

## HOW TO PROMOTE E-CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES

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**Abstract.** *The study aims to investigate the influencing mechanism of customer orientation on e-customer engagement relationship outcomes through perceived support for customer. A total of 525 responses to a survey were collected from e-shoppers in Kazakhstan. The results showed that customer focus and customer feedback have a positive effect on perceived rapport and perceived support for customers, which in turn positively influence e-customer engagement relationship outcomes (i.e., online review, word-of-mouth and customer commitment). The findings of this study imply that the e-retailers need to develop appropriate systems and measures to encourage online service workers' customer orientation behaviors which are the competitive attributes when it comes to e-customer commitment and e-customer engagement behaviors.*

**Keywords:** *Customer orientation, perceived rapport, perceived support for customer, engagement relationship outcomes*

**Introduction.** In the e-shopping context, e-customers perform some voluntary behaviors that have a brand or an e-retailer focus, beyond purchase which have been defined as customer engagement behaviors. For example, they may write online review or recommend the product/service they purchase to others. The positive engagement behaviors have positive consequences-financial and nonfinancial for the firms, while negative engagement behaviors might harm the interest of e-stores. For example, e-shopper's negative word of-mouth (WOM) and poor online review could significantly reduce other customers' willingness of purchase. Thus, the researcher and practitioners have taken an immense interest in customer engagement behaviors.

Customer orientation is important to organizations because it contributes to profits both directly and through its role as a dimension of service climate. However, the precise effects of customer orientation from a customer's perspective on customer engagement relationship outcomes are less clear. Hence, the present study aims to investigate and empirically test the links between e-shoppers' perceptions of online service workers' customer orientation and engagement relationship outcomes. In particular, this study examines a model in an e-retailing setting using customer orientation as the primary determinants of e-customer attitudes and engagement behaviors. The present study contributes to the understanding of how customer orientation of online service workers stimulates customer's perceived rapport and perceived support from the e-retailer, which in turn promote customer engagement relationship outcomes including online review, WOM and customer commitment.

**Theoretical background and hypotheses.** The social exchange theory provides a theoretical underpinning for the relationship between customer orientation and engagement behaviors. Reciprocity is a norm of action fundamental to all social exchange orders. Gobel et al. defined reciprocity as a form of interaction that essentially centres on mutuality. Based on the norm of reciprocity, we derive a conceptual model (Figure 1) depicting the hypothesized relationships proposed in the succeeding sections of this paper.

In the proposed model, it depicts a sequential framework, which begins with the customer orientation of the online service workers and ends with customer commitment and their engagement behaviors. We suggest, on the basis of the reciprocity theory, that when the customer service workers of an e-retailer's store provide the e-shoppers with helpful and satisfactory service, e-shoppers reciprocate by emotionally and cognitively responding positively to the e-retailer. The proposed model further illustrates how the customer focus and customer feedback influence shopper attitudes, such as perceived rapport and perceived support, finally affect WOM, online review and customer commitment.

### *A. Customer orientation and perceived rapport*

Based on Dean, customer orientation was defined as the extent to which customers believed that the online service worker was committed to understanding and meeting their needs and made an effort to

seek their opinions and monitor their feelings. Customer orientation was represented by customer focus and customer feedback. Customer focus mainly focus on the online service worker's commitment to eshoppers, while customer feedback concerned the online service worker's effort to seek e-shoppers' opinion and monitor their feelings.

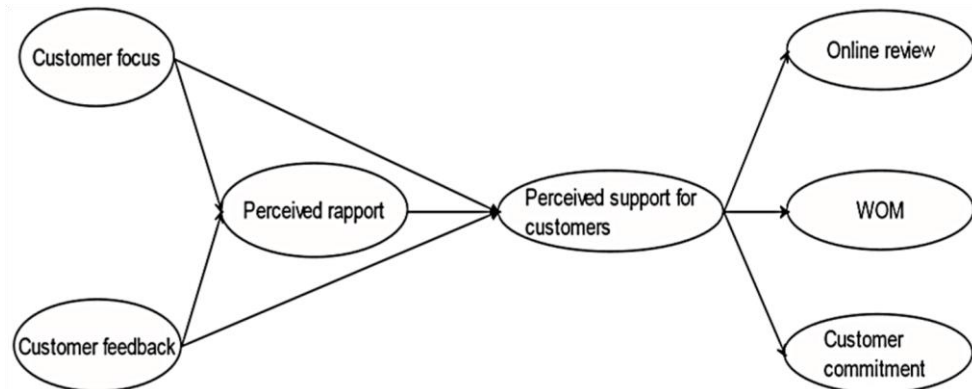


Fig. 1. The research model

The role of a service employee is central to a customer's service experiences. One useful relational construct in a customer-employee context is rapport. Rapport is a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants. Previous research has proved the influencing role of customer-oriented service on customer's perceived rapport. In our study, the online service workers play a key role in providing e-shoppers with an optimal online shopping experience. Their professional morality and excellent service make shopping easy and successful. The e-shoppers are more dependent on the service worker's help to learn the details about the products they want purchase from e-retailers than physical stores. Therefore, we expect that the online service worker's customer orientation will strongly influence perceived rapport.

H1. Customer focus (a) and customer feedback (b) will positively affect perceived rapport.

*B. Customer orientation and perceived support for customer*

Based on Bettencourt, perceived support for customer refers to the global beliefs of employees concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing. Organizational Support Theory (OST) may provide a theoretical framework for the relationship between the customer orientation of online service workers and perceived support for customers. Organizational support theory maintains that POS is cultivated through favorable treatment received from the organization. Some of the organizational research investigated that the perceived organizational support was affected by the agent of the organization such as Recruiters, colleagues, superiors, senior managers, organizational rules and human resource management practices. The findings of POS in the organizational behaviors context could provide a theoretical basis for the exploratory research. In this study, it is proposed that customer orientation of frontline service workers, the agent of the firm, would affect the perceived support for customer. We proposed that the e-retailers, through the online service workers, delivery service to the e-shoppers. Beliefs in organizational support may be fostered by the customer orientation of the service worker because the e-shoppers tend view actions by the online frontline service workers as the action of the e-retailer itself. Based on the previous discussion, we hypothesize:

H2. Customer focus (a) and customer feedback (b) will positively affect perceived support for customer.

We proposed that the perceived rapport and perceived support for customers are interrelated. Higher perceived rapport through favorable treatment received from the organization always increase the perceived support of a relationship to customers. As overall perceived rapport with a firm increases, these satisfying encounters may strengthen the individual's belief that the firm truly cares about him or her and values him or her as a customer. Based upon this discussion, we arrived at the following hypotheses:

H3. Perceived rapport will positively affect perceived support for customer.

*C. Perceived support for customer and engagement relationship outcomes*

Engagement behaviors of e-shoppers refer to e-shopper's behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers in an ecommerce environment. In this study, engagement relationship outcomes include WOM, online reviews and customer commitment. WOM refers to that the existing eshoppers voluntarily recommend the firm itself and/or the firm's product or service to other people. Online reviews refers to the e-shoppers share their opinions on, and experiences

with, goods and services with a multitude of other customer through the web-based consumer opinion platforms.

Existed studies have found that the perception of organizational support has a positive relationship with their compliance, cooperation and constructiveness of suggestions. Bettencourt pointed out that, like POS the greater perception support for customers will engender a sense of obligation to reciprocate with helpful behaviors that facilitate organizational goals. In our study, the eshoppers' belief that an organization cares about them and values them should translate into customer voluntary and reciprocate behaviours. That is, the perceived support for e-shoppers are most likely recommend a e-retailer and write positive online reviews. Thus, we provide following hypothesis based on the discussion above.

H4. Perceived support for customers has a positive effect on (a) WOM and (b) online review.

Finally, the perceived support for customer will enhance the customer commitment to a firm. The empirical evidence from human research supported the view that POS creates feelings of obligation to support the organization, and that this manifests itself in work-related attitudes and behaviors, including increased commitment, job satisfaction, performance and citizenship behaviors, and reduced intentions to leave. Extend their study to marketing context, customers will be more committed to a firm which they believe is committed to them and treats them in a fair and responsible manner. Based upon this discussion, we arrived at the following hypotheses:

H5. Perceived support for customers will positively affect customer commitment. **Method. A.**

#### *Samples and data collection*

Specially, we selected Taobao ([www.taobao.com.kz](http://www.taobao.com.kz)) and Shopdostavka ([www.shopdostavka.kz](http://www.shopdostavka.kz)) in Kazakhstan as a data source. 537 eshoppers were invited to participate in the survey. At last, the final sample after data cleaning was 525, resulting in a valid rate of 97.8 %. Table 1 showed the descriptive information of the dataset.

Table 1. Descriptive information of the dataset

Measure	Item	Count	%
Gender	male	249	47.4
	female	276	52.6
Age	18 or below	21	4.0
	>18 or ≤35	489	93.1
	>36 and ≤50	15	2.9
	Above 50	0	0.0
Education	High school or below	0	0.0
	Two-year college degree	113	21.5
	Four-year college degree	389	74.1
	Graduate school or above	23	4.4

#### *B. Measures*

All scales we have adopted are developed and tested in previous research. We measured all items using seven-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In our study, items were adapted partially from Dean to measure customer focus and customer feedback. Perceived support for customer was measured using items drawn from Bettencourt. Items measuring perceived rapport were adapted from Kim. Customer commitment was measured using items drawn from Morgan and Hunt, Bettencourt and Kim. Items were adapted from Johnson and Rapp and Groth to measure WOM. We adapted scale from the research of Tsao and Hsieh, which include three items, to measure online reviews.

#### *C. Measurement validation*

As all measures were self-reported, we used Harman's onefactor test to check the common method variance based on Podsakoff and Organ's suggestions. We extracted seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the first factor accounted for 28.7 % of the total variance. To examine the measurement validity of the constructs, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using AMOS

20.0. The fit statistics of a reduced measurement model revealed adequate fit:  $\chi^2 = 382.05$ ,  $df = 231$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.65$ , CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, NFI = 0.96 and RMSEA = 0.04. The standard loadings of the remaining items were mostly above 0.6. The average variance extracted (AVE) for every construct was above 0.5. We used composite reliabilities (CRs) to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement model. The result showed that the CRs were all above 0.7, indicating the scales had good reliabilities. All Cronach's alpha values were above the 0.70 threshold, indicating that the scales had high reliabilities.

#### D. Hypotheses tests

Table 2 shows means and standard deviations among study constructs. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS 20 to test the proposed hypotheses.

Table 2. Summary of measurement scales

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$
'Customer focus	5.44	0.90	0.81
Customer feedback	4.85	0.99	0.85
Perceived rapport	4.76	1.14	0.76
Perceived support for customer	5.14	0.95	0.83
Online review	5.29	1.15	0.89
WOM	4.83	1.07	0.90
Customer commitment	4.68	0.89	0.79

Table 3 showed the test result of the hypothesis and satisfactory fit of the model. The relationship between customer focus and perceived rapport was examined in Hypothesis 1a. As predicted in H1a, customer focus positively and significantly influenced perceived rapport ( $b = 0.47$ , C.R. = 2.78,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results also indicated that customer feedback significantly predict perceived rapport ( $b = 0.34$ , C.R. = 2.52,  $p < 0.05$ ). This provides support for Hypothesis 1b.

Hypothesis 2a and b predicted that customer orientation will positively affect perceived support for customer. The results indicated that customer focus ( $b = 0.48$ , C.R. = 6.11,  $p < 0.001$ ) and customer feedback ( $b = 0.44$ , C.R. = 7.21,  $p < 0.001$ ) both significantly predict perceived support for customer. This provides support for Hypothesis 2a and b.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the results provide strong evidence to show that perceived rapport ( $b = 0.05$ , C.R. = 2.23,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively influenced perceived support for customer.

Hypothesis 4a predicts that perceived support for customer will have a positive and significant effect on WOM. The results demonstrated that perceived support for customer positively and significantly influenced WOM ( $b = 1.12$ , C.R. = 18.61,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 3. Test of hypothesis

Regression Weights	Standardized Estimate	C.R.	Standard errors	Result of the test
Customer focus – Perceived rapport	0.47**	2.78	0.17	Supported
Customer feedback – Perceived rapport	0.34*	2.52	0.13	Supported
Perceived rapport – Perceived support for customers	0.05*	2.23	0.02	Supported
Customer focus – Perceived support for customers	0.48***	6.11	0.08	Supported
Customer feedback – Perceived support for customers	0.44***	7.21	0.06	Supported
Perceived support for customers – Online review	1.00***	17.05	0.07	Supported
Perceived support for customers – WOM	1.12***	18.61	0.61	Supported
Perceived support for customers – Customer commitment	0.29***	6.55	0.04	Supported
Indicators of Goodness-of-Fit				
$\chi^2$	504.14			
df	243			
$\chi^2/df$	2.07			
CFI	0.97			
TLI	0.96			
NFI	0.94			
RMSEA	0.05			

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Hypothesis 4b predicted that perceived support for customer will positively influence online review. The results support this relationship ( $b = 1.00$ , C.R. = 17.05,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Hypothesis 5 predicts that perceived support for customer has a positive effect on customer commitment. Consistent with Hypothesis 5, perceived support for customer has a positive and significant effect on customer commitment ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $C.R. = 6.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The results indicate that the Hypothesis 5 is supported.

**Discussion, implication and future research.** This study firstly attempts to formulate and empirical test a framework examining the influences of customer orientation on e-customer perceived support for customer as the motivation for e-customer engagement relationship outcomes in e-commerce. This study contributes to the literature by empirically investigating the antecedents of perceived support for customer, which was seldom examined in previous studies. The result showed the influencing role of customer focus and customer feedback on customer attitudes. Firstly, the relationship between customer focus, customer feedback and perceived rapport was supported. Meanwhile, the effect of customer orientation on perceived support for customer is also supported. The result indicated that critical role of customer orientation on the influencing of perceived support for customer.

Secondly, e-shoppers' perceived support from the online service workers was found to influence e-customer's intention to referral product/service to other customers and write positive online reviews about the shopping experience. The perceived support for customer is also found have an impacting on customer commitment.

This research also poses important management implications for the e-commerce executive managers who oversee the customer behaviorus beyond purchase. The finding of this study implied that the customer orientation of online service workers could enhance customer's perceived rapport and perceived wellbeing concern from the organization. Organizations need to develop appropriate systems and measures to encourage employees' customer orientation behaviours.

We conclude by acknowledging the primary limitations of our study. These limitations temper the findings drawn from our efforts, but provide viable areas of future research. Firstly, with the development of internet and e-commerce technology, e-customers may come from every corner of the world and their behaviors may bear strong cultural labels [25]. This study examined customer relationship engagement in china customers. Future research can examined whether the results could be generalized to international customers. Second the authors utilized cross sectional data to examine how customer focus and customer feedback influence ecustomer engagement relationship outcomes, which may not address causal relationships in the evolving of e-CEB. Future research may embark on longitudinal designs to better examine the proposed research framework.

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