intervals of the mediating role of satisfaction with the informal leader, we used bootstrapping (Shrout and Bolger 2002) because this method does not impose distributional assumptions (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Preacher and Hayes 2004). The standardized path coefficient of satisfaction with the formal leader on satisfaction with the service is .61, and the 95% confidence interval excludes zero (.51 to .703) and is statistically significant ($p < .01$). This indicates that mediation is present because the coefficient is significantly different from zero (Shrout and Bolger 2002). Therefore, satisfaction with the informal leader only partially mediates this relationship, and Hypothesis 2b is partially supported.

Discussion of the Results

The focus of our study was on the different roles in customer groups and their impacts on the satisfaction of individual customers. Our findings indicate that satisfaction with the formal and informal leaders influences the perception of the service positively, whereas contributions of the other customers have no impact on service satisfaction. Additionally, we showed that satisfaction with the informal leader partially mediates the relationship between satisfaction with the formal leader and service satisfaction. The primary contribution of our study is to enrich the existing work on customer satisfaction (e.g., Bolton 1998; Johnson 1996; Sergeant and Frenkel 2000). Our study provides a novel viewpoint in the literature, as we approached satisfaction from the perspective of a group member.

The findings have important implications for managers of service operations. Our research shows that the role of the informal leader should not be underestimated. Service firms must ensure that their formal leaders (i.e., tour guides, instructors, trainers, referees, etc.) are made aware of informal leaders potentially emerging from a group of customers. Furthermore, they must be instructed on how to manage this additional influence on group dynamics to create a positive outcome for the group without suppressing the activities of the informal leader. The formal leader is required to find the proper balance by controlling the situation and interacting with the informal leader on a constructive level. Staff training therefore must include the heightening of a service employee's understanding of group processes in general and of the role of informal leaders in particular.

The study's limitations have to be kept in mind. Our data were obtained through self-reported measures. We attempted to limit one possible influence of common method bias by surveying two different service providers. However, we were not able to reduce possible influences of simultaneously evaluating oneself and others without bias. Having used two service scenarios for our data collection, it is possible that particular social dynamics in each group setting, based upon the difference between rafting and indoor soccer, interfered with the results as well. Additionally, we are aware of the fact that pre-existing relationships between some group members (for example, a family taking part in a white water rafting experience) will also influence our results.

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