Consumer experience of social power during service consumption: an exploratory study

Abstract
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This paper uses a theoretically anchored understanding of social power, a key parameter defining consumer-service provider interactions, to explore consumer experiences of powerfulness and powerlessness during service consumption. With the established importance of services in the current economy, coupled with the fact that consumer – service provider interactions are a major determinant of the quality and outcome of consumer experiences, service providers could gain a competitive edge by understanding the key parameters (such as social power) that occur in such interactions. To our knowledge, no study thus far has examined the experience and consequences of consumer perceptions of their power in service situations.

In this exploratory study, rather than develop research hypotheses, we formed and investigated 3 key research questions. The first question of interest to this paper is what elicits experiences of powerfulness and powerlessness in consumers of services? Are they mirror images of each other i.e., does the absence of what elicits powerfulness elicit powerlessness and vice versa? Secondly, how do consumer perceptions of their power or the lack of power in a service context manifest itself? What kind of cognition, expectations, emotions, and expressions convey consumer perceptions of their power? And finally, this paper examines the impact of customer perceptions of their power on their judgements of two measures of marketing: service quality and satisfaction with the service.

A survey with a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions was used to derive rich scripts of consumer experiences of powerfulness and powerlessness in a range of service settings. Results indicate that rather than being mirror images, powerfulness and powerlessness were linked with distinct antecedents and consequences. Powerfulness was linked to high consumer perceptions of knowledge and tended to occur in same gender groups, powerlessness occurred during service failure and in mixed gender groups. Further, the experiences too are very distinctive. Powerful consumers report action oriented thoughts and have higher expectations from the provider. Powerless consumers, reflecting their lack of control in the situation, report very fragmented thoughts and expectations with no dominant category of either cognitions or expectations. While powerful consumer report more positive emotions than any negative emotion, and powerless consumers report the opposite pattern, powerless consumers also surprisingly report very high levels of emotions such as anger that are usually thought of as powerful emotions. Also in contradiction to past research indicating that powerless consumers are less likely to express emotions when compared to powerful consumers, we find that both are equally likely to do so. Finally, powerful consumers report higher perceptions of service quality and satisfaction than do powerless consumers. Based on these findings we discuss the implications of consumer perceptions of power and how providers may factor these in the design and delivery of effective service experiences.