



Harald Pol

Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections

*The influence of relational models on
customer experience*

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Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections

The influence of relational models on customer experience

DISSERTATION

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1 Introduction

“In modern society, human instincts and cultural traditions have lost their place. The result is an existential vacuum, an absence of meaning or purpose in life. The pursuance of pleasure or power cannot bring substance to this void, as they are merely empty quests. Growth is the result of the discovery of meaningful connections with others”, (Frankl, 1969).



Within customer markets, decision-making processes play an important role at various levels and trade-off points between products, brands, suppliers, and moments of consumption. The traditional marketing literature appears to pay considerable attention to the customer and knowledge development aimed at the analysis of demand (the economic perspective), to the influence of brands (and other intrinsic characteristics of the product), or to choice behaviour (the psychological perspective).

With the emergence of the field of service marketing, and more recently the experience economy, social scientists and practitioners alike realised that judgments about intangible characteristics (such as quality, speed of service, atmospherics, ambience, user experience, competencies of employees, and so on) represent important decision-making criteria for understanding customer choices within the temporal and spatial context. Technological developments have rapidly changed the way in which customers communicate with companies. Technical devices that are being used for storage and for the transfer of information are miniaturised, privatised, digitised, and mobilised (e.g., mobile phones, i-Pods, laptops, personal organisers, and wireless connections); people, the internet, and information increasingly overlap and converge, generating irreversible changes that move social connections towards personalised networking. Until now, the influence that these developments have on the connections between organisations and customers has been unclear.

One of the most important new insights in the world of marketing and communication in recent decades is the increasing awareness of the importance of customer experience. Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the concept of customer experience to the general public through their publication, *The Experience Economy*. Many other authors further developed this theme in subsequent years. An increasing number of studies (e.g., Reichheld, 2006; Reichheld & Markey, 2011; Schmitt, 2003; Shaw, 2007; Smith & Wheeler, 2002) have shown that judgments about customer satisfaction and processes that follow the purchase (such as complaints management and word-of-mouth advertising) are influenced by the experiences of customers. Much research has also been conducted into the determinants of customer experience, such as social environment, service interface, and environmental influences. Thus the factors that impact on customer experience have become clear, but the impact of these factors is not yet clear. Both Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009) and Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, and Schlesinger (2009) present a model in which they describe a number of determinants and moderators of customer experience. Determinants of customer experience

can be found, for example, in the social environment, the service interface, the retail atmosphere, the retail brand, and the assortment or price. Verhoef et al. (2009) also distinguish a number of situation moderators (such as type of store, location, and culture) and personal moderators (such as socio-demographics, task orientation, and consumer attitudes). However, none of these models mention relationship norms as a possible determinant of customer experience. Nevertheless, there are strong indications that the relationship norms used by a customer are an important factor in customer behaviour and customer experience (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Battacharya & Sen, 2003; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009; Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011; Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Parasuraman, 2013; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). Clarke and Mills (1979) proposed a distinction between exchange relationships and communal relationships. Exchange relationships are more common in a customer-supplier context, communal relationships are more common in a person-to-person context. Further, Fiske (1991) identified four relational models: Market Pricing (MP), Communal Sharing (CS), Authority Ranking (AR), and Equality Matching (EM). These models are described and explained in more detail in Chapter 2. Market Pricing has the characteristics of an exchange relationship, whereas Communal Sharing is usually seen as a communal relationship. Kaltcheva, Winsor and Parasuraman (2013) demonstrated that the relational model used by a customer may mitigate or amplify customer responses to service failure. If customers use a more personal model they will evaluate bad service in a different way than if they use a model that is business oriented. Although it is broadly accepted that relational models are of fundamental importance, there is still little research on the impact of these models on customer experience and customer behaviour. This is why we have chosen relational models as one of the main topics of this thesis. We are particularly interested in the effect of relational models on customer experience.

If it is true that relational models play an important role in the way customers perceive and assess the relationship, a compelling question is what the influence of relational models is on customer experience and what makes a customer choose either one or other relational model in a customer-supplier relationship. Furthermore, it is also interesting to understand the impact that organisational interventions in customer contact have on relational models and customer experience. Surprenant and Solomon (1987) found that service marketers are confronted with a huge challenge: how is it possible to offer an efficient and standardised service on an acceptable level, while at the same time companies want to give customers the feeling that they are unique. This challenge becomes even more urgent as a consequence of the rise of the internet and digital

communication channels. Organisations are confronted with increasing price pressure and thus a pressure to cut costs. One of the consequences of this development is that organisations are increasingly encouraging customers to make more use of digital channels (Pieterse, 2009; Pieterse & Ebbens, 2008). Contact through the internet is much cheaper than contact via telephone. For example, in October 2015 the tax authorities in the Netherlands announced that they intended to fully abolish written communication and to communicate with customers only through digital channels. Tax returns are now almost entirely handled digitally. On the other hand, companies find it important to know their customers in order to respond adequately to their needs (Peppers & Rogers, 1996, 1999). By responding to the specific needs and wishes of customers, companies can ensure that their customers remain satisfied and loyal (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

It is to be expected that these developments — on the one hand the increasing use of digital channels and, on the other hand, the wish to establish a more personal relationship, will have an impact on customer experience. It is also to be expected that the relational models that are used by a customer will be influenced by the way in which an organisation gives substance to these developments. The question what the effects of personalisation and digitisation will have on relational models and customer experience will also be a topic within this dissertation.

Finally, if relational models play an important role, another compelling question is whether it is possible to activate or influence relationship norms in the communication with customers. Recently, much research has been conducted into the way in which people can be influenced in their behaviour by confronting them with words and images that are associated with a specific kind of behaviour. In recent years a number of studies have been performed in a customer-supplier context (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009). In these studies customers were primed with a specific relationship (for example, a communal versus an exchange relationship or a Market Pricing versus an Equality Matching relationship). The participants' behaviour was subsequently evaluated by the researchers. For example, in one study McGraw and Tetlock (2005) demonstrated that the activation of different relationship norms (in this specific study the four relational models of Fiske, 1991) affected the way customers evaluated a business proposal — in this specific study, buying a pen from a graduate student. When the pen was received in a Communal Sharing (CS) relationship it was valued most highly, and when received in a

Market Pricing (MP) relationship it was valued least.

The studies described above show that it is possible to activate a specific type of relationship by using words and images that are associated with a specific relational model. In the studies, the activated relationship revealed an impact on how interventions of an organisation were perceived. In their studies the researchers usually used scenarios that were based on an interpersonal relationship, and often the relationship described in the scenario was a fictional one. One of our research questions is also whether priming techniques used in previous research also function for an already existing relationship between an organisation and its customers. A relationship between an individual and an organisation is more complex because the customer usually has contacts with different employees within the organisation across a period of time. This question will play a central role in this thesis. And, if it is possible to influence relational models with specific organisational interventions, it is also interesting to know what the role is of relational models in the reactions of customers to these interventions. As far as we know our research project is the first empirical research project that examines relational models in real-life and already existing customer-supplier relationships.

With the above in mind, we identified the following research question for this dissertation:

What is the impact of relationship norms on customer experience and how can relationship norms be used for the purpose of mastering meaningful customer connections?

In this thesis a meaningful customer connection is explained as a sustainable relationship that is beneficiary and satisfactory for both parties and that has a positive influence on the loyalty of customers.

Overview of the Dissertation

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Following the introduction to the thesis in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explores the concept of customer experience and the possible influence of relational models on customer experience. According to the scientific literature, relational models seem to have an important influence on the way in which people perceive and evaluate their relationships. We hypothesised that this will also be the case for relationships between customers

and organisations. To gain a better understanding of relational models and their impact on relationships, the Relational Models Theory (RMT; Fiske, 1991) appeared to be a very useful instrument.

Chapter 3 focuses on the relationship between the type of organisation and the relational models that are evoked and on the effect of these relational models on customer experience. We distinguished three types of organisations depending on the characteristics of the market and the nature of the services offered: finance, utilities, and social welfare organisations. We found six organisations that were interested in participating in the research project and that fitted the profile of the three clusters of organisations: a bank, an insurance company, a health insurer, a cable company, an energy company, and a social welfare institute. The organisations provided us with the names of customers whom we could approach for the different studies in our research project. In Chapter 3 two studies, focusing on the applicability and effects of relational models on customer experience, are reported.

The first study reported in Chapter 3 reveals that different types of organisations evoke different relational models and that different relational models also result in differences in customer experience. Profit-oriented organisations in finance and utilities appear to display relationships that are based on the principle of achievement (in the Relational Models Theory, this is described as the Market Pricing model). A solid and advantageous cost-benefit ratio is important in this kind of relationship. Relationships with not-for-profit organisations in social welfare appear to be based on authority (described in the Relational Models Theory as the Authority Ranking model). Both profit and not-for-profit organisations can also have (aspects of) relationships that are based on communal interest and equality (described in the Relational Models Theory as Communal Sharing). In the remainder of this thesis, we focus our research on the Market Pricing (MP), Communal Sharing (CS), and Authority Ranking (AR) relational models. Our research shows that the more a relationship is built on communal characteristics, the more positive the customer experience.

The second study was designed to gain a deeper insight into the beliefs of customers about their relationships with organisations and the factors that influence their customer experience. The results of this study indicate that the perceived involvement of an organisation with its customers and the perceived freedom to choose a communication channel have played prominent roles in customer experience to date. Customers nowadays seem to experience an increasing gap between organisations and customers. Customers have

the feeling that they are being reduced to a number in a customer database and that the possibilities of having personal contact are increasingly limited by organisations, because they are forced to make use of digital channels like the Internet and email. In the eyes of most customers, digital channels are less personal than voice-to-voice or face-to-face contact. All in all, customers appear to feel that the organisational involvement is diminishing and that they are limited in their freedom to choose the communication channels that they prefer.

Chapter 4 investigates whether the perceived organisational involvement and the perceived freedom of choice may also play a role in the process of adopting one or another relational model in a customer–supplier relationship. The results of our research show that there is a clear relationship between perceived organisational involvement and perceived freedom to choose the preferred communication channel on the one hand and relational models on the other hand. For example, if customers experience a relatively high level of organisational involvement and freedom of choice, they are more inclined to adopt the relationship norms of Communal Sharing. If customers experience a limitation in their freedom to choose the communication channels that they prefer, they are more inclined to adopt Authority Ranking relationship norms. We therefore assumed that, if organisations want to evoke the norms of a specific relational model, they will have to increase or decrease the degree of freedom of choice and/or the degree of organisational involvement.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the issue of the effects of organisational interventions in customer contact that are aimed to increase or decrease the freedom of choice and/or organisational involvement. Chapter 5 investigates the influence of more or less personal contact (personalisation) on relational models and customer experience. Chapter 6 investigates the effects of the use of digital channels on relational models and customer experience (digitisation). In the first study, we compared the influence of the traditional channel of the telephone on relational models and customer experience with the influence of the relatively new channel of chat. In the second study, we investigated the impact of limitation of the freedom to choose a communication channel (channel direction) on relational models and customer experience.

In Chapter 7 we investigate whether it is possible to influence relational models and customer experience by using certain words or images (primes) in communicating with customers. If this is true, it could have a tremendous impact on the way in which organisations communicate with their customers.

Previous research has shown that it is possible to activate relationship norms, but, in the studies that we investigated, this was mostly undertaken in a fictional situation with fictional and interpersonal relationships. A compelling question in our research was whether priming techniques also work for existing relationships between existing customers and existing organisations. In an existing relationship, expectations are already present and relationship norms have already been established.

Finally, in Chapter 8 we present the main findings of our research project, following the main research questions of this thesis:

- What is the influence of the type of organisation on relational models and what is the influence of relational models on customer experience?
- What makes a customer adopt either one or another relational model in a customer–supplier relationship?
- What is the impact of personalisation and digitisation on customer experience and relational models?
- Is it possible to activate or influence relationship norms in already-existing customer–supplier relationships by priming customers with specific words and/or images in communication with them?
- Do relational models mitigate or amplify the effect of organisational interventions on customer experience?

In Chapter 8 we also provide an overview of the scientific contributions and limitations of this dissertation. Chapter 8 concludes with a brief overview of the managerial implications of the results of this thesis.

2 Dimensions and Determinants of Customer Experience



In the introduction to this thesis we made the assumption that relational models may have a significant impact on customer experience, and that relational models may be an interesting starting point for understanding and influencing customer experience. This second chapter first investigates the possible dimensions and determinants of the concept of customer experience. This is followed by a consideration of the possible influences of relational models on customer experience. In this chapter we also develop a number of propositions that are further explored in Chapter 3 and which can serve as a starting point for the remainder of this thesis.

2.1 A Brief Exploration of the Concept of Customer Experience

2.1.1 From quality management towards customer experience management

Thinking about quality has quite a history. For as long as there are products and services, managers contemplate how to improve quality perceptions of these products and services. In thinking about quality there has been an important development in the past few decades. Until the early 1990s quality was approached in a rather instrumental way. Quality was mainly seen as setting up the organisation in accordance with established procedures and methods or by the use of models such as the models of the International Organisation of Standardisation (ISO) and European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). Quality was seen as something objective and measurable (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988). Along with the increasing attention to the management of service quality, interest in the topic of customer satisfaction and customer orientation also increased.

In the late 1990s Pine and Gilmore (1999) published *The Experience Economy*, according to which customers nowadays are looking for valuable, enjoyable, and memorable customer experiences. Creating a distinctive customer experience can, according to Pine and Gilmore, yield enormous economic value to businesses. The staging of customer experience plays an important role in the process of service delivery. To create a memorable experience, the customer needs to be analysed and all of his or her senses have to be involved in the process of delivery. A personal approach seems to be a key success factor in customer experience (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, Stanfield, & Tetreault, 1990). This aspect of the service delivery process is one of the key issues to

be studied in further detail in this thesis. For now, creating an outstanding customer experience is seen as one of the leading challenges in retail business and in tourism. Service organisations, both profit and non-profit, are reluctantly following the successful examples of organisations in retail and tourism and increasingly try to use customer experience as a distinctive aspect of their services.

Before Pine and Gilmore wrote *The Experience Economy* (1999), Otto and Ritchie (1996) investigated customer experiences in tourism and recreation. They defined the experience as the mental state of a customer as it is felt during the event or meeting. The total customer experience is the sum of all experiences a customer has with a supplier of goods and services during the relationship between the customer and the supplier – from awareness, discovery, attraction, interaction, purchase, use, cultivation, and advocacy. Experiences are highly individual and personal: individuals may react differently to the same events and stimuli (Graeburn, 2001). Customer experiences can vary in strength. Some are labelled as positive, others as negative. Some arise spontaneously without much reflection; others occur more purposefully and last longer. The longer lasting experiences, in particular, may be stored in the memory of the customer and may influence future customer behaviour in terms of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Reichheld, 2003, 2006; Reichheld & Markey, 2011).

2.1.2 Dimensions of customer experience

According to Gentile, Spiller, and Nogi (2007), a customer experience stems from a series of interactions between customer and product, a company or (part of) a business, and these interactions lead to a reaction. The experience is strictly personal and involves the commitment of the customer on multiple levels: rational, emotional, sensory, physical, and/or spiritual. Meyer and Schwager (2007) provide the following definition of customer experience: “Customer experience is the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company. Direct contact generally occurs in the course of purchase, use, and service and is usually initiated by the customer. Indirect contact most often involves unplanned encounters with representations of a company’s products, services, or brands and takes the form of word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews, and so forth” (p.118). Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, and Schlesinger (2009) indicate that the concept of customer experience is holistic in nature and that it relates to the cognitive, affective, emotional,

social, and physical reaction of the customer. Customer experience is a multi-dimensional concept. It is not only about factors that the provider can control (such as the service interface, the atmosphere in the store, the range of products, the price), but also aspects that are beyond the control of the provider (such as the influence of other customers, the purpose of shopping, or even the weather). The customer experience encompasses the entire experience, including the search, purchase, consumption, and after-sales.

Traditionally, it was often thought that customers engage in more or less elaborate, conscious information processing before they buy, choose, or decide (e.g., Chaiken, 1980). The processing of this information could lead to certain attitudes, and these attitudes would, in turn, affect the decision-making. The premise of the argument of conscious information processing has been that people process information before they decide what to buy. According to Dijksterhuis, Smith, Van Baaren, and Wigboldus (2005) this assumption is useful but can also be dangerous because a great deal of information is processed outside the conscious brain. In recent years the understanding has arisen that customers frequently thoughtlessly respond to certain stimuli and that these stimuli cause spontaneous or intuitive responses (e.g., Cialdini, 2001; Dijksterhuis, Smith, Van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986). Many customer decisions derive from habits and are based on attitudes that are automatically activated by the perception of a product. Perception affects behaviour both directly and unconsciously (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). Kahneman (2003, 2011) makes a distinction between the explicit and implicit system. He calls one system intuition (System 1) and the other the ratio (System 2). System 1 is fast and automatic and is subject to unconscious associations. System 2 is slower and is subject to conscious beliefs and attitudes. It can be assumed that customer experience is not only the result of cognitive, conscious processes but also that unconscious processes play an important role. In certain situations customers are very aware (conscious) of their experience. In other situations customers will be less aware of their experience (unconscious). Both conscious and unconscious processes can result in positive or negative emotions. A common thought in (recent marketing) literature (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Reichheld, 2003; Reichheld & Markey, 2011; Richins, 1997; Schmitt, 2003; Zaltman, 2003) is that the emotional experience of the customer has a strong influence on the loyalty of the customer. If we understand the impact of unconscious processes on customer experience, we also have to understand that customer experience has to be measured in a different way than by simply asking them whether they are satisfied. Moreover, by asking explicit questions about satisfaction and recommendation intention, the norm

becomes salient and the customer may start to think about their relationship with the service provider.

2.1.3 Measuring customer experience

As described above, the traditional way of thinking was that people consciously process information that is relevant for service experiences, and it was also often thought that customers can explain their own behaviour and can reproduce their experiences in an objective way (Zaltman, 2003). For this reason many organisations have used, and continue to use, customer satisfaction as the main indicator for customer experience. Customer satisfaction has been the dominant customer feedback metric for years (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Marketing and consumer researchers have done a lot of research into the antecedents and the behavioural and financial consequences of satisfaction (e.g., Bolton & Drew, 1991). Customer satisfaction is often seen as the result of conscious information processing. When a customer is questioned about his or her satisfaction about aspects of the service process, he or she will respond to this question by thinking about it and by recollecting his or her own experience(s) with the organisation. Reichheld (2003, 2006) developed a method for measuring recommendation intention. The measure was called the Net Promoter Score. The ultimate question of the NPS is: "How likely is it that you would recommend (this product, service, company) to a colleague or friend?". Many large service providers see this so-called Net Promoter Score (NPS) as a better indicator of the customer experience than that of customer satisfaction. These organisations think that the NPS gives a better indication of the emotional and unconscious processes that take place within the brain of the customer. However, NPS has also been criticised (Keiningham, Aksoy, Cooil, Andreassen, & Williams, 2008; Keiningham, Cooil, Andreassen, & Aksoy, 2007; Morgan & Rego, 2006). In a study by Van Doorn, Leeflang and Tijs (2013) it is demonstrated that NPS is as good (and as bad) as any other indicator (such as customer satisfaction) in predicting current gross margins and growth of sales revenues. Reichheld himself (2003, 2006) also does not provide compelling statistical evidence that NPS is a better predictor of customer behaviour, and just like customer satisfaction, asking customers about their recommendation intentions will result in cognitive and conscious processes. In our research we used both customer satisfaction and recommendation intention as instruments for measuring customer experience¹.

¹For measuring recommendation intention we used the same question as is used in the NPS, but we used a different scale. The NPS ranges from 0 to 10, and our scale is from 1 to 10. We have chosen the same scale as the one we used for measuring customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and recommendation intention give an indication of the cognitive experience but do not give an adequate indication of the emotions that arise in the relationship with a customer. A number of instruments have been developed over the last 30 years to measure emotions. One of the tools most used by marketers to measure the emotional response to environmental stimuli is the Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance (PAD) scale (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). This scale measures perceived pleasure, excitement, and control generated by environmental stimuli. However, according to Richins (1997) the PAD scale is not developed to measure the entire domain of emotional experience, but focuses on emotional responses to environmental stimuli such as the architectural space. Therefore, the scale is very suitable for the measurement of the experience in a store, but, according to Richins (1997), the method is not suitable for the assessment of emotional response to interpersonal aspects of shopping and consumption. From the desire to develop a more appropriate set of instruments for the measurement of the emotional responses during the process of consumption, Richins (1997) developed a new measuring instrument. The instrument was tested in six studies. This finally led to a list of 49 single emotions that are expected to reflect the emotions of consumers: the consumption emotion set (CES). The 49 single emotions can be clustered into sixteen emotion clusters. This list is used in our study to measure the emotions that occur during a customer relationship.

Given that asking about the emotions that are experienced by consumers in the process of service sheds no light on unconscious associations, we looked for an instrument with which we could measure the unconscious attitudes of customers. As previously described, there are indications that what consumers think is often in contradiction with what they really feel, plan, and actually do (LeDoux, 1996). One way to gain insight into the implicit associations of customers is by using the method of metaphor elicitation (Zaltman, 1997/2003). With this method, metaphors are used to uncover automatic, unconscious belief systems. We used the method to investigate the belief systems of customers about their experience with service providers. The method is described in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.1.4 Determinants of customer experience

Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009) investigated which (external) factors influence the emotional state of hotel guests. Whereas in other studies (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009) customer experience is seen as a holistic

concept with multiple dimensions, Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) focus mainly on the emotional dimension of the experience. Furthermore, their research project is focused on organisations and customers in the hotel business. Despite the fact that the research is only performed in the hotel business, their research is interesting for other service providers and, therefore, also for our research project. First, the emotional experience plays a very important role in the hotel business. This sector can therefore serve as an example for organisations in other service industries. Second, the study by Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) is one of the few studies in which a clear connection is made between customer experience, business-related factors, and customer-related factors. In their description of the business-related factors Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) make a distinction between hardware, software, and humanware. They define hardware as the environment in which the service is provided: architecture, design, light, and colour. Humanware refers to the people who provide the service and the (other) customers purchasing the service. Software supports the hardware and humanware with technology and process management. In addition to these business-related factors they distinguish demographic factors, situational factors, and personal moderators. This research showed that humanware has a stronger impact on the emotional experience of the customer than typical hardware factors. This will certainly be the case in business sectors, where hospitality plays an important role (like tourism), but it will also be the case in other service sectors. In addition, it was found that demographic and situational factors have no significant impact on the emotional state of a customer. Finally, the research showed that the customer's involvement in the process and the degree of freedom of choice play important roles during the service processes.

Verhoef et al. (2009) also distinguish determinants and moderators of customer experience. Determinants are the source of the stimuli perceived by the customer. These stimuli may reside in the vicinity of the company, but they can also come from previous experiences of the customer. Verhoef et al. (2009) distinguished eight categories of determinants: the social environment, the service interface, the atmosphere in the store, the product range, the price, but also the customer experience in other channels, brand perception, and previous customer experiences. In addition to these determinants they identified a number of situational and personal moderators. Situational moderators include the type of store, the location, the local culture, the economic climate, the season, and the level of competition. Personal moderators include the goals of the client, task orientation, socio-demographic factors (such as age and gender), and consumer attitudes. Verhoef et al. (2009) indicate that the next

stage of research into customer experience should go further than studying a limited number of elements that can be controlled by the organisation. If it is true that situational and demographic factors do not have a significant impact on customer experience (Brunner-Sperdin et al, 2009), then future research should focus more on the influence of personal moderators.

2.2 The Influence of Relational Models on Customer Experience

What does not arise in the research of Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) and Verhoef et al. (2009), but what becomes clear in other studies (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009; Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011; McGraw, Schwartz & Tetlock, 2012; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005) is that the way in which customers perceive the relationship with an organisation has a significant impact on the evaluation of the organisation, their products, and services. Clark and Mills (1979) made a distinction between exchange relationships and communal relationships. Exchange relationships may be characterised as impersonal. The main value in this relationship is “quid pro quo”. The relationship is based on the principle of reciprocity: you give something to the other expecting that you get something in return (comparable benefits). Communal relationships are more personal in nature. You give something to the other to meet a need or to show that you are interested in the other (incomparable benefits). There are relationships that may be characterised as typical communal relationships, such relationships with family, friends, and members of the sports club. There are also relationships that can be characterised as typical exchange relationships. These are mostly business relationships. Most relationships have elements of both relational models, but in a business relationship, the exchange component is often dominant. Clark and Mills (1979) also found that — depending on the type of relationship in which a person is engaged — people react differently to situations.

The Relational Models Theory (RMT; Fiske, 1991) states that people use relational models to structure and evaluate relationships. A relational model can be seen as a coherent set of relationship norms, values, and beliefs. Relationship norms provide an indication of how the relationship should be; values are an indicator of what is important in the relationship and beliefs provide us with information about how the relationship is experienced. The RMT distinguishes four elementary relational models: Communal Sharing, Market Pricing, Authority Ranking, and Equality Matching. These four models will be explained shortly in Section 2.3. The RMT is interesting for our research for two reasons. First,

relational models can provide us with a deeper insight into the processes that influence customer experiences. Relational models are valid for both explicit (accessible to conscious awareness) and implicit (inaccessible to conscious awareness) mental representations of social interaction (Fiske, 1991; Haslam & Fiske, 1992; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2010). A second reason why relational models are interesting for our research is that previous research (e.g., McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009) provides reasons to assume that it is possible to activate relationship norms unconsciously and, by doing so, to influence customer experience. This presupposition will be investigated in further detail in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

The RMT is the latest conceptualisation of relational models in the social sciences. The theory has been extensively tested and has received support in a great number of studies in different cultures. These studies have focused mainly on interpersonal relations. In the latest decade the theory has also been validated for issues in a business environment, such as retailer-customer relations (Aggarwal, 2004; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009), taboo trade-offs (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015; McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005), and word-of-mouth (Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009). For example, Aggarwal (2004) showed that people might react very differently to a service failure, depending on the relational context. Customers that saw themselves in a friendship relationship with the owner of a restaurant responded differently to the message that their favourite table was no longer available than did customers who saw themselves in a business relationship. McGraw and Tetlock (2005) conducted research into the effects of taboo trade-offs. A taboo trade-off occurs when people are asked to trade their sacred values for values considered to be secular. McGraw and Tetlock (2005) demonstrated that moral outrage and cognitive distortion occurs when people are asked to allow Market Pricing norms to influence decisions that fall under Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, or Equality Matching relationships. They also showed that the desire to maximise profit is stronger in a Market Pricing relation than in a CS relation. Although it is now broadly accepted that relational models are of fundamental importance, there is still little research on the impact of these models on customer experience.

2.3 The Relational Models Theory

The Relational Models Theory (RMT; Fiske, 1991) assumes that people organise their lives in terms of relationships with other people. The theory also assumes

that people from all cultures make use of various relational models to generate most types of social interaction, evaluation, and affect. Every relational model embraces specific values that indicate what is important in the relationship, norms that specify how the relationship should be, and beliefs about how the relationship is. The theory suggests that the behavioural norms guide people when they evaluate the relationship. This would also suggest that when people enter into a relationship with an organisation, relationship norms are used to (consciously or unconsciously) assess the interactions with the organisation. The assumption is also that this effect occurs mainly at an unconscious level. People often have a certain feeling about a relationship, without knowing exactly where that feeling comes from. Only when people start to think about the relationship do they become aware of the relationship norms. This is for example the case when relationship norms are violated. Clark and Mills (1979) show that what people expect in one kind of relationship may violate the norms of other types of relationships. They also show that people feel exploited if partners in the relationship go beyond these normative expectations. In an explanatory framework, Fiske and Tetlock (1997/2015) use the term taboo trade-off. A taboo trade-off is an action where MP norms are applied in an atmosphere that is traditionally regulated by CS norms (or an action where CS norms are applied in a traditional MP atmosphere). In a customer-supplier relationship there is a taboo trade-off if an organisation behaves differently to that agreed among the partners (if something has already been agreed). An example of a taboo trade-off in a business environment is when a communal organisation (such as a hospital or a religious institution) suddenly behaves in a very commercial way, for example, by organising marketing campaigns to attract new customers (McGraw, Schwartz, & Tetlock, 2012). Another example of a taboo trade-off occurs when a commercial organisation suddenly behaves like a communal organisation, for example, by showing commitment to a sustainable society.

Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000) exposed participants in one of their studies to routine trade-offs, such as paying someone to clean a house. Another group of participants were faced with taboo trade-offs such as the payment of adoption rights for orphans or selling votes during election time. The study confirmed previous findings (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015), namely that taboo trade-offs result in resistance, intense cognitive reactions (including wanting to punish those who suggest the taboo trade-off), and emotional reactions. It also showed that taboo trade-offs may lead to attempts to reinforce the norms that have been violated by the taboo trade-off. A subsequent study by McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel (2003) found that people show great resistance to the use of values in one relational model (MP) if these values are associated

with another relational model (CS, AR, or EM). In another study by McGraw et al. (2003), participants were found to have no problem with a proposal to buy or sell something if it was proposed in an MP environment, but when this was done in a CS environment, the resistance of participants increased. Organisational actions or interventions may be experienced as taboo trade-offs and may therefore have an effect on relational models and customer experience. The effect of a number of specific interventions in customer service is investigated in more detail in Chapter 5 and 6.

For reasons described above it is interesting to find out in what relational models people position themselves, and also when it is a customer-supplier relationship. As mentioned before, Fiske distinguishes four elementary relational models (Fiske, 1991):

Communal Sharing (CS)

In this relational model there is a common interest and/or solidarity between the parties within the relationship. These parties are usually a group of people who participate on an equal basis in the group. It can be a small group or a large group. Individual distinction is not made within the group. Everyone has the same rights and obligations. Everyone is equivalent on one or more characteristics. There may be differences between the participating parties, but they do not pay any attention to these differences. Parties invest something in the community and get something out of it, without monitoring the size of the investment and the return on this investment. Parties want to connect with each other because they want to share their personal characteristics (attitudes, behaviours, values), or because they want to share each other's resources. The best example of this type of relationship can be found in families, (sports) associations, and religious communities. In customer-supplier relationships, customers can identify with an organisation by categorising themselves as members of the same group as the organisation (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This phenomenon occurs, for example, with people who feel connected to a particular car or motorcycle brand (Volvo, Audi, Harley Davidson) or holders of a company card (Bijenkorf, American Express). In today's economic climate, this connection can also be seen when customers and organisations commit themselves to the theme of sustainability and care for the environment (Triodos Bank, ASN Bank).

Authority Ranking (AR)

This relational model organises relationships in terms of authority. The parties concerned are often in a hierarchical or authority relationship towards each other. It may be, for example, an employer-employee relationship, the relationship

between an expert and a layperson, or the relationship between a government organisation and a citizen. The rank determines the status and who obeys whom. The higher placed person in the relationship is authorised to recommend, protect, dominate, and prevail. The person who is in the top role has first access to available resources, but they also have the responsibility to care for subordinates. The lower ranking person is supposed to obey, follow, and be loyal. This relational model distinguishes a superior variant and a subordinate variant. For our study the first variant means that the customer is in the superior role, in the second variant the customer is in a subordinate role. In our study we have limited ourselves to the model where the customer is in the subordinate role and the organisation determines what is and what is not possible. Organisations often proclaim that the customer is the most important asset of the company, but in practice we see that customers have very limited possibilities for influencing the company policy of organisations in, for example, the financial services or utilities sector.

Equality Matching (EM)

In this relational model the degree of balance is very important. The investment in the relationship must be balanced with what the two parties get out of the relationship. Both parties keep track of what is invested and what each person receives. The benefits that must be weighed in relation to other benefits, may vary by culture. What you get out of the relationship, however, is not the reason for entering into the relationship. What is being taken out of the relationship is a sign of equality. The EM model is therefore used to express equivalence and respect towards each other. If you need to give more to others than you get in return, then the relationship is not balanced and will probably be ended. In this relational model parties wait for their turn to invest something into the relationship, there is reciprocity (if I give something, I can also expect something back), a division into equal parts and democratic decision-making.

Market Pricing (MP)

In this relational model, the participating parties use a common value (usually money) to determine the value of the investment and the return on investment. The exchange within the relationship must be proportional: earning a wage should be in proper proportion to the number of hours worked, obtaining a specific product should be in proportion to the investment or effort required to attain it. If a customer pays a certain amount of money for a product or service, the product or service must be of a good quality. A good cost-benefit ratio is essential in this kind of relationship. Both parties are fairly indifferent to each other; it does not matter with whom they do business. What is important is that the other person can provide the desired product. Both parties seek to acquire the desired result

at minimum cost. The MP relational model is, according to Price and Arnould (1999), the most common model in customer-supplier relationships.

In addition to these four basic models, Fiske (1991) distinguishes two other models. The first of these is called the NULL relationship. This is the case if the parties declare that they do not want to have or do not have a relationship with each other (Fiske, 1991, 1992). This model is not included in our study because we want to investigate relationships that do exist or are acknowledged. The sixth model is called the Asocial Relational Model. This model is used when the relationship has two characteristics. The first characteristic is that the other party is seen as a social entity and this entity is only approached to get something done. The second characteristic is that relationship norms are only maintained as long as they serve in achieving the desired result. According to Kaltcheva and Parasuraman (2009) this model is particularly found in pure leisure transactions, such as the theatre, a cruise, or an attraction park. The customer usually only consumes this kind of service because he or she wants to be entertained. These type of transactions are not considered in this thesis and therefore this relational model is also excluded from our research. Kaltcheva, Winsor, and Patino (2011) demonstrated that the null and the Asocial Relational Model have limited relevance to customers' interactions with for-profit marketers. These models are also not further investigated in our research.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, Clark and Mills (1979) made a distinction between communal and exchange relationships. If we look at the relational models developed by Fiske, Communal Sharing (CS) can be seen as a typical communal relationship, and Market Pricing (MP) can be seen as a typical exchange relationship. For Clark and Mills, the exchange relationship also contains aspects of the relational model of Equality Matching (EM) (Fiske, 1992), especially when it comes to reciprocity ("quid pro quo"). Fiske has conducted a considerable amount of research into the influence of relational models in many areas of society. During the last ten years much research has also been carried out into the applicability of the relational models in a business environment. For this reason we decided to take the relational models of Fiske as a starting point for this thesis. In the remainder of the thesis we will place particular focus on CS and MP. This is because these models — in accordance with the typology of Clark and Mills (1979) — are seen as most applicable to and recognisable for relationships in a customer-supplier environment. CS is seen as a more personal model, MP as a more business model. Due to the fact that one of the participating organisations in our research project was a government organisation, we also included the relational model, Authority

Ranking, in the exploratory studies described in Chapter 3. In the studies described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, we restricted ourselves to CS and MP.

Depending on the relational model, people have a different motivation to enter into the relationship with the other party (Fiske, 1991). Those who use the CS model do so because they have the desire to be intimate with each other. They identify themselves with the other and want to connect with the other. Fiske calls this an intimacy motivation. In a CS relationship, both parties will not be very aware of the reasons why they have entered into the relationship and why they maintain the relationship. In this relationship, parties are not thinking about a possible end of the relationship. When they start the relationship they think it will last for ever. People who use the MP model enter into the relationship because they want something from one another. They realise that they do have to pay a price but as long as this outweighs the revenues, the relationship is maintained. Fiske calls this an achievement motivation. When costs and benefits are no longer in balance then the relationship will be ended. The motivation to enter into the relational model AR is what Fiske calls a power motivation: one party determines what happens and the other party follows, more or less loyally. The choice for an AR relationship can be made on a voluntary or an involuntary basis. However, there is always a certain dependency within the relationship. For example, people choose this model because they want to have access to available resources (such as money or income) or because they are looking for protection, safety, or security.

Fiske (1991) indicates that people rarely use only one of the models (p. 693). In a customer-supplier relationship, hybrid relational models are expected to be even more common than in an interpersonal relationship because customers often deal with different employees, who could activate different relational models (Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009). When we look at the relationship between customers and organisations, it may be possible that customers employ different relational models through time. It is also possible that customers change relational models depending on the specific context. As transactions are completed, relationships evolve and psychological contracts change (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). The fact that relational models have a hybrid character and the fact that relational models can change over time also indicates that cultural or organisational differences may exist between relational models in customer relationships.

If customers use more than one model in their relationship with an organisation, it is interesting to investigate which relationship norms are used within that

specific relationship. In addition, if one model has a stronger presence than the other, it is interesting to know which norms dominate the relationship. One might assume that in a client-supplier-relationship, Market Pricing norms will be dominant. It is also interesting to know what happens if an organisation approaches its customers in a way that does not fit into the model that is preferred by the customer. The question of the applicability of relationship norms in customer-supplier norms and the effects these models have on customer experience will be investigated in Chapters 3 and 4. The effects of organisational interventions and reactions of customers on these interventions will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 5 and 6.

3 The Applicability and Effects of Relational Models on Customer Experience



This chapter examines whether, and to what extent relational models are applicable to the relationship between different types of organisation and their customers, and what effect these relational models have on different dimensions of customer experience (Study 1A). There appear to be significant differences in the presence of relational models in the relationship between customers and different types of organisations. In addition, there are significant differences between the impact of these relational models on customer experience. For this reason, further research is carried out into the belief systems of customers concerning their relationships with large service providers (Study 1B). This study shows that the organisation's involvement and the freedom of choice in use of communication channels play an important role in the experience of customers.

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The Influence of the Type of Organisation on Relational Models

It is obvious that differences in the presence of relational models in a customer-supplier environment can, to a large extent, be explained by the fact that organisations approach customers differently and customers perceive organisations differently. Our research was conducted with customers from six different organisations: a bank, an insurance company, a health care insurer, an energy company, a cable company, and a social welfare organisation. What these organisations have in common is that all six are major service companies with a large number of customers. The organisations differ in terms of the market in which they operate and the type of product they offer. The bank, the insurance company, the health care insurer, the energy company, and the cable company are all profit-oriented companies in highly competitive markets. The social welfare organisation is the only organisation in the study that is not focused on profit and is a monopolist in the sector in which it operates. The bank, the insurance company, the health care insurer, and the social welfare organisation differ from the cable company and the energy company in that they provide a relatively high-interest product. High interest products can be considered as products to which customers attach great importance. The services offered by the bank, the insurance company, and the health care insurer, require a high commitment from customers because these services have a direct impact on their financial situation. The cable company and the energy company offer a relatively low-interest product. Customers merely want the offered services to function properly. As long as that is the case the customer does not desire any

further involvement with the organisation. Based on the above characteristics, the six organisations participating in the survey can be divided into three clusters:

1. Profit-oriented organisations, competitive market, high-interest product;
2. Profit-oriented organisations, competitive market, low-interest product;
3. Non-profit organisations, monopolistic market, high-interest product.

The bank, the insurance company, and the insurer fall within the first cluster. We will call this cluster the Finance Cluster. The second cluster consists of the energy company and the cable company. This cluster is called the Utilities Cluster in the remainder of this thesis. The third cluster consists of only one organisation, the social welfare institution. This cluster will therefore be called the Social Welfare Cluster.

The relational model Communal Sharing (CS) is generally seen as a more personal model and that of Market Pricing (MP) as a commercial, non-personal model. Our expectation is that MP has a stronger presence in the relationship between a customer and a profit-oriented service provider in a competitive market (Finance and Utilities Cluster) than in the relationship between a customer and a non-profit organisation in the Social Welfare Cluster (Proposition 3.1). In the competition for customers, profit oriented organisations will try to present the best value proposition to (potential) customers. Our expectation is that the relational model Authority Ranking (AR) will have a stronger presence in the relationship between customers and non-profit organisations in a monopolistic market (Social Welfare Cluster (Proposition 3.2). The field of non-profit organisations in a monopolistic market is usually limited by legislation, leaving little room to meet specific individual customer needs. The organisation determines what happens and how it happens, leaving the customer with no choice. Due to the nature of the product (high interest), CS will have a stronger presence in the relationship between customers and organisations in the Finance and the Social Welfare Clusters (Proposition 3.3). Organisations in these clusters usually have more information about the customer, are committed to the social well-being of their customers, and therefore will also demonstrate a higher commitment to their customers.

Propositions

- 3.1 *The MP relational model will have a stronger presence in the relationship between a customer and a profit-oriented organisation in the Finance and Utilities Clusters than in the relationship between a customer and a non-profit organisation in the Social Welfare Cluster.*
- 3.2 *The relational model AR will have a stronger presence in the relationship between a customer and a non-profit organisation in the Social Welfare Cluster than in the relationship between a customer and a profit-oriented organisation in the Finance or Utilities Clusters.*
- 3.3 *The CS relational model will have a stronger presence in the relationship between a customer and an organisation in the Finance or Social Welfare Clusters than in the relationship between a customer and an organisation in the Utilities Cluster.*

3.1.2 The Influence of Relational Models on Customer Experience

As stated earlier in Chapter 2, a relational model is present both at a conscious and an unconscious level. At times, people are very conscious of the relationship norms and whether the relationship meets these norms. At other times they are not at all aware of these norms. Both the conscious and the unconscious processes that are activated within a relationship can result in positive or negative emotions. The nature of the relationship (personal or business) and the motivation to enter into this relationship, makes it plausible that the parties in a CS relationship have a more positive feeling about the relationship than parties in an MP or AR relationship. This is certainly the case as long as the relationship exists. A bad feeling about the relationship usually means that it will be terminated.

Customers that use the CS model, and identify themselves with the organisation, generally have a more positive image of the organisation, its culture, and its values (Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009). CS customers tend to trust the good intentions of the organisation, even when they are confronted with a service failure. This type of customer is also more loyal after a service failure and is less likely to spread negative word-of-mouth criticism (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011). Research by Kaltcheva et al. (2011) also showed that the CS relational model has a mitigating effect on the experience of service failures, especially on re-patronage and recommendation intention. Unlike CS customers, MP

customers are fairly indifferent to the identity of the other party (Kaltcheva et al., 2011). On average, the emotional experience in an MP relationship is fairly neutral, unless the service is very good or very bad and the cost-benefit ratio is affected. Customers that adhere to the AR model are often in a subordinate position. They partly feel comfortable with this kind of relationship because it can provide safety and security. People can, however, also feel dependent in such a relationship, which can evoke a negative rather than a positive feeling.

Proposition

3.4 *The more the CS model is used by customers, the more positive their feelings about the relationship, the more satisfied the customer is with the organisation and the more the customer is prepared to recommend the organisation to friends and acquaintances.*

The remainder of this chapter describes two studies. The first study (Study 1A) examines the relational models used by customers of different types of organisations and the impact these models have on customer experience. The second study (Study 1B) examines the associations customers have with large service providers and the beliefs they hold about their relationship with these organisations. Thus, the research model for Chapter 3 is as follows (Figure 3.1):

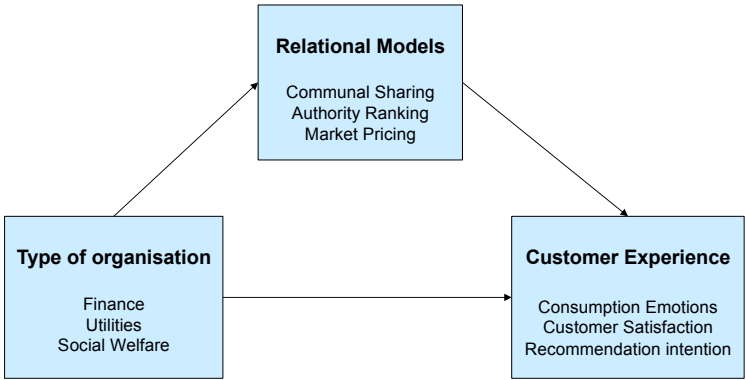


Figure 3.1. Research model Study 1A Chapter 3

This research model makes it plausible to assume that relational models have a mediating effect on the relationship between the type of organisation and the customer experience. To investigate this presupposition a number of mediation analyses were conducted, as discussed in Section 3.2.2.4.

3.2. Study 1A: The Influence of Relational Models on Customer Experience

This study examines the extent to which relational models are used by customers to guide their relationship with different types of organisations. It also analyses the influence that the type of organisation has on the relational models and the influence of these relational models on the customer experience. Finally, mediation analysis is used to determine the extent to which the relational models have a mediating effect on the influence of type of organisation on customer experience. Customer experience is operationalised in this study by measuring consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention.

3.2.1 Method

3.2.1.1 Procedure. In the period from February to December 2011 a total of 272 customers were interviewed about their experience as customers of a large service provider. The customers formed a sample from a customer base that was supplied by the six organisations that participated in this research project. During the interview customers had to complete a number of questionnaires. These questionnaires identified the relational models that customers used in their relationship with the organisation. The questionnaires also measured the consumption emotions that were applicable in the relationship with the provider. In addition, customers answered a number of questions that were intended to gain insight into customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. The results of this part of the research are presented in Study 1A. Following completion of the questionnaires customers were subject to an oral interview. The results of the oral interviews are described in Study 1B.

3.2.1.2 Respondents. The respondents were all customer of one of the six organisations participating in this research project. Fourteen of the 272 interviews took place during a pilot phase that tested the original design structure of the interview. Because the interviews in the pilot phase had a slightly different approach, these interviews were not included in the analysis. The remaining 258 customer interviews were analysed (147 men, 111 women, and a mean age of 47 years [$SD = 14.54$]). Of these 258 customers, 38 were customers of the bank, 41 were customers of the insurance company, 46 were customers of the energy company, 43 were customers of the social welfare institute, 46 were customers of the health care insurer, and 44 were customers of the cable company. Customers received a €50 gift voucher for their participation in the research project.

3.2.1.3 Measures

3.2.1.3.1 Consumption emotions. To measure the emotional experience of the customer in the relationship with the supplier, we used the Consumption Emotion Set (CES). This list, developed by Richins (1997), contains 49 single emotions. In the first study (Study 1A), all 49 emotions were presented to the respondents. Using a 5-point scale respondents had to indicate the extent to which the relevant emotion was applicable to their relationship with the respective service provider (1 = not applicable at all, 5 = very applicable). A complete overview of the scores on the 49 emotions is presented in Appendix A. The overview shows that there is a significant relationship between most of the consumption emotions and the CS relational model. In describing the research results in this chapter we have limited ourselves to the emotions that have the strongest link with one or more of the relational models ($\beta > .40$ or $\beta < -.40$). These emotions are: frustrated, irritated, discontented, unfulfilled, fulfilled, contented, optimistic, encouraged, hopeful, and happy.

3.2.1.3.2 Customer satisfaction. To measure customer satisfaction customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale their overall customer satisfaction with the respective service provider (1 = very unsatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). Customer satisfaction was measured as a single-item.

3.2.1.3.3 Recommendation intention. To measure recommendation intention customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale the extent to which they were willing to recommend the company to friends and acquaintances (1 = not at all willing and 10 = very willing). Recommendation intention was measured as a single-item.

3.2.1.3.4 Relational models. For the measurement of relational models, customers were provided with a list of statements relating to the relational models Communal Sharing (CS), Authority Ranking (AR), and Market Pricing (MP). In order to determine the extent to which the relational models were present, we used a list of 14 propositions based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent used a 7-point scale to indicate whether the statement was applicable to the relationship with the respective provider (0 = not applicable at all, 6 = very applicable). The original statements from Haslam and Fiske were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch they were slightly modified to make them more applicable to a business relationship. As these modified statements did not fully correspond to Haslam and Fiske's original statements we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. Two

statements were found to provide insufficient load to the appropriate relational model. Those statements were removed from the list. The remaining list of 12 statements is used in the remainder of this study (for a complete description of the confirmatory factor analysis see Appendix B). The scores on the statements (five statements for CS, four statements for MP and three statements for AR) were summed and divided by the number of statements thus creating an average score for each relational model. For each of the three subscales a Cronbach's Alpha was performed to determine the consistency of the items. This analysis led to acceptable scales (for CS $\alpha = .77$, for MP $\alpha = .69$, and for AR $\alpha = .72$).

3.2.2. Results

3.2.2.1 The influence of type of organisation on customer experience. If we perform a one-way ANOVA with the type of organisation as the independent variable and the consumption emotions as the dependent variable, it becomes clear that customers from the Social Welfare Cluster have a more negative emotional experience than customers from any of the other clusters (Table 3.1). Customers from the Social Welfare Cluster feel more frustrated, irritated, and unfulfilled than customers of the other clusters. They are also less fulfilled, less contented, and less happy about their relationship with the service provider.

Table 3.1

Means and standard deviations for consumption emotions clustered in three groups.

| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster | Social Welfare Cluster | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>F(2,251)</i> | <i>p</i> |
| frustrated | 1.88 (1.21) ^a | 1.87 (1.21) ^b | 2.47 (1.50) ^{ab} | 3.89 | .02 |
| irritated | 1.92 (1.23) ^a | 2.00 (1.25) ^b | 2.47 (1.45) ^{ab} | 2.99 | .05 |
| discontented | 1.98 (1.12) | 1.97 (1.11) | 2.28 (1.26) | 1.26 | .28 |
| unfulfilled | 2.02 (1.19) | 1.88 (1.09) ^a | 2.35 (1.25) ^a | 2.28 | .10 |
| fulfilled | 3.71 (1.11) ^a | 3.98 (0.92) ^b | 3.12 (1.26) ^{ab} | 9.14 | .00 |
| contented | 3.34 (1.22) ^a | 3.35 (1.19) ^b | 2.63 (1.22) ^{ab} | 6.32 | .00 |
| optimistic | 3.31 (1.18) | 3.27 (1.29) | 2.91 (1.27) | 1.79 | .17 |
| encouraged | 3.07 (1.30) | 3.13 (3.44) | 2.81 (1.31) | .29 | .75 |
| hopeful | 3.22 (1.24) | 2.97 (1.31) | 2.91 (1.25) | 1.57 | .21 |
| happy | 3.11 (1.25) ^a | 3.17 (1.30) ^b | 2.60 (1.28) ^{ab} | 3.19 | .04 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row ($p < .05$)

The satisfaction of customers in the Social Welfare Cluster also appears to be significantly lower than that in the other two clusters (Table 3.2). With respect to recommendation intention, the differences between customers in the Finance Cluster and those in the Utilities Cluster were not significant (Table 3.3). Recommendation intention was not measured among customers in the Social Welfare Cluster because it is inappropriate to ask customers about the extent to which they are willing to recommend a social welfare institution to their friends.

Table 3.2

Means and standard deviations for customer satisfaction clustered in three groups.

| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster | Social Welfare Cluster | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>F(2,251) =</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Customer Satisfaction | 7.38 (1.32) ^a | 7.49 (1.18) ^b | 5.77 (2.40) ^{ab} | 21.40 | .00 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row ($p = .00$)

Table 3.3

Means and standard deviations for recommendation intention clustered in three groups.

| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------|
| | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>M(SD)</i> | <i>F(1, 207) =</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Recommendation Intention | 6.65 (2.31) | 6.43 (2.23) | .50 | .48 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row ($p = .00$)

3.2.2.2 The influence of type of organisation on relational models.

The extent to which customers of the six organisations activated the relational models was then examined, broken down into the three aforementioned clusters. If we look at the research results of individual respondents, these results confirm findings of previous studies (Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009) that in customer-supplier relationships the relational models have a hybrid character. In their relationship with an organisation, customers rarely use the relationship norms of only a single model. They usually use a combination of the norms of two or three relational models (MP, AR, and CS).

Table 3.4

Mean scores and standard deviation for relational models clustered in three groups.

| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster | Social Welfare Cluster | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-----|
| | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) | F(2, 251) = | p |
| Communal Sharing (CS) | 2.77 (1.39) | 2.73 (1.30) | 2.64 (1.16) | .16 | .85 |
| Authority Ranking (AR) | 2.07 (1.50) ^a | 2.45 (1.47) ^b | 3.50 (1.67) ^{ab} | 14.22 | .00 |
| Market Pricing (MP) | 4.01(1.12) ^{ab} | 4.42 (1.23) ^{ac} | 2.14 (1.45) ^{bc} | 52.94 | .00 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row (p = .00)

Table 3.4 shows that in respect of the presence of the MP relational model, the three clusters differ significantly from each other. For proposition 3.1 — MP is more present in the relationship between a customer and a profit-oriented organisation in Finance and Utilities than in the relationship between a customer and a non-profit organisation in the Social Welfare Cluster — is thus found sufficient support. Table 3.4 also shows that AR is significantly more present in the relationship between customers and the organisation in the Social Welfare Cluster than in the relationship between a customer and a profit-oriented organisation in the Finance and Utilities Clusters. There is therefore also sufficient support for proposition 3.2. For proposition 3.3 — CS is more present in the relationship between a customer and a Finance and Social Welfare organisation than in the relationship between a customer and an organisation in the Utilities Cluster — no support was found in this study. The differences in the presence of the relational models between the three clusters also become clear when shown in a graph (Figure 3.2):

42

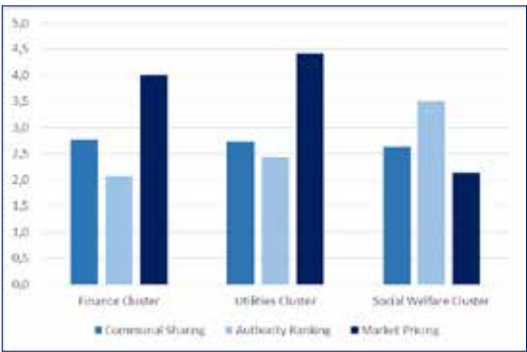


Figure 3.2. Means relational models clustered into three groups

3.2.2.3 The influence of relational models on customer experience

3.2.2.3.1 Consumption emotions. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the relational models and the consumption emotions for each organisational cluster. The analysis shows that for all three clusters there is a significant relationship between CS and consumption emotions. The stronger the presence of CS, the stronger the positive emotions and the weaker the negative emotions (Table 3.5). For customers of organisations in the Finance and Utilities Cluster AR has a significant influence on frustration, feeling unfulfilled, and feeling irritated: the more an organisation is associated with AR, the more negative are these three emotions. The influence of AR on the positive and negative emotions is clearly weaker than the influence of CS. MP does not have a significant impact on any of the three clusters. The MP relational model has little influence on the emotional experience of a consumer.

Table 3.5

Regression coefficients for the influence of relational models on selected consumption emotions.

| | | Fru | Irr | Unc | Unf | Ful | Con | Opt | Enc | Hop | Hap |
|-------------------------------|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | | β | β | β | β | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| Finance Cluster | CS | -.40*** | -.44*** | -.46*** | -.50*** | .49*** | .54*** | .55*** | .65*** | .54*** | .68*** |
| | AR | .25** | .18* | .12 | .18* | -.23** | -.10 | -.11 | -.08 | -.06 | -.02 |
| | MP | -.08 | -.03 | -.01 | -.05 | -.03 | .06 | -.11 | -.18* | -.05 | -.15 |
| | R^2 | .19*** | .20*** | .20*** | .25*** | .23*** | .30*** | .26*** | .36*** | .26*** | .40*** |
| Utilities Cluster | CS | -.47*** | -.60*** | -.48*** | -.30** | .41*** | .40*** | .44*** | .30** | .35** | .37** |
| | AR | .29*** | .26*** | .30*** | .23* | -.21* | -.13 | -.11 | -.11 | -.03 | -.10 |
| | MP | .02 | .12 | .10 | -.11 | .03 | .08 | -.09 | -.21 | -.10 | -.03 |
| | R^2 | .28*** | .39*** | .29*** | .15** | .20*** | .19*** | .19*** | .12* | .12* | .14** |
| Social Welfare Cluster | CS | -.46** | -.42** | -.26 | -.36* | .49*** | .33* | .39* | .38* | .67*** | .57*** |
| | AR | -.08 | .01 | .02 | .04 | .21 | .07 | .19 | .15 | .31* | .08 |
| | MP | .08 | .08 | .19 | .33* | -.02 | -.13 | .13 | -.09 | .19 | -.02 |
| | R^2 | .21* | .18 | .10 | .24* | .25** | .12 | .18 | .16 | .49*** | .32** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note: Fru = Frustrated, Irr = Irritated, Unc = Uncontented, Unf = Unfulfilled, Ful = Fulfilled, Con = Contented, Opt = Optimistic, Enc = Encouraged, Hop = Hopeful, Hap = Happy

3.2.2.3.2 Customer satisfaction. Next, a multiple regression analysis was performed with the purpose of predicting customer satisfaction from the relational models. The relational models are hereby used as the independent variable and customer satisfaction as the dependent variable. Table 3.6 shows that in all clusters CS is a significant predictor of customer satisfaction. The stronger the presence of CS relationship norms, the more satisfied customers will be. AR appears to be a significant predictor only in the Finance and Utilities Clusters. The relationship between AR and customer satisfaction is however a negative one. The more an organisation is associated with AR relationship norms, the less satisfied the customers will be. MP is not a significant predictor of customer satisfaction in any of the three clusters.

Table 3.6

Regression coefficients for influence of relational models on customer satisfaction.

| | Customer Satisfaction | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster | Social Welfare Cluster |
| | β | β | β |
| Communal Sharing | .59*** | .34*** | .38* |
| Authority Ranking | -.23** | -.33** | .07 |
| Market Pricing | .04 | .09 | -.25 |
| R^2 | .35*** | .21*** | .20* |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$;

3.2.2.3.3 Recommendation intention. A multiple regression analysis was performed to predict the recommendation intention from the relational models. This analysis was performed only for the Finance and Utilities Cluster. Customers in the Social Welfare Cluster were not asked for their recommendation intention, because they do not have freedom of choice between several providers. Table 3.7 shows that CS is also a significant predictor of recommendation intention, whereas MP and AR do not have predictive value for recommendation intention.

Table 3.7

Regression coefficients for influence of relational models on recommendation intention.

| | Recommendation Intention | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| | Finance Cluster | Utilities Cluster |
| | β | β |
| Communal Sharing | .51*** | .45*** |
| Authority Ranking | -.02 | -.21* |
| Market Pricing | -.04 | -.12 |
| R^2 | .24*** | .23*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$;

The results presented in Tables 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7 show that that there is sufficient support for hypothesis 3.4: the CS relational model has a stronger impact on consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention than AR and MP.

3.2.2.4 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the type of relational model mediates the relationship between the type of organisation and customer experience, a number of regression analyses were carried out. For the operationalisation of customer experience in the mediation analyses we used perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention as dependent variables. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (Figure 3.3). First, the type of organisation (dummy coded) must predict the mediator (presence of CS, MP and AR relationship norms, Table 3.8). Second, the type of organisation (dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention), with the relational models being added as covariates (Table 3.9). And last, the relationship between the type of organisation and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

²Because the type of organisation is a categorical variable, we used two dummy variables for the analyses: DUM_C1 for the Finance Cluster and DUM_C2 for the Utilities Cluster. Both variables can take on the value 0 (the organisation does not belong to this cluster) or 1 (the organisation belongs to this cluster). If a customer does not belong to an organisation in the Finance or Utilities Clusters, it automatically falls into the Social Welfare Cluster.

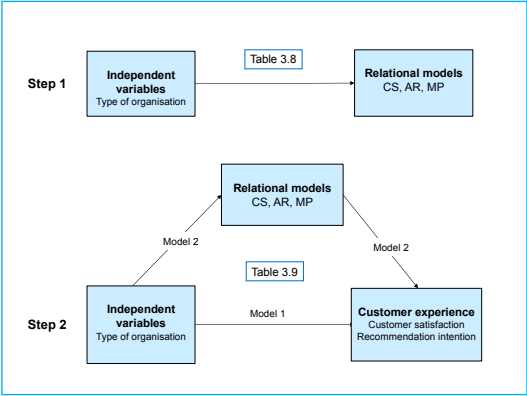


Figure 3.3. Mediation analysis for mediating effect of relational models

The results of the first step show that there is a significant relationship between organisations in the Finance Cluster and AR and MP and between organisations in the Utilities Cluster and MP (Table 3.8).

Table 3.8

Regression results for influence of type of organisation on relational models CS, MP and AR

| | CS | AR | MP |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | β | β | β |
| Finance Cluster | .02 | -.28*** | .26*** |
| Utilities Cluster | -.01 | -.11 | .30*** |
| R^2 | .00 | .06 | .08 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the second step show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the Finance Cluster and customer satisfaction and between the Utilities Cluster and customer satisfaction. If we add the CS, AR, and MP relational models as covariates, then both the regression coefficient and the significance decrease. However, the influence of the independent variable does not disappear. It could thus be concluded that there is a partial mediating effect of relational models (Table 3.9). This was supported by the results on the Sobel Z test (Sobel, 1982). The Sobel test revealed an indirect effect of the Finance Cluster on customer satisfaction, mediated by AR (Sobel $Z = 2.62$, $p < .01$).

Table 3.9

Regression results for influence of type of organisation on customer satisfaction with relational models CS, AR and MP as mediating variables.

| | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | |
| Communal Sharing | | .40*** |
| Authority Ranking | | -.20** |
| Market Pricing | | .08 |
| <i>Independent Variables</i> | | |
| Finance Cluster | .23** | .15* |
| Utilities Cluster | .20** | .16* |
| R^2 | .05** | .25** |
| Delta R^2 | | .20*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Performing the same analysis but with recommendation intention as the dependent variable, the results show that the relational models do not have a mediating effect on recommendation intention. In this second analysis we only used one dummy variable because recommendation intention was not measured among customers of the Social Welfare Cluster. If we perform a regression analysis on the relationship between the Finance Cluster and recommendation intention, it appears that this relationship is not significant ($\beta = .05$, ns).

3.3 Study 1B: Beliefs of Customers About the Relationship with their Service Provider

In the first part of the study described in this chapter (Study 1A), it was established that relational models are important influencers of customer experience. In the second part of the study (Study 1B) we investigated the beliefs that customers have about their relationship with the service provider. The aim of this study was to clarify which customers' beliefs nowadays play an important role in customer experience.

3.3.1 Method

3.3.1.1 Procedure. Following the completion of a number of questionnaires (as described under Study 1A), four different interviewers questioned respondents face-to-face on their beliefs about the relationship with their service provider. Given that most customers are usually not consciously aware of these beliefs, we used the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET; Christensen & Olson, 2002; Coulter & Zaltman, 1995; Zaltman, 1997/2003) to make their belief systems visible. ZMET is used to create a collective cognitive map for a group of customers. In this method, metaphors are used to elicit (implicit) beliefs. The essence of the method is that when people describe their relationship with a brand, product, or service in terms of metaphors, this automatically addresses (subconscious) networks of abstract concepts (mental models). In this study we showed customers 50 pictures of random landscapes and situations with people. These pictures could, for example, be an image of a clock, empty apartment blocks, a buoy, a rustic landscape, a market place, or a crowded store (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4. Examples of images used to elicit metaphors about the customer relation

From the collection of 50 images respondents were asked to select one or two pictures that best represented their relationship with their service provider. They were then asked about the background of their choice and what associations they had with the picture and the organisation. By asking customers why they had chosen the image, they created their own metaphor (Christensen & Olson, 2002). Subsequently, with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions it was possible to discuss customers' beliefs in further detail. Customers were asked about the nature of their relationship, the interaction between the customer and the organisation, and the frequency and nature of customer contact.

3.3.1.2 Analysis. All interviews were recorded on video and written down in detail after the interview took place. From each interview the interviewer selected the main stimulating and restrictive beliefs of customers about their relationship with their service provider. In addition, a second interviewer watched the video of each interview to verify whether the first interviewer had distilled the correct beliefs from the interview. By combining the individual customer beliefs into common beliefs an aggregated consensus map emerged that represented the beliefs of all customers (see Figure 3.5). In mapping customer belief systems it became clear that two themes play a central role in the perception of customers today: the organisation's involvement with customers and the freedom of choice in the use of communication channels.

3.3.1.3 Participants. This part of the research project was performed with the same customers as those who participated in the Study 1A.

3.3.2 Results

3.3.2.1 The general impression customers have of large service providers. If we examine the (subconscious) associations that customers have in their relationship with a service provider, it appears that customers have a lot of negative beliefs about large service providers. According to customers, service providers are getting bigger and bigger. The customer increasingly feels that he or she is merely a number. One customer of the energy company said: "You have little say as a consumer. You're one out of many". Or as a customer of the insurer pointed out: "The organisation behaves very formal and impersonal". A customer of the social welfare institute stated: "The organisation is very bureaucratic, everything must be done according to the rules". Another customer of the social welfare institute noted: "The organisation is getting bigger and bigger and communication among employees is not good". According to most customers large service providers today are difficult to reach by telephone. Customers have to wait a long time before they speak to someone on the line. Furthermore, if they do manage to speak to someone on the line, the employees often do not know how to help them. As a customer indicated: "The operator who works in one place does not know what the other has done". According to another customer, "One has to contact the organisation several times before the problem is solved". Not all customers have this negative image of large service providers. A smaller group of customers were satisfied with the service they receive. For example, another customer of the insurer stated: "The organisation is accessible, approachable, everything can be done via the

internet, it is easy to contact the organisation, a telephone number is easy to find". A customer of the cable company said: "Employees are customer friendly and have the right knowledge. They listen carefully and think along with the customer". Many customers also feel comfortable with the idea that they are customer of a large organisation. As a customer of the insurance company pointed out: "The organisation is reliable, does not take risks and does not do crazy things". Customers of other organisations made similar statements. A customer of the energy company stated: "With this organisation, you do not have to worry about the service". A customer of the social welfare institute said: "The organisation is a bit dull, grey, not so ambitious, but for this organisation that is not negative". A customer of the bank indicated: "In a large organisation there are many opportunities to get tailor-made products and services".

3.3.2.2 Organisational involvement. The interviews revealed that most customers are quite satisfied with the relationship they have with their service provider. Most customers find it acceptable to have a business-like, non-personal relationship with their service provider. They indicate that they are not really looking for a personal relationship. In fact, customers appreciate it if the relationship remains a little remote. This certainly applies to customers of organisations in the Utility sector, but — only to a lesser extent — it is also true for customers of the insurance company, the health care insurer, and the bank.

Customers have the feeling that large service providers are not very concerned about their customers. "It is a very large organisation, there is quite a distance to the customer. Customer contact is less personal and they are also less personally involved". Sometimes customers prefer a more business-like relationship rather than a personal one. As a customer of the bank said: "Employees know well what distance they should keep: not too close, not too distant". That changes when the customers has a personal question or a problem. A lack of organisational involvement becomes a problem if the customer has an urgent issue that needs to be solved and staff shows insufficient commitment at that time. A more personal approach will be appreciated at such a moment.

A customer of the cable company expressed his feelings as follows: "Employees of this organisation are not really concerned with existing customers. They are particularly focused on bringing in new customers". According to customers, organisational involvement arises when they regularly meet the same people and these people get to know the customer better. Customers appreciate it when the employees of an organisation know a little bit more about their personal situation so that, when needed or desired, they can actively help to find

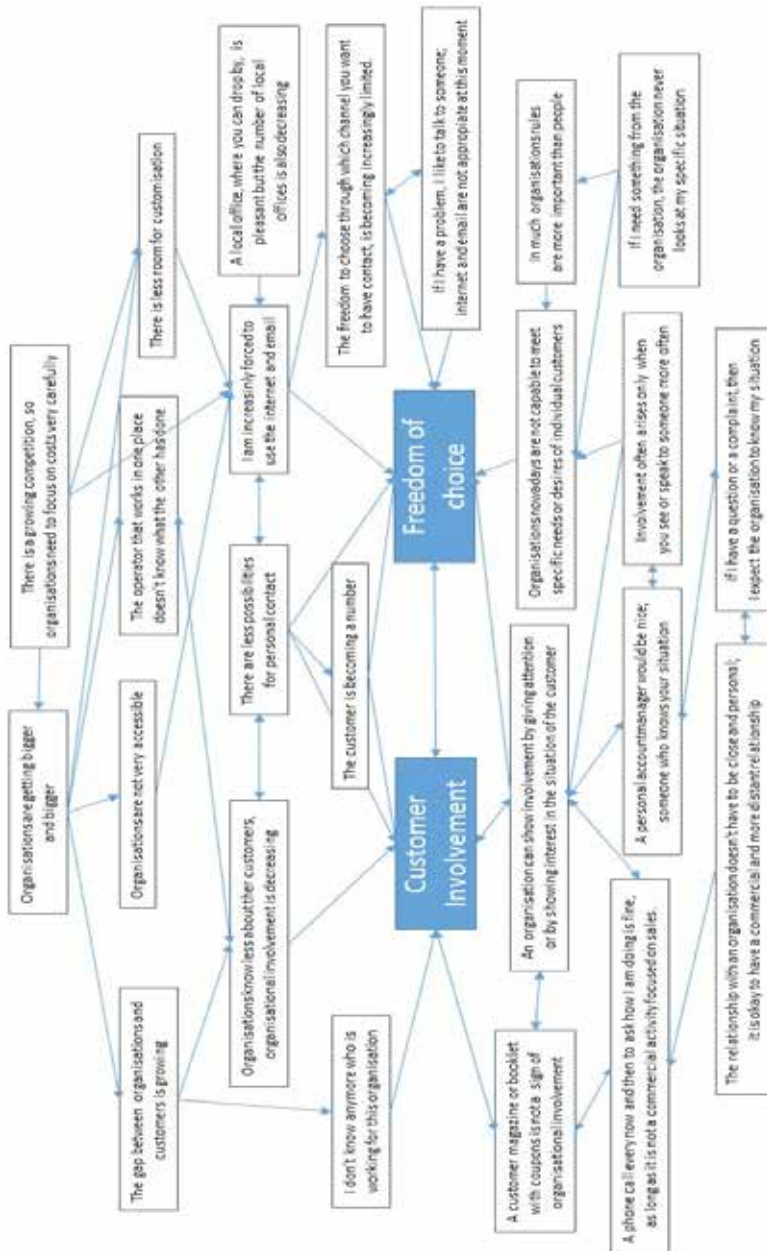


Figure 3.5. Consensus map with most important beliefs of customers about organisational involvement and freedom of choice in communication channels

a solution for them. A customer of the health care insurer said: “It would be nice if you have a fixed point of contact, someone who knows your situation, so you do not have to explain it every time all over again.”. On the other hand, customers are very sensitive about interference in what they perceive as their private domain. Customers generally understand very well that companies are faced with increasing competition, that organisations have very tight budgets, and, therefore, that not everyone can have a personal account manager.

Many customers indicated that they would appreciate a more personal approach and more personal involvement from the organisation. An organisation could show more commitment by organising activities for customers. Or the organisation could occasionally call the customer to ask if the organisation can do anything to help them, provided that the offer to help does not pertain to a commercial operation. As a customer of the insurance company indicated: “It would be nice if the organisation shows some personal commitment and give a signal when something is particularly interesting for my situation.”. What could contribute to the perceived involvement of an organisation would be if the organisation gives an advice that specifically fits the situation of the customer. By doing these kinds of things the organisation could build a better relationship with customers. For example, a customer of the insurance company commented: “It would be better if the organisation asks more questions about my situation and gives more advice to show more personal involvement”. However, the involvement should not be too commercial or intrusive. Customers do not want more personal contact if this is intended as a means to generate more business.

A network of local offices gives customers a feeling of confidence. Or, as a customer of the bank said: “The network of local offices gives us the feeling that the bank is never far away, it feels familiar”. A network of local offices is seen by many customers as important for the ability to generate personal involvement. People who visit a local office regularly generally, experience a greater sense of personal involvement. They also find it important but this works both ways. People who find personal involvement less important, choose the telephone or internet as their preferred communication channel. Young people believe that personal contact can also be established through digital channels, but still find it nice to be able to speak to someone if necessary.

3.3.2.3 Freedom of choice. According to customers, freedom of choice nowadays is very much about having a free choice in using communication channels. Most customers feel that this freedom of choice is under pressure

and that customers are increasingly forced to use the internet and email. For example, a customer of the bank said: "Everything is going online, you become a number, it is impersonal". If customers have a problem with something they find it pleasant to have personal contact. "If I have a problem then internet or email is not an option for me because you do not get a direct answer, and you often have to mail back and forth". Some customers prefer to go to an office at these times, but for most customers contact by telephone is sufficient. Customers are worried that the ability to have personal contact will be even less in the future. "The number of local branches where customers can go is decreasing rapidly along with all other cost reductions", said a customer of the bank. Customers perceive a reduction in the number of local branch offices, particularly those of banks and (health) insurers. The social welfare institute also reduced the opportunities to speak to someone in person. "If you want to apply for an unemployment benefit it is no longer possible to make a telephone call during the first six months. Everything has to be done on the internet.", said a customer of the social welfare institute. Almost all customers believe that the possibilities of contacting an organisation by making a phone call are being reduced and that more and more business will be handled through the internet. In their eyes this will threaten the potential for personal contact, a development that people generally do not feel good about. As a customer of the social welfare institute said: "It just feels better and more comfortable to talk to a real person".

3.3.2.4 Summary

If we look at customers' beliefs about the relationship with their service provider then it can be concluded that the organisational involvement and the freedom to choose a communication channel play important roles in the perception of the customer. Many customers feel that organisational involvement and personal contact are strongly connected. They believe that it takes personal contact to be able to demonstrate organisational commitment (and vice versa). Personal contact can, according to many customers, only be established face-to-face or by telephone. Written contact or contact through email is perceived as impersonal. It is therefore possible to assume that perceived involvement and freedom of choice in communicating with the organisation play important roles in the customers' activation of relationship standards.

3.4 Discussion

Based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, we assumed that relational models would play an important role in customer experience and that the type of organisation would exert a significant influence on the activation of these relational models. Therefore this chapter first examined whether these assumptions were true and whether, and to what extent the relational models described by Fiske (1991) were also applicable in a customer-supplier relationship. Prior to the investigation it was expected that MP would be more present in the relationship between a customer and a profit organisation than in the relationship between a customer and a non-profit organisation. In addition, the expectation was that AR would be more present in the relationship between a customer and a monopolistic non-profit organisation than in the relationship between a customer and a profit organisation. Both expectations appeared to be true. For most customers of both profit-oriented and non-profit organisations all relational models are more or less active but, overall, the MP model is dominant and is followed by the CS model. In the Utilities Cluster (i.e., the energy company and the cable company) MP is significantly more present than in the other two clusters. A possible explanation for this result can be found in the strong competition in this sector in the Netherlands during the period of our research. Competition mainly focuses on price and performance, which are typical MP indicators. What has to be placed as a side note however, is that prior to the investigation participants were told that they would receive €50 for their participation in the study. One could argue that this payment motivated a particular type of customer to take part in the study, namely customers in an MP relationship. On the other hand, CS customers are more willing to give feedback to an organisation (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011) and will therefore accept an invitation to take part in a research project more easily. This side note applies to all clusters.

Because financial services have a relatively high interest product it was expected that the CS relational model would be more present in the relationship between a customer and organisations in the Finance and Social Welfare Clusters than in the relationships between customers and organisations in the Utility Cluster. This expectation proved to be wrong. The personal element in the relationship, which can be found in the presence of CS, turns out to be eligible for all types of organisations to almost the same degree. Apparently, there is not much difference in the involvement of large service organisations with their customers. One explanation could be that a relatively large gap exists between customers and this kind of organisation. Organisations do not know their customers well enough to be able to respond to individual needs and desires.

What also emerged from the first study is that CS has a much stronger influence than MP and AR on the emotional experience, regardless of the type of organisation. In addition, as CS becomes more present, positive emotions are amplified and negative emotions are mitigated. AR mainly shows an effect on negative emotions in the Finance and Utilities Clusters. When organisations in these clusters show authoritarian behaviour, this leads to frustration and irritation among customers and it reduces customer satisfaction. Interestingly enough, we do not see this effect with organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster. Here, AR does not have a significant effect on negative emotions. Apparently, customers expect authoritarian behaviour from this kind of organisation. Furthermore, it is true that organisations that behave like authorities often also offer their customers safety and security. That is certainly the case in the Social Welfare sector where customers are offered a social safety net. Finally, MP does not demonstrate any effect on consumption emotions. As expected, MP is a more rational model. AN MP relationship has hardly any impact on emotional experience.

The CS relational model not only has the strongest impact on consumption emotions but also on customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. Moreover, the effect of CS on recommendation intention is stronger than the effect of CS on customer satisfaction. This could be due to the fact that recommendation intention is more the expression of the feeling that a customer has about an organisation than it is about customer satisfaction. When people are asked how satisfied they are about an organisation they are more inclined to think about their positive and negative experiences than if they are asked for their recommendation intention. Fiske (1991) indicates that people enter into a CS relationship because they want to be intimate with each other. The fact that CS customers have a better customer experience could be explained by the desire for intimacy. It could also be possible that there is more room for personal involvement and personal contact in a CS relationship. These results are consistent with previous research (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Parasuraman, 2011) that clearly shows that customers in a CS relationship assume that the organisation is doing their best for them. This makes it easier for customers to accept possible service failures. CS has a soothing effect on poor service. Our research also examined whether the relational models have a mediating effect on the influence of the type of organisation on the customer experience. There appears to be no mediating effect. Relational models clearly affect customer experience but this occurs regardless of the type of organisation.

If we reflect on the central question of this study, as formulated in the introduction, then the main conclusion of this chapter is that the relational models are important for both improving customer experience as well as building a sustainable and meaningful customer connection. A better customer experience leads to more loyal customers (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Reichheld, 2006; Reichheld & Markey, 2011). The key to a better customer experience and a sustainable and meaningful customer connection seems to be the CS relational model. Customers who use this model have a better emotional experience, are more satisfied, and have a higher recommendation intention.

The second part of the study described in this chapter, focused on the perception that customers have about the relationship with their service provider. This part of the study reveals a few clear trends in customer experience. Many customers experience less and less involvement with organisations and the gap between customers and organisations is growing. Customers feel as though they have merely become a number. Additionally, customers have the feeling that there are less opportunities for personal contact and that they are increasingly forced to use the internet and email to get a response to their questions. This corresponds with the conclusion of Solomon and Surprenant (1987) that there is a huge challenge for marketers: on the one hand companies have to work in ever more cost-efficient ways while at the same time they want to give the customer the feeling that he or she is unique. The second part of the study also indicated that perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice are key influencers of customer experience. In the next study, described in Chapter 4, we investigate whether these two factors can provide an explanation for the difference in the presence of relational models. The research model for this study (Figure 3.6) makes it plausible to assume that freedom of choice and organisational involvement have a mediating effect on the activation and presence of relational models. To verify this assumption a number of mediation analyses are performed and discussed in Section 4.3.3 of the next chapter.

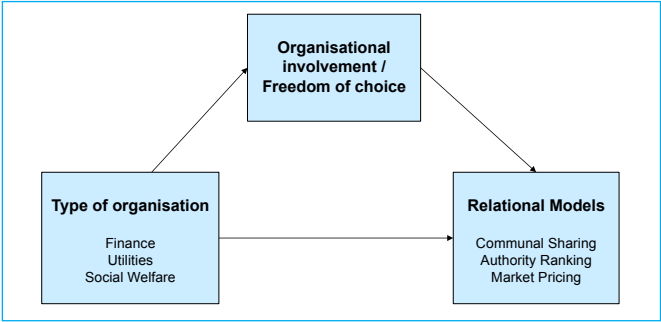


Figure 3.6. Research model Chapter 4

Main conclusions of this chapter

This first study shows that the MP relational model is most present in the relationship between commercial, profit-oriented organisations and their customers, followed at a distance by relational models CS and AR. The relational model AR is strongest in the relationship between non-profit organisations in a monopolistic market and their customers. Furthermore, the study makes clear that the relational models lead to significant differences in customer experience; these differences can be found in consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention. The more CS is present in the relationship, the more positive the emotional experience and the better the customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. CS appears to be the key to a more sustainable and meaningful connection between organisations and customers.

4 The Influence of Perceived Organisational Involvement and Freedom of Choice on Relational Models



The previous chapter showed that there are differences between customers of different types of organisations in the extent to which relational models are activated in customer-supplier relations. It also revealed that customer experience is highly influenced by both the perceived organisational involvement and also by the perceived freedom of choice in the use of communication channels. In Chapter 4 we investigate whether this perceived involvement and freedom of choice is able to provide an explanation for the differences in the presence of relational models between organisations and whether these relational models have a mediating effect on the relationship between the type of organisation and the presence of relational models.

4.1 Organisational Involvement and Freedom of Choice as Mediators of Relational Models

As we saw in the previous study in Chapter 3, both organisational involvement and the freedom of choice offered by the organisation play important roles in the perception of the customer. Involvement of the organisation can be defined as the ambition of the organisation to want to know as much as possible about the customer, to show interest in his or her personal situation, and to offer the best suitable solution for the needs and desires of the customer. Freedom of choice can be defined as “the individual’s autonomy and opportunity to perform an action selected from at least two available options, unconstrained by external parties” (Carter, 2004). In a business context freedom of choice can be explained as the freedom of the customer to choose, for example, an organisation, a product, or a method of communication. If we use a model to illustrate these two dimensions this results in a framework with four quadrants (Figure 4.1).

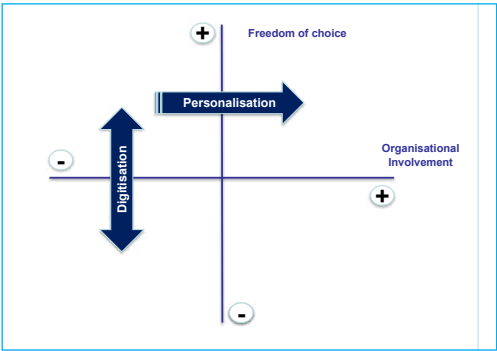


Figure 4.1. Dimensions of relational models in customer relations

Organisations possess the ability to increase both the involvement with customers and the freedom of choice. Increasing organisational involvement can be achieved in many different ways. Personalisation in customer contact is one of these ways. An organisation also has many possibilities at its disposal if it wishes to increase the customers' freedom of choice. The digitisation of communication with customers, which has occurred over recent years, can have a positive effect on the perceived freedom of choice. This is the case when the digital channel (email, chat, internet) is used as an additional channel alongside traditional channels such as mail and telephone. However, digitisation can also lead to a restriction in the freedom of choice. This is the case when customers are encouraged or even directed to make use of digital channels and when the possibilities to have contact by telephone are limited or even completely closed. The two processes of personalisation and digitisation and their impact on customer experience and relational models are investigated in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 focuses on the effects of personalisation in oral and written communication with the customer. Chapter 6 focuses on the effects of digitisation and more specifically the deployment of new digital communication channels.

The framework shown in Figure 4.1. is applicable to organisations in general. We can make the model more specific to this study by looking at the organisations that participated in the research. The expectation is that organisations in a competitive market with multiple providers and a high interest product, such as banks and insurance companies (in this research organisations in the Finance Cluster), will demonstrate a relatively high organisational involvement and freedom choice. In order to serve customers well this type of organisations needs to make a good assessment of the customer's situation and offer them a service package that suits customer needs. Organisations in the Utilities Cluster are still relatively supply-driven, but in the Netherlands they have also been confronted with more competition in recent years. This has led to more customer choice. That choice is mainly offered in the form of various service packages. In order to deliver a cable network of good quality or a good quality gas and lighting supply, it is to be expected that organisations in these clusters do not (need to) know the customer very well. The involvement of this type of organisation with its customers will thus be less than the involvement of organisations in the Finance Cluster. Organisations that are in a monopolistic market with few or no competitors, such as government agencies and social welfare institutions, usually do not offer their customers much choice. These organisations are limited by strict regulations and have to treat their customers in an equal way. The involvement of organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster varies dependent on the type of product and the stage of the customer journey.

As noted in the first study in Chapter 3, the question is: what impact do differences in perceived customer involvement and freedom of choice have on the extent to which customers activate relational models and can these differences explain part of the variance between different organisational clusters? In a Communal Sharing (CS) relationship, parties want to connect with each other because they find the other attractive. Due to the nature of the relationship the perceived involvement and freedom of choice in CS relationships will be higher than in the other relational models. In a Market Pricing (MP) relationship, partners have no desire to become intimate with each other; more important is that they deliver whatever has been requested (Fiske, 1991). Mutual involvement will therefore be relatively low in an MP relationship. The parties, however, wish to provide the other what he or she wants. Therefore, freedom of choice plays an important role in this relational model. If an organisation offers little freedom of choice and only operates on the basis of what they can offer, instead of what the customer wants, this will probably activate AR relationship norms. This can occur in both a commercial, non-personal relationship as well as in a personal relationship. On the basis of the above, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypotheses

- 4.1 *The effect of the type of organisation on the relational model that is used by the customer will be mediated by the perceived organisational involvement and the perceived freedom of choice; more specifically we expect that:*
 - 4.1.1 *Organisations in the Finance Cluster will be perceived by customers as more involved than organisations in the Utilities and the Social Welfare Clusters, which in turn will result in a stronger presence of CS;*
 - 4.1.2 *Organisations in the Utilities and Finance Clusters will, according to customers, offer more freedom of choice than organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster, which in turn will result in a stronger presence of MP;*
 - 4.1.3 *Organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster will, according to customers, offer less freedom of choice than organisations in the Finance and Utilities Clusters, which in turn will result in a stronger presence of AR.*

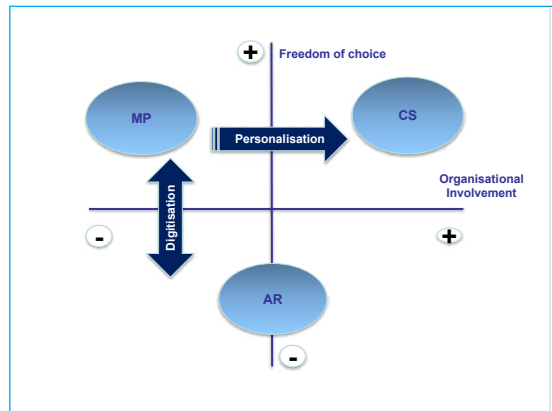


Figure 4.2. Hypothetical model for the influence of perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice on the presence of relational models

4.2. Method

4.2.1 Procedure

The study described in this chapter consisted of a survey among customers of five service providers. In their capacity as customers of one of these five service providers, customers received an email with the request to participate in an online research project. Customers were first asked to characterise the organisation according to the two dimensions of organisational involvement and freedom of choice. Respondents were then shown the statements that were used in Chapter 3 to measure the presence of relational models.

4.2.2 Measures

4.2.2.1 Perceived organisational involvement. Customers were asked to indicate on a 15-point scale from -7 to 7 how much involvement they experienced from the organisation (-7 = not at all involved, 7 = extremely involved). The following explanation was given for this dimension: “An organisation is considered to be involved if there is personal attention towards the customer. The organisation listens carefully to its customers, can imagine itself in the situation of the customer, and shows understanding when something is not going well. An organisation is seen as not involved when there is little

commitment and little room for personal contact. The organisation does not know the customer and his or her personal situation. Empathy in the situation of the customer is limited”.

4.2.2.2 Perceived freedom of choice. Customers were asked to indicate on a 15-point scale from -7 to 7 how much freedom of choice they experienced with the organisation (-7 = no freedom of choice at all, 7 = very much freedom of choice). The following explanation was given for this dimension: “An organisation offers much freedom of choice if there are many possibilities for customised products or processes. Customers can choose how they want to communicate with the organisation. An organisation offers little freedom of choice if there is not much room for customised products or processes. The organisation determines how and where customers can interact with the organisation. Rules are more important than people. The possibilities to communicate with the organisation are limited.

4.2.2.3 Relational models. For the measurement of relational models customers were provided with a list of statements relating to the relational models of Communal Sharing (CS), Authority Ranking (AR), and Market Pricing (MP). In order to determine the extent to which the relational models were present we used a list of 12 statements. These statements were originally based on Haslam and Fiske (1999) and were modified after a confirmatory factor analysis (see Appendix B). For each statement the respondent was asked to indicate on a 7-point scale whether this statement was applicable for his or her relationship with the respective provider (0 = not applicable at all, 6 = very applicable). The scores on the statements (four statements for each relational model) were summed and divided by four, thus creating an average score for each relational model. For each of the three subscales a Cronbach's Alpha was performed to determine the consistency of the items. This analysis led to acceptable scales (for Communal Sharing $\alpha = .76$, for Market Pricing $\alpha = .68$, and for Authority Ranking $\alpha = .75$).

4.2.3 Respondents

A total of 981 customers participated in this online research (250 customers of the insurer, 114 customers of the energy company, 542 customers of the health care insurer, 31 customers of the cable company, and 44 customers of the Social Welfare Institute). Customers of the bank did not participate in this part of the research project.

4.3 Results

4.3.1 The Influence of Type of Organisation on Perceived Involvement and Freedom of Choice

A one-way ANOVA was first performed to establish how customers evaluate the organisations within the three clusters according to the dimensions of customer involvement and freedom of choice (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Means and standard deviations for perceived involvement and perceived freedom of choice.

| | Cluster Finance | | Cluster Utilities | | Cluster Social Welfare | |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Organisational involvement | .02 ^a | 2.87 | -.03 ^b | 2.98 | -1.16 ^{ab} | -.98 |
| Freedom of choice | .27 ^{ab} | 2.45 | -.52 ^a | 2.90 | -.98 ^b | 2.97 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row ($p < .05$)

The results show that there are significant differences between the types of organisations, both in terms of involvement and in terms of freedom of choice. Organisations in the Finance and Utilities Clusters are perceived as more involved than organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster ($F(2, 978) = 3.42, p < .05$). Organisations in the Finance Cluster offer customers the most freedom of choice ($F(2, 980) = 10.10, p = .00$). The Social Welfare Cluster is perceived as the least involved and, according to customers, this organisation offers the least freedom of choice.

4.3.2 Influence of Perceived Involvement and Perceived Freedom of Choice on Relational Models

A multiple regression analysis was performed to determine whether there is a relationship between the way customers characterise the organisation (in terms of involvement and freedom of choice) and the relational model that is activated in the relationship between customer and supplier. First, a multiple regression analysis was carried out to assess the influence of involvement and freedom of choice on the CS relational model. This analysis showed that both involvement and freedom of choice are significant predictors of CS

(Table 4.2). Subsequently, a multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the influence of both dimensions on MP. This analysis showed that there is also a significant correlation between both dimensions and MP. The regression coefficient for the relationship between freedom of choice and MP is however slightly negative. This means that a lesser freedom of choice offered by the organisation leads to a stronger presence of MP relationship norms. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to establish the impact of involvement and freedom of choice on AR. This analysis showed that both involvement and freedom of choice are also significant predictors of AR. The regression coefficient for the relationship between AR and freedom of choice is negative, which means that less freedom of choice leads to a stronger presence of AR. The relationship between organisational involvement and AR is positive, which means that more organisational involvement leads to a stronger presence of AR relationship norms.

Table 4.2

Results of regressing organisational involvement and freedom of choice on relational models.

| | Communal Sharing | Market Pricing | Authority Ranking |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| | β | β | β |
| Organisational involvement | .48** | .24** | .12** |
| Freedom of choice | .19** | -.09* | -.26** |
| R^2 | .37** | .05** | .04** |

Note: * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$;

If we adjust the hypothetical model (Figure 4.2) to the findings of this study, then the model will resemble the one shown below for the organisations that participated in this part of the research project (Figure 4.3).

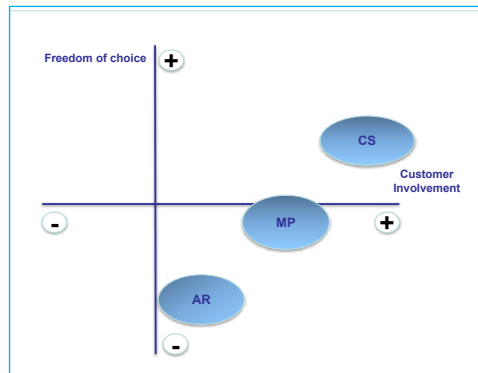


Figure 4.3. Adjusted model for the influence of perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice on relational models

The results indicate that only partial support was found for hypothesis 4.1.1 — organisations in the Finance Cluster are perceived by customers as more involved than organisations in the Utilities and Social Welfare Clusters, resulting in turn in a stronger presence of CS. Organisations in the Finance Cluster are perceived as more involved than organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster but not more involved than organisations in the Utilities Cluster. We found sufficient support for the second part of hypothesis 4.1.1: more involvement leads to a stronger presence of CS. No support was found for hypothesis 4.1.2, which stated that, according to customers, organisations in the Utilities and Finance Clusters offer more freedom of choice than organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster, resulting in turn in a stronger presence of MP. The results show that organisations in the Finance Cluster offer customers more choice than organisations in the Utilities and Social Welfare Clusters, but this does not necessarily result in a stronger presence of MP. Sufficient support was found for hypothesis 4.1.3: according to customers, organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster offer less freedom of choice, resulting in turn in a stronger presence of AR.

4.3.3 Mediation analysis

To determine whether the effect of the type of organisation on the relational models is mediated by perceived organisational involvement and perceived freedom of choice, a number of regression analyses were conducted. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables consisted of two steps (Figure 4.4). First, the type of organisation (dummy coded³) must predict the mediator (organisational

³Because type of organisation is a categorical variable, we used two dummy variables for the analyses: DUM_C1 for the Finance Cluster and DUM_C2 for the Utilities Cluster. These two variables were given the value 0 (the organisation does not belong to this cluster) or 1 (the organisation belongs to this cluster). If a customer does not belong to an organisation in the Finance or Utilities Clusters, he or she automatically falls into the Social Welfare Cluster.

involvement and freedom of choice, Table 4.3). Second, the type of organisation (dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (CS, AR and MP relational models), with organisational involvement and freedom of choice as covariates (Table 4.4). And last, the relationship between the type of organisation and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

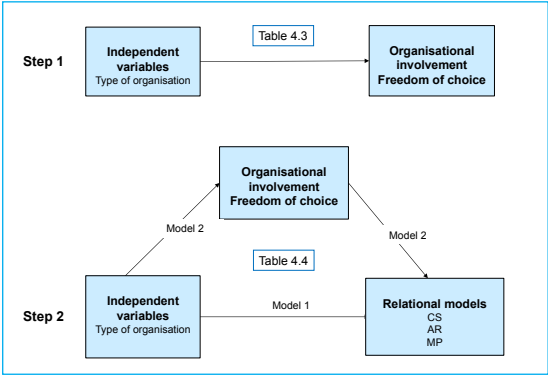


Figure 4.4. Mediation analysis of the mediating effect of organisational involvement and freedom of choice

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The results of the first step showed that there is a significant relationship between the type of organisation on the one hand and perceived organisational involvement on the other hand (Table 4.3). There is also a significant relationship between organisations in the Finance Cluster and the perceived freedom of choice.

Table 4.3

Results of regressing type of organisation on perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice.

| | Perceived organisational involvement | Perceived freedom of choice |
|-------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| | β | β |
| Finance Cluster | .16** | .19** |
| Utilities Cluster | .14* | .06 |
| R^2 | .01* | .00** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the second step showed that there are no statistically significant connections between the independent variables and the dependent variable CS. It can be concluded that perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice have no mediating effect on the relationship between the type of organisation and the CS model (Table 4.4.). When we performed the same analysis but used MP as the dependent variable, it could be concluded that organisational involvement and freedom of choice also do not have a mediating influence on the relationship between the type of organisation and the MP relational model, since the statistically significant relationships remain as the covariates are added. Performing the same analysis but used AR as the dependent variable, the results showed that organisational involvement and freedom of choice also do not have a mediating influence on the relationship between the type of organisation and the AR relational model.

Table 4.4

Regression results for influence of type of organisation on relational models with covariates organisational involvement and freedom of choice.

| | Communal Sharing | | Market Pricing | | Authority Ranking | |
|------------------------------|------------------|---------|----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Organisational involvement | | .49*** | | .21** | | .13** |
| Freedom of choice | | .19*** | | -.08* | | -.26** |
| <i>Independent Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Finance Cluster | .02 | -.09 | .31*** | .29*** | -.18** | -.15** |
| Utilities Cluster | -.05 | -.12 | .45*** | .42*** | -.17** | -.18** |
| R^2 | .00 | .38*** | .06** | .09** | .01** | .06** |
| Delta R^2 | | .37*** | | .03** | | .05* |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

4.4 Discussion

This chapter investigated whether differences in perceived involvement and freedom of choice are able to explain the differences in the presence of relational models. The results of the study show that there is a significant difference in how customers evaluate organisations in terms of freedom of choice and involvement. Organisations in the Finance Cluster, in comparison with organisations in the other clusters, are seen as most involved and are perceived as offering the

greatest freedom of choice. Organisations in the Utilities Cluster also offer more freedom of choice than organisations in the Social Welfare Cluster. The results also show that organisations that demonstrate a relatively high involvement and provide a relatively wide freedom of choice will activate CS relationship norms among customers. Involvement also shows a positive relationship with MP, but the correlation is less strong than with CS. Freedom of choice shows a slightly negative relationship with MP. Less freedom of choice results in a stronger presence of MP. This is not what we expected prior to the start of this study. Presumably this occurs because customers tend to strengthen MP norms once the balance between investment and return on investment is disturbed. This is consistent with the results of a study by Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000) who found that a violation of certain relationship norms may result in a strengthening of these norms. In Chapter 6 we will investigate the effects of a restriction of freedom of choice on relational models in more detail. Finally, the results of the study in this chapter show that organisations that offer relatively little freedom of choice (according to customers) activate AR relationship norms more easily. Organisational involvement showed a significant but minor relationship with the relational model AR.

Based on the results presented in this chapter we can also conclude that perceived freedom of choice and organisational involvement do not have a mediating effect on the relationship between the type or organisation and relational models. However, they do affect the way customers shape the relationship with their service providers and vice versa. The main conclusion of this study is that if organisations want to activate or stimulate CS relationship norms they may have to increase the perceived freedom of choice and/or their involvement with their customers. This is consistent with the findings of earlier studies (Fiske, 1991; Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011), indicating that partners in a CS relationship want to connect with the other because the other appeals to them, not because they want to acquire something from the other. It is interesting to figure out what interventions an organisation might undertake to display more or less involvement in their relationship with the client and/or to provide more freedom of choice. Furthermore, it would be useful to examine in more detail the question of the effect of these interventions on relational models and customer experience.

In the remainder of this thesis we will investigate the possibilities for organisations to increase their involvement, to offer freedom of choice and thus to influence relational models. This will be done by examining a number of possible interventions in the field of customer service and customer contact.

Chapter 5 examines how an organisation can increase its involvement in customer contact through the use of personalisation. Chapter 6 examines the effects of the increasing use of digital channels of communication. As already noted in Chapter 3, for customers, the increasing use of digital media is associated with a loss of personal contact and personal involvement. Chapter 6 first investigates the effects of a new digital channel (i.e., chat) on relational models and customer experience when compared with the effects of a more traditional channel such as the telephone. In addition, we examine the impact of channel direction (encouraging or even directing customers to use digital channels in communication) on relational models and customer experience. Finally, Chapter 7 examines how organisations can actively influence relational models and customer experience by priming subjects with words and images that are associated with relational models.

Main conclusions of this chapter

The study described in this chapter shows that organisational involvement and freedom of choice play major roles in the activation of relationship norms. Organisations that show a relatively high involvement and freedom of choice activate CS relationship norms more easily. Organisations that show a relatively low involvement towards customers will rather activate MP relationship norms. Organisations that limit freedom of choice will activate AR relationship norms. If an organisation wants to master a meaningful customer connection, the organisation has to increase organisational involvement and freedom of choice.

5 Personalisation in Customer Contact and the Effect on Relational Models and Customer Experience



As we saw in Chapter 3 the key to a meaningful connection with customers lies within the relational model of Communal Sharing (CS). In Chapter 4, it was found that the organisation's involvement has a key influence on relational models. Chapter 4 also showed that more organisational involvement has a positive impact on the CS relational model. The question then, is what an organisation can do to demonstrate more involvement with their customers. One of the possible interventions is to choose a more personal approach in communicating with customers (this is also called personalisation). As Study 1B in Chapter 3 indicated, customers experience more commitment if they are approached in a more personal way. This chapter investigates the effects of personalisation on customer experience and relational models. Personalisation is operationalised in two studies that take the form of a personal approach: (1) written forms of communication (Study 1), and (2) spoken forms of communication (Study 2). The study was conducted with existing customers that already had a relationship with the energy company, an organisation from the Utilities Cluster (see Chapter 3).

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 The Importance of Personalisation in Service Processes

Research by Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009; see Chapter 2) showed that humanware — the people who provide a service — has more influence on the emotional experience of customers than typical hardware, such as the environment in which the service is provided. The nature of the interaction between customers and service employees is recognised as a critical influencer of customer satisfaction (e.g., Czepiel, 1990; Czepiel, Solomon, Surprenant, & Goodman, 1985). What this nature exactly is and what organisations have to do to expose this nature, is much less clear. According to Surprenant and Solomon (1987), good service is often interpreted by organisations as a more personalised service, which results in a competition between companies as to who is most friendly to the customer. Personalisation refers to the behaviour of employees when in contact with customers, especially in spoken forms of contact. Personalisation means that the contact changes from a more formal, business-like contact into a more personal, intimate contact (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1995; Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In the latter, the contact with the customer is improved because the customer is recognised as a unique person and not as an anonymous customer (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). There seems to be consensus among service providers that personal service is something that

customers want, but there is little consensus on what personal service really means. This often involves a friendly smile, eye contact, or a friendly greeting. It may also involve some attention, time spent with the customer, small talk, and showing interest in the customer. Without clear agreement about what personal service really means, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

Surprenant and Solomon (1987) investigated the effect of the style and content of service encounters on the evaluation of the service and customer satisfaction. They achieved this by measuring the effects of two types of personalisation: outcome personalisation and process personalisation. The first involves the personalisation of the outcome of the service, such as an appointment confirmation, a letter with information about a product, or a ticket for a theatre show. The second involves the personalisation of the process, for example, telephone contact with an employee. This chapter describes two studies. The first study examines the effect of a form of outcome personalisation, the second study measures the effect of a form of process personalisation. The concept of process personalisation makes a distinction between programmed personalisation and customised personalisation. Programmed personalisation mainly concerns pro forma courtesy. Customers have the impression that they are receiving a personalised service. Service employees are, for example, encouraging small talk and using the name of the customer. With customised personalisation, service employees emphasise the desire to help customers by finding the best solution for their needs. The research conducted by Surprenant and Solomon (1987) showed that the personalisation of service is a multi-dimensional construct and that not all forms of personalisation will result in a better customer experience. Their research showed that programmed personalisation (non-functional small talk) in a financial services environment had a negative impact on customer expectations about, for example, competence, confidence, and effectiveness. Customised personalisation was found to have a positive impact on the customer experience and mainly in respect to the dimension of friendliness.

A distinction between the output and the process of service providers can also be found in the concepts of service validity and service reliability (Van Raaij & Pruyn, 1998). Service validity concerns the consistency between the actually delivered services and the service as they are specified before they are rendered. Service reliability concerns the process of service delivery and whether the services are provided in a satisfying way. Service validity is about what is being delivered, service reliability about how it is delivered. Galetzka, Verhoeven, and

Pruyn (2006) added another dimension to the distinction between validity and reliability. They distinguished three different forms of services: search services, experience services and credence services. Search services are services of which output and process are exactly specified before they are being rendered (e.g., products and services in retail). With experience services the own experience plays an important role in the evaluation of the service (e.g., services in hospitality and tourism). With credence services there is hardly any information available with which the outcome of the service process can be evaluated (e.g., healthcare). The credibility of the service provider is very important for these kind of services. Research of Galetzka et al. (2006) showed that with search services service validity and service reliability independently affect customer satisfaction. For experience services, service validity and service reliability are necessary conditions for customer satisfaction. For credence services, no effects of service validity were found but the effects of service reliability on customers' satisfaction were profound. Behaviour and attitudes of service employees play a more important role in these services than the output of the process. The studies described in this chapter are performed among customers of the energy company, which can be seen as an example of a search service: output and process are exactly specified before they are being rendered. It is therefore to be expected that for customers of the energy company process both output and process personalisation will have impact on customer experience.

Since the mid-1990s a growing number of companies have established contact centres. The contact with the customer has become an important source of knowledge about the customer. In the marketing literature, listening to the customer has long been seen as an important competitive factor, but only with the growing number of contact centres has this been brought in practice more widely. Listening is defined as “an interrelated set of concepts including attentiveness, verbal behaviour, non-verbal behaviour, attitudes, memory, and behavioural responses” (Lewis & Reinsch, 1988, p.18). Listening is a complex affective and cognitive behavioural activity. Anderson and Martin (1995) identified three components in listening behaviour: attention, attentiveness, and responsiveness. A study by De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) investigated the influence of listening behaviour on the customer experience and suggested that attentiveness reflects “the extent to which customers receive verbal and nonverbal cues from call center agents during the telephone service interaction” (De Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000, p.277). Their research shows that attentiveness is a direct influencer of the customer's evaluation of the services. Attentiveness is a form of (personal) commitment to the customer. In the second study described in this chapter we added attentiveness into a telephone call between

an employee and a customer. Attentiveness can be seen as a form of customised personalisation.

5.1.2 Customer Reactions to Personalisation

Based on the results of research described earlier in this chapter (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009; Surprenant & Solomon, 1985/1987), it can be expected that personalisation has a positive effect on customer experience. The question is whether the way that customers see the relationship with the organisation, and the relationship norms they maintain in this relationship, affect their response to a more or less personal approach. It is to be expected that the relational models used by customers in the relationship with an organisation have an effect on the impact of personalisation on customer experience. Customers who use Communal Sharing (CS) relationship norms (Fiske, 1991; see Chapter 2) have a different idea of what fits within the relationship than customers who use MP relationship norms. The qualitative study in Chapter 3 showed that most customers would like to have more personal involvement, especially if it benefits their own personal situation. Too much involvement, however, is contrary to the norms set by the customer in the relationship with the organisation and can be seen as a form of taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015). A taboo trade-off may also occur if a commercial service provider suddenly approaches its customers in a highly personal manner. Taboo trade-offs are cognitively taxing and emotionally unpleasant (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Taboo trade-offs lead to attempts to reinforce the norms that had been violated by the taboo trade-off (Tetlock et al., 2000).

A compelling question is whether customers will change the relationship norms when faced with a personal approach in a business environment. In the studies that are described in this chapter, customers are faced with various forms of written and oral contact. The customers that participated in the different studies were customers who already had a relationship with the organisation. If we follow the theory of taboo trade-offs (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015), a business-like, non-personal approach will fit perfectly within an MP relationship but not within a CS relationship. Customers that apply CS norms in the relationship with the service provider will not appreciate a business-like approach or may even experience such an approach as a violation of the relationship norms. On the other hand, a personal approach fits well within CS. A personal approach will not be found disagreeable by MP customers as long as the approach is not

too personal. In the latter case, it is expected that MP customers will see the approach as a violation of relationship norms.

A personal approach will probably function as a prime for the CR relational model, a business-like approach as a prime for the MP relational model. As long as a more personal (CS) approach fits within the relationship norms used by the customer, whether this is CS or MP, this is expected to lead to a strengthening of the CS component in the relationship and thus to a better customer experience. A business-like, non-personal (MP) approach will lead to a strengthening of the MP component in the relationship. Based on the results presented in Chapter 3, we can assume that strengthening MP will have little or even a negative effect on the customer experience. However, an approach that is too personal will lead to a strengthening of MP, an approach that is too business-like will lead to a strengthening of CS. In both cases, the violation of relationship norms will lead to a less favourable customer experience. We do not expect that the interventions investigated in this chapter, will be experienced as taboo trade-offs.

In Chapter 3 we saw that relational models have a significant impact on the customer experience. If it is also the case that personalisation shows an effect on the relational models, then it could be that the relational models have a mediating effect on the relationship between personalisation and customer experience. The effect of personalisation on customer experience can be strengthened or weakened depending on the relationship norms used by the customer in his or her relationship with the organisation. To investigate the possibility of a mediating effect we performed a number of mediation analyses that are described in Sections 5.2 and 5.3.

To investigate the direct effect of a personal versus a business-like approach in customer contact we used a new measure: perceived impact. With this measure a customer can indicate the estimated effect of a particular intervention on his or her customer experience. Whereas the previously used measures, such as consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention, provide an indication of how the customer assesses the entire relationship, the perceived impact will mainly provide an indication of the perceived effect of a specific organisational intervention. The two studies described in this chapter were carried out among customers of the energy company. These customers can be seen as customers of a commercial service provider (Financial or Utilities Cluster; see Chapter 3).

Hypotheses:

- 5.1 *A personal approach in customer contact (written or oral) will stimulate customers of a commercial service provider to strengthen CS relationship norms, which in turn will lead to a more positive customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, emotions, satisfaction and recommendation intention) than a business-like, non-personal approach.*
- 5.2 *A business-like, non-personal approach in customer contact (written or oral) will stimulate customers of a commercial service provider to strengthen MP relationship norms, which in turn will lead to a less positive customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, emotions, satisfaction and recommendation intention) than a personal approach.*

5.2 Study 1: Personalisation in Written Customer Contact

In the introduction to this chapter we argued that a personal approach in customer contact usually results in a more positive customer experience than a business-like approach, unless there is a violation of relationship norms. In the latter case, a personal approach will lead to a more negative customer experience than a business-like approach. In two studies we examined the effect of a personal versus a business-like, non-personal approach. In the first study we examined the effect of a personal versus a business-like letter on the customer experience and the influence that this difference in approach has on relational models. The letter is viewed as a form of outcome personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

5.2.1 Method

5.2.1.1 Pretest. We used two different letters in the study: a personal letter and a business-like, non-personal letter. The subject of the letter was a contract confirmation for a new address. To verify that the personal letter was actually experienced as more personal, a pretest was conducted with 190 customers of the energy company. Some of these customers received a letter that was personal in nature, other customers received a letter that was business-like in nature (see Section 5.2.1.4. Stimulus material). The customers were asked how personal or business-like they would rate each of the letters. They could score on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all personal / business-like, 7 = very personal / business-like). A one-way ANOVA showed that the personal letter was

experienced as significantly more personal than the business-like letter (Table 5.1). The business-like letter was experienced as significantly more business-like than the personal letter.

Table 5.1.

Means of personal and business-like letter on dimensions personal and business-like.

| | Personal Letter | | Business Letter | | <i>F</i> (1, 189) = | <i>p</i> |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Personal | 4.92 | 1.32 | 3.48 | 1.27 | 5.22 | .00 |
| Business-like | 4.73 | 1.52 | 5.23 | 1.45 | 5.51 | .02 |

5.2.1.2 Experimental design and procedure. The study consisted of a between-groups design with one independent variable with three levels (personal letter, business-like letter, no letter). Half of the customers received the personal letter and others received the business-like letter. A third group of customers did not receive any letter at all. The latter formed the control group in this study. After seeing the hosletter, customers could indicate what influence the letter had on their opinion of their customer experience (perceived impact). Customers were then shown a series of statements about the two relational models Market Pricing and Communal Sharing. Customers from the control group were not asked about the perceived impact because they had not seen either of the letters. This group was only shown the statements about the relational models. Finally, all customers were asked about their consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention (see Section 5.2.1.5 Measures).

5.2.1.3 Participants. 225 Customers from the energy company participated in the study (142 men, 42 women, 41 gender unknown). The average age of the participating customers was 54.7 years (*SD* = 13.77). 57 Customers received the personal letter, 57 customers received the business-like letter, and 111 customers were in the control group (and did not receive either letter).

5.2.1.4 Stimulus material. In the study, a letter was presented to customers of the energy company to confirm a change of address. Two versions of the letter were produced: a personal one and a business-like one. The main differences between the two letters were as follows:

- In the business-like letter the customer was asked to check his or her personal data; in the personal letter these contact data were placed in the header of the letter together with the text: “Are these data incorrect? Please contact our customer service department so we can process the appropriate data in our customer database”. In the business-like letter a text was placed under the personal contact data that indicated which part of organisation was responsible in the chain of electricity and gas supply and what was supplied under what conditions; in the personal letter the role of the different organisations in the supply chain and the delivery terms were not explained, making the letter a lot less formal.
- The business-like letter not only mentioned the amount of money the customer had to pay each month, but it also specified exactly how this monthly payment was made up; the personal letter only mentioned the monthly payment together with the invitation to call if something was not clear.
- Both letters ended with the invitation to contact the organisation, in case the customer would have any questions; in the personal letter the text “We are happy to help you.” was added to the invitation.
- The business-like letter was signed in a formal way with the initials and surname of the director of customer service, the personal letter was signed in a more personal way with the name and surname of the director.

The last point was perhaps the most important difference between the personal and the business-like letter. A director who signs with his or her name probably makes a more personal impression than a director who signs with “Mrs.” followed by initials and surname.

5.2.1.5 Measures

5.2.1.5.1 Consumption emotions. To measure the emotional experience of the customer in the relationship with the supplier, we used a selection of emotions from the Consumption Emotion Set (Richins, 1997). Based on the results of Study 1A, as described in Chapter 3, we selected the 10 emotions that have the strongest link with one or more of the relational models ($\beta > .40$ or $\beta < -.40$). These emotions are: frustrated, irritated, discontented, unfulfilled, fulfilled, contented, optimistic, encouraged, hopeful, and happy. Using a 5-point

scale, customers had to indicate the extent to which the relevant emotion was applicable to their relationship with the energy company (1 = not applicable at all; 5 = very applicable).

5.2.1.5.2 Customer satisfaction. To measure customer satisfaction customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale their overall customer satisfaction with the energy company (1 = very unsatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). Customer satisfaction was measured as a single-item.

5.2.1.5.3 Perceived impact. After showing the manipulation (personal versus business-like letter) customers had to indicate on a 5-point scale what impact the manipulation had on their customer experience (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive). Because we asked customers to estimate what the impact was on their customer experience, we called this measure perceived impact. Perceived impact was not measured among customers in the control group because they had not seen either of the two letters. Perceived impact was measured as a single item.

5.2.1.5.4 Recommendation intention. To measure recommendation intention, customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale the extent to which they were willing to recommend the energy company to friends and acquaintances (1 = not at all willing and 10 = very willing). Recommendation intention was measured as a single item.

5.2.1.5.5 Relational models. To measure the CS and MP relational models, we used a list of statements based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent could indicate on a 7-point scale whether the statement was appropriate for the relationship with the energy company (0 = not applicable at all, 6 = very applicable). In our first study (described in Chapter 3) the original statements were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch they were slightly modified to make them more applicable to a business relationship. As these modified statements did not fully correspond to Haslam and Fiske's original statements we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the results of the first study. This analysis resulted in nine statements for the CS and MP relational models (for a complete description of the confirmatory factor analysis see Appendix B). The scores on the statements (five statements for CS, four statements for MP) were summed and divided by the number of statements, thus creating an average score for each relational model. To establish the reliability of the statements

used in this first study, a Cronbach's Alpha was performed for each of the two subscales. The reliability of the statements used to measure CS was acceptable ($\alpha = .83$); the reliability for the statements used to measure the presence of MP was not acceptable ($\alpha = .52$). Removing one or more statements did not result in a higher reliability. Because the statement, "The interaction between the organisation and me is strictly rational: we both calculate what our payoffs are, and act accordingly", represented best what the MP relational model stands for, we used this statement as a single item to measure the presence of MP.

5.2.2 Results

5.2.2.1 Influence of manipulation on customer experience

5.2.2.1.1 Perceived impact. First, we have analysed the effect of the manipulation (business-like versus personal letter) on the perceived impact of the letter on the customer experience. This was measured by asking customers immediately after showing them the letter what impact the letter had on their customer experience. Customers from the control group saw no letter and therefore did not answer this question. An independent t-test showed that there is a significant difference in experience between the group that saw the business-like letter and the group that saw the personal letter ($t(112) = 4.02, p < .05$). Customers who read the personal letter thought that this letter makes a more positive contribution to the experience with the service provider ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 3.72; SD = .77$) than did customers who read the business-like letter ($M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 3.14; SD = .77$).

5.2.2.1.2 Consumption emotions. We then performed a one-way ANOVA to analyse the effect of the manipulation (business-like letter, personal letter, no letter) on consumption emotions (Table 5.2). The manipulation is used as the independent variable; consumption emotions are the dependent variables. From the results it can be deduced that in all positive emotions (contented, optimistic, encouraged, happy, fulfilled, and hopeful) there is a significant difference between customers who read the personal letter and customers who read the business-like letter. Customers who received the personal letter were more positive than customers who received the business-like letter. In almost all positive emotions there was also a significant difference in emotional experience between customers who read the business-like letter and the control group. Customers in the control group had a more positive emotional

experience than customers who read the business-like letter. Apparently, for customer experience it is better not to send a letter than to send a business-like letter. It is striking that with respect to the negative emotions there are no significant differences between customers who read the personal letter and customers who read the business-like letter. A business-like letter does not lead to more negative emotions than the personal letter, but it certainly leads to less positive emotions.

Table 5.2

Means and Standard Deviations for Different Letters and Consumption Emotions.

| | Personal letter | | Business-like letter | | No letter | | <i>F</i> (2, 222) = | <i>p</i> |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|---------------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Frustrated | 1.93 | 1.05 | 2.04 | .98 | 2.19 | .99 | 1.36 | .26 |
| Contented | 3.75 ¹ | .87 | 3.14 ^{1,2} | .91 | 3.53 ² | .81 | 7.68 | .00 |
| Optimistic | 3.26 ¹ | .90 | 2.67 ¹² | .95 | 3.15 ² | .78 | 8.31 | .00 |
| Encouraged | 3.26 ¹ | .99 | 2.49 ¹² | .87 | 3.04 ² | .81 | 12.08 | .00 |
| Happy | 3.07 ¹ | .96 | 2.42 ¹² | .89 | 2.80 ² | .77 | 8.39 | .00 |
| Irritated | 1.98 | 1.16 | 2.32 | 1.07 | 2.28 | .91 | 1.99 | .14 |
| Fulfilled | 3.68 ¹² | .83 | 3.26 ¹ | .92 | 3.40 ² | .90 | 3.44 | .03 |
| Hopeful | 3.16 ¹² | .98 | 2.33 ¹³ | .87 | 2.86 ²³ | .85 | 12.78 | .00 |
| Unfulfilled | 2.16 | 1.08 | 2.23 | .91 | 2.27 | .85 | .28 | .76 |
| Discontented | 2.02 | 1.09 | 2.18 | .95 | 2.25 | .96 | 1.06 | .35 |

Note: means with the same superscripts differ significantly in the row

5.2.2.1.3 Customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. A one-way ANOVA was then performed to analyse the effect of the manipulation (business-like letter, personal letter, no letter) on customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. This analysis also showed significant differences between the groups. Customers who read the personal letter were more satisfied than customers who read the business-like letter ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 6.81$, $SD = 1.73$; $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 6.00$, $SD = 1.71$; $M_{\text{CONTROL}} = 6.48$, $SD = 1.74$, $F(2, 222) = 3.16$, $p < .05$; Figure 5.1). The same applies to recommendation intention: customers who read the personal letter were clearly more willing to recommend the organisation than customers who read the business-like letter ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 6.05$, $SD = 2.09$; $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 5.18$, $SD = 2.23$; $M_{\text{CONTROL}} = 5.86$, $SD = 2.16$; $F(2, 222) = 2.69$, $p < .05$; Figure 5.2). The differences between the customers in the control group and the customers who read a letter, only proved significant

for the customers who received the business-like letter. Customers who read the business-like letter were less satisfied and less willing to recommend the company than customers who read the personal letter or who did not read either letter.

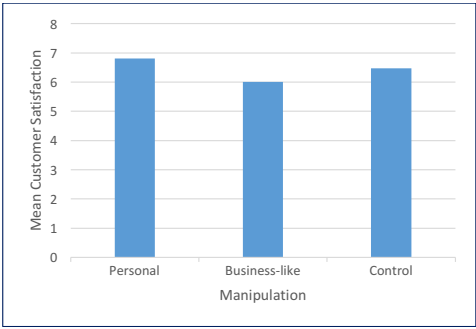


Figure 5.1. Effect of manipulation (personal letter, business letter, no letter) on customer satisfaction

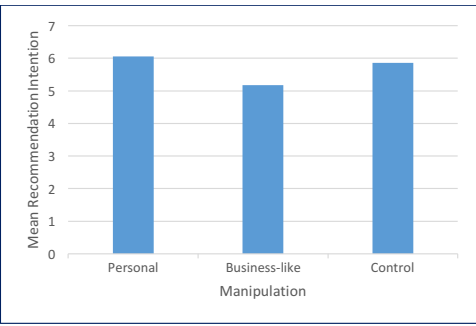


Figure 5.2. Effect of manipulation (personal letter, business letter, no letter) on recommendation intention

5.2.2.2 Influence of manipulation on relational models. Next, a one-way ANOVA was performed to analyse the effect of the manipulation (personal letter, business-like letter, no letter) on relational models. In this analysis the manipulation was again the independent variable; the relational models the dependent variable. The analysis shows that in the minds of customers who read the business-like letter, CS is significantly less present than in the minds of customers from the control group who did not see either letter ($F(2, 222) = 3.58, p < .05$; Figure 5.3).

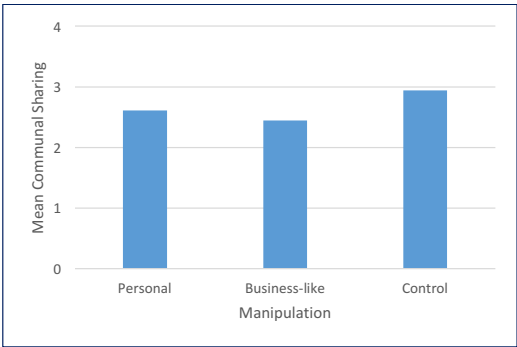


Figure 5.3. Effect of manipulation (personal letter, business-like letter, no letter) on relational model CS

In respect of the extent to which MP is activated, no significant differences were found between customers who read the personal letter or the business-like letter and customers in the control group ($F < 1$).

5.2.2.3 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the effect of personalisation in written communication (independent variable) on customer experience (dependent variable) is mediated by CS and MP relational models, a number of regression analyses were conducted. For the operationalisation of customer experience in the mediation analysis we used the measures of perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses performed for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (Figure 5.4). First, personalisation in written communication (dummy coded⁴) must predict the mediator (CS and MP relational models, Table 5.3). Second, personalisation in written communication (dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention), with CS and MP relational models as covariates (Table 5.4). And last, the relationship between the personalisation in written communication and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

⁴Because personalisation in this study is a categorical variable with three levels, we used two dummy variables for the analysis: DUM_L1 for the personal letter, DUM_L2 for the business-like letter. These two variables were given the value 0 (no personal resp. business-like letter) or 1 (a personal resp. business-like letter). If the variables DUM_L1 and DUM_L2 both have the value 0, then this automatically means that the respondent has not seen either letter.

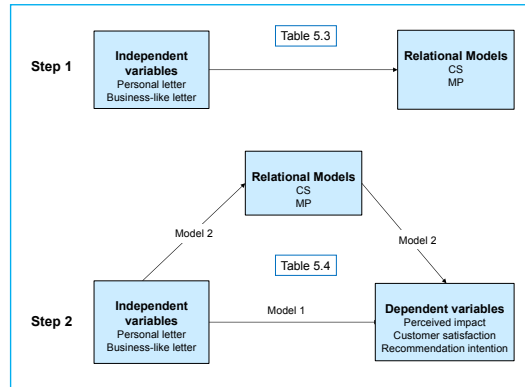


Figure 5.4. Mediation analysis for mediating effect of relational models CS and MP

The results of the first step showed that there is only a significant relationship between the business letter and CS (Table 5.3). This is consistent with the results described in paragraph 5.2.2.2.

Table 5.3

Regression results for influence of type of letter on CS and MP relational models

| | CS | MP |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| | β | β |
| <i>Independent variable</i> | | |
| Personal Letter | -.12 | .05 |
| Business Letter | -.18* | .05 |
| R^2 | .03 | .00 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the second step showed that the relational models have no mediating effect (Table 5.4). The statistically significant relationship between the personal letter and perceived impact continues to exist if the covariates are added. In the analysis for the measure of perceived impact, the second dummy variable was not used because the customers who did not see a letter did not answer the question about perceived impact.

Table 5.4

Regression results for influence of type of letter on perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention with covariates CS and MP relational models

| | Perceived impact | | Customer satisfaction | | Recommendation intention | |
|------------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Communal Sharing | | .37*** | | .54*** | | .54*** |
| Market Pricing | | .06 | | .06 | | .06 |
| <i>Independent Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Personal Letter | -.36*** | -.33*** | .08 | .14* | .08 | .14* |
| Business-like letter | | | -.12 | -.03 | -.12 | -.03 |
| R^2 | .13*** | .26*** | .03* | .33*** | .03* | .33*** |
| Delta R^2 | | .14*** | | .30*** | | .30*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

This study found only partial evidence for Hypothesis 5.1 — a personal approach in customer contact leads to a stronger presence of CS, which in turn leads to a more positive customer experience. The personal letter did not lead to a stronger presence of CS, but it did lead to a better customer experience. No support was found for Hypothesis 5.2 — a business-like approach to customer contact leads to a strengthening of MP, which will have no impact on customer experience. The business-like letter did not lead to a strengthening of MP but rather to a weakening of the CS norms. This could be an explanation for the fact that the business-like letter has a less positive effect on customer experience than the personal letter. The personal letter clearly led to a more positive customer experience than the business-like letter. We see this result not only in perceived impact, but also in consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention. The mediation analyses showed that the relational models do not have a mediating effect. The personal letter clearly leads to a better customer experience, but this does not depend on the relational model used. From the fact that the business-like letter does not lead to a strengthening of CS and that the personal letter does not lead to a strengthening of MP, it can be concluded that there was no question of a violation of relationship norms in this study (“taboo trade-off”). The personal letter apparently does not exceed the norms of what is acceptable for customers who adhere to CS. The same applies to the business-like letter. This letter does not exceed the norms of what is acceptable for customers who adhere to MP.

5.3 Study 2: Personalisation in Customer Contact by Telephone

The first study makes clear that a difference in written communication with the customer — personal or business-like — can lead to differences in customer experience and can have an impact on the relationship norms that are applied by the customer. In the second study we examined whether these effects also occur if the information is not offered in written form but is presented in oral form: what is the influence of a personal versus a business-like telephone call on the customer experience and what is its effect on the relational models used by customers. The personal telephone call is an example of customised personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). In the conversation between service employee and customer the employee gives more attention to the customer and shows understanding for the situation of the customer. In this second study we also examined whether the relational models have a mediating effect.

5.3.1 Method

5.3.1.1 Experimental design and procedure. The study consisted of a between-groups design with one independent variable with three levels (personal call, business-like call, no call). The manipulation implied that customers heard a telephone call between a customer and an employee of an energy company. The conversation was about an increase in the monthly payment. Part of the group heard a conversation that was personal in nature, and another group heard a conversation that was business-like and non-personal. The third group of customers did not listen to a telephone call. This last group formed the control group in the study. After overhearing the conversation, customers were first questioned about how personal or business-like they judged the conversation to be (manipulation-check). They could score on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all personal / business-like, 7 = very personal / business-like). A one-way ANOVA shows that the personal call is clearly viewed as more personal ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 5.00$, $SD = 1.56$; $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 2.55$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(1, 132) = 76.65$, $p = .00$), and the business-like call is clearly viewed as more business-like ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 4.43$, $SD = 1.79$; $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 5.94$, $SD = 1.29$, $F(1, 132) = 30.87$, $p = .00$). The manipulation can therefore be seen as successful.

5.3.1.2 Participants. The investigation was held with 231 customers of the energy company. 67 Customers heard the personal telephone call, 66 customers heard the business-like telephone call. 98 Customers were part of the control

group that did not hear any telephone call. 142 Customers were male and 59 were female. The gender of 30 customers was not known. The average age of the customers was 57.5 years ($SD = 14.61$).

5.3.1.3 Stimulus material. In the study we used two different telephone calls between an employee of the energy company and a customer. In the first case the call was handled in a business-like way, in the second case in a personal way. The reason for the telephone call was a request from the customer to increase his monthly payment. Two employees of the energy company conducted the interviews. One employee played the role of the customer and the other employee played the role of contact centre employee. To neutralise the impact of the voice on the customer experience, the same person played the role of the employee and the customer in both conversations. The differences between the two calls were:

- In the personal telephone call the employee introduced herself as Ingrid van der Meulen (fictional name), in the business-like telephone call as Mrs. Van der Meulen;
- In the personal telephone call the employee showed interest in the background to the customer's request: the customer wanted to increase his monthly payment because his cousin had come to live with him for a while; in the business-like call the employee was not interested in the background to the request;
- At the end of the personal telephone call the employee asked the question, "Has my answer taken away your concern for an extra payment at the end of the year?" This question was not asked in the business-like telephone call;
- Upon completion of the personal telephone call the employee took a moment to address the personal situation of the customer: "I wish you a lot of fun with your new roommate and have a nice day". The business-like telephone call was ended with "Have a nice day".

Showing interest in the specific situation of the customer by paying attention to and showing understanding in the background to the question can be seen as a form of customised personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987).

5.3.1.4 Measures. In this study we used the same instruments as those described in section 5.2. The Cronbach's Alpha of the CS statements used in this study was $\alpha = .80$, and for the statements of MP, $\alpha = .41$. Removing one or more statements did not result in a higher reliability of MP statements. Because the statement, "The interaction between the organisation and me is strictly rational: we both calculate what our payoffs are and act accordingly", was the best representation of the MP relational model, we used this statement as a single item to measure the presence of MP.

5.3.2 Results

5.3.2.1 Influence of manipulation on customer experience

5.3.2.1.1 Perceived impact. First, we analysed the effect of the manipulation (business-like telephone call, personal phone call) on the perceived impact. The perceived impact is measured by asking customers about the effect of the telephone call on their opinion of their customer experience. The question was only asked to customers who had heard one of the two calls. The question was not asked to customers in the control group who did not hear any conversation. An independent t-test shows a significant difference in the perceived impact of the two telephone calls. Customers who had heard the personal telephone call thought that the call had a significantly more positive contribution to the customer experience than consumers who heard the business-like call ($M_{\text{PERSONAL}} = 3.19$, $SD = .76$; $M_{\text{BUSINESS}} = 2.85$, $SD = .73$; $t(131) = 2.67$, $p < .01$).

5.3.2.1.2 Consumption emotions. We subsequently looked at the effect of the manipulation (business-like telephone call, personal phone call, no phone call) on consumption emotions. This was done by performing a one-way ANOVA with the manipulation as the independent variable and the consumption emotions as the dependent variables. The analysis shows that there are no significant differences in emotional experience between customers who heard the personal telephone call, customers who heard the business-like telephone call, and customers who did not hear a telephone call (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5

Means and standard deviations for the influence of different phone calls on consumption emotions.

| | Personal call | | Business-like call | | No call | | <i>F</i> (2, 228) = | <i>p</i> |
|--------------|---------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|---------------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Frustrated | 2.19 | .88 | 2.05 | 1.10 | 2.19 | 1.03 | .51 | .60 |
| Contented | 3.58 | .78 | 3.71 | .82 | 3.71 | .80 | .64 | .53 |
| Optimistic | 3.06 | .81 | 2.89 | .88 | 3.13 | .81 | 1.65 | .19 |
| Encouraged | 2.85 | .89 | 2.79 | .94 | 3.03 | .79 | 1.77 | .17 |
| Happy | 2.66 | .90 | 2.68 | .93 | 2.82 | .88 | .77 | .46 |
| Irritated | 2.12 | .83 | 2.21 | 1.07 | 2.28 | 1.00 | .51 | .60 |
| Fulfilled | 3.04 | .96 | 3.27 | .92 | 3.13 | .89 | 1.04 | .35 |
| Hopeful | 2.82 | .97 | 2.79 | 1.02 | 2.95 | .85 | .69 | .50 |
| Unfulfilled | 2.16 | .96 | 2.15 | 1.00 | 2.44 | .94 | 2.40 | .09 |
| Discontented | 2.09 | .95 | 2.0 | 1.01 | 2.16 | 1.01 | .53 | .59 |

5.3.2.1.3 Customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. We then analysed the impact of the manipulation (business-like call, personal call, no call) on customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. If we perform a one-way ANOVA with the manipulation as the independent variable and customer satisfaction and recommendation intention as the dependent variables, it becomes clear that customers who heard the personal call are no more satisfied with the organisation than customers who heard the business-like call or customers who did not hear any call ($F < 1$). A one-way ANOVA also shows that customers who heard the personal call are no more willing to recommend the organisation than customers who heard the business-like call or customers who heard no call ($F < 1$).

5.3.2.2 Influence of manipulation on relational models. If we perform a one-way ANOVA and compare the presence of relational models in the minds of customers who heard a personal or a business-like telephone call with the presence of relational models in the minds of customers who did not hear a telephone call, we can conclude that neither the personal call nor the business-like call affected the presence of the relational models CS ($F < 1$) and MP ($F < 1$).

5.3.2.3 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the effect of personalisation in oral communication on customer experience is mediated by CS and MP relational models, a number of regression analyses were performed. For the operationalisation of customer experience we used the measures of perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (for a graphic representation of this two-step analysis see Figure 5.4). First, personalisation in oral communication (dummy coded) must predict the mediator (CS and MP relational models, Table 5.6). Second, personalisation in oral communication (dummy coded⁵) must predict the dependent variables (perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention), with CS and MP relational models as covariates (Table 5.7). And last, the relationship between personalisation in oral communication and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

Table 5.6

Regression results for influence of manipulations on CS and MP relational models

| | CS | MP |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | β | β |
| <i>Experimental Variable</i> | | |
| Personal Call | -.00 | .02 |
| Business-like Call | .00 | -.04 |
| R^2 | .00 | .00 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the first step showed that there is no significant relationship between the type of call and the relational models (Table 5.6). The results of the second step showed that in this study the relational models have no mediating effect on the different dimensions of customer experience (Table 5.7). Where there are statistically significant relationships between the type of call and dimensions of customer experience, these direct relationships remain significant if the covariates are added.

⁵Because personalisation in this study is a categorical variable with three levels, we created two dummy variables for the analysis: DUM_C1 for the personal telephone call and DUM_C2 for the business-like call. These two variables were given the value 0 (no personal resp. business-like call) or 1 (a personal resp. business-like call). If the variables DUM_C1 and DUM_C2 both have the value 0, then this automatically means that the respondent did not hear a call.

Table 5.7

Regression results for influence of type of phone call on perceived impact, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention, with covariates CS and MP relational models.

| | Perceived impact | | Customer satisfaction | | Recommendation intention | |
|------------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Communal Sharing | | .31*** | | .65*** | | .65*** |
| Market Pricing | | .04 | | .06 | | .03 |
| <i>Experimental Variable</i> | | | | | | |
| Personal call | .23** | .23** | -.02 | -.02 | -.01 | -.01 |
| Business-like call | | | .05 | .05 | .04 | .04 |
| R^2 | .05** | .15** | .00 | .44*** | .00 | .43*** |
| Delta R^2 | | .10** | | .44*** | | .43*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In the second study we only found partial support for hypothesis 5.1 — a personal approach to customer contact leads to a strengthening of CS norms, which in turn leads to a more positive customer experience. The personal telephone call made a positive impression on the customer experience in the eyes of the customers, but did not lead to a strengthening of CS norms. The personal call showed a positive effect on perceived impact but did not lead to a better emotional experience, a higher customer satisfaction, or a higher recommendation intention (as was the case with the personal letter in Study 1). No evidence was found in this study for hypothesis 5.2 — a business-like approach to customer contact leads to a strengthening of MP, which will have no impact on customer experience. The nature of the telephone call (personal or business-like) showed no effect on the relational models. The mediation analyses carried out for this second study showed that relational models do not have a mediating effect on the experience of the phone call. As neither the business-like nor the personal phone call led to a strengthening of CS and MP norms, respectively, we can also conclude that there seems to be no violation of relationship norms (taboo trade-off) in this study.

5.4 Discussion

In this chapter we examined the influence of a personal approach in customer communication on relational models and customer experience. The results show that a personal letter causes a more positive impression on customer

experience than a business-like letter. A personal letter also has a more positive impact on consumption emotions than a business-like letter. It even appears that people have a more positive experience when they do not receive a letter than when they receive a business-like letter. The results also show that a business-like letter does not lead to more negative emotions, but it does lead to less positive emotions than the personal letter. Chapter 3 already showed that most people use MP relationship norms in their relationships with large service providers. A business-like letter fits well with this relationship norm and with customers' expectations. A personal letter apparently exceeds expectations, leading to more positive feelings. The personal letter also shows a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. Apparently, one relatively subtle expression of an organisation may lead to changes in the assessment of the relationship. Despite the fact that the personal letter is actually perceived as more personal by customers, it may also be that other aspects of the letter played a role in the evaluation. The personal letter is not only more personal but also more concise, perhaps more transparent, and is based more on mutual trust. These are probably elements of the service that are being appreciated by both CS and MP customers. This could also be the reason why the personal letter is not perceived as a violation of the MP relational model and why the personal letter has a more positive effect on customer experience than the business-like letter. What also could have played a role is that people do not like to be confronted with the financial consequences of a transaction. The business-like letter people specified exactly how the monthly payment was made up.

The results of the second study showed that a personal telephone call leaves a more positive impression on customer experience than a business-like telephone call. Unlike the first study with the different kinds of letters, the personal telephone call in the second study did not show a more positive effect on consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention than the business-like telephone call. The fact that the personal and business-like calls did not lead to significant differences in customer experience is in itself remarkable. In the personal telephone call more attention was paid to the customer by addressing his personal situation. Research from De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) showed that attention is a direct influencer of the evaluation of the service. In our study the extra attention in the personal call should lead to a better experience than the lack of attention in the business-like telephone call. There may be various reasons to explain why this did not happen. One possible explanation could be that the customer has not experienced the extra attention as customised personalisation but as programmed personalisation (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987). The customer sees the extra attention as a form of small talk that

is not sincere. This could also be the reason why the emotional impact is lower than if it is perceived as real attention. Another explanation could be that the reading of a letter (Study 1) is cognitively more burdensome than listening to a telephone call (Study 2). When listening to a telephone conversation it is easy for your thought to wander off. A third explanation could be found in the relational norms that are applied by customers. Chapter 3 showed that most customers prefer a business-like, distant relationship and also apply the relationship norms that are appropriate for such a relationship (MP). Both telephone calls apparently fit with people's expectations of an energy company and do not lead to an adjustment of relationship norms. The extra attention in the personal telephone call is perhaps experienced as something special. This extra service does lead to a better impression of customer experience but does not lead to a different evaluation of the relationship.

The results of the first study suggest that a business-like letter did not lead to a strengthening of MP, as we expected, but, rather, to a weakening of CS norms. That is surprising. A possible explanation could be that if people receive a business-like letter the CS-character of the relationship changes in their eyes, so they do not strengthen MP relationship norms but instead adjust CS relationship norms downward. A personal letter will not lead to a strengthening of the CS relationship model. Apparently, both the business-like and the personal letter fit with the expectations that people have about the relationship in an MP or CS model.

In the introduction to this chapter we recognised that a personal letter or a personal telephone call could be experienced as being too personal, and a business-like letter or a business-like telephone call as too commercial. In that case the nature of the letter or the call could be perceived by customers as a violation of the relationship norms associated with the MP and CS relational models, respectively, that is, a taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015). Taboo trade-offs are clearly not visible in the studies we conducted. The personal letter or the personal telephone call was clearly not seen as a violation of norms by customers who predominantly use MP. A business-like letter or business-like telephone call was not seen as a violation of CS norms by customers who use CS as their predominant model. This means that from the two studies we can conclude that both the personal and business-like approach fit within the existing CS and MP relationship norms.

Previous research showed that it is possible to activate relationship norms by confronting people with certain scenarios, words, and/or images (e.g.,

Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009). One of the possible explanations as to why it was possible to activate relationship norms in these studies, and why the manipulations in our study hardly show any effect on relational models, may be that in these previous studies made use of fictional relationships. Our studies were conducted with existing customers, some of whom already had a relationship with the organisation for years, and whose relationship norms were firmly embedded in their mind. Apparently the relational models form a fairly constant factor in the mind of the customer and these will not change as a result of a single intervention. It should also be noted that in neither of the studies were the customers confronted with a negative message. It could be that if a customer is given a negative message, the impact of the intervention is stronger and that customers might well adjust relationship norms. This should be further investigated. As one-time interventions hardly show any effect, the question is whether this effect will be seen if an organisation carries out multiple interventions in succession. The question is also whether an organisation can influence relationship models by consistently communicating in words and images that are associated with a specific type of relationship. This question is addressed in further detail in Chapter 7.

The mediation analyses carried out for both the first and the second study showed that the relational models do not have a mediating effect on the relationship between the nature of a letter or a telephone call and the customer experience. The nature of the letter and the telephone call do have an impact on the customer experience but this effect is independent of the relational model used by the customer. This does not mean that the relational models do not have an impact on customer experience. In Chapter 3 we already saw that CS has a more positive effect on customer experience than MP and AR.

Main conclusions of this chapter

The research described in this chapter shows that a personal letter and a personal telephone call clearly lead to a better perceived impact (customer experience immediately after the customer contact). A personal letter also leads to a better emotional experience than a letter with a business-like approach. Customers that have not seen a letter have a better emotional experience than those who have seen a business-like letter; apparently customers prefer not to receive a business-like letter at all. The study also shows that a personal letter leads to higher customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. A business letter leads to a less strong presence of the CS relational model. This effect was not found in the study with the telephone call. A personal letter or a personal phone call does not affect the presence of the relational models. Finally, the study shows that the relational models do not have a mediating effect on the relationship between the nature of the contact (personal versus business-like) and the customer experience.

6 The Use of Digital Channels in Customer Contact and the Effect on Relational Models and Customer Experience



As we saw in Chapter 3, the key to a more sustainable and meaningful connection with customers lies in the relational model Communal Sharing (CS). Furthermore, as was noted in Chapter 4, freedom of choice is a major influencer of relational models and thus a key success factor in the customer experience. New technologies have created additional communication channels for organisations and customers. Internet, email, chat and sms have expanded the opportunities of communicating with each other. However, in recent years the freedom of choice in the use of communication channels by customers is also restricted again by service providers. Organisations are increasingly realising that internet, email, and chat are cheaper communication channels than traditional channels such as the telephone or mail. As Chapter 3 showed, customers feel that they increasingly have to deal with issues over the internet and that there is less room for personal contact. This chapter investigates two aspects of digitisation in customer contact and their effects on relational models and customer experience. First, this chapter examines how in the perception of the customer a relatively new medium, such as chat, relates to more traditional media such as the telephone. Second, the chapter examines the effects of directing customers to the internet. In both studies we examined whether the relational models have a mediating effect.

6.1 Customer Relations are Becoming Digital

6.1.1 The Rise of New Media

All large service organisations currently have a desire to work in a more cost efficient way and are looking for ways to achieve these cost efficiencies by using new technologies. The rise of the internet, email, and chat have led to a completely new development of the contact that organisations have with their customers. The question is what impact these new communication channels have on the customer experience compared to more traditional media such as the telephone. Daft and Lengel's (1986) Media Richness Theory assumes that communication media differ in the communication capacities they allow their users. Face-to-face contact is seen as the most rich media, followed in order of decreasing effectiveness by video conferencing, telephone, two-way radio, written addressed documents (including e-mail and letters) and, finally, unaddressed documents (including bulk mail and posters). The theory assumes that the more ambiguous the message, the more signals and information the receiver needs to understand the message and, therefore, the richer the medium has to be. The medium should match the needs of the customer. A simple message can be communicated through the internet or through a simple, short

email. For a more complex message it would be better to use the medium of a face-to-face conversation. Recent research shows that customers who only need information prefer to go to a website; individuals who are eager to solve a problem directly, make a telephone call or go to the office (Reddick, 2010).

At present, many organisations are creating possibilities for communicating with customers in alternative ways. Chat seems to be one of the most interesting developments. The ability to communicate with customers via chat is improving as a result of technological developments. The question is what influence chat has on the customer experience when compared with the experience of a telephone call, and whether the type of question still plays a role in the experience of the medium. Following the Media Richness Theory (MRT), one might assume that customers with a simple administrative question will have a better experience with the chat medium than with the medium of the telephone. For many people chat will be a more accessible medium than the telephone because there no personal contact is involved. As the investigation of Reddick (2010) shows, customers prefer to choose the website rather than the telephone when they only need information. In the case of a complex question, telephone contact with a real employee should result in a better experience than contact with a virtual assistant. According to the MRT a telephone is seen as a richer medium that is more convenient if a customer has a complex question. The agent on the telephone should be better able to receive signals from the customer and to react adequately to these.

6.1.2 Customer Reactions to New Media

The question is not only whether the handling of a question by telephone or chat has an impact on the customer experience, but also whether customers will react differently to digital media because they use different relationship norms. Following the Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 1991; see Chapter 2) it is to be expected that customers who use Communal Sharing (CS) norms have communication needs that differ from those of customers who use Market Pricing (MP) norms.

Our expectation is that for simple, administrative questions, chat will have a more positive impact on customer experience than the telephone, and that this effect occurs regardless of the relational models used. Previous research has shown that in their choice for a particular communication channel, customers are often led by factors such as ease of use, habits, and emotions (Pieterse, 2009). Chat is usually seen as a more accessible medium, but is thought to

be especially suitable for simple questions. Customers who use CS relationship norms will not react very differently to chat than customers using MP norms. However, if the communication concerns a complex question, then the experience of the medium by CS and MP customers will probably be different. Chapter 3 showed that customers prefer to call if they have a complex question because they feel that a telephone gives them a greater opportunity to tell their story. When people have a complex question they want to use a medium that allows them to properly explain their problem. If we follow the Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), the medium of telephone may better enable a customer to connect emotionally to the organisation and its employees than the more distant, non-personal medium of chat. Chat is a medium that gives customers less opportunity to establish an emotional connection. This is something that CS customers in particular, consider to be important. CS customers have a need to connect themselves with the organisation and to identify with the values that represent the organisation (Fiske, 1991; Kaltcheva, Winsor & Patino, 2011). CS customers will therefore strengthen CS norms when the complex question is handled by phone. This will, in turn, lead to a positive customer experience. MP customers will probably see the medium chat as a deterioration of the cost-benefit ratio. Certainly if they have to ask a complex question via chat when they would prefer to do this over the telephone. The result will be that the customer will probably experience a taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; see Chapter 5) and strengthen MP norms, which will, in turn, lead to a less positive customer experience. It is to be expected that handling a complex question by telephone will result in a strengthening of the CS norms because the telephone will better enable customers to connect to the organisation. This will lead to a more positive customer experience than the chat medium.

Hypotheses:

- 6.1 *In the case of a simple, administrative question a chat conversation with a virtual employee will lead to a more positive customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention) than a conversation by telephone with a real employee; this effect will be found regardless of the relational model that is being used by the customer;*
- 6.2 *In the case of a complex question, contact by telephone with a real employee will lead to a strengthening of CS relationship norms, which in turn will lead to a more positive customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention) than a chat conversation with a virtual employee;*

6.3 *In the case of a complex question, a chat conversation with a virtual employee will lead to a strengthening of MP relationship norms, which in turn will lead to a less positive customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention) than a telephone call with a real employee.*

In Chapter 3 we saw that relational models have a significant impact on the customer experience. If it is true that the aspects of digitisation examined in this chapter show an effect on the relational models, then it could be that the relational models have a mediating effect on the relationship between digitisation and customer experience. The impact of digitisation on customer experience can be strengthened or weakened depending on the relationship norms that the customer uses in the relationship with the organisation. To investigate whether there is a mediating effect, a number of mediation analyses are performed in sections 6.2 and 6.3.

6.2 Study 1: The Virtual Employee

In recent years the medium of chat is becoming increasingly popular in the world of customer contact. The question is what effect this new medium has on the customer experience compared to a more traditional medium such as the telephone. In this first study we examined the difference between the experience of a customer with a telephone conversation and the experience of a customer with a chat conversation. The difference in experience is studied in a situation where the customer had a simple, administrative question, and a situation where the customer had a more complex question. In addition, this study investigated the effect on the relational models of the use of these different media for different types of questions. The study was conducted with existing customers that already had a relationship with the health care insurance company, an organisation from the Finance Cluster (see Chapter 3).

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6.2.1 Method

6.2.1.1 Experimental design and procedure. The study has a between-groups design with two independent variables. The first independent variable was a manipulation of the content of the conversation with two levels (simple question, complex question). Some of the customers were confronted with the handling of a simple administrative question; other customers were

confronted with a complex insurance-related question. The simple question was about reimbursement for glasses, and the more complex question was about reimbursement for speech therapy (for more information see Section 6.2.1.3 Stimulus material). The second independent variable related to a manipulation on the communication channel that was used, also with two levels. Some of the customers had to assess a telephone conversation between a customer and a call centre employee. Another group of customers saw a chat conversation between a customer and a virtual assistant. For both the questions and answers in the telephone conversation we used exactly the same script as the questions and answers in the chat conversation. After listening to the telephone call or seeing the chat conversation, a manipulation check was performed on the complexity of the question. The manipulation check measured whether customers actually evaluated the simple question as more simple than the complex question. A one-way ANOVA showed this to be the case. The simple question was assessed as significantly more simple than the complex question ($M_{\text{SIMPLE}} = 5.31$, $SD = 1.40$, $M_{\text{COMPLEX}} = 3.16$, $SD = 1.46$; $F(1, 133) = 25.59$, $p < .05$). The complex question was rated as significantly more complex than the simple question ($M_{\text{SIMPLE}} = 3.47$, $SD = 1.54$, $M_{\text{COMPLEX}} = 4.51$, $SD = 1.61$, $F(1, 133) = 51.53$, $p < .05$). Following the manipulation check, customers had to assess a number of statements that measured the presence of the CS and MP relational models. This was followed by a number of questions aimed to provide insight in the experience of the customer (consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention). To measure the effect of the manipulations on relational models, a control group was added to the study. The control group consisted of customers who did not hear the telephone call and did not see the chat conversation, but who only assessed the statements about relational models and answered questions about their own consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention.

6.2.1.2 Participants. 207 Customers of the health care insurance company participated in the investigation (125 men, 82 women). The average age of the customers was 49.0 years ($SD = 12.80$). 62 Customers were presented with the scenario with the simple question. Of these 62 customers 31 listened to the telephone call and 31 people saw the chat conversation. 72 Customers were presented the scenario with the complex question and of these 48 listened to the telephone call and 24 saw the chat conversation. 73 Customers were part of the control group that was created to measure the effects on the relational models. This group did not see the chat conversation or listen to the telephone call.

6.2.1.3 Stimulus material. At the start of the study one of the following two scenarios was presented to the customers. The first scenario describes a situation where a customer contacts an insurer with a simple administrative question about reimbursement of the cost of spectacles:

You are Mrs. Van Leeuwen and you have a question about reimbursement of the cost of your spectacles. It's now been a few years since you last selected a new pair of glasses. Lately you have a strong feeling that your eyes have deteriorated and you realise that it is time for new glasses. You just do not know for sure whether your insurance will cover the cost of your glasses. Therefore, you contact your health care provider to find out how much reimbursement you can receive for your new glasses.

The second scenario describes a situation in which the customer contacts the health care insurer with a more complex question about reimbursement of the costs of speech therapy:

You are Mrs. Van Leeuwen. You have a question for your health care provider regarding reimbursement of the costs of speech therapy for your daughter. Since January 1 2013 your health insurance company no longer reimburses the expenses for speech therapy. Therefore, you contact your health care provider to find out how speech therapy is covered by the new insurance scheme.

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Part of the customers was then shown the following text:

You pick up the phone and make contact with the customer service department of your health care insurer.

These customers then listened to the recording of a telephone conversation between Mrs. Van Leeuwen and an employee of the health care insurer. Another part of the customers was shown the following text:

You are sitting in front of your computer and decide to make contact via the chat-function on the internet site of your health care insurer.

Subsequent to this, these customers saw a chat conversation between Mrs. Van Leeuwen and an employee of the health care insurer. The scripts of the telephone and chat conversation were completely identical. In the scenario with the simple question about the reimbursement of glasses the employee simply tells the customer what she is entitled to. In the scenario with the complex

question the customer hears that she needs to switch to another speech therapist to be eligible for a 100% reimbursement. The customer may also stay with her current therapist but if she does so she will only receive a 75% reimbursement. The reason for this is that her current speech therapist does not have a contract with the health care insurer. This is a difficult decision for the customer because her daughter very much wants to stay with the current speech therapist.

6.2.1.4 Measures

6.2.1.4.1 Consumption emotions. To measure the emotional experience of the customer in the relationship with the supplier, we used a selection of emotions from the Consumption Emotion Set (Richins, 1997). Based on the results of Study 1A, as described in Chapter 3, we selected the 10 emotions that have the strongest link with one or more of the relational models ($\beta > .40$ or $\beta < -.40$). These emotions are: frustrated, irritated, discontented, unfulfilled, fulfilled, contented, optimistic, encouraged, hopeful, and happy. Using a 5-point scale customers were asked to indicate the extent to which the relevant emotion was applicable to their relationship with the health care insurer (1 = not applicable at all; 5 = very applicable).

6.2.1.4.2 Customer satisfaction. To measure customer satisfaction customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale their overall customer satisfaction with the health care insurer (1 = very unsatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). Customer satisfaction was measured as a single-item.

6.2.1.4.3 Perceived impact.

The measure perceived impact is used in this study to measure the impact an intervention has in the eyes of the customer on customer experience. After showing the manipulation (manipulation 1: simple versus complex question; manipulation 2: chat versus telephone) customers were asked to indicate on a 5-pointscale the impact that the manipulation had on their customer experience (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive). Because we asked customers to estimate the impact on their customer experience, we called this measure perceived impact. Customers in the control group did not answer this question because they did not listen to the telephone call or see the chat conversation. Perceived impact was measured as a single item.

6.2.1.4.4 Recommendation intention. To measure recommendation intention customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale the extent to

which they were willing to recommend the health care insurer to friends and acquaintances (1 = not at all willing and 10 = very willing). Recommendation intention was measured as a single item.

6.2.1.4.5 Relational models. In this study we investigated the effects of new digital media on relational models and customer experience. Because we did not expect the manipulation in the first study to have an impact on freedom of choice, and therefore we also did not expect an effect on AR (Chapter 4), we limited ourselves in this first study to the relational models CS and MP. To measure the relational models CS and MP we used a list of statements based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent could indicate on a 7-point scale whether the statement was applicable for the relationship with the health care insurer (0 = not applicable at all, 6 = very applicable). In our first empirical study (described in Chapter 3) the original statements were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch they were slightly modified to make them more applicable to a business relationship. As these modified statements did not fully correspond to Haslam and Fiske's original statements we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the results of the first study. This analysis resulted in nine statements for the relational models CS and MP (for a complete description of the confirmatory factor analysis see Appendix B). The scores on the statements (five statements for CS, four statements for MP) were summed and divided by the number of statements, thus creating an average score for each relational model. For each of the two subscales a Cronbach's Alpha was performed to determine the consistency of the items in this study. This analysis led to an acceptable scale for CS ($\alpha = .82$). The scale for MP was less reliable than we would have liked but in our opinion it was just reliable enough ($\alpha = .62$).

6.2.2 Results

6.2.2.1 Influence of manipulation on customer experience

6.2.2.1.1 Perceived impact. In this study we used two manipulations: a manipulation on the type of question and a manipulation on the type of medium. The control group did not answer the question on perceived impact because they did not experience either manipulation. Through a two-way ANOVA we looked at the main effect of the first manipulation (type of medium: chat versus telephone versus no call) on the perceived impact. The manipulation on the

type of communication medium was used as the independent variable, the perceived impact as the dependent variable. The analysis shows that customers who saw the chat conversation have a more positive assessment of the impact on the customer experience than customers who heard the telephone call ($M_{\text{CHAT}} = 3.50$, $SD = .10$; $M_{\text{PHONE}} = 3.20$, $SD = .08$; $F(1, 130) = 5.31$, $p < .05$). As for the main effect of the second manipulation (type of question: simple versus complex), the analysis shows that the type of question leads to a significant difference in perceived impact. Customers expect that the handling of the simple question clearly has a more positive contribution to the customer experience than the handling of the complex question ($M_{\text{SIMPLE}} = 3.74$, $SD = .09$; $M_{\text{COMPLEX}} = 2.96$, $SD = .09$, $F(1, 130) = 37.31$, $p = .00$). Finally, we looked at the interaction between the two independent variables and their impact on the perceived impact. This analysis shows that there is no significant interaction effect between the two manipulations ($F < 1$). The two variables do not influence each other. It makes no difference to the perceived impact of the medium whether it is a simple or complex question.

6.2.2.1.2 Consumption emotions. Next a two-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of the manipulation (manipulation type of medium: chat conversation versus telephone call, manipulation type of question: simple versus complex question) on consumption emotions. Here the manipulations were used as the independent variable, the consumption emotions as the dependent variable. The analysis shows that the manipulation on the type of medium does not lead to significant differences in emotional experience. Customers who saw the chat conversation did not have a significantly different emotional experience than customers who heard the call or customers who were in the control group. The manipulation on the type of question also did not show any significant differences in emotional experience. The analysis shows that there is a significant interaction between the two manipulations on the emotions of frustration and discontented (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1

F- and P- Value for Influence of Manipulations on Consumption Emotions

| | Type of Medium | | Type of Question | | Interaction Medium*Question | |
|--------------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------|
| | <i>F</i> (1, 130) = | <i>p</i> | <i>F</i> (1, 130) = | <i>p</i> | <i>F</i> (1, 130) = | <i>p</i> |
| Frustrated | .76 | .38 | .17 | .68 | 3.91 | .05 |
| Contented | 3.00 | .09 | .05 | .83 | .40 | .42 |
| Optimistic | .23 | .63 | .09 | .76 | .84 | .36 |
| Encouraged | .00 | .99 | .44 | .51 | 1.10 | .30 |
| Happy | 1.29 | .26 | .11 | .74 | 1.78 | .18 |
| Irritated | .32 | .57 | .03 | .86 | 1.15 | .29 |
| Fulfilled | 1.38 | .24 | .09 | .76 | .25 | .62 |
| Hopeful | .08 | .78 | .38 | .54 | .23 | .63 |
| Unfulfilled | .27 | .60 | 1.62 | .21 | 1.22 | .27 |
| Discontented | 2.64 | .11 | 1.10 | .30 | 3.99 | .05 |

Customers are clearly more frustrated if the complex question is handled via the telephone than if this question is handled by chat (Figure 6.1, Table 6.2).

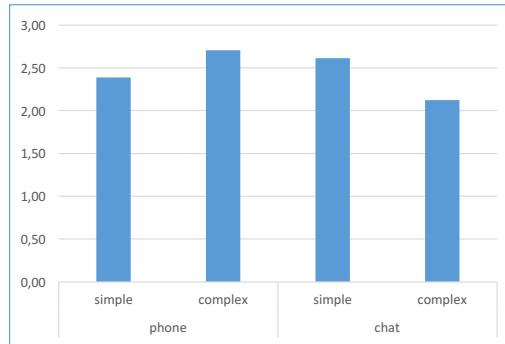


Figure 6.1. Frustration as a function of type of medium and type of question

Table 6.2

Frustration as function of type of medium and type of question (means and sd's)

| | Phone | | Chat | |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| Simple Question | 2.39 | 1.15 | 2.61 | 1.23 |
| Complex Question | 2.71 ^a | 1.18 | 2.31 ^a | .95 |

Note: cells with the same superscript differ significantly in the row ($p < .05$)

Customers are also more discontented if the complex question is handled by phone than if the complex question is handled by chat (Figure 6.2, Table 6.3).

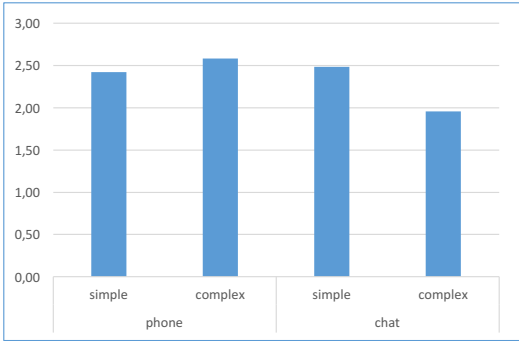


Figure 6.2. Discontented as a function of type of medium and type of question

Table 6.3

Discontented as function of type of medium and type of question (means and sd's)

| | Phone | | Chat | |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| | M | SD | M | SD |
| Simple Question | 2.42 | .96 | 2.48 | .99 |
| Complex Question | 2.58 ^a | .96 | 1.96 ^a | .96 |

Note: cells with the same superscript differ significantly in the row ($p < .05$)

In the case of the other emotions there is no significant interaction between both independent variables.

6.2.2.1.3 Customer satisfaction. We subsequently performed a two-way ANOVA to determine the impact of the two manipulations (manipulation type of medium: chat conversation versus telephone call; manipulation type of question: simple versus complex question) on customer satisfaction. The manipulations are again used as the independent variable and customer satisfaction as the dependent variable. The analysis shows that the type of medium showed no significant effect on customer satisfaction ($F(1, 130) = 2.01$, ns). The same applies to the type of question ($F < 1$). The analysis shows that with respect to customer satisfaction there is no significant interaction between the two manipulations ($F < 1$).

6.2.2.1.4 Recommendation intention. A two-way ANOVA does

show a significant effect of the type of medium (telephone versus chat) on recommendation intention. Customers who saw the chat conversation are significantly more prepared to recommend the organisation than customers who heard the call ($M_{PHONE} = 6.22$, $SD = .22$; $M_{CHAT} = 7.07$, $SD = .26$, $F(1, 130) = 6.60$, $p < .05$). The type of question shows no significant effect on recommendation intention ($F < 1$), nor is there any significant interaction effect between the two independent variables ($F < 1$). Customers who saw the chat conversation are more likely to recommend the organisation, but this is independent of the type of question that is dealt with.

6.2.2.2 Influence of manipulation on relational models. A two-way ANOVA shows that none of the manipulations had a significant effect on the MP relational model. CS and MP relationship norms were no more present among customers who saw the manipulation than among customers who did not see any manipulation (the control group). This applies to both the manipulation of type of medium (telephone versus chat, $F(1, 202) = 2.66$, ns) and the manipulation of type of question (simple versus complex, $F < 1$). Furthermore, the interaction effect was not significant ($F(1, 202) = 1.43$, ns). If we look at CS we see the same results. Neither of the manipulations shows a significant effect on CS. This applies to the type of medium ($F(1, 202) = 2.66$, ns) and the type of question ($F < 1$). The interaction between both variables is also not significant ($F < 1$).

6.2.2.3 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the effect of a certain type of medium with certain types of questions on customer experience is mediated by the CS and MP relational models, a number of mediation analyses were carried out. For the operationalisation of customer experience in the mediation analysis we used the measures of perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (Figure 6.3). First, type of medium (dummy coded⁶) and type of question (dummy coded⁷) must predict the mediator (relational models CS and MP, Table 6.2). Second, type of medium and type of question (dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention), with relational models CS and MP as covariates (Table 6.3). And last, the relationship between the type of medium respectively the type of question and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

⁶Because both the type of medium and the type of question are categorical variables, we used dummy variables for the analysis. For the independent variable, type of medium, we created a dummy variable: DUM_M1. If variable DUM_M1 has the value 1, this means that the customer heard the question being handled by telephone. If this dummy variable has the value 0 this automatically means that the customer saw the chat conversation.

⁷We also created a dummy variable for the second independent variable: DUM_Q1. If variable DUM_Q1 has the value 1, this means that the customer was confronted with the simple question. If the variable DUM_Q1 has the value 0 this automatically means the customer was confronted with the complex question.

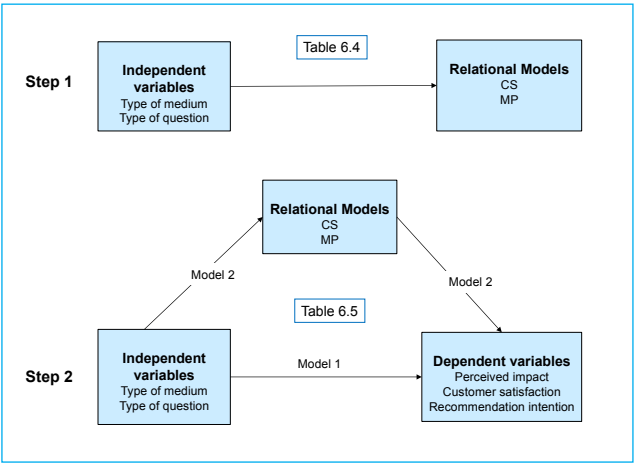


Figure 6.3. Mediation analysis for mediating effect of relational models CS and MP

Table 6.4

Regression Results for Influence of Manipulations on Relational Models CS and MP

| | CS | MP |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|
| | β | β |
| <i>Experimental Variable</i> | | |
| Type of medium | -.04 | .18 |
| Type of question | .14 | -.09* |
| R^2 | .02 | .02 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the first step show that there only is a significant relationship between the independent variable, type of question, and the MP relational model (Table 6.4). The results of the second step show that the relational models have no mediating effect on perceived impact in this study (Table 6.5). There is only a significant relationship between the type of question and perceived impact. The direct relationship between type of question and perceived impact remain significant if the covariates are added.

Table 6.5

Regression results for influence of type of medium and type of question on perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention with covariates relational models CS and MP

| | Perceived Impact | | Customer Satisfaction | | Recommendation Intention | |
|------------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Communal sharing | | .36*** | | .70*** | | .72*** |
| Market pricing | | -.06 | | -.08 | | -.14** |
| <i>Experimental Variable</i> | | | | | | |
| Type of medium | -.13 | -.10 | -.06 | -.02 | -.14 | -.09 |
| Type of question | .58*** | .51*** | .07 | -.04 | .15 | .03 |
| R^2 | .26*** | .38*** | .00 | .46*** | .02 | .49*** |
| ΔR^2 | | .12*** | | .46*** | | .48*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of this first study show that partial support was found for hypothesis 6.1 — using the medium of chat for simple questions leads to a more positive customer experience than the telephone; the effect on customer experience will be found regardless of the relational model applied by customers. For both perceived impact and recommendation intention, chat leads to a significantly better experience than the telephone. However, we did not see this effect on consumption emotions and customer satisfaction. The second part of the hypothesis appears to be confirmed: the effect on customer experience is found regardless of the relational model applied by customers. The mediation analysis shows that the relational models had no mediating effect in this study. In this study we did not find any support for hypothesis 6.2 — in the case of complex questions, a telephone call will lead to a strengthening of CS norms and thus to a better customer experience than a chat conversation. The telephone call showed no effect on CS and the customer experience of telephone contact is no better than chat contact, even if it is a complicated question. On the contrary, both with simple questions and with complex questions a chat conversation shows a more positive customer experience. Our analyses show that on the emotions of frustration and discontented, there is a significant interaction effect between the type of question and the type of medium. If the complex question is handled by telephone this clearly leads to more frustration and discontentment. We also found no support in this study for hypothesis 6.3 — in the case of a complex question a chat conversation leads to a strengthening of MP and thus to a poorer

customer experience — on the contrary, the medium of chat has no effect on the MP relational model and chat actually leads to a better customer experience.

6.3 Channel Choice and Channel Direction

6.3.1 Introduction

Until recently, most organisations, both profit and non-profit, have offered their customers a wide range of service channels. These might include a customer service desk, mail, telephone, and internet/email. In recent years organisations have become increasingly aware of the advantages of electronic communication. Studies by the Canadian Customs and Revenue Agency calculated that the use of electronic channels was, on average, 20 times less expensive than a channel in which employees are involved (cited in Ebbers, Pieterse, & Noordman, 2008). This is the reason that more and more organisations are encouraging their customers to make use of the digital channel. This is also referred to as channel direction. Chapter 3 showed that customers have also noticed this channel direction and have a sense that they are increasingly forced to communicate through the internet and email.

Channel direction can take place in many ways. For example, organisations can make it difficult for customers to find a telephone number in their written communications or on their internet site. Organisations can also simply prohibit customers from contacting them by telephone. Emotions can arise when customers feel that their freedom of choice or autonomy is affected. Unlike other studies on channel direction, in our study we have investigated channel direction from the perspective that channel direction usually means a restriction of freedom of choice and an undermining of the autonomy of customers. Based on previous research (e.g., Brehm, 1966, 1989; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974), the expectation is that — depending on the nature and tone of the channel direction — a limitation of the freedom of choice will result in a greater or lesser reaction of emotional resistance. A study by Liu (2012) discusses the impact of forced self-service on customers. This study shows that imposing a self-service for a specific group of customers can have disastrous consequences for their customer experience. In the second study of this chapter we therefore look at the impact of a restriction of freedom of choice in communication channels on the customer experience and the relational models used by the customer.

6.3.2 Limitation of Freedom of Choice: Absolute or Non-Absolute

According to previous scientific research, customers can respond in two ways to a restriction of their freedom of choice. These two ways seem to contradict each other. The first research stream suggests that people enter into a series of cognitive processes that are aimed to place the restriction in the most positive light for the particular individual (Aronson, 1989; Elster, 1983; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). This set of processes is called rationalisation. The cognitive processes have to identify a specific purpose that is served by the restriction of freedom of choice, and this purpose makes it more attractive for those people who are in the process of rationalisation. According to this theory, when it comes to channel direction, people would tell themselves the reasons why it is better for them to use the internet channel. For example, people might think that using the internet or email is better for their wallet or that the use of the internet makes a positive contribution to the environment. The first argument fits well within MP relationship norms, the second argument fits well within CS relationship norms. In the MP relational model, people are attached to the value of achievement, which can be explained in a business context as a good price-performance ratio. People that use CR relationship norms are more attached to caring for each other and caring for the environment (Roccas & McCauley, 2004).

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The second research stream suggests a different reaction when people are limited in their freedom of choice. According to this stream, people are motivated to restore a restriction in freedom and they will react negatively to others' attempts to restrict this freedom (Brehm, 1966/1989; Wicklund, 1974). In so doing, the value that a person attributes to his or her freedom of choice will be emphasised. The freedom of choice is made more attractive and the person that is faced with the restriction of freedom of choice will try to restore his or her freedom of choice. The reasoning followed in the second stream fits in particularly well within the thoughts that MP customers will have in such a situation (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Patino, 2011). MP customers will try to restore the price-performance balance and if this balance is disturbed it will lead to a strengthening of MP norms. Researchers describe the reaction in which people emotionally resist a restriction in freedom of choice as reactance (Brehm, 1966/1989; Wicklund, 1974).

For decades the conflicting streams of research stood side by side in the psychological literature. Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons (2012) have shown that the nature of the restriction determines which of the two processes will occur.

An absolute restriction is complete, certain, and permanent; there are no (temporary) alternatives. For our study an absolute restriction of freedom of choice in communication channels could mean, for example, that from a certain moment on one can only communicate via the internet for a particular action. It is no longer possible to make a telephone call to the service department. A non-absolute restriction is incomplete, uncertain, or temporarily restricted. For our study this would mean that people (temporarily) still have an alternative channel of communication at their disposal, such as the telephone. The investigation of Laurin et al. (2012) shows that if the restriction of freedom of choice is absolute, people are more inclined to rationalisation. They will thus try to place the restriction of freedom of choice in a positive light. A non-absolute restriction evokes reactance because people are confronted with the fact that they are going to lose something in the future that is still currently available.

In the second study in this chapter, two scenarios of channel direction will be submitted to customers: an absolute and a non-absolute scenario. The absolute scenario indicates that from a specific time, and for a certain operation, customers will be forced to use the internet. No alternative channel is available. In the non-absolute scenario the customers hear the same message, but the customer does have an alternative available: for a period of three months the customer has the ability to make a telephone call if the internet is a too great a hurdle. The aim here is to investigate what effects the different scenarios have on the customer experience and the relational models that customers use. The main premise is that a restriction of the freedom of choice leads to more frustration and irritation and a feeling of being unfulfilled or discontented. The restriction will have a negative impact on the customer experience. It is to be expected that this effect is greater when people are subject to a non-absolute scenario than when they are subject to an absolute scenario. The absolute scenario might even lead to a positive response.

6.3.3 Customer Reactions to Channel Direction

When organisations direct customers towards the internet, thereby reducing customer choice, this could have consequences for the relational models applied by customers and their experience of the service process. Chapter 3 showed that a restriction of freedom of choice leads to a weakening of CS relationship norms. Apparently, customers feel a restriction of freedom of choice as a violation of the norms and values of the CS relational model. One of the most important values in relation model CS is equivalence (Roccas &

McCauley, 2004). The restriction of freedom of one party by the other party will be seen as a violation of this value, which will lead to a less positive customer experience. Within an MP relation a restriction on freedom of choice will be experienced by the person as a deterioration of the cost-benefit ratio, unless it means that the costs are reduced. Each party in the MP relationship aims at the best possible cost-benefit ratio. The MP customer will realise that restricting the freedom of choice by sending him or her to the internet, will have a favourable effect on costs for the organisation. Initially a customer will assume that this will also be beneficial for him or her. However, if the organisation does not provide any compensation, the customer will tend to additionally emphasise the costs and benefits ratio in the relationship. This could eventually lead to a strengthening of MP relationship norms. However, we expect that this effect will not occur directly, but only in the longer term. This assumption seems to be confirmed by the results of the study presented in Chapter 4. These results show that a restriction of freedom of choice leads to a strengthening of MP, but the relationship between freedom of choice and MP is not very strong ($\beta = .09, p < .01$, see Table 4.2). Chapter 4 also shows that the relationship between freedom of choice and the relational model Authority Ranking (AR) is stronger ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$). A limitation of freedom of choice is therefore surely expected to lead to a strengthening of AR relationship norms. Chapter 3 showed that in general the relational model AR has a negative impact on the customer experience. A restriction on the freedom of choice will lead to a less positive customer experience than if there is no restriction on freedom of choice. This effect will clearly be more visible in a scenario of non-absolute limitation of freedom of choice than in a scenario with an absolute limitation.

Hypothesis:

6.4 *A limitation in the freedom to choose a communication channel leads to a weakening of CS relationship norms and a strengthening of AR relationship norms, which in turn leads to a more negative customer experience than if the freedom of choice is not limited; this effect is stronger in the case of a non-absolute limitation than in the case of an absolute limitation of the freedom to choose.*

6.4 Study 2: Limitation of the Freedom to Choose

In the second study of this chapter we investigated the effect on customer experience and relational models if customers are required to use the internet channel for future communication. We investigated the impact on the customer

experience if an organisation decides that customers can no longer call the service department to ask a question, but that these customers can only do this by mail or via the internet. A distinction is made between an absolute limitation of this freedom to choose a communication channel, a scenario in which customers have no available alternative, and a non-absolute limitation that, for a period of time, continues to provide customers with an alternative channel. Because none of the organisations that participated in this project wanted to be associated with such a strong form of channel control, we decided to conduct the study with a fictional organisation and a fictional customer relationship.

6.4.1 Method

6.4.1.1 Experimental design and procedure. The study consisted of a between-groups design with a single independent variable with three levels. The independent variable consisted of three different scenarios of restricting freedom of choice. One group of customers saw a scenario in an absolute variant, a second group the customers saw a scenario in a non-absolute variant, and a third group of customers was given a neutral scenario. The latter group formed the control group. In the neutral scenario there was no restriction of freedom. For a description of the three scenarios see Section 6.4.1.3 Stimulus material. In the study we used a fictional organisation, in this case a pension fund. The participating customers were asked to empathise with the situation described, which was a situation that occurred in relations to their pension fund.

6.4.1.2 Participants. The investigation was held among customers of the Social Welfare Institute, and they were approached by mail to ask if they would be willing to participate in the investigation. 191 Customers fully and correctly completed the questionnaire. We worked with a manipulation with three scenarios (absolute scenario, non-absolute scenario, neutral scenario). Customers were randomly assigned to one of these conditions. Seventy customers read the absolute scenario, 73 customers read the non-absolute scenario, and 48 customers saw the neutral scenario.

6.4.1.3 Stimulus material. At the start of the study we presented one of the following three scenarios to the participating customers. The first scenario (absolute) describes a situation in which the customer has conduct all future communication with the pension fund over the internet. No alternative communication channel is offered. In the second scenario (non-absolute) the

customer still has an alternative communication channel available (telephone). The third scenario is for the control group. In this scenario, there is no restriction on the freedom to choose a communication channel.

Absolute scenario

During your working years you have built up a supplementary pension with the pension fund provider that is active in your industry. You are approaching retirement age and are considering contacting the pension fund provider to ask exactly how everything will work once you retire. However, six months before you retire you receive a letter from your pension fund provider stating that the organisation has decided to switch to digital services. This means that from that moment, all communication will be done through the internet. This also means that it is no longer possible to call your pension fund provider. From now on you will receive your pension statements by mail, but will also have to use a digital application form to apply for pension benefits. You will receive this application form by mail. The mail will explain how the procedure works. If you have any questions about your supplementary pension you have to use email to ask your questions.

Non-absolute scenario

The description here was the same as that for the absolute scenario, but with the following addition: "If you have any problems using the internet or if you do not have access to the internet, for three months there will still be a special telephone number that you can call for help and support."

Scenario control group

During your working years you have built up a supplementary pension with the pension fund provider that is active in your industry. You are approaching retirement age and are considering contacting the pension fund provider to ask exactly how everything will work once you retire. Six months before you retire you receive a letter from your pension fund provider that explains how the application procedure works.

6.4.1.4 Measures. In this study we used the same instruments as the instruments described in section 6.2. In measuring relational models we also measured AR again because in this study the freedom of choice of the customer is actually limited. Chapter 4 showed that there is a significant relationship between freedom of choice and the presence of AR. The Cronbach's Alpha of the five CS statements used in this study was $\alpha = .64$, for the three AR statements $\alpha = .63$, and for the four MP statements, $\alpha = .42$. The reliability for the MP

statements was too low. Removing one or more statements did not result in a higher reliability of MP statements. Because the statement, “The interaction between the organisation and me is strictly rational: we both calculate what our payoffs are, and act accordingly”, best represented what the MP relational model stands for, we used this statement as a single item to measure the presence of MP.

6.4.2 Results

6.4.2.1 Influence of manipulation on customer experience

6.4.2.1.1 Perceived impact. First, a one-way ANOVA was performed to analyse the effect of the manipulation (absolute scenario, non-absolute scenario, neutral scenario) on the perceived impact. This analysis shows a significant difference between the valuation of the absolute and the neutral scenario, but also between the valuation of the non-absolute scenario and the neutral scenario ($F(2, 188) = 6.25, p < .01$; Figure 6.4). Customers think that both an absolute and a non-absolute restriction of freedom of choice will have a negative impact on the customer experience ($M_{\text{ABSOLUTE}} = 2.63, SD = .73$; $M_{\text{NON-ABSOLUTE}} = 2.47, SD = .77$; $M_{\text{CONTROL}} = 2.94, SD = .63$). There was no significant difference in perceived impact between the non-absolute and the absolute scenario. In the eyes of the customers, the restriction of freedom of choice led to a less good customer experience, but it did not seem to matter whether this restriction is absolute or non-absolute.

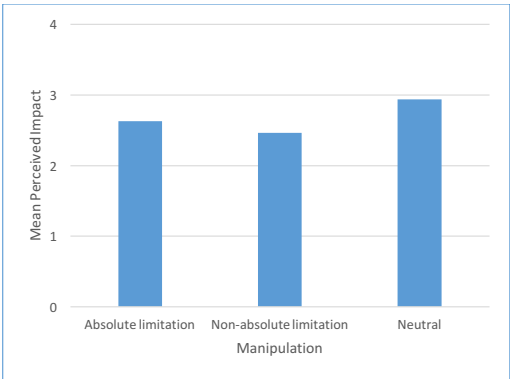


Figure 6.4. Influence of limitation of freedom of choice on perceived impact

6.4.2.1.2 Consumption emotions. Following this, we performed a one-way ANOVA to analyse the effect of the manipulation (absolute, non-absolute, neutral scenario) on consumption emotions (Table 6.6).

Table 6.6

Means and standard deviations of the effect of limitation of freedom of choice on consumption emotions

| | Absolute scenario | | Non-absolute scenario | | Neutral scenario | | <i>F</i> (2,188)= | <i>p</i> |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Frustrated | 2.67 ¹ | 1.03 | 3.05 ¹² | .96 | 2.65 ² | .96 | 3.62 | .03 |
| Contented | 2.86 | .73 | 2.74 | .88 | 2.92 | .79 | .77 | .46 |
| Optimistic | 2.46 | .86 | 2.45 | .80 | 2.52 | .77 | .12 | .89 |
| Encouraged | 2.39 | .77 | 2.45 | .75 | 2.60 | .84 | 1.14 | .32 |
| Happy | 2.27 | .85 | 2.19 | .83 | 2.46 | .87 | 1.45 | .24 |
| Irritated | 2.83 | 1.04 | 3.05 ¹ | 1.03 | 2.67 ¹ | 1.02 | 2.18 | .02 |
| Fulfilled | 2.61 ¹ | .79 | 2.99 ¹ | .75 | 2.90 | .75 | 4.48 | .01 |
| Hopeful | 2.36 | .89 | 2.59 | .91 | 2.67 | .91 | 2.00 | .14 |
| Unfulfilled | 2.89 | .88 | 2.81 | .84 | 2.79 | .77 | .23 | .80 |
| Discontented | 2.87 | .98 | 3.11 | .94 | 2.77 | .93 | 2.11 | .12 |

Note: means with identical superscripts in the row differ significantly;

Customers who saw the non-absolute scenario were clearly more frustrated and irritated than those who saw the absolute or the control scenario. In addition, with respect to the emotion fulfilled, there was a significant difference between the absolute and the non-absolute scenario.

6.4.2.1.3 Customer satisfaction. A one-way ANOVA was then conducted to analyse the effect of the manipulation (limitation of freedom: absolute, non-absolute, or control) on customer satisfaction. This analysis shows that the differences between the three groups were not significant ($F < 1$).

6.4.2.1.4 Recommendation intention. A one-way ANOVA was subsequently conducted to analyse the effect of the manipulation (limitation of freedom: absolute, non-absolute, or control) on recommendation intention. This analysis shows a significant difference between customers who read the non-absolute scenario and customers who read the control scenario (Figure 6.5). Customers whose freedom to choose was limited in a non-absolute way were clearly more willing to recommend the organisation

than customers whose freedom to choose was not limited ($F(2, 188) = 3.15$, $p < .05$).

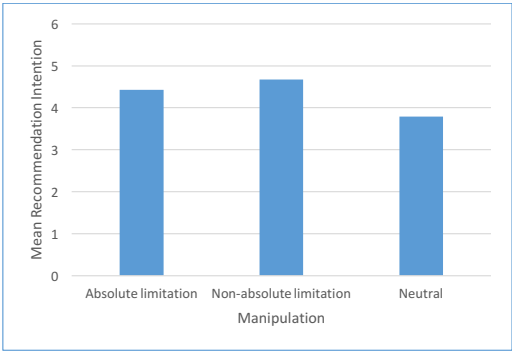


Figure 6.5. Influence of limitation of freedom of choice on recommendation intention

6.4.2.2 Influence of manipulation on relational models. If we conduct a one-way ANOVA and compare the relational models of the customers who read a scenario in which their freedom of choice was limited (absolute or non-absolute), with the customers in the control condition, we can see that there are no significant differences between the three groups regarding the presence of CS, MP or AR (all $F_s < 1$).

6.4.2.3 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the effect of a limitation in freedom of choice (independent variable) on customer experience (dependent variables) is mediated by the CS, MP and AR relational models, a number of mediation analyses were carried out. For the operationalisation of customer experience in the mediation analysis we used the measures of perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (for a graphic representation of this two-step analysis see Figure 6.3). First, the limitation in freedom of choice (dummy coded⁸) must predict the mediator (relational models CS and MP, Table 6.7). Second, the limitation in freedom of choice (dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention), with relational models CS and MP as covariates (Table 6.8). And last, the relationship between the limitation of freedom of choice and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

⁸Because limitation of freedom of choice in this study is a categorical variable with three levels, we used two dummy variables for the analysis: DUM_B1 for the absolute limitation of freedom, DUM_B2 for the non-absolute limitation of freedom. The variable DUM_B1 can have the value 0 (no absolute limitation of freedom) or 1 (absolute limitation of freedom). The variable DUM_B2 can also have the value 0 (no non-absolute limitation of freedom) or 1 (non-absolute limitation of freedom). If both of the variables have the value 0, then this automatically means that the respondent has not experienced any limitation of freedom.

The results of the first step show that there are no significant relationships between the independent variables and the relational models CS, MP and AR (Table 6.7).

Table 6.7

Regression results for influence of manipulations on CS, MP and AR

| | CS | MP | AR |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | β | β | β |
| <i>Experimental Variable</i> | | | |
| Absolute limitation of freedom | .11 | -.03 | .04 |
| Non-absolute limitation of freedom | .10 | -.13 | .00 |
| R^2 | .01 | .01 | .04 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the second step show that in this study the relational models have no mediating effect on the relationship between dependent and independent variables (Table 6.8). The direct relationships remain significant if the covariates are added.

Table 6.8

Regression results for influence of limitation of freedom on perceived impact, customer satisfaction and recommendation intention with covariates CS, MP and AR relational models

| | Perceived Impact | | Customer Satisfaction | | Recommendation Intention | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Communal Sharing | | .21*** | | .47*** | | .43*** |
| Market Pricing | | .05 | | .16** | | .04 |
| Authority Ranking | | .02 | | .07 | | .11 |
| <i>Experimental variable</i> | | | | | | |
| Absolute limitation of freedom | -.20* | -.22* | .02 | -.02 | .16 | .12 |
| Non-absolute limitation of freedom | -.31** | -.33** | .01 | -.03 | .22* | .18* |
| R^2 | .06** | .11** | .00 | .29*** | .03* | .22*** |
| ΔR^2 | | .05** | | .29*** | | .19*** |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

With regard to Hypothesis 6.4 — restricting freedom of choice leads to a weakening of CS and a strengthening of AR, which in turn has a negative impact on the customer experience — only support was found for the second part of the hypothesis. We see that a restriction in freedom of choice has a negative impact on perceived impact, consumption emotions, and recommendation intention. However, we do not see a weakening of CS or strengthening of AR. It is therefore to be concluded that a restriction of freedom of choice leads to a negative customer experience, but this is not because the CS or AR norms are adjusted. The mediation analyses also show that the relational models do not have a mediating effect. Partial support was found for the second part of hypothesis 6.4 — the impact on customer experience is stronger in a non-absolute than in an absolute scenario. With regard to consumption emotions, we see that a non-absolute restriction of freedom leads to more frustration and irritation than an absolute limitation.

6.5 Discussion

This chapter has examined the impact of the use of digital channels on customer experience. Customers and organisations are increasingly making use of the digital channel, and customers are often encouraged, or even forced to do so by the organisation. In this chapter, the effects of this development are examined with respect to two aspects. In the first study we examined whether the communication medium influences the relational models and the customer experience. Based on the Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), one would expect that the telephone is a richer medium than a digital medium, especially when it is used for handling complex questions. The hypothesis we formulated at the start of the study — that for a complex question the telephone would have a more positive impact on customer experience than chat — proved to be wrong. Customers think that chat is not only better for simple questions but also for complex questions chat makes a more positive contribution to the customer experience than the telephone. Chat also has a more positive influence than the telephone on recommendation intention. These findings contradict the Media Richness Theory. A possible explanation for this is that the convenience aspect has played a role in the assessment. According to Pieterse (2009), ease of use plays an important role in the choice of a communication channel. It could be that chat is considered to be a more accessible and easier medium to use and that ease of use is weighted more heavily than richness in the assessment of the medium.

The first study also showed that people who heard the complex question over the telephone became more frustrated and discontented than those who dealt with the same question via chat. The complex question was associated with a negative message for the client and it could be that the impact of this message had a stronger effect on the emotional experience in a telephone call than it did in a chat conversation. In a telephone conversation the emotion of the customer about the negative message can be felt more than in the chat conversation. This may explain the interaction effect that occurs when we look at the effect of both manipulations (type of medium and type of question) on the emotions of frustration and discontentment. It can also be that the voice of the employee that is heard by the respondent is found to be unpleasant. After all, with chat you do not hear a voice. A third explanation could be found in the (unconscious) associations that people have with the medium of the telephone. Study 1B, presented in Chapter 3, already showed that, in general, people do not have positive associations with the contact centres of large service providers. This form of contact is usually associated with long waiting times, complicated IVR menu's, and employees who are not involved or do not have the right knowledge.

The second study makes clear that a restriction of the freedom of choice in communication channels has a negative impact on the customer experience. This applies to both an absolute as well as a non-absolute limitation of freedom. However, the effect is less strong in the case of an absolute limitation of freedom of choice, which could indicate some form of rationalisation (Aronson, 1989; Elster, 1983; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002). The restriction of freedom of choice has no impact on customer satisfaction. These results suggest that a single restriction of freedom of choice leads to one bad transactional customer experience, but it has no impact on the way in which a customer assesses the overall relationship. The perceived impact gives an indication of the experience of a single transaction, while consumption emotions, satisfaction, and recommendation intention are indicators of the overall relationship.

A non-absolute restriction of the freedom to choose a communication channel leads to more frustration and irritation than an absolute restriction of freedom of choice or no restriction. This could be an indication of the occurrence of reactance in the case of a non-absolute limitation of freedom of choice (Brehm, 1966/1989; Wicklund, 1974). The hypothesis that the effect of an absolute limitation on the customer's experience would be less negative than a non-absolute limitation (Laurin et al., 2012) is confirmed by the second study. The effect is only found in the emotional experience of customers. Further

investigation is needed to determine with certainty whether it actually is reactance and rationalisation. The study also shows that customers that saw the non-absolute scenario are more fulfilled. We could not find a suitable explanation for this result. One possible explanation could be that customers did not understand this emotion and interpreted fulfilled as a negative emotion. It could also be that customers in the non-absolute scenario feel more fulfilled because they still have the opportunity to call the organisation. The service offering is therefore more extensive than in the case of the absolute scenario.

The research results show that neither the used communication-medium (Study 1) nor a restriction of freedom of choice (Study 2) have a significant influence on the relational models. Apparently these interventions fit within the expectations and relationship norms customers have for the organisation at this moment, and there is no reason to modify these norms. The interventions are not seen as taboo trade-offs (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997/2015; see Chapter 5) and apparently do not violate once activated relationship norms.

The mediation analyses indicate that the relational models do not have a mediating effect on the influence of the interventions described in this chapter. Earlier research (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Parasuraman, 2013) showed that the nature of the relationship might influence the effects of poor service, and that the nature of the relationship might mitigate or amplify these effects. We have not found such an effect in our studies. The fact that the described interventions have no effect on the relational models, and that these models do not have a mediating effect, could mean that this type of one-time intervention does not affect the overall image that the customer has of the relationship with the service provider. As already noted in Chapter 5, once activated, the relational models are apparently a fairly constant factor in the mind of the customer. It could well be that if a customer is repeatedly confronted with this type of interventions he or she or will change the image of the relationship. To determine whether this is the case further, longitudinal research is required.

Main conclusions of this chapter

The research described in this chapter shows that chat has a significantly better effect on the customer experience than telephone. Chat also leads to a higher recommendation intention. The kind of question that the medium is used for is unimportant. The study further shows that when people have a complex question, they feel more frustrated and discontented when the question is handled by telephone than when the question is handled in a chat conversation. A limitation of freedom of choice in communication channels has a negative impact on the customer experience. A non-absolute restriction of freedom of choice leads to more frustration and irritation than an absolute limitation. This could indicate the occurrence of reactance in a non-absolute scenario and/or rationalisation in the case of the absolute scenario. The extent to which the relational models are being used is not affected by the type of medium (telephone or chat). Even if an organisation has more or less forced a customer to use the internet, in the short term that will not affect the relational model used by the customer. The relational models in the studies described in this chapter do not have a mediating effect on organisational interventions. This means that relationship norms do not play a role in making a choice for one of the available communication channels and in the experience the customer has with organisational interventions that are designed to provide guidance in the use of these communication channels.

7 Is it Possible to Activate Relationship Norms in Customer Communication?



Chapter 3 showed that there is a significant relationship between the relational models used by customers and their customer experience in terms of consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention. For example, as the CS relational model is more present, customers have a better emotional experience, are more satisfied, and are more willing to recommend the organisation. Previous research (Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2009; Wan, Hui, & Wyer, 2011) has also shown that relational models are a good instrument to predict the customer reaction to communications from a person or organisation. It is therefore obvious that organisations that want to improve their customers' experience should seek tools that allow them to activate or influence relational models. In this chapter we will investigate the opportunities that organisations have to activate and influence relational models and customer experience by priming customers with specific words and images.

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 Activating or Influencing Relationship Norms in a Customer-Supplier Environment

Knowing that relational models have a significant impact on customer experience, a compelling question is whether it is possible to activate and influence relational models in customer-supplier relations. Previous studies

(e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk et al., 2009; Wan et al., 2011) have shown that, if customers enter into a relationship with a person, a brand, or an organisation, they use relationship norms to evaluate the relationship and the actions that take place within this relationship. For instance, the studies by Aggarwal (2004) and McGraw and Tetlock (2005) showed that adherence to or violation of relationship norms influenced the appraisal of marketing actions, a business proposal, and the overall brand evaluations. A study by Tuk et al. (2009) showed that, if a Market Pricing (MP) norm is activated, people react less negatively to a recommendation if they know that the referent will receive a financial reward for it. Wan et al. (2011) discovered that a customer responds differently to poor service if he finds himself in a business relationship than if he is in a personal relationship. A friendly relationship with a service provider can sometimes decrease the negative feelings that consumers experience as the result of poor service.

In most of the abovementioned studies (Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Wan et al., 2011), the researchers activated relationship norms by

explicitly mentioning the relationship in scenario descriptions. In other studies the researchers made use of more unobtrusive techniques to activate relationship norms. For example, in the study by Tuk et al. (2009), relationship norms were activated unobtrusively by asking the participants to solve a word search puzzle. MP relationship norms were activated by using words related to the marketplace (like price, store, and purchase). In the Equality Matching (EM) condition, these words were related to people with whom the participants had EM relationships in real life (e.g., lecturers). Images can also be strong but unobtrusive influencers of relationship norms and behaviour (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Dijksterhuis, Smith, Van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006). For instance, Vohs et al. (2006) confronted participants with images of money on the screensaver of their computer and showed that these participants were less willing to help a fellow student than participants who were primed with neutral concepts.

When it comes to the underlying process that explains how relationship norms become activated and affect subsequent judgements and behaviour, the question arises of whether these norms occur outside awareness without explicit appraisal. To address this question, the studies by Tuk et al. (2009) and Wan et al. (2011) included a task to impair the cognitive capacity of the participants while processing information by giving them an unrelated filler task. The idea behind a filler task is that, if participants have to perform a cognitive task during the study, they will be less conscious of the prime and the prime will therefore have a stronger impact. The study by Wan et al. (2011) showed that, under conditions of cognitive impairment, an unobtrusive prime appeared to be effective. The study by Tuk et al. (2008) showed that the effects of the activation of relationship norms proved to be strongest when the cognitive capacity was limited.

The studies described above seem to indicate that it is possible to activate relationship norms. This can be achieved by giving someone a scenario to read that explicitly mentions the relationship, but it can also be achieved through the use of words and/or images that are unconsciously associated with specific relationship norms. For the MP relational model, one could think of market-related words, like cost, value, market, discount, sale, investment, or efficiency. In addition, for MP images one could for example think of an image of cash or an image of a supermarket. For the CS relational model, one could think of words and images that express values like equality, care for the environment, and care for each other, for example images that show a close friendship, a family, a football team, a choir, or people who are helping each other.

The abovementioned studies, in which words and/or images were used to activate relationship norms (Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk et al., 2009; Wan et al., 2011), all used fictional relationships between organisations and/or individuals instead of existing relationships between customers and service organisations. Besides that, the studies described a relationship with an individual or an individual employee of a company, not a relationship with a brand or an organisation as a whole. Finally, in none of the studies was a manipulation check carried out to check whether the activation of relationship norms had led to actual differences in the presence of relationship norms.

Our assumption on the basis of the results of Chapters 5 and 6 is that it will be easier to activate or influence relationship norms in a new or fictional relationship than in an existing relationship in which norms have already been activated. According to Verhoef et al. (2009), previous experiences play an important role in the development of customer experience. The first study in this chapter investigated whether it is possible to influence the relationship norms of existing customers under varying conditions of cognitive capacity.

Hypotheses:

- 7.1 *CS relationship norms will have a stronger presence among existing customers who are primed with images or words that are (implicitly) associated with the CS relational model than among customers who are primed with MP-related images/words or no images/words; this effect will be more pronounced if the cognitive capacity of the customers is impaired as opposed to the situation in which their cognitive capacity is not impaired;*
- 7.2 *MP relationship norms will have a stronger presence among existing customers who are primed with images or words that are (implicitly) associated with the MP relational model than among customers who are primed with CS-related images/words or no images/words; this effect will be more pronounced if the cognitive capacity of the customers is impaired as opposed to the situation in which their cognitive capacity is not impaired.*

7.2 Study 1: Activation of Relationship Norms with Images and Words

The first study reported in this chapter investigated the extent to which the relational models used by existing customers for their relationship with an organisation can be influenced by specific images (Study 1A) or specific words (Study 1B) that are associated with the CS or MP relational model.

7.2.1 Study 1A: Activation of Relationship Norms with Images

7.2.1.1 Method

7.2.1.1.1 Experimental design and procedure. The study consisted of a 3 x 2 between-groups design with an independent variable with three levels (relational model: MP images, CS images, and no images) and a second independent variable with two levels (cognitive load and no cognitive load). Customers were randomly assigned to one of the conditions and were presented with five CS pictures (Figure 7.1) or five MP pictures (Figure 7.2), which were displayed one after another in a fixed order and in a fixed time frame (5 seconds). Some of the customers saw no pictures. They formed the control group. After the slide show, some of the participants received a cognitive load task. They received the instruction to memorise seven symbols (@ * % # ? ! &) until asked to report them (Krul, 1993; Van den Bos, Peters, Bobocel, & Ybema, 2006; Tuk et al., 2009). While keeping the symbols in mind, the customers were instructed to read the following scenario:

At a party you heard from your neighbour that he has taken out an internet health insurance. Since your neighbour is very excited about this product, you also decide to inquire about the possibilities of such insurance with your own health care insurer. You currently have regular health insurance. Because you do not make much use of the Internet, you decide to call the customer service department of your health care insurer. After dialling the phone number, you get an employee of your health care provider on the line, who asks what he can do for you. You explain the situation and ask what the advantages of internet insurance are. The employee explains what the benefits are but also what the limitations are. After this the employee asks whether all of this is clear and whether you have any further questions. You indicate that you are enthusiastic and that you want to apply for internet insurance. The employee explains that you can apply easily using the digital application form. After the conversation, you decide to apply directly and you turn your computer on. You go through all the steps described and send in the digital application form. After a week you still have not heard anything from your health care insurer. You try to remember what the employee told you but you cannot remember anything about the expected duration of this application procedure. Because you are not sure whether you have done everything right, you decide to call the customer service department again.

After reading the scenario, the customers were presented with a series of statements that were used to measure the presence of the CS and MP relational models (see Measures).

7.2.1.1.2 Participants. A total of 162 customers of the health care insurer (102 men and 60 women) participated in the study. Of these, 66 customers saw the CS images, 44 saw the MP images, and 52 saw no images; 84 customers were given the cognitive load task and 78 customers did not receive this task.

7.2.1.1.3 Stimulus material. A pretest was conducted ($n = 22$) to identify the images that were the most appropriate for activating CS and MP. The five images in Figure 7.1 were identified as being more appropriate for CS than for MP. The five images in Figure 7.2 were identified as being more appropriate for MP than for CS. Customers were randomly assigned to a condition (MP, CS, or no images). Some of the customers saw images that were associated in the pretest with CS, and some of the customers saw images that were associated in the pretest with MP.



Figure 7.1. CS images selected from the pretest and used in Study 1A (in the order in which they were presented to the customers)

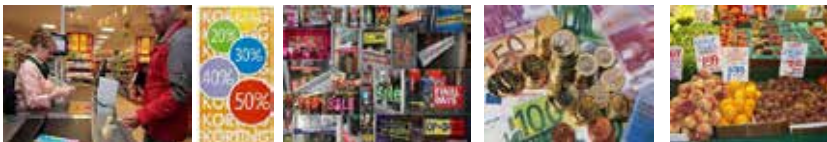


Figure 7.2. MP images selected from the pretest and used in Study 1A (in the order in which they were presented to the customers)

7.2.1.1.4 Measures. The only measure that we used in this study was the presence of the MP and CS relational models. To measure the relational models, we used a list of statements based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent could indicate on a 7-point scale (0 = not applicable at all to 6 = very applicable) the extent to which the statement was applicable to the relationship with the service provider. For our first empirical study of this thesis (described in Chapter 3), the original statements from Haslam and Fiske were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch

into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch, they were modified slightly to make them more applicable to a business relationship. As these modified statements did not fully correspond to Haslam and Fiske's original statements, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in our first empirical study (Study 1A, Chapter 3). This analysis resulted in 9 appropriate statements for the CS and MP relational models (for a complete description of the confirmatory factor analysis, see Appendix B). In this study the Cronbach's Alpha for CS was .76. The Cronbach's Alpha for MP was less than we expected but acceptable for the present purposes ($\alpha = .60$).

7.2.1.2.1

Results. A two-way ANOVA showed that the main effect of the images was not significant for the presence of CS ($F(2,161) = .08$, ns). CS did not have a stronger presence among the customers who saw the CS pictures than among the customers who saw MP or no images. There was also no significant difference in the presence of CS between customers who received a cognitive task and customers who did not receive such a task ($F(1, 161) = 1.51$, ns). However, there was a significant interaction between the manipulation of images and the manipulation of cognitive load ($F(2, 161) = 3.21$, $p < .05$; Figure 7.3). CS had a stronger presence among the customers who were primed with CS images than among the customers who had not seen any images but only when they were distracted by the cognitive load task ($p < .05$). This effect was not significant for the MP images and the control group.

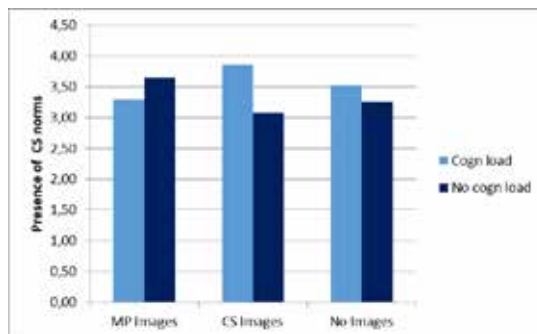


Figure 7.3. Results of a two-way independent ANOVA with the presence of the CS relational model as the dependent variable and relationship norm activation and manipulation of cognitive load as the independent variables.

A two-way ANOVA showed that there were no significant main or interaction effects for the presence of MP norms: all p s > .05.

7.2.1.3 Replication of the Study. Looking at the results of the first study, it appears to be possible to influence the CS relationship norms of customers by showing them images that are associated with CS primes. This does not apply to MP relationship norms, and the effects of the CS images seemed to depend on the cognitive capacity of the customers. The activation of CS relationship norms only works if the cognitive capacity of customers is limited. This is consistent with the findings from previous research (Aggarwal, 2004; Tuk, 2008). A possible explanation for the fact that only CS-related images were able to strengthen the presence of CS relational norms is that the participants in the first study were customers of a health care provider. It is possible that customers of a health care provider are more accustomed to CS images and that these images fit well within the intrinsic motivation of a customer to join a health care insurer: (health) care and attention at the moment when they are needed. A study by Karremans, Stroebe, and Claus (2006) showed that subliminal priming only works if the prime is connected to an already-existing intrinsic motivation to buy or use the product. To find out whether this effect played a role in our first study, the study was therefore replicated in exactly the same way but with customers of the banking department of the insurance company. Until the moment when the study took place, the bank insurer had not used CS images in its campaigns.

7.2.1.3.1 Method. In this study we used the same design and the same procedure as in the previous study (see Section 7.2.1.1.1). A total of 158 customers of the banking department of the insurance company participated in the study (94 men and 64 women). The average age of these customers was $M = 48.68$ ($SD = 11.05$). We also used the same stimulus material as in the previous study (see Section 7.2.1.1.3). In the scenario in which contact between a customer and the organisation is described, the words “health care insurer” were replaced with “bank insurer”. The “internet health insurance” was replaced with an “internet saving account”. Finally, we also used the same measures as in the previous study. In this second study, the Cronbach’s Alpha for the five CS statements was $\alpha = .83$, and for the four MP statements it was $\alpha = .60$.

7.2.1.3.2 Results. In line with the previous study, a two-way ANOVA showed that the CS relational model did not have a stronger presence among the customers who saw the CS images than among the customers who saw the MP or no images ($F(2, 157) = 1.23$, ns). There was also no significant difference

in the presence of CS between customers who did and customers who did not perform the cognitive load task ($F(1, 157) = 1.69$, ns). More notably, for the bank insurer, there was no significant interaction between the two manipulations ($F(2, 157) = .13$, ns). A two-way ANOVA also showed that there were no significant main or interaction effects for the presence of MP norms: all $ps > .05$. It can be concluded that, in replicating the first study, we did not find any effects of the manipulation. This reinforces the impression that the images used should be in line with the images that customers normally see in external communications from the organisation. The images also have to match the intrinsic motivation of customers to buy or use the product.

7.2.2 Study 1B: Activation of Relationship Norms with Words

Study 1A investigated the extent to which the relational models used by existing customers for their relationship with an organisation can be influenced by specific images. Study 1B will investigate whether it is also possible to influence relational models by priming customers with specific words.

7.2.2.1 Method. Study 1B consisted of a between-groups design with an independent variable with three levels (a word search puzzle with MP words, CS words, and neutral words). The words were derived from a pretest that was performed to select and validate the words. The pretest ($n = 22$) resulted in 10 words that were associated with the CS and MP relational models (five words for each model) and five words that were not associated with one of these models. The participants were presented with a word search puzzle (see Figure 7.4) and were instructed to solve this puzzle. In the CS condition, the words were related to the community (i.e., community, group, equal, trust, and family); in the MP condition, the words were related to the marketplace (i.e., price, money, customer, market, and purchase). In the control condition, we used neutral words (i.e., bike, tyre, park, table, and reading). After seeing the word search puzzle, all the participants performed a cognitive load task (see the first study). The aim was to maximise the chance of successful priming. After this, the participants had to read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine the described interaction with an employee of an insurance company. We used the same scenario as in the first study, adjusted for the relationship between a customer and the banking department of the insurance company (see Section 7.2.1.1.4). After reading the scenario, the customers had to read a series of statements that were used to measure the presence of the CS and MP relational models. In this study the Cronbach's Alpha for the five CS

statements was $\alpha = .78$, and for the four MP statements it was $\alpha = .65$. The study was attended by 252 customers of the insurance company (139 men and 113 women). The average age was $M = 45.57$ ($SD = 12.26$).

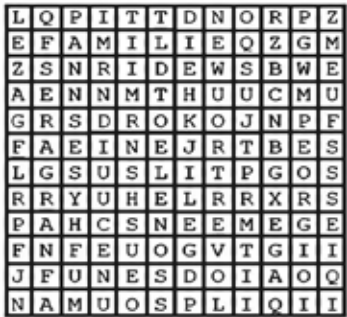


Figure 7.4. Example of the word search puzzle used for the CS condition (with the Dutch words ‘gemeenschap’, ‘groep’, ‘gelijkheid’, ‘vertrouwen’, and ‘familie’).

7.2.2.2 Results. A one-way ANOVA showed that CS was not significantly more present among the customers in the CS condition than among the customers in the MP or neutral condition ($F(2, 251) = 1.75$, ns). MP was not significantly more present among the customers in the MP condition than among the customers in the CS or neutral condition ($F(2, 251) = .98$, ns).

7.2.3 General Conclusion Studies 1A and 1B

For Hypothesis 7.1 – when existing customers of an existing organisation are shown CS images or words, this leads to a stronger presence of CS; this effect will mainly be seen as the cognitive capacity of customers is limited – partial support was found in the first two studies. CS images can indeed lead to a strengthening of CS, but this effect only occurs if customers have also performed a cognitive load task. For Hypothesis 7.2 – MP images or words lead to a stronger presence of the MP relational model – no support was found in the first three studies. Another interesting result of the first study was that priming only seems to work for the health care insurer (under conditions of limited cognitive capacity). We argued that the activation of a relational model needs to be connected to a specific intrinsic motivational goal, which represents the reason why the product or service is being purchased. This result is investigated in more detail in the second study of this chapter.

7.3 Study 2: Activation of Relationship Norms to Influence Switch Intention

In Study 1 an attempt was made to influence the relationship norms of existing customers by priming them with images and words that may be associated with one of the relational models. In Study 2 we investigated the effects of the primes on customer behaviour, more specifically the effects on switching behaviour. Based on the results of Study 1, one could assume that influencing relationship norms is especially possible if the words and images are connected to the intrinsic motivation to use or buy the product. This was investigated in more detail in the second study reported in this chapter. Study 2 investigated the switch intention of customers after they have been primed with words and images that are connected to a CS motivation or after they have been primed with words and images that are connected to an MP motivation. A CS motivation to buy a product is for example the desire to engage in nice activities with this product with family or friends. An MP motivation to buy a product is the wish to obtain the product in the most favourable conditions. The central question of Study 2 therefore is whether customers are more willing to switch to another product after they have been primed with CS images and words or whether they are more willing to switch after they have been primed with MP words and images. In this second study, we chose fictional relationships, because we expected to see a more pronounced effect than if we had used existing relationships. In the scenario description of Study 2, we also made a distinction between existing customers and new customers, because we expected a difference between these two groups.

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7.3.1 Customer Loyalty from the Perspective of Relational Models

The central question of this thesis concerns how organisations can build meaningful connections with their customers to improve customers' experience. The premise is that meaningful connections will lead to more loyal customers. Chapter 3 has already shown that CS customers have a more positive emotional experience. One might assume that CS customers are therefore also more loyal to the company. The Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 1991; for more information see Chapter 2) seems to confirm this: the theory states that people in a CS relationship have an intimacy motivation to enter into a relationship. A customer chooses an organisation because the organisation appeals to him or her. Within an MP relationship, the situation is quite different. Customers in an MP relationship want to obtain something from the organisation and are willing to pay for it. When the costs and benefits are no longer in balance, the

relationship will probably be terminated (Kaltcheva et al., 2011). Based on this assumption, one would expect customer loyalty to decrease and the willingness to switch to a competitor to increase as MP becomes more pronounced. Loyalty will increase and the willingness to switch to a competitor will decrease as CS is more present. This will be different in the case of an internal switch: if an organisation wants its customers to switch from one product to another, the willingness to switch will be higher when customers are inclined towards CS. CS customers assume that the organisation has the best intentions for its customers. They will therefore follow the organisation's wishes more easily (Kaltcheva et al., 2011).

Study 2 was developed to determine the effect of MP and CS words and images in a related context (a brochure) on switch intentions. In this study we presented customers with a brochure of a fictional commercial telecom company and measured the effect on the willingness of customers to switch to a different company or a different product of the same company. The study examined the influence of two different types of brochures on the relational models, the customer experience, and more specifically the willingness to change to the offer presented in the brochure (in this case an offer for an all-in-one package of the fictional organisation TelCom). The first of the brochures responded to a CS motivation to buy the product (spend time with your family), and the second brochure responded to an MP motivation to buy the product (lowest price). Our expectation was that the CS brochure would stimulate the presence of CS relationship norms. A stronger presence of CS norms would lead to increased loyalty and an increased intention to switch to the all-in-one product among existing customers. An MP brochure would stimulate the presence of MP relationship norms, but, based on the results of Chapter 3, we did not expect that a stronger presence of MP would have an effect on customer experience. Potentially new customers, who have a phone subscription elsewhere, would be more willing to switch to a competitor if they receive a brochure with MP primes. New customers would be more susceptible to a sharp price-performance (MP) proposition.

Hypotheses:

7.3 Customers who have been primed with CS-related words and images show a stronger presence of CS norms, which will result in a better customer experience (in terms of perceived impact, consumption emotions, and customer satisfaction); among existing customers this will lead to a higher intention to switch to another product within the same company as opposed to the intention to switch to a competitor among new customers;

7.4 Customers who have been primed with MP-related words and images show a stronger presence of MP norms; among new customers this will lead to a higher intention to switch to a competitor as opposed to the intention to switch to another product within the same company among existing customers.

7.3.2 Method

7.3.2.1 Pretest. In a pretest among 34 students from the University of Twente, a selection of 18 images and 5 pay-offs was tested to determine which images and pay-offs were most strongly associated with CS and respectively MP. We selected images and pay-offs that represented values that play an important role in the different relational models. For CS that was the principle of equivalence, and for MP it was the principle of achievement (Biber, Hupfeld, & Meier, 2008; Roccas & McCauley, 2004). The images and pay-offs that were associated most strongly with CS and MP were used to make a CS brochure and an MP brochure.

In the second pretest, the three brochures were presented to acquaintances of The Customer Connection, the consultancy firm of the author of this thesis. A total of 29 participants completed the questionnaire. This pretest was conducted to establish whether the CS and MP brochures were indeed associated with CS and MP. A one-way ANOVA showed that the participants who saw the CS brochure associated this brochure significantly more with CS than the participants who saw the MP or the neutral brochure ($F(2,28) = 7.18, p < .05$). Participants who saw the MP brochure associated this brochure significantly more with MP than the participants who saw the CS or the neutral brochure ($F(2,28) = 7.75, p < .05$).

7.3.2.2 Experimental design and procedure. The study had a between-groups design with two independent variables. The first independent variable was the status of the customer (existing versus new customer). The second independent variable was the relationship norm activation (CS and MP). The second independent variable activated relationship norms by presenting participants with a brochure. The study also included a control group of participants who read a neutral brochure and for whom no relationship norms were activated. After reading the brochure, the participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which measured customer experience (perceived impact, consumption emotions, and customer satisfaction), switching intention, and the presence of relational models.

7.3.2.3 Participants. A total of 186 participants completed the questionnaire (97 men and 89 women). The participants were all readers of the digital newsletter of The Customer Connection, the consultancy firm of the author of this thesis. The average age of the participants was $M = 47.5$ years ($SD = 11.63$). Of the participants, 63 were primed with CS relationship norms, 66 were primed with MP relationship norms, and 57 were not primed with relationship norms; 99 participants read the scenario of an existing customer and 87 the scenario of a new customer.

7.3.2.4 Stimulus material. The stimulus material used in this study to activate relationship norms consisted of a brochure with four pages. The first two pages differed by condition (Figures 7.5, 7.6, and 7.7) and were meant to prime customers with CS, MP, or neutral pictures and words. Pages three and four were the same for all three brochures and were added to impair the participants' cognitive capacity (Figure 7.8).



Figure 7.5 Front page and second page of the CS brochure (an image of a family, the pay-off “More fun to watch TV for the whole family!”, and the words “family”, “trust”, and “equally” incorporated into the text on page 2).



Figure 7.6 Front page and second page of the MP brochure (an image of money, the pay-off “For only €49,-”, and the words “price”, “money”, “purchase”, and “market” incorporated into the text on page 2)



Figure 7.7 Front page and second page of the neutral brochure (without CS or MP words and images)



Figure 7.8 Pages 3 and 4 of the brochure, used as a cognitive load task

7.3.2.5 Measures

7.3.2.5.1 Customer satisfaction. To measure customer satisfaction, customers were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale their overall customer satisfaction with TelCom (1 = very unsatisfied and 10 = very satisfied). Customer satisfaction was measured as a single item.

7.3.2.5.2 Perceived impact. The measure perceived impact was used in this study to measure the impact that the intervention has on customer experience in the eyes of the customer. After showing the manipulation (manipulation 1: existing versus new customer; manipulation 2: CS versus MP versus neutral brochure), customers had to indicate on a 5-point scale the impact that the manipulation had on their customer experience (1 = very negative to 5 = very positive). The perceived impact was measured as a single item.

7.3.2.5.3 Switch intention. The switch intention was measured in this study by asking customers the question “How likely is it that you are going to switch to the All-in-One package of TelCom?” Customers could indicate on a 10-point scale the chances that they would switch (1 = probability is zero to 10 = probability is very high). For participants who were placed in the scenario of the existing customer, this meant an internal switch from one product of TelCom to another product of TelCom. For customers who were placed in the

scenario of the new customer, this meant a switch from their present provider (a competitor of TelCom) to TelCom. The switch intention was measured as a single item.

7.3.2.5.4 Relational models. To measure CS and MP, we used a list of statements based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For a description of this measure, we refer to Section 7.2.1.1.4. The Cronbach's Alpha for each of the two subscales in this second study was $\alpha = .77$ for CS and $\alpha = .66$ for MP.

7.3.3 Results

7.3.3.1 Influence of Manipulation on Customer Experience

7.3.3.1.1 Perceived impact. A two-way ANOVA showed a main effect of the relationship norm activation on the perceived impact ($M_{CS} = 3.45$, $SD = .08$, $M_{MP} = 3.11$, $SD = .08$, $M_{NEUTRAL} = 3.37$, $SD = .08$; $F(2, 180) = 5.23$, $p < .01$). The participants perceived the CS brochure as more impactful on the customer experience than the MP brochure. There were no significant differences in the perceived impact of brochures between existing and new customers ($F < 1$). There was also no significant interaction between the type of brochure and the type of customer ($F < 1$).

7.3.3.1.2 Consumption emotions. Next a two-way ANOVA on consumption emotions showed significant differences between the CS and the MP relationship norm activation, particularly with the negative emotions irritation and discontent (see Table 7.1). Customers who saw the MP brochure were clearly more irritated ($M_{CS} = 2.56$, $SD = .12$; $M_{MP} = 2.74$, $SD = .12$; $M_{NEUTRAL} = 2.27$, $SD = .13$) and discontented ($M_{CS} = 2.27$, $SD = .11$; $M_{MP} = 2.62$, $SD = .11$; $M_{NEUTRAL} = 2.27$, $SD = .12$) than customers who saw the CS or the neutral brochure.

Table 7.1

F- and P-values for the influence of manipulations on consumption emotions

| | Type of Relationship Norm Activation: CS, MP, Neutral | | Type of Customer: Existing, New | | Interaction Activation vs Customer | |
|--------------|---|----------|------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|----------|
| | <i>F</i> (2, 180) = | <i>p</i> | <i>F</i> (1, 180) = | <i>p</i> | <i>F</i> (2, 180) = | <i>p</i> |
| Frustrated | 2.13 | .12 | .11 | .74 | 2.54 | .08 |
| Contented | 1.92 | .15 | .87 | .35 | .73 | .48 |
| Optimistic | .71 | .50 | 2.91 | .09 | .86 | .42 |
| Encouraged | .88 | .42 | 2.09 | .15 | .48 | .62 |
| Happy | .87 | .42 | 1.09 | .30 | 1.26 | .29 |
| Irritated | 3.72 | .03 | .05 | .82 | 1.27 | .29 |
| Fulfilled | .02 | .98 | 2.84 | .09 | 1.01 | .37 |
| Hopeful | 1.42 | .25 | 3.32 | .07 | .38 | .69 |
| Unfulfilled | .57 | .57 | 2.04 | .16 | .42 | .66 |
| Discontented | 3.45 | .03 | 3.26 | .07 | 2.61 | .08 |

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The analysis showed that there were no significant differences in emotional experience between existing and new customers. There were no significant interactions between the two manipulations.

7.3.3.1.3 Customer satisfaction. A two-way ANOVA showed that there was also a significant difference in satisfaction between customers who saw the MP brochure and customers who saw the CS or the neutral brochure ($F(2, 180) = 3.83, p < .05$). Customers who saw the MP brochure were significantly less satisfied than customers who saw the CS brochure or the neutral brochure ($M_{CS} = 5.98, SD = 1.60$; $M_{MP} = 5.41, SD = 1.70$; $M_{NEUTRAL} = 6.23, SD = 1.77$). The main effect of the customer type and the interaction with relationship norm activation was non-significant ($F(1, 180) = 1.30, ns$ and $F < 1$, respectively).

7.3.3.1.4 Switch intention. A two-way ANOVA on the effects of the relationship norm activation (CS, MP, or neutral) showed that the switch intention was significantly higher when customers saw the CS or the neutral brochure than when they saw the MP brochure ($M_{CS} = 5.71, SD = 1.64$; $M_{MP} = 4.17, SD = 2.24$; $M_{NEUTRAL} = 5.39, SD = 2.26$; $F(2, 180) = 9.84, p < .05$). There was no significant difference between existing customers and new customers ($F(1, 180) = 9.84, ns$), and there was no significant interaction between the two manipulations ($F < 1$).

7.3.3.2 Influence of Manipulations on Relational Models. A two-way ANOVA showed a significant difference in CS relationship norms between customers who saw the MP brochure and customers who saw the CS or the neutral brochure ($F(2, 185) = 13.71, p < .05$; Figure 7.9). CS norms were considerably less present among the customers who saw the MP brochure than among the customers who saw the CS or the neutral brochure ($M_{CS} = 3.08, SD = .93$; $M_{MP} = 2.68, SD = 1.17$; $M_{NEUTRAL} = 3.18, SD = 1.10$). There was no significant difference in the presence of CS between existing and new customers ($F < 1$). There was also no significant interaction between the two manipulations ($F < 1$).

The main and interaction effects on the presence of MP norms were non-significant ($F_s < 1$ for the main effects, $F(2, 180) = 1.34, ns$ for the interaction effect).

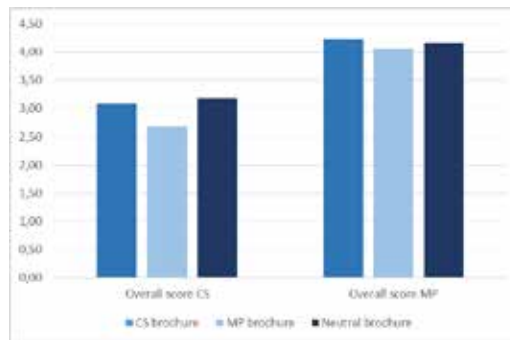


Figure 7.9. Effect of relationship norm activation on the presence of the CS and MP relational models

7.3.3.3 Mediation analysis. To determine whether the effect of the relationship norm activation on customer experience is mediated by the presence of the CS and MP relational models, a number of mediation analyses were carried out. For the operationalisation of customer experience in the mediation analyses, we used perceived impact, customer satisfaction, and switch intention as dependent variables. In accordance with Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analyses carried out for these dependent variables each consisted of two steps (Figure 7.10). First, the activation of relationship norms (CS and MP dummy coded⁹) must predict the mediator (presence of relationship norms, Table 7.2). Second, the activation of relationship norms (CS and MP dummy coded) must predict the dependent variables (perceived

⁹If variable DUM_B1 has the value 1, then the customer has seen the CS brochure. If the value is 0, then the customer has seen the MP or the neutral brochure. If variable DUM_B2 has the value 1, then the customer has seen the MP brochure. If the value of this variable is 0, then the customer has seen the CS or the neutral brochure. If both DUM_B1 and DUM_B2 have the value 0, the customer automatically has seen the neutral brochure. When variable DUM_C1 has the value 1, then it refers to an existing customer. If this variable has the value 0, then it automatically means that the respondent is a new customer.

impact, customer satisfaction, and switch intention), with the CS and MP relational models being added as covariates (Table 7.3). Finally, the relationship between the relationship norm activation and the dependent variables must be reduced when controlling for the mediator.

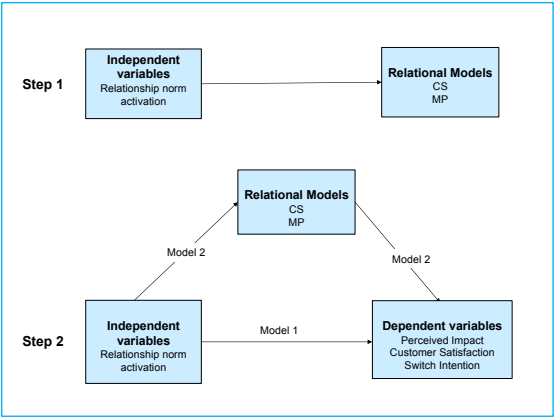


Figure 7.10. Mediation analysis for the mediating effect of CS and MP

Table 7.2

Regression results for the influence of manipulations on the CS and MP relational models

| | CS | MP |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|
| | β | β |
| <i>Independent Variable</i> | | |
| CS Brochure (Dum_B1) | -.04 | .03 |
| MP Brochure (Dum_B2) | -.22* | -.04 |
| Existing Customer (Dum_C1) | .01 | .04 |
| R ² | .04 | .01 |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results of the first step showed that only the presence of CS is significantly predicted by MP norm activation (Table 7.2). The results of the second step indicated that mediation applies to the effect of MP norm activation on perceived impact, customer satisfaction, and switch intention with the presence of CS as a mediator (Table 7.3). That is, the statistically significant effect of MP norm activation on perceived impact, customer satisfaction, and switch intention decreases or disappears when the covariate CS is added. This was supported by the results of the Sobel Z test (Sobel, 1982). The test revealed an

indirect effect of MP relationship norm activation on perceived impact (Sobel $Z = -2.51$, $p < .02$), customer satisfaction (Sobel $Z = -2.62$, $p < .01$), and switch intention (Sobel $Z = -2.59$, $p < .01$), mediated by the presence of CS.

Table 7.3

Regression results for the influence of type of brochure and type of customer on perceived impact, customer satisfaction, and switch intention with the covariates CS and MP relational models

| | Perceived Impact | | Customer Satisfaction | | Switch Intention | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 1 | Model 2 |
| | β | β | β | β | β | β |
| <i>Mediating Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Communal Sharing | | .43*** | | .53*** | | .54*** |
| Market Pricing | | .00 | | .17** | | -.01 |
| <i>Independent Variable</i> | | | | | | |
| CS Brochure (Dum_B1) | .06 | .08 | -.07 | -.06 | .07 | .09 |
| MP Brochure (Dum_B2) | -.20* | -.10 | -.23** | -.11 | -.27*** | -.15*** |
| Existing Customer (Dum_C1) | .05 | .05 | .08 | .07 | .08 | .07 |
| R ² | .06 | .24** | .05* | .42*** | .11*** | .38*** |
| Delta R ² | | .18*** | | .40*** | | |

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

For Hypothesis 7.3 – CS relationship norm activation leads to a stronger presence of CS, which in turn will result in a better customer experience and an increased intention to switch to a new product from the same organisation among existing customers – partial support was found. From the mediation analysis, we can conclude not that CS norm activation leads to a stronger presence of CS norms but rather that MP norm activation leads to a less strong presence of CS. The effect is the same: MP norm activation led to a lesser emotional customer experience, lower customer satisfaction, and a lower switch intention among the customers who saw the MP brochure. The effect of relationship norm activation was similar for existing and new customers. For Hypothesis 7.4 – MP relationship norm activation leads to a stronger presence of MP, which will lead to a greater intention to switch to a competitor among new customers – no support was found.

7.4 Discussion

In this chapter we tried to determine whether and under which circumstances the relational models of (existing) customers can be influenced. The results of the first study (Study 1A) showed that it is indeed possible to influence an already-existing relational model but only with CS images and when the cognitive capacity of the customer is limited. The fact that a prime shows a stronger effect when the cognitive capacity is limited is consistent with the results of previous research (Aggarwal, 2004; Tuk, 2008). The activation of relationship norms of existing customers in the first study only showed an effect with the CS images. The most likely explanation for this result is that the participants in the investigation were customers of a health care insurer. Customers of a health care insurer are more accustomed to CS images, since these images fit within the intrinsic motivation of a customer to join a health insurance scheme. A study by Karremans et al. (2006) showed that subliminal priming only works if it connects to a motivational goal that is already present. The explanation for the phenomenon that priming is only effective when it connects to a motivational goal is that this type of goal is represented as desirable in the human brain. For customers of a health care insurer, the motivational goal could be the need for care. Care for each other and care for the environment are values that are strongly related to CS (Roccas & McCauley, 2004). The replication of the first study seemed to confirm this explanation. When the study was replicated with customers of a bank insurer, the CS images showed no effect.

Study 1B investigated whether it is also possible to influence the relationship norms by making use of certain words. Contrary to previous research (Tuk et al., 2008), a word search puzzle in this study showed no effect on the norms applied by existing customers. The most probable explanation for this result is that in our research we used existing relationships, as opposed to fictional relationships, which were used in previous research. An explanation for the difference in effect between images (Study 1A) and words (Study 1B) could be that solving a word search puzzle is an activity on a more conscious and cognitive level, whereby images usually have more impact on an unconscious and emotional level (e.g., Zaltman, 2003).

The words and images used in the first study were offered in an unrelated context. We assumed that the images and words would have a stronger impact if they were combined with each other, if they were presented in a related context (like a brochure or an internet site), and if they corresponded to a motivational goal. For that reason we designed a second study in which the CS

and MP words and images were placed in combination with each other and in a related context, that is, a brochure. The brochure was intended to activate CS and MP relationship norms. One brochure corresponded to a CS motivational goal: time spent with family and friends. The other brochure corresponded to an MP motivation: buying a good-quality product for a low price. Both the MP and the CS prime showed a significant effect on relational models and on customer experience. The explanation for this may be that, in the second study, the primes were offered in combination with each other and corresponded to a specific motivational goal. Another possible explanation could be that, in derogation from the first study, in the second study, we worked with a fictional organisation and fictional relationships. The fact that priming is more effective in a fictional relationship than in an existing relationship could indicate that the activation of relationship norms takes place at the moment when the relationship is started.

In the second study, the activation of CS relationship norms showed better results in all the dimensions of customer experience. This is in line with the results presented in Chapters 3 and 4. Customers perceive the organisation as warmer and more involved when they see a brochure with CS words and an image of a happy family. Something that may also play a role is the fact that people do not like to be confronted with the financial consequences of a transaction. Our research seems to support this assumption. The MP brochure with the image of a stack of coins may lead to more irritation and discontentment and less satisfaction than the CS or even the neutral brochure. Apparently people would rather see a CS or a neutral brochure than an MP brochure with a strong price/performance proposition. A similar result was found in the first study described in Chapter 5, which showed that customers prefer to receive a personalised letter or not to receive a letter at all than to receive a business-like letter. The business letter contained a considerable amount of information about the rates of gas and electricity.

Our expectation was that the activation of CS or MP relationship norms would lead to a stronger presence of CS and respectively MP, because the words and images used would function as a prime. The study showed, however, that the CS relationship norms were significantly less present among the customers who saw the business-like (MP) brochure than among the customers who saw the CS brochure. We identified a similar effect in Chapter 5, in which the business-like (MP) letter led to a weaker presence of CS (and not to a stronger presence of MP, as was expected). The explanation for the finding that an MP intervention leads to a weakening of CS relationship norms could be that an MP brochure

fits with the existing MP relationship norms, but it does not fit with the existing CS relationship norms, causing the CS norms to be adjusted downwards. A CS intervention is taken for granted by customers who are inclined towards CS and customers who are inclined towards MP norms.

In both studies of Chapter 7, the primes showed an effect only on the CS relational model and only if the cognitive capacity was limited. This suggests that activating relationship norms with words or images is more effective if it happens outside the awareness of customers. This probably also indicates that CS norms are more active on a subconscious level than MP norms. MP can be considered a rational model that probably appeals to a different part of the brain from CS. It can be assumed that MP norms are more active at the cognitive level. In an MP relationship, customers are continuously weighing costs and revenues against each other. If CS norms are more active on a subconscious level, this can also explain the difference between the effects of a prime with words and a prime with images.

Main conclusions of this chapter

The studies described in this chapter showed that the activation of relationship norms of existing customers is most successful when their cognitive capacity is limited and when images are used that respond to a motivational goal. Words alone are not strong enough to influence relationship norms. A combination of words and images in a related context (like a brochure or internet text) shows the strongest effect on relationship norms. The activation of CS relationship norms in the form of a corporate brochure with CS words and images leads to a better customer experience. Among existing customers this also leads to a stronger willingness to switch to another product of the same provider. Among possible new customers, the activation of CS relationship norms leads to a stronger willingness to switch to another provider. MP relationship norms, activated by a brochure with MP words and images, cause irritation and discontentment and lead to less satisfied customers. An MP brochure also leads to a weaker presence of CS than a CS or a neutral brochure.

8 General Discussion



8.1 Main Findings

According to previous research and publications, customer experience appears to be a key success factor in the relationship between an organisation and its customers (Gentile, Spiller, & Nogi, 2007; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Pine & Gillmore, 1999; Smith & Wheeler, 2002; Reichheld, 2003/2006). The main purpose of this dissertation was to gain more insights into the concept of customer experience and particularly into the influence of relationship norms on customer experience and the sustainability of customer relations. Both Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009) and Verhoef et al. (2009) developed models that describe a number of determinants and moderators of customer experience. Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) showed that besides organisational stimuli personal moderators, like customer involvement and the individuals' tendency to make decisions either in a more rational or in a more intuitive way, also play an important role. In the model by Verhoef et al. (2009), organisational stimuli and previous customer experiences are seen as possible determinants of customer experience. On the customer side, the model by Verhoef et al. (2009) posits that "the effect of the considered determinants on customer experience is moderated by consumers' goals" (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 33). According to Verhoef et al. (2009), these consumers' goals are shaped by factors such as personality traits, socio-demographics, location, and situational circumstances. Both the model by Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2009) and the model by Verhoef et al. (2009) do not mention expectations about the relationship or relationship norms as possible determinants or moderators of customer experience. Studying the scientific literature about relationships, we reached the conclusion that these relationship norms might play an important role in the evaluation of the actions and interventions of service organisations. If organisations violate the relationship norms that belong to a specific relational model, then this will result in negative emotions and reinforcement of the relationship norms that have been violated (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). This new perspective on customer relationships and their possible impact on customer experience was the main reason for our decision to focus our research on the applicability and effects of relationship norms in a customer-supplier environment. We achieved this by investigating the influence of relational models on customer experience. In previous research the relational models theory (Fiske, 1991) appeared to be a very useful instrument for understanding people's thoughts and feelings about their relationships with their environment. Most of the research into the applicability of relational models, however, was conducted in the atmosphere of personal and individual relationships. Only in the last decade

has the relational models theory also been investigated for its implications in a business environment (e.g., Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk et al., 2009; Wan et al., 2011). Most of this research was undertaken with fictional relationships. The most important contribution of this dissertation to the scientific literature is that it provides a deeper insight into the applicability of relational models in existing customer–supplier relationships and the effect of relational models on customer experience. Our research also shows that customers with different relationship norms have different customer experiences and that customers react to specific organisational interventions. Knowing that relational models are also used in customer–supplier relationships, it provides a deeper insight into how customers think and feel about their interactions with service organisations. Relational models tell us which norms and values are important in customer relationships, how they are used to evaluate this relationship, and how they affect customer experience. During the last decades, we have gained more insights into how the brain works and how important subconscious processes are in our daily behaviour. There are, however, hardly any validated measures that provide insights into the subconscious mind. Relational models provide an understanding of the way in which customers perceive and evaluate organisational interventions in customer contact, consciously and subconsciously. Our research is – as far as we know – the first empirical research project to examine relational models in already-existing and real-life customer relationships. It was possible to conduct research in real-life customer–supplier relationships because we had access to the customer databases of the organisations that participated in this research project. In the remainder of this chapter, we will try to answer the most important research questions formulated in Chapter 1 of this thesis:

- What is the influence of the type of organisation on relational models and what is the influence of relational models on customer experience (Section 8.1.1)?
- What makes a customer adopt either one or another relational model in a customer–supplier relationship (Section 8.1.2)?
- What is the influence of personalisation and digitisation on customer experience and relational models (Section 8.1.3 and 8.1.4)?
- Is it possible to activate or influence relationship norms by priming customers with specific words and/or images (Section 8.1.5)?
- Do relational models mitigate or amplify the effect of organisational interventions on customer experience (Section 8.1.6)?

8.1.1 Applicability of Relational Models to Customer–Supplier Relationships

In our first empirical study, we examined the applicability of relational models to a customer–supplier environment. The first question to be answered was whether relational models play a role in customer experience and what impact they have on customer experience. We focused on the three models of the Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 1991) that we assumed were most frequently used in customer relationships: Market Pricing (MP), Authority Ranking (AR) and Communal Sharing (CS). As we expected after reading the available literature on relational models (e.g., Fiske, 1991; Haslam & Fiske, 1999; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009; Kaltcheva et al., 2011), our research showed that customers use elements of all the relational models in their relationship with an organisation, but MP is most present. Our research also showed that the CS relational model has a clearer and significantly more positive relationship with customer experience than MP and AR. In accordance with our expectations, our research also showed that, as the presence of CS increases, customers feel happier and more hopeful, contented, optimistic, and encouraged. Furthermore, as CS relationship norms become more present, customers become less frustrated, irritated, and discontented. Customers who are inclined towards CS relationship norms are generally also more satisfied and have a higher recommendation intention than customers who are inclined towards MP norms. This result is consistent with previous research into relational models. According to Fiske (1991), a CS customer has another motive to start and continue the relationship. Instead of wanting something from the other, as is the case in an MP relationship, a person enters into a CS relationship because he is attracted by and wants to make a connection with the other. A CS customer therefore accepts more from the organisation and has the confidence that the other will act in the best interest of the customer. We also find this positive attitude to be present in customer experience: the stronger the presence of CS, the better the emotional experience, customer satisfaction, and intention to recommend the company. This means that, if an organisation wants to improve customers' experience, it has to activate or stimulate CS relationship norms. If the premise is that a good emotional experience leads to a lasting and meaningful customer connection, as is argued in the recent marketing literature (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Reichheld, 2006; Schmitt, 2003), the CS relational model is the key to such a kind of connection.

Is the CS relational model the holy grail for all service organisations? If an organisation wants loyal customers, a Communal Sharing relational strategy

seems to be most effective. However, if an organisation wants to attract large numbers of customers, the organisation is likely to pursue a Market Pricing relational strategy (Kaltcheva, Winsor, & Parasuraman, 2013). It will be less costly to maintain an MP relationship than to maintain a CS relationship. CS customers are generally more emotionally involved in the relationship, and they expect organisations to be involved with their customers. A consequence of this mutual involvement is that these customers will be more willing to accept a service failure. However, if CS customers experience a service failure and it is the last straw that breaks the camel's back, it will be much harder to satisfy a CS customer than an MP customer. Whereas an MP customer can be satisfied again by restoring the cost–benefit ratio, a CS customer has to be satisfied by restoring trust, which is more difficult. After all, trust is more easily lost than gained.

8.1.2 What Makes a Customer Adopt One or Another Relational Model?

The findings of our first empirical study, as described in Section 8.1.1, made us curious about what causes the differences in the presence of relational models applied by customers. Our first study showed that, in the eyes of customers, there are two dominant factors that nowadays play an important role in their experience and their evaluation of their relationship with organisations: the perceived involvement of the organisations and the freedom of choice that organisations offer to their customers in communicating with them. Customers nowadays feel that they are increasingly becoming a number and that there is less room for personal contact. They also feel limited in their possibilities for communicating with organisations and increasingly forced to communicate through the Internet and email. Our research showed that this is a general feeling that is present among customers of all types of organisations.

In our second empirical study, we investigated the effects of perceived organisational involvement and perceived freedom of choice on the activation of relationship norms. In this study we interpreted freedom of choice in a somewhat broader sense than only the freedom to choose the preferred communication channel. We defined freedom of choice as the freedom of the customer to choose, for example, an organisation, a product, or a mode of communication. Our research showed that if organisations, in the perception of customers, increase their involvement with customers and the freedom of choice, CS relationship norms will be activated more strongly. This is in

line with previous findings (Fiske, 1991; Haslam & Fiske, 1999; Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009; Kaltcheva et al., 2010). In a CS relationship, it is not to be expected that partners limit each other in the ways of communication with each other. Furthermore, one might assume that partners in a CS relationship are more involved with each other than partners in an MP or AR relationship, respectively.

Our research also showed that organisations that limit the freedom of choice of their customers will activate or stimulate AR relationship norms. A limitation of the freedom of choice within a relationship is apparently interpreted by customers as an authoritarian act. There also appeared to be a positive relationship between AR and perceptions of organisational involvement: the more involved the organisation, the stronger the presence of AR. However, we do not know whether this finding applies to specific types of organisations or rather occurs regardless of the type of organisation. This effect probably applies specifically to customers of non-profit organisations. In this study a large part of the participants were customers of the social welfare institute. Our research already showed that AR relationship norms have a relatively strong presence in the relationship between the social welfare institute and its customers. Due to the nature of the services of the social welfare institute (disability or unemployment benefits), the organisation knows a lot about its customers and is involved with their personal situation. This involvement does not always have to be experienced as positive.

If we reflect on our main research question – how can organisations master meaningful customer connections? – the main conclusion is that, if organisations want to establish a meaningful relationship with their customers, then they have to activate or stimulate CS relationship norms. This can be achieved by offering more freedom of choice in products, services, and communication channels as well as by showing more involvement with customers.

8.1.3 The Influence of Personalisation on Customer Experience and Relational Models

The results of our second empirical study, described in Section 8.1.2, showed that if, according to customers, organisations show more involvement with their customers, customers are more inclined to adopt CS and MP relationship norms. Our next research question was what the effect would be of a more personalised approach on customer experience and relational models and

what role relational models play in the way in which customers react to a more personalised approach. Personalisation is expected to have a positive effect on customer experience. Solomon and Surprenant (1987) distinguished two kinds of personalisation: outcome personalisation and process personalisation. Outcome personalisation involves the outcome of the service process, such as the confirmation of a change of address, an invoice, or a ticket. Process personalisation involves the service process itself, such as a phone call or a personal conversation with a customer. We investigated the effects of outcome personalisation (in the form of a personalised versus a business-like letter) and process personalisation (in the form of a personalised versus a business-like phone call) on relational models and customer experience. Outcome personalisation showed a positive effect on all the dimensions of customer experience (perceived impact, consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, and recommendation intention). Process personalisation only had an effect on the impact on customer experience as perceived by the customer (perceived impact). We think that it is not plausible that the form of personalisation causes the difference between the effects of the first and the second study. A possible explanation for the fact that we found differences in the results between outcome and process personalisation could be that, in the study on the effects of process personalisation, customers had to listen to a phone call, while, in the study on the effects of outcome personalisation, customers had to read a letter. It can be argued that listening to a phone call activates a different part of the customer's brain from reading a letter. Reading a letter is a cognitive activity. It is necessary to stay focused to understand what the letter is saying. Listening to a phone call makes it easier for the customer to shift his or her attention to other things, certainly if this is a conversation between a customer service employee and a customer, in which the voice of the customer clearly is not one's own voice.

Another of our research questions concerned whether relational models are influenced by personalisation and digitisation. Previous research has indicated that relationship norms will be adjusted when they are violated (Tetlock et al., 2000). Our study on the effects of personalisation showed that more or less personalisation may have an impact on relational models. A business-like (MP) approach has a (negative) impact on the presence of CS relationship norms, whereas a personal (CS) approach does not have an impact on relational models. Apparently, a business-like approach fits with MP norms but it does not fit with CS relationship norms, causing the CS norms to be adjusted downwards. If an organisational intervention fits with the expectations of a customer, then the relationship norms do not have to be adjusted. The reason why a personal (CS)

approach does not lead to an adjustment of MP norms is probably that MP customers take a more personal approach for granted. MP customers believe that extra benefits in the relationship do not have to be compensated (Kaltcheva et al., 2011).

8.1.4 The Influence of Digitisation on Customer Experience and Relational Models

Customers nowadays indicate that there is less room for personal contact, because they have to communicate more and more through digital channels. Most customers whom we interviewed told us that this development (also referred to as digitisation) affects their customer experience. We therefore examined the effects of the increasing use of the digital channel by service providers. Does the way in which organisations communicate with their customers affect the way in which these customers evaluate the relationship and does it affect their customer experience? We investigated two aspects of the effects of digitisation. The first aspect was the increasing use of new digital channels (like the Internet, email, and chat) as opposed to the use of traditional channels like phone calls. The second aspect was the tendency for organisations to stimulate or even require customers to use digital channels (also called channel direction).

In contrast with what we expected, the use of the new digital medium (i.e., chat) had a more positive effect on customer experience than the use of a traditional medium like a phone call. Customers were more positive if a question was handled by chat than if it was handled by phone, both for simple and for more complex questions. Channel direction also showed an effect on customer experience, but this effect was negative. We investigated the effects of two different scenarios: a scenario in which the freedom to choose a communication channel was limited in an absolute way and a scenario in which the freedom to choose was limited in a non-absolute way. Both scenarios led to a negative customer experience, but, as we expected, the absolute scenario showed a less negative impact than the non-absolute scenario. Customers who were confronted with a non-absolute scenario were significantly more frustrated and irritated than customers who were confronted with an absolute scenario. This could be an indication that reactance plays a role (Brehm, 1996/1989; Wicklund, 1974).

The investigated aspects of digitisation did not have an effect on the relational

models. New communication channels, such as chat or email, apparently do not change the norms that customers adopt in their relationship with an organisation. The increasing use of new digital channels, like the Internet and chat, is welcomed as an extra opportunity to communicate with organisations. Channel direction also does not immediately encourage customers to change their relationship norms. Channel direction is not appreciated by customers, but there are no indications that channel direction is perceived as a taboo trade-off (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). Apparently these interventions fit within the expectations and the relationship norms that customers use in their relationship with the organisation, and for customers there is no need to adjust these norms. The fact that organisational interventions have no effect on the relational models can also indicate that relationship norms are a fairly stable factor in the mind of the customer once they have been settled.

Table 8.1

Summary of the effects of personalisation and digitisation on customer experience (“+” means a significant relationship was found and “-” means that no significant relationship was found)

| Intervention | Customer Experience | | | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| | Perceived Impact | Consumption Emotions | Customer Satisfaction | Recommendation Intention |
| Personalisation in written customer contact | + | + | + | + |
| Personalisation in telephone customer contact | + | - | - | - |
| Digitisation: chat versus telephone | + | + | - | + |
| Digitisation: channel direction | + | + | - | + |

8.1.5 The Use of Specific Words and Images in Customer Communication

In our research we took the few first steps in discovering whether it is possible to influence relational models by using specific images and words that are implicitly associated by customers with these relational models. In the scientific literature, the process of activating relationship norms by using words or images is also referred to as priming. In previous research (Aggarwal, 2004; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tuk, 2008; Vohs, 2006), researchers used priming techniques to activate different types of relationships. Most of the primes were used in

interpersonal and/or fictional relationships (or a combination of the two). In our first study on the possibilities of activating relationship norms, we used existing customer relationships. In these relationships it appeared to be difficult to influence relationship norms only by using specific words or pictures. The most promising effect of priming on the presence of relational norms through the use of images occurred when the cognitive capacity of the participant was limited and when the images were associated with a motivational goal. The finding that an image shows a stronger effect when the cognitive capacity is limited is consistent with the results of previous research in the field (Aggarwal, 2004; Tuk et al., 2009). The finding that images only show an effect when they are associated with a motivational goal is also consistent with previous research. Earlier research (Bermeitinger et al., 2009; Karremans et al., 2006; Veltkamp, Custers, & Aarts, 2011) indicated that the subliminal priming of a brand may have a positive influence on the choice of the brand and on the intention to consume the product, but it appeared to work only when people had a motivational goal to consume the product.

Where specific images showed an effect on relationship norms, the use of specific words did not have an effect on the relational models. This could indicate that images used in customer communication have a stronger impact than words. Images may also activate a different part of the brain from words. It can be argued that images activate the affective and associative parts of the brain, whereas words affect the cognitive part of the brain.

A combination of words and pictures in a related context (i.e., a brochure) showed that it is also possible to influence behavioural attitudes (i.e., switch intention). Customers reported a more positive customer experience and willingness to switch after they had seen a CS prime than after they had seen an MP prime. It can be concluded that it is possible to activate relationship norms by using specific images and words, but the words and images have to correspond to a motivational goal to buy or use the product. A CS goal is reported as being more attractive than an MP goal with a strong price proposition. Our findings also made it clear that a prime is more effective if the cognitive capacity of customers is limited.

8.1.6 Do Relational Models Mitigate or Amplify the Effect of Organisational Interventions on Customer Experience?

In two of our empirical studies, a business-like (MP) approach led to a weaker

presence of CS relationship norms. We also saw that a more personalised (CS) approach resulted in a more positive customer experience. The question is whether this more positive customer experience with the personalised approach is a result of the weaker presence of CS norms caused by the business-like (MP) approach. In other words: does the presence of relational models (i.e., CS) have a mediating effect? Previous research (Kaltcheva et al., 2013) has suggested that relationships have a mitigating or amplifying effect on customer responses to service failures. In this thesis we performed a number of mediation analyses. Our first empirical study showed that relational models have a partial mediating effect on the relationship between the type of organisation and the customer satisfaction. Thus, depending on the relational model that is activated, the satisfaction of customers with a specific type of organisation may either increase or decrease. In our last empirical study, we also found a mediating effect of relational models on the relationship between an MP intervention and customers' satisfaction and recommendation intention. In all the other studies, the relational models did not show a mediating effect. The main conclusion of all these mediation analyses was that relational models sometimes have a mediating effect. Further research into the mediating role of relational models is necessary to understand when and how relationship norms have a mediating effect. If, in a specific situation, relational models do not have a mediating effect, this does not mean that the relational models do not cause differences in customer experience. Our first empirical study has already demonstrated that there are significant differences in customer experience between customers who are inclined to adopt different relational models.

8.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this research is that we initially used fifteen different statements to measure three relational models. The statements were derived from the confirmatory factor analysis by Haslam and Fiske (1999). The score for a certain model was calculated by taking the average of the statements that belonged to that specific model. We translated the statements into Dutch and adjusted them to a customer–supplier environment. Because of the adjustments, we also performed a confirmatory factor analysis. The number of CS statements remained the same. The number of MP statements was reduced from five to four, and the number of AR statements was reduced from four to three. In some of the reported studies, the four MP statements had to be reduced to a single item, because the internal consistency of the MP scale was too low. The reliability of the CS statements was more than acceptable in all the studies. An

explanation for the fact that the CS scale was reliable enough throughout all the studies and the MP scale showed insufficient coherence could not be given. The consequence was that, when we measured the effect of interventions in customer service in a number of studies, we measured the effect on the average of five different norms or the effect on only one relationship norm. Neither is ideal: if we measure the effect on the average of five different relationship norms, we cannot see the changes in the scores for individual norms. If we measure the effect on only one relationship norm, it could be that that relationship norm is not (fully) representative of the whole relational model. Future research should therefore focus on developing a solid and more reliable scale for measuring the presence of relational models in customer relationships.

The second limitation also concerns a measurement instrument, in this case the instrument that we used to measure consumption emotions. In measuring the emotional component of customer experience, we used the Consumption Emotions Set, which was developed by Richins (1997). This measure obtained very mixed results. In a number of studies, we saw clear differences in consumption emotions between groups that experienced different organisational interventions. Other studies did not show any differences at all. One possible explanation could be that it is difficult for a participant to describe the emotions that he or she experienced in the study if he or she has not experienced the described situation before in real life. This is also something that could be explored further in future research.

8.3 Practical Implications

Besides the scientific contributions, this dissertation also has valuable practical contributions for service organisations. At this moment almost every organisation is focusing on the improvement of customer experience. Organisations are also looking for valid methods for measuring customer experience. Most companies still use customer satisfaction as the main dimension for measuring and analysing customer experience. Fewer companies use the net promotor score, trust, or consumption emotions to measure customer experience. In measuring the net promotor score, some companies make a distinction between transactional NPS and relational NPS. Transactional NPS gives an indication of the experience of a one-time customer contact, and relational NPS gives an indication of the experience of the relationship. Transactional NPS can be compared with the metric of perceived impact in our research project, and relational NPS can be compared

with the metric of the relational models. Despite the attempts to gain more insights into the mind of the customer, still very little is known about the processes that determine the evaluation of an experience or even a relationship that consists of multiple experiences. The relational models provide insights into these processes. The most valuable result is that relational models reveal (part of) what is taking place outside the consciousness of the customer, as customers usually are not aware of the relationship norms that they use. Our research provides insights into these implicit associations of customers about their relationship with service providers and the effects that these implicit associations have on customer experience. We have seen that there appears to be a relationship between the relational models and the different dimensions of customer experience. Therefore, if we know which relational models the customer uses and which relationship norms are being used to evaluate the relationship, we can predict his or her behaviour. If we know that a customer favours relationship norms that belong to Communal Sharing, we know that he will react differently to a particular situation from a customer who favours Market Pricing norms. If we measure the different items of relational models, we know which norms are applied by a customer in the relationship that he has with the company. If the actual performance is compared with the norms that the customer uses, we can predict his evaluation of this performance in terms of consumption emotions, customer satisfaction, recommendation intention, trust, and willingness to switch.

Once organisations know which relational models are used by their customers, they need to develop a relational strategy. Does the organisation want to activate an MP model with its customers or would it rather have a CS relationship? Does the organisation want a relationship based on a good intimate relationship or does it want the most competitive price for its customers? If an organisation chooses customer intimacy, this means that it has to show considerable involvement with its customers. If an organisation chooses cost efficiency, an MP strategy seems to be the most appropriate strategy. A consequence of this strategy will probably be that the organisation is less involved with its customers and that customers will probably experience less freedom of choice in the use of communication channels (Figure 8.3).

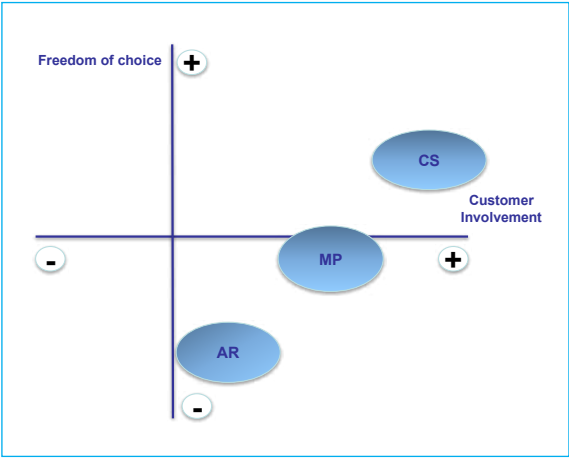


Figure 8.1. Adjusted model for the influence of perceived organisational involvement and freedom of choice on relational models (elaborated in Chapter 4)

Our research shows that most customers use MP relationship norms in their relationship with large service providers. If an organisation aims for a large market share and wants to attract large numbers of customers, than an MP strategy is most effective. MP customers are, however, less satisfied, less willing to recommend an organization, and probably also less loyal towards the organisation. Thus, if an organisation follows an MP strategy, it has to accept that its customers will be less loyal. If an MP customer receives a better offer from a competitor, he or she will be more willing to switch. If an organisation wants a lasting and meaningful relationship with its customers, it has to implement a CS strategy. Service failures are a major cause of customer dissatisfaction and unfavourable word of mouth (Keaveney, 1995). They can also have a damaging effect on the profitability of an organisation (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). Service managers should therefore implement strategies that mitigate the impact of service failures on outcome variables such as customers' repatronage intentions, complaint behaviour, and unfavourable word of mouth (Kaltcheva et al., 2011).

Does this mean that large service providers that mainly have MP relationships can stop working on the loyalty of their customers? Our research indicates that it is easier to activate relationship norms at the start of a relationship than when a relationship has already existed for a certain period. This will however not mean that it is not possible to influence norms once they have been established. Our assumption is that it is possible to change existing relationship norms

from MP towards CS but that it will require a consistent and consequent CS approach to customers and that the organisation must invest in organisational involvement and freedom of choice. Once an organisation has chosen an MP or CS strategy, this choice has to be implemented in all aspects of marketing, communications, sales, and customer service. Further research into the development of relationship norms during the customer journey is necessary. This requires different, more longitudinal research.

Values play an important role in the development of a specific kind of relationship. Roccas and McCauley (2004) and later Biber et al. (2008) concluded that there is a clear relationship between relational models and certain value types. The values of universalism and benevolence, for example, correlate positively with CS but negatively with MP. With values that fall under the type of achievement and power, the situation is the opposite: a positive correlation with MP and a negative correlation with CS. Some of the values are diagonally opposite to each other: the wish to realise one value type can block the realisation of the other. If an organisation wants to activate CS or MP relationship norms among customers, it will have to profile itself with the values that are in line with the specific relational model. A customer will choose the relational model and the organisation that best fulfils his or her personal values.

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Appendix A.
Extended table for the influence of relational
models on consumption emotions



Table A.1
Regression coefficient and t-value for consumption emotions (with the score on relational models being the independent variable and the score on consumption emotions being the dependent variable)

| Emotion | CS | | | AR | | | MP | | |
|--------------|---------|---------|-----|---------|---------|-----|---------|---------|-----|
| | β | t(251)= | p | β | t(251)= | p | β | t(251)= | p |
| angry | -.36 | -6.06 | .00 | .18 | 3.12 | .00 | -.07 | -1.15 | .25 |
| frustrated | -.41 | -7.08 | .00 | .22 | 3.96 | .00 | -.04 | -.70 | .48 |
| irritated | -.48 | -8.40 | .00 | .21 | 3.82 | .00 | .01 | .16 | .87 |
| uncontented | -.43 | -7.28 | .00 | .16 | 2.85 | .01 | .04 | .72 | .47 |
| unsatisfied | -.41 | -6.95 | .00 | .16 | 2.70 | .01 | -.02 | -.35 | .73 |
| scared | -.16 | -2.47 | .01 | .19 | 3.12 | .00 | -.16 | -2.54 | .01 |
| afraid | -.19 | -2.98 | .00 | .13 | 2.15 | .03 | -.19 | -2.99 | .00 |
| panicky | -.17 | -2.81 | .01 | .21 | 3.58 | .00 | -.32 | -5.37 | .00 |
| nervous | -.09 | -1.43 | .15 | .20 | 3.38 | .00 | -.26 | -4.25 | .00 |
| worried | -.12 | -1.90 | .06 | .21 | 3.39 | .00 | -.17 | -2.77 | .01 |
| tense | -.13 | -2.23 | .00 | .19 | 3.25 | .00 | -.31 | -5.15 | .00 |
| depressed | -.13 | -2.04 | .03 | .07 | 1.15 | .25 | -.25 | -4.07 | .00 |
| sad | -.21 | -3.38 | .00 | .08 | 1.26 | .21 | -.18 | -2.89 | .00 |
| miserable | -.21 | -3.39 | .00 | .16 | 2.60 | .01 | -.14 | -2.16 | .03 |
| upset | -.12 | -1.98 | .05 | .19 | 3.04 | .00 | -.19 | -3.10 | .00 |
| embarrassed | -.20 | -3.25 | .00 | .16 | 2.63 | .01 | -.11 | -1.77 | .08 |
| thrilled | .24 | 3.75 | .00 | .19 | -.52 | .00 | -.02 | -.26 | .79 |
| excited | .08 | 1.21 | .23 | .05 | .77 | .44 | -.15 | -2.33 | .02 |
| ashamed | -.15 | -2.54 | .01 | .17 | 2.97 | .00 | -.31 | -5.15 | .00 |
| humiliated | -.18 | -2.85 | .01 | .18 | 2.90 | .00 | -.15 | -2.43 | .02 |
| satisfied | .41 | 6.92 | .00 | -.18 | -3.14 | .00 | .08 | 1.40 | .16 |
| contented | .44 | 7.69 | .00 | -.11 | -1.90 | .06 | .12 | 2.01 | .05 |
| peaceful | .29 | 4.66 | .00 | -.08 | -1.25 | .21 | .08 | 1.31 | .19 |
| optimistic | .45 | 7.75 | .00 | -.10 | -1.80 | .07 | -.01 | -.15 | .88 |
| encouraged | .37 | 5.92 | .00 | -.10 | -1.66 | .10 | -.13 | -2.19 | .03 |
| hopeful | .47 | 7.99 | .00 | -.04 | -.62 | .54 | -.02 | -.37 | .71 |
| happy | .52 | 9.31 | .00 | -.09 | -1.63 | .10 | .01 | .12 | .91 |
| pleased | .30 | 4.81 | .00 | -.07 | -1.19 | .24 | .04 | .67 | .50 |
| joyful | .31 | 4.95 | .00 | -.11 | -1.91 | .06 | .04 | .69 | .49 |
| surprised | .36 | 5.96 | .00 | -.01 | -.18 | .88 | -.17 | -2.74 | .01 |
| amazed | .12 | 1.85 | .07 | .16 | 2.60 | .01 | -.09 | -1.34 | .18 |
| calm | .33 | 5.45 | .00 | -.07 | -1.12 | .26 | .07 | 1.11 | .27 |
| envious | -.01 | -.09 | .93 | .12 | 1.90 | .06 | -.04 | -.57 | .57 |
| jealous | -.03 | -.46 | .65 | .03 | .42 | .68 | -.04 | -.68 | .50 |
| lonely | -.20 | -3.10 | .00 | .17 | 2.75 | .01 | -.10 | -1.63 | .11 |
| homesick | .02 | .32 | .75 | -.02 | -.33 | .74 | -.12 | -1.81 | .07 |
| sexy | .14 | 2.23 | .03 | -.13 | -2.03 | .04 | .08 | 1.32 | .19 |
| romantic | .16 | 2.51 | .01 | -.05 | -.80 | .42 | .09 | 1.42 | .16 |
| passionate | .27 | 4.27 | .00 | -.10 | -1.61 | .11 | .08 | 1.35 | .18 |
| loving | .36 | 6.18 | .00 | -.11 | -1.87 | .06 | .05 | .76 | .45 |
| sentimental | .21 | 3.25 | .00 | -.03 | -.51 | .61 | -.05 | -.72 | .47 |
| guilty | -.04 | -.62 | .54 | .18 | 2.91 | .00 | -.13 | 2.05 | .04 |
| proud | .33 | 5.31 | .00 | -.05 | -.88 | .38 | .03 | .42 | .68 |
| eager | .14 | 2.09 | .04 | .07 | 1.05 | .29 | .07 | 1.04 | .30 |
| relieved | .35 | 5.68 | .00 | .00 | .04 | .97 | -.15 | -2.37 | .02 |
| warmhearted | .33 | 5.37 | .00 | -.15 | -2.54 | .01 | -.15 | -2.47 | .01 |
| fulfilled | .28 | 4.53 | .00 | -.15 | -2.55 | .01 | .09 | 1.48 | .14 |
| enthusiastic | .30 | 4.98 | .00 | -.21 | -3.48 | .00 | .10 | 1.65 | .10 |
| astounded | -.12 | -1.81 | .07 | .13 | 2.14 | .03 | -.13 | -2.02 | .05 |

Appendix B.
Measuring relational models: a confirmatory
factor analysis



Procedure

For the measurement of relational models, customers were provided with a list of statements relating to the Communal Sharing (CS), Authority Ranking (AR), and Market Pricing (MP) relational models. In order to determine the extent to which the relational models were present, we used a list of 14 propositions based on Haslam and Fiske (1999). For each statement the respondent used a 7-point scale to indicate whether the statement was applicable for the relationship with the respective provider. The original statements from Haslam and Fiske were translated from English into Dutch (and back-translated from Dutch into English to check whether the translation was correct). After translating the statements into Dutch they were slightly modified to make them more applicable to a business relationship.

Communal Sharing

- If the organisation needs something from me or if I need something from the organisation, it will be given without expecting anything in return.
- The organisation and I feel a moral obligation to be kind and compassionate to each other.
- The organisation and I are a unit: we belong together.
- The organisation and I have the same ideas about how a relationship should be.
- I have the feeling that the organisation and I have something unique in common that makes us two essentially the same.

Market Pricing

- What the organisation gets from me is directly proportional to what the organisation gives to me.
- If the organisation does something for me, I usually pay for what the organisation has done.
- With this organisation I make decisions according to the ratio of the benefits I get and the costs I make.
- For the money I pay the organisation I expect a good service in return.
- The interaction between the organisation and me are strictly rational: we both calculate what your payoffs are, and act accordingly.

Authority Ranking

- The organisation directs the work we do together, I pretty much do what I am told to do.
- The organisation makes the decisions and I generally go along.
- I look up to the organisation: I see the organisation as an example for other organisations in the market.
- The organisation is above me in a kind of hierarchy.

In the various studies and studies we replaced the word “organisation” in the different statements by the name of the (fictional or existing) organisation, of which the participant was customer. As the used statements did not fully correspond to Haslam and Fiske’s original statements, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. The analysis showed that most of the statements load substantially on the relational model for which the statement is used. The only exception is the statement: “I look up to the organisation: I see the organisation as an example for other organisations in the market.” This statement should load to the relational model AR, but it turns out to load to the CS relational model. The statement “What the organisation gets from me is directly proportional to what the organisation gives to me” appears not to load on any of the relational models. These two statements were therefore removed from the list. The remaining list of 12 statements was used in the different studies of this study. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis also show that – if we use the remaining twelve statements – the models are sufficiently distinctive from each other.

Table A.1
Factor loadings for different items measuring relational models

| | Factor | | |
|--|--------|-----|-----|
| | CS | MP | AR |
| The organisation and I have the same ideas about how a relationship should be. | .84 | | |
| I have the feeling that the organisation and I have something unique in common that makes us two essentially the same. | .84 | | |
| The organisation and I are a unit: we belong together. | .82 | | |
| I look up to the organisation: I see the organisation as an example for other organisations in the market. | .77 | | |
| If the organisation needs something from me or if I need something from the organisation, it will be given without expecting anything in return. | .57 | | |
| The organisation and I feel a moral obligation to be kind and compassionate to each other. | .39 | | |
| With this organisation I make decisions according to the ratio of the benefits I get and the costs I make. | | .74 | |
| The interaction between the organisation and me are strictly rational: we both calculate what your payoffs are, and act accordingly. | | .71 | |
| If the organisation does something for me, I usually pay for what the organisation has done. | | .71 | |
| For the money I pay the organisation I expect a good service in return. | | .69 | |
| What the organisation gets from me is directly proportional to what the organisation gives to me. | | | |
| The organisation makes the decisions and I generally go along. | | | .82 |
| The organisation directs the work we do together, I pretty much do what I am told to do. | | | .80 |
| The organisation is above me in a kind of hierarchy. | | | .70 |

Samenvatting
(summary in Dutch)



Inleiding

De laatste decennia zijn er veel nieuwe inzichten ontwikkeld omtrent de psychologie van klantbeleving. Veel onderzoek is gedaan naar de vraag hoe gedachten en gevoelens van consumenten ontstaan, hoe consumenten beslissingen nemen, tot welk gedrag dit leidt en hoe dit gedrag door organisaties kan worden beïnvloed. Waar in de jaren '70 en '80 van de vorige eeuw het managementdenken nog heel erg werd bepaald door de gedachte dat kwaliteit objectiveerbaar en meetbaar was, zijn wetenschappers – en in hun voetsporen ook managers en marketeers – steeds meer tot het besef gekomen dat de beleving van kwaliteit geen objectief begrip is. Kwaliteitsbeleving blijkt vaak heel subjectief te zijn. Met het ontstaan van dit besef werden organisaties zich ook steeds meer bewust van het belang van een goede klantbeleving. Pine & Gilmore zetten dit onderwerp met hun boek *The Experience Economy* (1998) voor het eerst goed op de kaart. Vanaf dat moment zijn veel onderzoekers, adviseurs, managers, marketeers en customer service deskundigen aan de slag gegaan met het verder uitdiepen van het concept klantbeleving. Waar het bedrijfsleven zich vooral richtte op de vraag hoe je als organisatie de klantbeleving kunt managen (“customer experience management”), richtte de wetenschap zich vooral op onderzoek naar de determinanten, dimensies en moderators van klantbeleving. Dit heeft geresulteerd in een aantal zeer bruikbare modellen die inzicht geven in de verschillende factoren die een rol spelen bij de beoordeling door de klant van de geboden dienstverlening. Wat echter in alle modellen van klantbeleving ontbreekt, is de rol die relatienormen spelen in dit proces. Eerder onderzoek heeft uitgewezen dat deze een belangrijke rol vervullen in elke relatie, ook in de relatie tussen een klant en een dienstverlenende organisatie. Vanuit de sociale psychologie is duidelijk geworden dat mensen gebruik maken van verschillende normen om een relatie te vormen, te begeleiden en te evalueren. De Amerikaanse professor Alan Fiske ontwikkelde begin jaren '90 zijn Relational Models Theory (RMT). Deze theorie gaat er vanuit dat mensen in essentie vier verschillende relatiemodellen hanteren in de totstandkoming en het in stand houden van relaties: Market Pricing, Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking en Equality Matching. Van deze vier modellen heeft Market Pricing de kenmerken van een typisch zakelijke relatie, waarin de uitwisseling van een goed of dienst centraal staat en waarin de verhouding tussen kosten en baten een belangrijke rol speelt. Het relatiemodel Communal Sharing heeft de kenmerken van een typisch persoonlijke relatie, die is gebaseerd op gelijkwaardigheid en waarin elke partij iets investeert in de relatie zonder exact bij te houden hoe groot de investering is en wat deze oplevert. Het relatiemodel Authority Ranking wordt gekenmerkt

door een gezagsverhouding waarin de ene partij bepaalt wat er gebeurt en de ander min of meer loyaal volgt. Het relatiemodel Equality Matching ten slotte staat voor een relatie die wordt gekenmerkt door reciprociteit. In ons onderzoek hebben we ons vooral gericht op Communal Sharing en Market Pricing omdat deze op de dimensie persoonlijk – zakelijk het meest tegenover elkaar staan. Het relatiemodel Authority Ranking hebben we in een aantal van de onderzoeken ook nog toegevoegd, omdat één van de deelnemende organisaties een non-profit organisatie was en omdat keuzevrijheid één van de onderzochte dimensies was. Elk van de vier relatiemodellen omvat een aantal normen over hoe de relatie zou moeten zijn en een aantal waarden die aangeven wat belangrijk is in de relatie. Aan de hand van deze normen en waarden beoordeelt een persoon of de relatie voldoet aan de verwachtingen. Na de publicatie van de RMT is binnen uiteenlopende onderzoeksdomeinen vervolgonderzoek gedaan naar de toepasbaarheid van relatiemodellen. In eerste instantie was dit onderzoek vooral gericht op interpersoonlijke relaties, vanaf 2004 is ook meer onderzoek gedaan naar de toepasbaarheid van relatiemodellen in klant-leverancier-relaties. Dit leverde interessante nieuwe inzichten op. De relatiemodellen (in deze thesis ook wel relatielnormen genoemd) geven niet alleen inzicht in hoe mensen bewust, maar vooral ook onbewust, een relatie ervaren. Daarnaast is het mogelijk om vanuit de gehanteerde modellen gedrag van klanten te voorspellen.

De aanwezigheid van relatielnormen in klant-leverancier-relaties

Ons onderzoek heeft zich in eerste instantie gericht op de vraag welke relatielmodellen een klant hanteert in zijn relatie met grote dienstverleners en wat de invloed is van de verschillende relatielmodellen op de beleving van de klant. Hieruit kwam naar voren dat relatielmodellen een hybride karakter hebben en dat elementen van alle relatielmodellen terug zijn te vinden in een klant-leverancier relatie. Het relatielmodel Market Pricing (MP) is onder alle klanten het sterkst aanwezig. De modellen Communal Sharing (CS) en Authority Ranking (AR) zijn veel minder sterk vertegenwoordigd. Dat is op zich niet verrassend. Het relatielmodel MP is immers het model dat het meest de typisch zakelijke relatie benadert, waarin kosten worden afgewogen tegen baten. Verontrustend wordt het wel als we kijken naar het effect van de verschillende relatielmodellen op de klantbeleving. Dan blijkt namelijk dat het relatielmodel Communal Sharing een significant sterkere en positieve invloed heeft op verschillende dimensies van klantbeleving zoals de consumptie emoties, klanttevredenheid en aanbevelingsintentie. Klanten die CS normen hanteren zijn duidelijk minder gefrustreerd en geïrriteerd dan MP klanten.

Ze zijn daarnaast duidelijk meer tevreden en meer bereid om de organisatie aan te bevelen bij vrienden en kennissen. Deze uitkomsten sluiten aan op eerder onderzoek. CS klanten willen een relatie aangaan omdat ze zich graag willen identificeren met de ander (een “intimacy motivation”). Beide partijen investeren in de relatie en halen er iets uit, maar houden niet bij hoe deze twee zich tot elkaar verhouden. Bij het aangaan van een CS relatie houden de partijen zich niet bezig met het einde van de relatie. MP klanten willen een relatie aangaan omdat ze iets van de ander willen hebben en bereid zijn hiervoor te betalen (een “achievement motivation”). Beide partijen houden bij wat ze investeren in de relatie en wat ze er uit halen. Zodra kosten en opbrengsten niet meer in balans zijn wordt de relatie verbroken.

Waarom kiest een klant voor het ene of voor het andere relatiemodel?

In de wetenschap dat CS klanten een betere klantbeleving hebben dan MP of AR klanten, dringt zich de vraag op hoe relatiemodellen tot stand komen en hoe het komt dat de ene klant CS normen hanteert en de andere klant MP normen. Uit een kwalitatieve studie onder klanten van de aan dit onderzoek deelnemende organisaties bleek dat er op dit moment twee ontwikkelingen zijn die van grote invloed zijn op de beleving van de klant. Allereerst heeft de klant het gevoel dat de afstand tussen organisaties en klanten steeds groter wordt en dat de klant in toenemende mate een nummer wordt in een grote klantendatabase. Daarnaast heeft de klant het gevoel dat hij of zij steeds meer gebruik moet maken van digitale kanalen (zoals internet en email) en dat er steeds minder ruimte is voor persoonlijk contact. Klanten hebben het gevoel dat de vrijheid om het door hen geprefereerde communicatiekanaal te kiezen, de laatste jaren wordt ingeperkt. Dit is een algemeen gevoel dat leeft onder klanten van alle aan het onderzoek deelnemende organisaties.

In onze tweede empirische studie hebben we daarom onderzocht wat de invloed is van de gepercipieerde betrokkenheid van een organisatie en de gepercipieerde keuzevrijheid op de activatie van relatielijken. We hebben keuzevrijheid hierbij breder gedefinieerd dan alleen de vrijheid om een communicatiekanaal te kiezen. We hebben keuzevrijheid gedefinieerd als de vrijheid om een organisatie, een product of dienst of een communicatiekanaal te kiezen. Uit ons onderzoek bleek dat naarmate een organisatie meer betrokkenheid bij haar klanten toont en meer keuzevrijheid biedt, dit een positieve invloed heeft op de aanwezigheid van CS relatielijken. Meer betrokkenheid leidt overigens ook

tot een sterkere aanwezigheid van MP normen, maar dit verband is duidelijk minder sterk dan bij CS. Naarmate organisaties minder keuzevrijheid bieden worden AR relatienormen sterker geactiveerd. De belangrijkste conclusie van deze tweede studie was derhalve dat, wil een organisatie een meer duurzame relatie met haar klanten onderhouden, dan zal ze moeten kiezen voor betrokkenheid van de organisatie bij haar klanten en dan zal ze voldoende keuzevrijheid moeten bieden.

Het effect van personalisatie op klantbeleving en relatiemodellen

Onze volgende onderzoeksvraag was wat het effect zou zijn van een meer gepersonaliseerde benadering van klanten op de klantbeleving en op de relatiemodellen. In de wetenschap wordt personalisatie over het algemeen geacht een positief effect te hebben op de klanttevredenheid. Hierbij wordt onderscheid gemaakt naar personalisatie die betrekking heeft op de uitkomst van het proces en personalisatie die betrekking heeft op het proces zelf. Bij het eerste kan gedacht worden aan bijvoorbeeld een gepersonaliseerde brief of nota, bij het tweede aan een gepersonaliseerd (telefoon)gesprek. In ons onderzoek bleek een gepersonaliseerde brief een duidelijk positief effect te hebben op de klantbeleving. Niet alleen de directe klantbeleving, maar ook de algehele klanttevredenheid en de aanbevelingsintentie was aanzienlijk hoger bij klanten die een gepersonaliseerde brief hadden gelezen dan bij klanten die een zakelijke brief hadden gelezen. Een gepersonaliseerd telefoongesprek, waarin de medewerker van een energiebedrijf aandacht schonk aan de persoonlijke situatie van de klant, liet geen betere beleving zien dan een zakelijk gesprek, waarin geen aandacht werd geschonken aan de situatie van de klant. Dit verschil in effect van de gepersonaliseerde brief tegenover het effect van het gepersonaliseerd gesprek is waarschijnlijk te verklaren vanuit de aard van de activiteit: het lezen van een brief is vooral een cognitieve bezigheid, waar je de aandacht bij moet houden. Bij het af luisteren van een telefoongesprek kun je nog wel eens afdwalen met je gedachten, zeker als de stemmen die je hoort, niet jouw stem zijn.

Het onderzoek naar de effecten van een gepersonaliseerde benadering liet verder zien dat een zakelijke benadering kan leiden tot een neerwaartse bijstelling van de CS relatienormen. Deze uitkomsten sluiten aan op de uitkomsten van eerder onderzoek, die laten zien dat relatienormen vooral worden aangepast als deze worden geschonden. Ons onderzoek laat zien dat klanten een zakelijke brief blijkbaar zien als een schending van de CS relatienormen. De verklaring waarom een persoonlijke brief niet leidt tot een aanpassing van MP normen, zou kunnen

zijn dat MP klanten een persoonlijke benadering als een prettige bijkomstigheid ervaren, als een extraatje in de relatie waar geen tegenprestatie tegenover hoeft te staan, maar waar de relatielijkenormen ook niet voor hoeven worden aangepast.

Het effect van digitalisering op klantbeleving en relatiemodellen

Vervolgens is onderzocht wat de invloed is van digitalisering op de beleving van de klant en de door de klant gehanteerde relatiemodellen. De effecten van digitalisering zijn onderzocht op twee aspecten: 1) het toenemend gebruik van nieuwe, digitale kanalen (zoals internet, email en chat), en 2) de tendens dat organisaties vanuit kostenoverwegingen klanten proberen te sturen naar het digitale kanaal (ook wel kanaalsturing genoemd). Uit ons onderzoek bleek allereerst dat klanten het relatief nieuwe medium chat beter waardeerden dan het traditionele medium telefoon. Hierbij maakte het niet uit of het ging om de afhandeling van een eenvoudige of de afhandeling van een complexe vraag. Kanaalsturing bleek een negatief effect te hebben op klantbeleving. Kanaalsturing is in ons onderzoek gezien als een beperking van de keuzevrijheid. We hebben hierbij gekeken naar de effecten van twee verschillende scenario's: een scenario waarin de keuzevrijheid op een absolute manier is beperkt en een scenario waarbij de keuzevrijheid op een niet-absolute manier is beperkt. Een absolute beperking houdt in dat de klant gedwongen wordt om vanaf een bepaald moment alles via internet te doen. Er zijn geen alternatieven voorhanden. Bij een niet-absolute beperking houdt de klant gedurende een bepaalde tijd een alternatief achter de hand (bijvoorbeeld een telefoonnummer dat nog gedurende een bepaalde periode kan worden gebeld). Volgens de theorie zou een absolute beperking kunnen leiden tot rationalisatie, een niet-absolute beperking tot emotionele weerstand (in de wetenschappelijke literatuur ook wel "reactance" genoemd). Bij rationalisatie gaat de klant de beperking voor zichzelf in een positief licht plaatsen. Emotionele weerstand treedt op als de klant zich realiseert dat hij iets gaat kwijtraken waar hij tot dat moment nog de beschikking over heeft. Uit ons onderzoek bleek dat beide scenario's tot een negatieve klantbeleving leidden, maar dat klanten bij het niet-absolute scenario beduidend meer geïrriteerd en gefrustreerd waren dan bij het absolute scenario. Dit zou een indicatie van emotionele weerstand kunnen zijn.

De onderzochte aspecten van digitalisering lieten geen effect zien op de door de klant gehanteerde relatiemodellen. Een extra communicatiekanaal, zoals chat, wordt blijkbaar gezien als een extra mogelijkheid om met een organisatie te communiceren, niet als een vervanging van bestaande kanalen. Kanaalsturing

leidt in de door ons gepresenteerde vorm ook niet direct tot een aanpassing van relatiennormen. Blijkbaar was er bij geen van de onderzochte interventies sprake van een schending van relatiennormen en was er voor klanten geen aanleiding om de gehanteerde relatiennormen aan te passen. Uit het feit dat deze interventies geen effect lieten zien zou ook kunnen worden afgeleid dat de relatiennormen een redelijk stabiele factor zijn in het brein van de klant.

Het gebruik van specifieke woorden en beelden in klantcommunicatie

De laatste empirische studies binnen ons onderzoek richtten zich op de vraag of het mogelijk is relatiemodellen te activeren of te beïnvloeden door gebruik te maken van woorden en beelden die door klanten onbewust worden geassocieerd met deze modellen. Het onbewust activeren van relatiennormen wordt in de wetenschappelijke literatuur ook wel “priming” genoemd. Eerdere onderzoeken hebben laten zien dat het mogelijk is om verschillende relatietypen te activeren door mensen een scenario te laten lezen of door ze bepaalde woorden of beelden te laten zien. Voor zover bekend is in alle eerder uitgevoerde studies gebruik gemaakt van fictieve relaties. In ons onderzoek hebben we ons in eerste instantie gericht op de beïnvloeding van reeds bestaande relaties. Onze veronderstelling was dat het makkelijker zou zijn om relatiennormen te activeren in een fictieve relatie, dan in een relatie die al langere tijd bestaat en waarin zich al allerlei verwachtingen hebben gevormd. Ons onderzoek liet zien dat het ook mogelijk is om relatiennormen binnen bestaande relaties te beïnvloeden. Dit bleek vooral mogelijk als gebruik wordt gemaakt van beelden die aansluiten op een al aanwezig motivationeel doel om het product te kopen of te gaan gebruiken. In het geval van een zorgverzekeraar kan hierbij gedacht worden aan beelden waarop te zien is dat mensen voor elkaar zorgen. De aanleiding om een zorgverzekering te sluiten is dat je op zoek bent naar een verzekering die ervoor zorgt dat je geholpen kan worden als je ziek bent. Een andere uitkomst van het onderzoek was dat het “primen” vooral bleek te werken als de cognitieve capaciteit van deze klanten beperkt was. Deze uitkomst sloot aan op uitkomsten van ander onderzoek. Het idee hierbij is dat als de cognitieve capaciteit van een klant beperkt is, bijvoorbeeld omdat iemand is afgeleid of onder tijdsdruk staat, hij of zij zich minder bewust zijn van de prime, waardoor deze meer effect heeft. Het gebruik van bepaalde, aan een relatiemodel verbonden woorden bleek geen effect te hebben op de aanwezigheid van relatiennormen. Blijkbaar maken beelden meer indruk dan woorden. Het zou ook kunnen zijn dat beelden het affectieve en onbewuste

brein activeren, waar woorden veel eerder het cognitieve en bewuste brein activeren.

In de laatste empirische studie binnen dit promotie-onderzoek is onderzocht of het ook mogelijk is om met een bepaalde combinatie van woorden en beelden in een gerelateerde context (i.c., een brochure) invloed uit te oefenen op attitudes van klanten (i.c., de overstapbereidheid). Overstapbereidheid is een interessant construct als het gaat om de duurzaamheid van de relatie en de loyaliteit van de klant. Het onderzoek liet zien dat een brochure met CS primes leidde tot een betere klantbeleving, een hogere bereidheid om te switchen binnen het assortiment van een aanbieder en een lagere bereidheid om te switchen naar het aanbod van een concurrent dan een brochure met MP primes. De CS brochure bevatte woorden en beelden die aansloten op een CS motivatie, namelijk samen met je familie gezellige dingen doen. De MP brochure bevatte woorden en beelden die aansloten op een MP motivatie, namelijk het verkrijgen van een kwalitatief goed product tegen een zo laag mogelijke prijs. Het CS doel werd als duidelijk meer attractief beoordeeld dan het MP doel.

Slotconclusie

Ons onderzoek heeft inzicht gegeven in de rol van relatienormen in de beoordeling van de relatie en het effect van deze normen op de emotionele beleving. Relatienormen geven niet alleen inzicht in de bewuste processen binnen het brein van de klant, maar vooral ook in de onbewuste processen. Daarmee is inzicht in de door klanten gehanteerde relatienormen van onschatbare waarde voor managers en marketeers die voor hun organisatie een relatiestrategie willen ontwikkelen. Ons onderzoek heeft duidelijk gemaakt dat, als organisaties op zoek zijn naar een duurzame en betekenisvolle relatie met hun klanten, een Communal Sharing (CS) relatiestrategie het meest voor de hand ligt. Helaas voeren in het hedendaagse bedrijfsleven Market Pricing (MP) normen, waarbij iedere partij probeert voor zichzelf het maximale uit de relatie te halen, nog steeds de boventoon. Als een organisatie een duurzame relatie met haar klanten wil opbouwen, lijkt een transformatie in het denken over de manier waarop organisaties met hun klanten omgaan, noodzakelijk. Hetzelfde geldt natuurlijk evenzeer voor ons als klanten: willen wij een duurzame en toekomstbestendige samenleving, dan zullen we het streven om uit alle transacties het maximale rendement te willen halen los moeten laten.

**Dankwoord
(acknowledgements in Dutch)**



Dankwoord

Mijn reis door de wereld van academisch onderzoek begon in 2006. Ik kwam net terug van onze reis naar China. Toen ik thuis kwam zag ik dat één van de leden van de Raad van Advies van The Customer Connection, professor Teun Hardjono, mij meerdere keren geprobeerd had te bereiken. Hij had bedacht om samen met een aantal (oud) collega's van de Erasmus Universiteit, onder wie professor Frank Go en professor Ad Pruyn, een subsidie aan te vragen voor een onderzoeksproject binnen een onderzoeksprogramma van het Ministerie van Economische Zaken. Vanuit het programma werd geld beschikbaar gesteld voor onderzoek op het terrein van klantenservice en technologie.

Teun en zijn collega's waren van mening dat The Customer Connection een goede penvoerder zou zijn. The Customer Connection was immers een kennisnetwerk met op dat moment meer dan 35 aangesloten organisaties. Alle organisaties die lid waren van het platform, hadden een gemeenschappelijke ambitie: het verhogen van de klantgerichtheid van de eigen organisatie. Het was dan ook niet moeilijk om binnen het netwerk een aantal organisaties te vinden die mee wilden doen aan het project. Een unieke combinatie van wetenschap en bedrijfsleven verenigd in één gezamenlijk onderzoeksproject: het project Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections was geboren.

Er was echter één belangrijke uitdaging: we hadden beperkte tijd om alle partijen aan tafel te krijgen en een onderzoeksvoorstel in te dienen. Het voorstel moest daarnaast niet alleen gedragen worden door de betrokken hoogleraren, maar ook door de organisaties die in het project zouden gaan participeren. Maar het lukte: in twee weken hadden we een uitgewerkt voorstel voor een mooi driejarig onderzoek dat gedragen werd door twee universiteiten en ruim 10 dienstverlenende organisaties. Helaas, helaas ... de subsidie-aanvraag werd niet gehonoreerd en het onderzoeksvoorstel verdween in de la.

Enkele jaren later kreeg ik het idee om vanuit The Customer Connection een andere bestemming te geven aan de onderzoeksvraag die centraal stond in Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections. Dit idee mondde uiteindelijk uit in de eerste Service Leadership Course. Deze postacademisch leergang bestond uit acht werkconferenties van twee dagen. In elk van de werkconferenties ging één van de bij de leergang aangesloten hoogleraren vanuit zijn eigen vakgebied met de deelnemers op zoek naar een antwoord

op de vraag hoe je als organisatie een duurzame verbinding met je klanten tot stand kunt brengen. De supervisie van het programma lag in handen Frits Philips Jr., die op dat voorzitter was van onze Raad van Advies van The Customer Connection.

In 2010 ging de tweede Service Leadership Course van start. Tijdens een gedachtenwisseling met professor Ad Pruyn, aansluitend aan één van de werkconferenties, ontstond het idee om nog iets anders te gaan doen met het oorspronkelijke onderzoeksprogramma van Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections: er een promotie-onderzoek van maken. Ad was enthousiast over het idee, maar vroeg mij wel of ik me realiseerde wat een promotie-onderzoek inhield. Hoewel het nooit één van mijn expliciete levensdoelen is geweest om te promoveren, sprak het idee om me een aantal jaren opnieuw in de theorie te verdiepen me wel aan. Ik realiseerde me wel direct dat ik als zelfstandig ondernemer fondsen zou moeten vinden om het project te financieren.

Binnen zes maanden vond ik zes organisaties die bereid waren om mee te doen aan het project en hiervan gezamenlijk de kosten te dragen. Alle organisaties waren grote dienstverlenende organisaties, die op exclusieve basis voor hun branche meededen aan het project. Doordat de zes organisaties geen concurrenten waren van elkaar, konden zij vrijelijk onderzoeksresultaten, inzichten en ervaringen met elkaar delen. De namen van de zes deelnemende organisaties worden in dit proefschrift omwille van de privacy niet genoemd.

Met het vinden van de zes deelnemende organisaties was de doorstart van het project Mastering Meaningful Customer Connections een feit. Het onderzoek ging van start in augustus 2010. In het eerste onderzoekjaar zijn voor het project meer dan 275 klanten mondeling geïnterviewd, van elk van de deelnemende organisaties zo'n 45 klanten, een logistieke megaklus. In het tweede en derde onderzoekjaar hebben we met de deelnemende organisaties zo'n 15 experimenten gedaan, waarin we onderzocht hebben hoe klantbeleving door organisaties beïnvloed kan worden. Over alle deelonderzoeken is apart gerapporteerd aan de deelnemende organisaties. Een eindrapportage werd opgeleverd in juni 2013.

Met het opleveren van de eindrapportage voor deelnemende organisaties, begon voor mij het schrijven van het proefschrift. Dat moest vanaf dat moment weer in de weekenden en avonden gebeuren. Het heeft drie jaar geduurd voordat mijn begeleiders het proefschrift goed genoeg vonden om voor te leggen aan een promotie-commissie. Het schrijven van het proefschrift was niet altijd makkelijk, soms lastig en vervelend, maar gelukkig altijd inspirerend en uitdagend. Voor

iemand die ruim 20 jaar in de praktijk werkzaam is geweest, was het niet altijd makkelijk om me te verplaatsen in de denkwereld van een wetenschapper. Maar, terugkijkend op het resultaat, denk ik dat dit aardig is gelukt.

Vanaf deze plaats wil ik een aantal mensen bedanken die een belangrijke bijdrage hebben geleverd aan de succesvolle afronding van het project. Allereerst wil ik mijn promotor prof. Ad Pruyn bedanken voor de tijd en energie die hij heeft geïnvesteerd in dit project. Ad heeft zich laten kennen als een kritische begeleider die niet gauw tevreden is. Hij heeft mij echter wel altijd het idee gegeven dat ik het kon en dat ik het zou redden. En ik heb zijn persoonlijke betrokkenheid ook enorm op prijs gesteld. Ik wil ook mijn co-promotor, dr. Mirjam Galetzka, bedanken voor haar rol als dagelijkse begeleider. Mirjam heeft mij de inspiratie gegeven om door te gaan op momenten dat ik mijn proefschrift het liefst in de hoek van de kamer wilde gooien. Zij heeft me niet alleen enorm geholpen met het vinden van de grote lijn in het proefschrift, maar ook met het op een wetenschappelijk manier opschrijven van onderzoeksresultaten.

Dit onderzoek zou waarschijnlijk niet hebben plaatsgevonden, als ik niet binnen het netwerk van The Customer Connection een aantal mensen had die mij de inspiratie gaven om de dingen te doen die ik hierboven heb beschreven. Ik denk hierbij in de eerste plaats aan Frits Philips Jr, die mij vanaf de oprichting van The Customer Connection zowel privé als zakelijk geïnspireerd heeft om de weg te volgen die ik uiteindelijk heb gekozen. Een belangrijke inspiratiebron voor mij was ook Teun Hardjono, één van de grondleggers van het kwaliteitsdenken in Nederland. Teun en Frits zaten beiden in de Raad van Advies van The Customer Connection. Mijn dank gaat ook uit naar Lucia Voerman, die mij de afgelopen jaren met raad en daad heeft bijgestaan. Als ik weer eens met een ingewikkelde vraag worstelde, dan kon ik Lucia bellen en was het probleem zo opgelost. Hoe prettig is het om zo'n coach te hebben! Dank ook aan Jan Post, die in 2016 het stokje heeft overgenomen van Frits als voorzitter van de Raad van Toezicht van het Institute for Service Leadership (ISL). Jan heeft binnen het ISL vanuit zijn enorme ervaring met het klantgericht maken van organisaties het bedrijfsleven en de wetenschap weer wat dichterbij elkaar gebracht.

Een speciaal woord van dank wil ik hier ook richten aan professor Frank Go, die mij samen met Ad de inspiratie heeft gegeven om dit traject in te gaan. Ik heb Frank leren kennen als een buitengewoon inspirerende man, soms onnavolgbaar in zijn analyses van de ontwikkelingen binnen de samenleving, maar altijd in bezit van een hoop stof om over na te denken. Helaas heeft Frank de afronding van dit promotie-onderzoek niet meer mee mogen

maken. Ik weet dat Frank van een afstand de vorderingen in het onderzoek heeft gevolgd en tot het laatst betrokken was bij alles wat ik hierin heb gedaan. Bijzonder goede herinneringen heb ik overgehouden aan ons gezamenlijk bezoek aan Guangzhou en de gesprekken die we daar hebben gevoerd over het leven, familie, kinderen en werk.

Mijn dank gaat ook uit naar de mensen die vanuit de participerende organisaties het onderzoek mogelijk hebben gemaakt. En dan denk ik niet alleen aan de directie-leden die hun handtekening hebben gezet maar ook aan de mensen die gedurende drie jaar mij vanuit de klankbordgroep hebben bijgestaan met hun kennis, ervaring en inzichten vanuit de markt. Om de privacy van de betrokken organisaties niet prijs te geven noem ik hier alleen hun voornamen: Caroline, Han, Michael, Cindy, Daniëlle, Peter, Henk, Eric, Jan Luuk, Henri, Jeroen, Robert-Jan, Angelique en Erik. Het is niet altijd mogelijk geweest alle organisaties tevreden te houden en de behoeften die bij deze organisaties leefden, in overeenstemming te brengen met de eisen die vanuit de wetenschap aan een dergelijk onderzoek worden gesteld. Ik hoop echter toch dat ook zij, bij lezing van het eindresultaat, met een goed gevoel op het project en het eindresultaat terug kunnen kijken. En dat de resultaten hebben bijgedragen aan een verder inzicht in de werking en beïnvloedbaarheid van klantbeleving.

Gedurende het project heb ik van een aantal medewerkers en afstudeerders hulp gehad bij de uitvoering van het onderzoek. Allereerst gaat mijn dank uit naar Eveline Staal en Annemarie Harthoorn, die beide gedurende een aantal jaren de organisatie en administratie van The Customer Connection voor hun rekening hebben genomen. Doordat zij dit zo goed deden, kon ik mij volledig op het onderzoek richten. In het eerste onderzoekjaar heb ik verder veel steun gehad van Eva Rekers. Eva zorgde ervoor dat de hele logistiek van alle interviews goed draaide. Daarnaast heeft zij een groot aantal van de interviews voor haar rekening genomen. Naast Eva heb ik gedurende het onderzoek veel gehad aan de hulp van Florian Hollander en Steven Peutz, beiden student psychologie aan de Universiteit Utrecht. Zij hebben voor hun afstudeeropdracht geholpen bij de uitvoering van een aantal experimenten.

Mijn ouders Aaldert en Marry wil ik bedanken voor de mogelijkheden die ze mij hebben geboden en voor het vertrouwen dat ze in mij hebben gesteld. Ik realiseer me dat ik op een aantal momenten keuzes heb gemaakt, die zij waarschijnlijk zelf nooit zouden hebben gemaakt, maar ze hebben me altijd het gevoel gegeven dat ik wist wat ik deed. Mijn zus Helma wil ik bedanken voor het feit dat ze er altijd is als ik iemand nodig heb en altijd een luisterend oor heeft. Ik heb grote

bewondering voor de manier waarop zij het allemaal voor elkaar krijgt en ben dan ook erg blij dat ze mij als paranimf bij wil staan bij de verdediging van mijn proefschrift.

Helma vervult haar taak als paranimf samen met mijn goede vriend Oscar Schouw, die ik al ken vanaf mijn eerste jaar bij het Ministerie van Economische Zaken en met wie ik inmiddels al heel wat levenservaringen heb gedeeld. De gesprekken met Oscar over het leven zijn altijd leuk, inspirerend en zetten aan tot nadenken. We hebben helaas het gat in de markt nog steeds niet gevonden, maar wat niet is, kan nog komen. Een klus als deze is ook niet te klaren zonder de support van een aantal goede vrienden. Vrienden bij wie je terecht kunt als je ergens mee zit of met wie je gewoon iets gezelligs kunt doen. Het gaat te ver om ze hier allemaal te noemen, maar ik hoop dat ze weten hoezeer ik hun vriendschap op prijs stel.

De laatste die ik op deze plaats wil bedanken is mijn lieve dochter Yinte. In 2006 als 2,5 jarig meisje uit China bij ons gekomen en al meer dan 10 jaar niet meer weg te denken uit mijn leven. Wat een heerlijke dochter en wat ben ik blij met haar! Met nog een hele mooie en lange weg voor de boeg wil ik haar vanaf deze plek mijn belangrijkste levensles meegeven: volg je hart, doe de dingen waar je plezier in hebt, waar je energie van krijgt en waar je goed in bent, dan komt het helemaal goed. Of zoals Lao Tzu het zo mooi zei:

"If you are a pattern for the world, the Tao will be strong inside you and there will be nothing you can't do."

