

Full Length Research Paper

The impact of perceived employee identification on the relationship between customer company-identification and customer citizenship behaviour: Practice from Turkish hotels

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This study examines the impact of customer perception of employee identification on the relationship between customer-company identification and customer citizenship behaviour in service settings. A total of 386 surveys are collected from city hotels in Ankara, Turkey. Results of the present study provide empirical evidence that customers who identify more strongly with the organisation indicate more voluntary behaviour. Moreover, findings of this study show that when customers perceive employees to be more identified with the company, the effect of identification on citizenship behaviour becomes stronger. Implications for managers and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Key words: Customer-company identification, customer perception of employee identification, customer citizenship behaviour, Turkey, hotels.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of customer citizenship behaviour attracts academic attention in the field of service management. Many researchers have attempted to answer the question of what determines customer citizenship behaviour by investigating possible antecedents of it (Gruen et al, 2002; Groth, 2005). This pervasive interest comes mainly from recognition that citizenship behaviour can be very helpful and understanding and managing it better, can provide considerable benefits. Customer citizenship behaviour contributes to the overall success of the service organisation in many ways. For example, customers may provide crucial mental and physical inputs that increase organisational productivity, and can be a valuable source of new ideas for business strategies. Moreover, customer can help train other customers, and serve as organisational consultants by sharing their front-line experiences with management (Juttner and Wehrh,

1994). Thus, customer citizenship behaviour will likely remain a primary concern into the future for service organisation.

Service organisations must understand how they can actualize the potential of their customers to be partners in service delivery (Bitner, 1995; Bogazzi, 1995). Customers who see themselves as partners may perform extra-role behaviour such as word of mouth, product improvement suggestions, recruitment of other customers and proactive communication of anticipated problems (Bettencourt 1997; Gruen et al., 2002). Groth (2005) states that this kind of extra role behaviour can be considerable as customer citizenship behaviour (CCB). Understanding and managing the discretionary behaviour of customers allows organisations to reduce the cost of attracting and training new customers, improving the service delivery process and creating the conditions for sustaining a long-term relationship with current customers. Considering these important outcomes of CCB, it is crucial to investigate the antecedents of it. Therefore why some customers demonstrate CCB and why others do not, can be explained.

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CCB requires affectionate ties and intimacy between organisation and customer. Identification takes into consideration as an important variable that causes people to become psychologically attached to and care about the organisation in both organisational and consumer behaviour literature (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). When customers identify with the organisation they engage in supportive behaviour that may benefit the organisation (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Ahearne et al., 2005). Moreover, in the service industry, customer-contact employees are the direct representatives of the organisations. Customer perception of employee attitudes positively influence the customer's behaviour toward service organisation (Chao et al., 2007). The main concept of hospitality studies in previous years was based on the question of how employee's attitudes and behaviour affected customer behaviour. However, more study is required to understand the intermediate link, such as customer perception of employee's attitude to the organisation.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between customer-company identification and CCB in hospitality organisations. The current study also investigates whether the perception of an employee's identification with the organisation moderates the relationship between customer company identification (C-C identification) and CCB or not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

C-C Identification and customer citizenship behaviour

The concept of citizenship behaviour has attracted a great deal of attention over the past decade in organisational literature (Podsakoff and McKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff, 1997; Organ, 1988). Organ (1988) defines organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) as "behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation". He considers this type of behaviour to be an "extra-role" behaviour which is organisationally beneficial but not formally required. Although citizenship behaviour plays an important role in service organisations, research on citizenship behaviour has almost exclusively focused on employees rather than on customers. Recently, the framework of the OCB has been extended to the customer context by considering that customers may display citizenship behaviour where they purchase products and services (Bettencourt, 1997; Gruen et al., 2002; Groth 2005; Rossenbaum and Massiah, 2007).

Groth (2005) defines customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) as voluntary and discretionary behaviour that is not required for the successful production and/or delivery

of the service, but that, in aggregate, helps the service organisation overall. Word-of-mouth, product improvement suggestions, recruiting other customers and proactive communication of anticipated problems are the types of voluntary and discretionary behaviour in the customer context (Gruen et al., 2002). Bettencourt (1997) also conceives voluntary customer behaviour that assists an organisation's performance, such as customers acting as partners, promoting the organisation through word of mouth and cooperating with employees. When customers consider themselves as partners, they contribute to the development and delivery of an organisation's service quality, similar to an organisation's employees (Bowen, 1986; Mills and Morris, 1986). In order to act as a partner, customers should become psychologically attached to and care about the organisation. Identification is primarily a psychological substrate for deep, committed, and meaningful relationships with the company (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003).

Ahearne et al. (2005) define C-C identification as the degree to which consumers feel a sense of connection to a company and suggest that within the customer context, customers who identify with the organisation expend more effort on voluntarily behaviour. Identified customers support the company's goals (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), recruit new customers, encourage and advise others to purchase from the company, and build resilience to negative corporate information (Lichtenstein et al., 2004). C-C identification is also one of the desirable consequences of high brand loyalty (Bhattacharya et al., 1995) and positive word of mouth (Peter and Olson, 1990; Brown et al., 2005). Therefore, it is expected that C-C Identification leads CCB.

H₁: C-C identification has positive impact on CCB.

Moderating effect of perception of employee's identification

As a result of the intangible and interactive nature of hospitality services, customers often rely on the behaviour of service employees when judging the service performance. From the customer's perspective, the perception of service performance is largely determined by the interaction with employees during the service encounter (Czepiel, 1990). In the hospitality industry, customer-contact employees are the direct representatives of the organisations. The relationship between employees and customers influences the customer's evaluation of services (Chao et al., 2007). Therefore, customer-contact employee's behaviour is significantly condition the future of the service relationship (Paulin et al., 2000). Researchers indicate that employee's attitudes and behaviour during the service encounter strongly influence customer satisfaction, loyalty and positive behavioural intentions (Bitner et al., 1990; Hartline and

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct indicator	Factor loading	α
C-C identification		0.74
When someone criticizes [hotel X] it feels like a personal insult.	0.53	
I am very interested in what others think about [hotel X].	0.70	
When someone praises [hotel X] it feels like personal compliment.	0.74	
When I talk about [hotel X] I usually say “we” rather than “they.”	0.81	
The successes of [hotel X] are my successes.	0.74	
Customer perception of employee identification		0.63
When someone criticizes employees of [hotel X], it feels like a personal insult.	0.58	
When the employees talk about [hotel X], they usually say “we” rather than “they.”	0.83	
The employees see successes of [hotel X] as their successes.	0.79	
Customer citizenship behaviour		0.80
I assist other people in finding services provided by [hotel X].	0.91	
I explain to other people how to use the services provided by [hotel X].	0.91	
I provide helpful feedback to improve the service quality of [hotel X].	0.77	

All factor loadings are significant at $p < 0.01$.

Ferrel, 1996; Donovan-Hocutt, 2001).

Organisational psychologists suggest that employee identification is a critical consideration in managing service quality. Employees who identify strongly with their organisation value their organisational membership more (Mael and Ashforth, 1995), and indicate extra role behaviour for the organisation (Tyler and Blader, 2003). Identification with the organisation also improves motivation, job satisfaction and commitment (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Mael and Tetrick, 1992; Pratt, 1998; Tuzun, 2009). Although positive outcomes of employee identification toward organisation are discussed by many studies in organisational behavioural literature, studies related to customer perception of employee attitudes are limited. Whereas employee-customer interaction influences the customers' evaluation of services received from the corresponding employee (Chao et al., 2007). One of the critical variables for employees to indicate positive attitudes and behaviour towards customer in a service setting is employees' identification level with their organisations. The patterns of employee identification are likely to influence attitudes and the commitment to customer service (Solnet, 2006). Any individual in the company with whom the customer has regular contact may have an impact on his or her sense of identification. Ahearne et al. (2005) posit that identification is likely to be stronger when customers have favourable perceptions of the boundary spanning agents with whom they interact (for example the company's salesperson, customer service, technical representatives). Therefore, when customer perceives that employees are more identified with their organisation, the effect of customer identification on customer supportive behaviour becomes stronger.

H₂: Customer perception of employee identification moderates the relationship between C-C identification and CCB.

METHODS

Sample selection and administration

The current study was conducted in city hotels in Ankara, Turkey. Seven different hotel customers are selected. The empirical work is based on self-administered questionnaires. From an initial sample of 445 customers, 59 questionnaires were discarded due to missing values, leaving a final sample of 386, representing a response rate of 87%. Customers were asked to complete a questionnaire and, during the process, one of the researchers of the study waited for its completion. The sample consists of 52% male, 48% female. Respondents' mean age is 39.6 years.

Measurement validation

The study was conducted in a Turkish-speaking environment. Since the survey instrument was originally developed in English, it was translated into Turkish. It was then translated back into English in order both to avoid translation errors (Ball et al., 2002) and to make sure that the intended meaning of the items was maintained. The survey includes measurements of CCB, C-C identification and customer perception of employee identification. All ratings use 7-point Likert scale responses (“1=strongly disagree” to “7=strongly agree”).

1. Customer citizenship behaviour: The dependent variable is measured with three items which are adapted from Groth's (2005) studies.
2. C-C identification: C-C identification is measured using Mael and Ashforth's (1992) survey scale. Five items of that scale are adapted.
3. Customer perception of employee identification: Mael and

Table 2 . Means, standard deviations and correlations.

Study variable	1	2	3
1. C-C identification			
2. Customer perception of employee identification	0.23**		
3. Customer citizenship behaviour	0.40**	0.20**	
Mean	4.26	4.14	4.23
Standard deviation	1.42	1.26	1.38

N = 386, ** p < 0.01.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression results.

Variable	Model 1 β	Model 2 β
C-C identification	0.40**	0.26**
C-C identification*Customer perception of employee identification		0.18**
R ²	0.16	0.20
ΔR^2	0.04	
F	68.66**	37.66**

** p < 0.01.

Ashforth's (1992) survey scale is used to measure perception of employee identification. Three items of the scale are adapted.

An overview of all items, composite measures, factor loadings and their reliability assessments are shown in Table 1. All scales have satisfactory Cronbach's alfa values.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations for the study variables are displayed in Table 2. The results indicate that C-C identification is positively correlated to customer perception of employee identification (0.23) as well as CCB (0.40). It should also be noted that perception of employee identification is significantly and positively correlated with CCB (0.20).

In testing the hypotheses relating to moderating effects, the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) is followed. Regression analysis is undertaken hierarchically to test for a significant interaction effect over and above the simple effect of the independent variable. Hierarchical regression is especially appropriate for this study because it allows for the evaluation of incremental changes in R-squared as new variables are included in the model. The resultant models are shown in Table 3. In the first step of the regression the independent variable - C-C identification is entered. The initial model (Model 1) has an adjusted R-square of 16 %. As indicated by standardized beta, the study finds that C-C identification has a significant positive effect on CCB ($\beta = 0.40$ p < 0.01).

The overall model is significant (F = 68.66 p < 0.01). Therefore, H₁ is supported. At the next stage the interaction effect of "C-C identification" and "customer

perception of employee identification" is added to the model (Model 2). An increase in the adjusted R-square value to 20 % resulted. According to the Model 2, C-C identification has still positive effect on CCB ($\beta = 0.26$ p < 0.01) and the interaction term is significant ($\beta = 0.18$ p < 0.01). The overall model is also significant (F = 37.66 p < 0.01). Results of the regression analysis indicate that customer perception of employee identification moderates the relationship between C-C identification and CCB. Therefore, H₂ is supported. As can be seen in Figure 1, the relationship between customer identification and customer citizenship behaviour is stronger when customer perception of employee identification is higher.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between customer identification with company and customer citizenship behaviour. The study also attempts to investigate how customer perception of employee's identification moderates the mentioned relationship.

According to the study results, customers who identify more strongly with the organisation indicate more voluntary behaviour. In the light of the role played by customer-company interaction in facilitating embeddings and thus identification, service companies are more likely to benefit from identification than are those that sell products (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Within this context, C-C identification is a desirable concept for hospitality organisations. As indicated by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), identification allows customers to become psychologically attached to and care about the organisation,

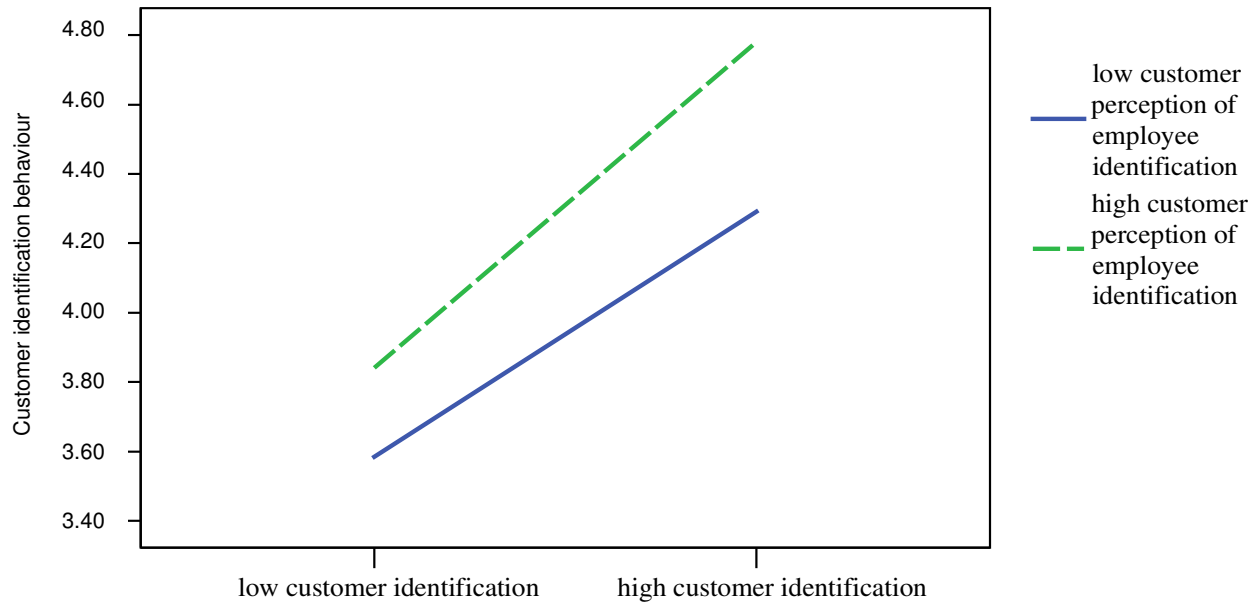


Figure 1. Cross level interaction effect of customer identification and perception of employee identification on customer citizenship behaviour.

which motivates them to commit to the achievement of its goals, expend more voluntary effort on its behalf, and interact positively and cooperatively with organisational members. The current research empirically supports the theoretical implications of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). The result of the study is also consistent with the findings of Ahearne et al. (2005), in which identification is one of the antecedents of extra role behaviour. So, the study expands on the research of Ahearne et al. (2005) by examining the direct effect of C-C identification on CCB in the hospitality context.

Another result of this study is that customer perception of employee's identification moderates the relationship between C-C identification and CCB. If customers perceive employees to be more identified with the company, the effect of identification on citizenship behaviour becomes stronger. It is known that, in the service industry, customer-contact employees are the direct representation of the organisation, and that interaction between employees and customers influences the customers' evaluation of services received from the corresponding employees (Chao et al., 2007). Some researchers have found that employee's attitudinal and behavioural responses may affect customer perceptions about the service they received and the company's service performance (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Different from the previous studies, the current study implies that a customer's perception of employee's organisationally relevant attitudes has a positive impact on customer behaviour. More specifically, employee identification is an important factor that affects a customer's positive behaviour.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Because identification is expected to engender customer's voluntary behaviour, hospitality establishments targeting the same segment are likely to benefit to a greater extent. If hospitality organisations actually want their customers to identify with their company, they must communicate their identities clearly and they should continually supervise identity information to address distinctiveness in a persuasive manner. Moreover, hospitality organisations must also devise strategies for developing sustained, deep and meaningful customer-company interaction that embeds customers in the service organisations and makes them feel like insiders. Strongly identified customers feel like partners and indicate supportive and voluntary behaviour.

Inevitably, the central role played by employees in hospitality organisations should be taken into account more seriously. If customers' voluntary behaviour is desirable, it is recommended for organisations to provide more identified employees. Management should devise strategies to strengthen the employee's identification with the organisation by facilitating deep and meaningful employee-company interactions. Internal marketing programmes may play an important role in not only customer identification with the company but also in the employee's identification with their organisation. As indicated by many studies in service literature, employees' attitudes and behaviour directly influence the customer's perceptions of the company. So managers should be aware of the types of messages that employees send regarding the service process. Therefore, human resource

ments should play an active role in the management of the company's identity attributes. Besides, even employee selection devices would be especially important and should be taken into account when considering which employees may best fit within the desired attributes of a service company's identity.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the data are self-reported, and thus susceptible to common method variance. Second, the present study is conducted at one specific time. A longitudinal study would be useful, although limited resources make such a study difficult. Third, since only hotel customers are investigated, the generalisability of the findings is somewhat limited. Other limitations of this study are the sample, where convenience sampling is used. Finally, the study will stimulate researchers to pursue deeper understandings of both identification and citizenship behaviour in different service settings in different countries.

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