Relationships between Customer Socialization, Customer Participation, and Loyalty of On-line Service Providers

Matthew Min-Suk Shin*, Jae-Hun Joo**

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to propose and validate a research model that describes the relationships between customer socialization, customer participation, and customer loyalty in the online service industry. Although customer loyalty is frequently discussed topic in marketing and strategy research, this study takes a novel approach in adopting customer socialization and participation as the antecedents to customer loyalty.

Research design, data, and methodology – Based on adopting and modifying measurement items of the constructs from previous studies, this study develops survey regarding the constructs within the proposed research model. Among current registered members of Facebook and DaumKakao, 522 college students and other regular users are selected as the samples for conducting the survey. The collected data is analyzed by structural equation modeling method using SPSS and AMOS.

Results – Proposed hypotheses of the positive relationships between customer socialization and customer participation, and between customer participation and customer loyalty are all supported.

Conclusions – The results of this study suggest customer participation as an important precursor to customer loyalty in the online service industry. Also, customer socialization is validated as a new strategy to increase customer participation. These results validate the practical importance of communicating mission, purpose, value, and other customer socialization activities that firms undertake.

Keywords: Customer Socialization, Customer Participation, Customer Loyalty, Online Services, Facebook, Kakao.

JEL Classifications: M10, M15, M30.

* 1st Author, Assistant Professor, Department of International Trade, Konkuk University, Korea. E-mail: shinm@konkuk.ac.kr.
** Corresponding Author, Professor, School of Management, Dongguk University, Gyeongju, Korea. E-mail: givej@dongguk.ac.kr.

1. Introduction

Customers take on an important role within the distribution channel of the online service industry (Shiri et al., 2013). Customers'role as a co-producer or a co-value creator is critical to the competitiveness of the firms in online service industry (Holland et al., 2001). In the online service business, users are the main distribution channels for online content (Holland et al., 2001). Also, when new products or services are released, customers participate in a process to improve the service or product by giving negative or positive feedback to the firms (Park, 2013). Although, due to low switching costs, customers show low loyalty in online service industry (Deng et al., 2010), utilizing customer participation may pose as a key to increase customer loyalty in the online service industry. Thus, a comprehensive research needs to be conducted on what stimulates customer participation and how customer participation influences customer loyalty.

According to the study on customer socialization based on the organizational socialization theory, particularly in service industry, customer socialization can encourage customer participation (Guo et al., 2013; Wu, 2011). Customer socialization is a process of firms socializing customers to understand the vision, objective, and core value of the firms, to become interested in the firms, and to have favorable attitudes toward the firms. This study proposes are search model and hypotheses on the relationships between customer socialization, customer participation, and customer loyalty, and then conducts an empirical analysis. Because customer participation is particularly important in the online platform business, this study validates the research model and tests hypotheses by surveying the users of Facebook, a popular social network service (SNS), and Daum Kakao, a popular platform service in Korea.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer Socialization

Schein (1968) introduced the concept of socialization at an

organization level. Organizational socialization at an employee level refers to a process of employees adapting to the rules, customs, and culture of an organization. In other words, employees undertake organizational socialization to acquire necessary knowledge and skills for their jobs or roles (Chao et al.,1994). In an organizational perspective, the socialization is a process for individuals to learn knowledge and skills to adjust to the organization (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Many studies have been dealt with organizational socialization as a strategy to adjust new employees into an organization (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013).

Later studies (Kelly et al., 1990 Guo et al., 2013) applied organizational socialization to customers (here after: customer socialization). The process of customer socialization is similar to that of organizational socialization. The purpose of the process is to ensure that customers perform their expected activities effectively and understand norms and behavior patterns of firms (Groth, 2005). These studies consider customers as partial employees. Customer socialization in a service organization is a process that customers understand the value of an organization and their roles (i.e., abilities and knowledge) to complete the service delivery. Kelly et al. (1990) emphasized on a mechanism of managing customers to help themselves to perform necessary actions for completing the service and consumption. Such customer socialization is pivotal in that online services become more customized and personalized (Jarvenpaa, 2012).

2.2. Customer Participation

Customer participation in the online service industry is derived from customer's capability to influence the processes and content created for the services (Holland et al., 2001). According to these studies, customers are viewed as partial employees due to the nature of service industry that production and consumption cannot be separated. As firms place higher emphasis on the customer experience, customer participation becomes more critical for the firm.

Several researchers conducted studies on factors of customer participation in the online service industry. Content creation means the creating online content on the platform provided by the online service provider. According to Rha (2010), the spectrum of platform usage consists of three categories, which are (1) obtaining such as searching, reading, and watching content; (2) spreading such as sharing content; and (3) producing such as posting content and making videos, and managing various communities in on-line and off-line. In addition, Oh et al.(2000) reports that users of platform business such as Facebook and DaumKakao tend to spend extended hours and make efforts in creating content as co-producers in the platform business. Feedback includes solicited and unsolicited information that customers provide to firms such as review and suggestion, and the feedback helps the firms to improve their services in the long run (Yi et al., 2013).

2.3. Loyalty

Gremler et al.(1996) explained the concept of loyalty in service industry whose products are intangible. They defined service loyalty as the repurchase from the same provider, favorable attitudes toward the same provider, and recollection of the same provider. According to Gummerus et al. (2004), the concept of service loyalty can be applied to content-based online services. Customer loyalty can be a major driver of success in online service industry. Loyal customers tend to display low sensitivity to price and spread positive word-of-mouth about the service to others (Yang et al., 2004). In the online service industry, customer loyalty is particularly important because loyal customers tend to spread a viral marketing such as word-of-mouth, purchase additional services, and accept premium prices(Gummerus et al., 2004). The online environment offers more opportunities for interaction with customers compared to the offline environment. Also, alternative online services can be obtained easily in the online environment. For instance, users can switch their choices by a few clicks on the Internet, which offers low switching costs (Deng et al., 2010). Due to such low switching costs, customer loyalty takes a critical role in customer relationship in the online industry (Deng et al., 2010).

3. Research Model and Hypotheses

3.1. Research Model

When customers have high levels of knowledge and interests in a firm, the high levels of knowledge and interests influence customers' behaviors. In turn, the customers' behaviors affect the performance of the firm (Bauer et al., 2007). Also, the customers with high levels of knowledge and interest in the firm tend to actively participate in activities of the firm (Bauer et al., 2007). Particularly, customer participation is a determinant to the performance of online services, such as online platform service firms. Therefore, firms can encourage customer participation by increasing customers' knowledge and interest via customer socialization.
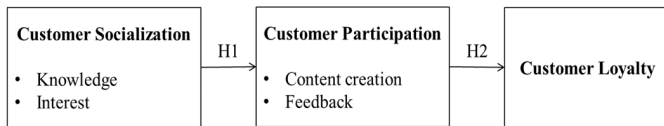
Generally, scholars in the marketing field report the relationship between customer loyalty and forms' profitability (Honget al., 2011). Thus, loyal customers have become an important competitive factor for the success of online businesses (Park, 2013). Park (2013) proposed that customer participation has a positive impact on customer loyalty in the online service industry. Also, many studies discussed positive effects of customer participation on customer loyalty (Eisingerich et al., 2006 Holland et al., 2001; Park, 2013).Table 1 includes operational definitions of the constructs in the research model and the sources. Definitions of constructs in this study are based on previous studies and modified to fit this study.

<Table 1> Operational definition of constructs in the research model

Construct	Operational definition	Source
Knowledge (Socialization)	The level of customers' knowledge in the philosophy, the core value, and policies of a firm.	Guo et al. (2013) Kelly et al. (1990)
Interest (Socialization)	The level of customers' interest in the activities, performances, and the image of a firm.	Guo et al. (2013) Kelly et al. (1990) Wu (2011)
Content-creation (Participation)	The level of customers' participation in creating content by posting or sharing them on a platform.	Holland et al. (2001)
Feedback (Participation)	The level of customers offering their opinions about products or services of a firm.	Wu (2011)
Customer Loyalty	The level of customers' tendency to favor one firm over all others.	Gremler et al. (1996)

3.2. Hypotheses

Based on the above discussion, the relationships among customer socialization, customer participation, and customer loyalty are presented in the Figure 1.

<Figure 1> Research model

Kelly et al. (1990) insisted that a process of socializing customer is critical in order to improve service quality via customer participation. For example, according to Wu's study (2011) on the relationship between customer socialization and customer participation, services such as a guide, a map, and signs in a theme park are tools for customer socialization. With these items, visitors can have better understanding and more interest about the theme park, and they can make plans about how to enjoy their times in the park. Oh et al. (2000) suggest customers'knowledge on the firms as important antecedents of customer socialization. Being exposed to the external information such as advertisements is a part of customer socialization. As one accumulates knowledge on an object, he or she also increases interest in the object (e.g., Althaus et al., 2002). Thus, customers increase interest by accumulating knowledge on a firm. In other words, customer socialization toward a firm occurs through customers accumulating knowledge and interest on the firm. Guo et al. (2013) insisted that customers are more likely to participate in co-production if they go through socialization. Also, Jarvenpaa et al. (2012) said customer socialization is important in the organization whose outcomes depend on custom-

ers'participation. According to Bauer et al. (2007), customers with high levels of understanding and interest about a firm tend to participate in the firm's activities. In addition, customer socialization is linked to ability to co-create, which is a method of customer participation. Therefore, we proposed the first hypothesis:

<Hypothesis 1> Customer socialization has a positive effect on customer participation.

According to Gremler et al. (1996), customer participation is defined as customers'willingness to give firms constructive suggestions such as how the firms can improve their services, and customer loyalty is defined as customers' intentions to stay with the firms. In the study, Eisingerich et al. (2006) found out a significant and positive impact of customer participation on customer loyalty in service industry. For example, as customers participate and become involved in the service, they share credits with each other. Also, Hong et al. (2011) said customers' involvements in activities of a firm develop customer loyalty. Further, such customers' involvements can increase customer participation in the virtual community and thus lead to higher loyalty to the brand.

According to Lin (2008), the Internet allowed customers and firms to interact powerfully. Customers in the online service demand their roles in many stages of service process, and online service firms need to provide more businesses for customer participation. Then, customers are willing to take responsibility for jointly produced outcomes because they are actively involved in the firm. Consequently, active customer participation can reduce switching cost for customers and lead the development of social bonds between customers and firms. Therefore, the development of a relationship between customers and firms via customer participation creates customer loyalty (Hong et al., 2011). On the other hand, according to Lin (2008), communities need to attract active member participation because loyalty creates a stable pool of customers, and the loyalty plays a critical role in expanding its community. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

<Hypothesis 2> Customer participation has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

4. Research method and analyses

4.1. Questionnaire design

Table 2 organizes measurement items based on existing research. A pilot test before the survey was conducted and the questionnaire was revised based on the pilot test results. Vague and unnecessary items were deleted. Accordingly, these questionnaires included a total 5 constructs and 20 items.

Each measurement item was measured by Likert-type 5 point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 =

strongly agree. The items in each construct are based on previous studies in this field. Measurement items for knowledge were assessed and modified using measurements by Wu (2011), and the items in interest were derived from Choi (2012) and revised to fit into this study. In addition, measurement items in content-creation (Participation) were adopted from Park (2013) and developed for this study, and the items in feedback (Participation) were derived and modified from Park (2013) and Groth (2005). Also, measurement items in loyalty were based on Honget al. (2011), and developed to fit into this study.

<Table 2> Measurement items

Construct	Factors	Measurement items	Source
Socialization	Knowledge	I understand the management philosophy of this firm.	Wu (2011)
		I understand the purposes this firm aims to.	
		I understand the core value this firm pursues.	
		I understand the policy of this firm.	
	Interest	I am interested in corporation social responsibility of this firm.	Choi (2012)
		I am interested in environmental protection activities of this firm.	
		I am interested in performance of this firm.	
		I am interested in the brand image of this firm.	
Participation	Content-creation	I often post content on the platform offered by this firm.	Park (2013)
		I often share content on the platform offered by this firm.	
	Feedback	I am willing to inform this firm about ideas to improve its service.	Park (2013) Groth (2005)
		I am willing to give this firm my comments on new services it provides.	
		I am willing to inform this firm about problems of it services if it has the problems.	
		I am willing to cooperate with this firm.	
		I am willing to give this firm my ideas if I have good ideas for them.	
Loyalty		I will continuously use the services offered by this firm.	Hong et al. (2011)
		I will continuously remain as a member of this firm.	
		I have no intention of switching to another firm.	
		I think it is a right decision for me to become a member of this firm.	
		I think I am a member with a high degree of loyalty for this firm.	

4.2. Data collection

To gain credible responses for the research model, this study surveyed online service users whom online platform services are a part of their everyday lives. Initially, this survey was conducted to students who are members of Facebook and DaumKakao in Dongguk University and in Konkuk University from April 15th to 29th in 2015. Afterward, randomly selected users of Facebook and Daumkakao were recruited to participate in the survey. In total, 526 responses were collected. Four responses had missing data point and were removed from the final sample. The final sample used in the analysis was 522.

4.3. Sample characteristics

Among the final522 questionnaires, 268 respondents were Facebook members and 254 respondents were DaumKakao members. Among respondents, male was 58% and female was 43%, and majority of respondents were 20s (65%) and 60% of respondents had used the online-platform service for 4 years. Details of sample characteristics are organized in the Table 3.

<Table 3> Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Type	DaumKakao (48.7%)	Facebook (51.3%)	Total	Ratio (%)
Gender	Male	142	155	297	56.9
	Female	112	113	225	43.1
	Total	254	268	522	100.0
Age	10s	1	1	2	0.4
	20s	162	176	338	64.8
	30s	51	47	98	18.8
	40s	23	24	47	9.0
	50s	17	20	37	7.1
	Total	254	268	522	100.0
Experience	Less than 1 year	14	34	48	9.2
	1-2 years	28	52	80	15.3
	3-5 years	173	141	314	60.2
	6-8years	27	33	60	11.5
	9 years or more	12	8	20	3.8
	Total	254	268	522	100.0

4.4. Reliability and Validity

The research model has constructs with interrelated dependence relationships or causal paths, thus requiring a SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2011). SEM analysis requires constructs to be assessed rigorously by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), to examine reliability and validity. The t-value of each construct was >11.933 at significant level p<.01. We also examined convergent

validity by CFA. Table 4 shows competitive reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) values. CR values were greater than 0.734. AVE values were in the ranges of 0.513 –0.697. Also, the reliability of this study is sufficiently demonstrated since Cronbach's α indexes are all above .70 (Hair et al., 2011). In this model, customer socialization which is a second order factor is set as a latent variable of knowledge and interest, and also customer participation is set as a latent variable of content creation and feedback. All factor loadings on latent variables are significant at significant level p≤.01.

\<Table 4\> Internal consistency and results of the confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs	Items	Standard Loading	t-value	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR
Knowledge	KNW1	.757		.892	.697	.902
	KNW2	.870	20.231***			
	KNW3	.834	19.378***			
	KNW4	.824	19.126***			
Interest	INT1	.644		.830	.513	.807
	INT2	.803	14.570***			
	INT3	.755	13.983***			
	INT4	.780	14.304***			
Content creation	CCR1	.843		.834	.559	.734
	CCR2	.848	14.694***			
Feedback	FDB1	.826		.921	.679	.914
	FDB2	.878	24.534***			
	FDB3	.830	22.522***			
	FDB4	.810	21.721***			
	FDB5	.840	22.923***			
Loyalty	LYY1	.569		.869	.621	.889
	LYT2	.891	13.939***			
	LYT3	.843	13.592***			
	LYT4	.791	13.132***			
	LYT5	.677	11.933***			

Note: *** p < .001

The squared correlation matrix is provided in Table 5. Knowledge showed the highest correlation with interest (.520). The maximum of squared correlation among constructs is .270, which is lower than the minimum of AVE at .513. The correlations provided assure discriminant validity of the construct associated in this study (Hair et al. 2011).

\<Table 5\> Squared correlations matrix

	KNW	INT	CCR	FDB	LYT
Knowledge (KNW)	.697				
Interest (INT)	.270	.513			
Content-Creation (CCR)	.054	.142	.559		
Feedback (FDB)	.101	.221	.200	.679	
Loyalty (LYT)	.030	.081	.162	.204	.621

Note: Diagonal values indicate AVE
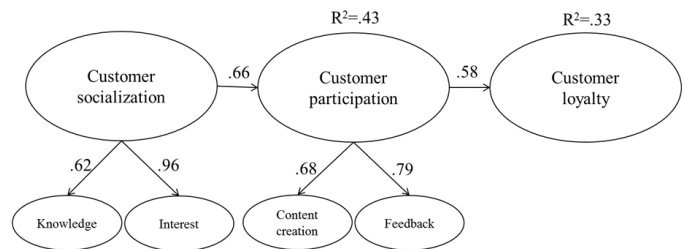
4.5. Hypothesis test

Table 6 presents model fit indices. Model fit indices are acceptable based on the guidelines provided by Hair et al. (2011). Considering that all of the fit indices are acceptable, it can be inferred that research model shown in Figure 2 is statistically valid.

\<Table 6\> Model fit indices

	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	χ^2/df
Obtained	.905	.875	.943	.932	.066	3.286
Suggested	≥ .900	≥ .850	≥ .900	≥ .900	≤ .080	<5

Note: χ^2 = 525.719(p=.000), df = 160

As suggested in Figure 2, this study designed knowledge and interest as the latent variables of customer socialization and content creation and feedback as the latent variables as customer participation based on a second order confirmatory factor analysis. Customer socialization is positively related to customer participation with a coefficient of 0.66 (p<.01). This is an important finding in terms of displaying the impact of customer socialization in evaluating customer participation. Finally, customer participation positively affects customer loyalty with a path coefficient of 0.58 (p<.01). Based on this finding, a customer socialization strategy to encourage customers' participation may increase customer loyalty. Therefore, both hypothesis 1 and 2 are supported.

\<Figure 2\> Analysis result

5. Conclusion

In this study, we proposed and tested a research model regarding customer socialization, customer participation, and loyalty. Through the proposed model, we were able to suggest effective strategic actions to develop customer loyalty in the online service industry utilizing customer socialization and customer participation. Based on the results from these analyses, we drew some meaningful theoretical implications. Also, a discussion section is provided to suggest practical applications of the findings in this study.

5.1. Implications

This study provides three theoretical implications below. First, customer socialization has been mainly discussed in the service industry such as bank and hotel in which the physical contact between customers and service providers is the core of their services (Halbeslebenet al., 2013). This study introduces the concept of customer socialization in the online service, which consists of non-physical contact and low-context interactions (Javanshir et al., 2013). This study tested and confirmed that effectiveness of socialization as an antecedent of customer participation for online services.

Second, the online service industry including SNS and social media has been classified as an industry with low level of customer loyalty (Cyr et al., 2007). Thus, online service firms have been making efforts on enhancing their competitiveness through developing innovative services (Oly et al., 2006) or the user-friendly service (Zhang et al., 2012). However, this study demonstrated the importance of online service firms to pay attention to the customer loyalty and provided the clue that customer loyalty can be increased based on firms' efforts.

Third, as previous studies suggested in this study, customer participation is particularly important to online service firms (Denget al., 2010). For example, in the online platform service, platform service users create and share content as an active body of business, and the service firms provide the environment for users' participation (Joo et al., 2014; Payne et al., 2008). This study bolsters previous studies on the importance of customer participation in the online service. Also, this study found that through customer participation, customers improve their loyalty by themselves toward firms as well as they help the firms to improve firms' management or services.

5.2. Discussion

Most of online service advertisements have mainly explained functions of the service or stimulated customers' interest (Moon et al., 2011). For example, currently, DaumKakao provide a mobile application for the taxi service called 'Kakao Taxi'. In the advertisement of this service, functions of the service are explained via several short situations. Also, advertisements of online games introduce high video quality and story of the games in their advertisements. These advertisements that explain func-

tions or characteristics of the service can be viewed as information offering for an innovative service or ease to use, usefulness, and interest of the service for customers (Olyet al., 2006).

However, this study suggests that the socialization process through advertisements containing value or philosophy of online service firms could socialize customers to take on positive roles on the business ecosystems. In order to socialize customers, firms should develop advertisements or campaigns that convey customers with firms' mission and draw customers' interests. Some firms in the traditional industry had experienced success via image advertisements of the firms. For instance, when Donga pharmaceutical firm introduced its energy drink in the advertisement, Bacchus, the firm tried to show its philosophy that the firm put values on various members of the society such as factory workers, job applications, and entry-level employees. Also, the international sports brand, Nike does not introduce its new products in the advertisement. Rather, the firm emphasizes on its value that the firm is always with people when they exercise in their daily lives. DaumKakao and Facebook mentioned in this study are the platform service and social networking service. Users of these services already have long been exposed to these services and have enough experiences of utilizing such services. Therefore, along with demonstrating their technical features, it might be the right time for these online services to focus on demonstrating their values and philosophies through advertisements for customer socialization.

5.3. Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to this study although the current study firstly proposed and tested an integrated model describing the relationships between customer socialization, customer participation, and customer loyalty. In this study, we used the Facebook and DaumKakao in South Korea as the sample firms. However, customers' reaction to online services might change depending on the location and the type of service. Hence, it is necessary to investigate customers'reactions to different online services (i.e., online game, shopping mall, media, etc.) and in different countries as the future study. By conducting research in different countries the comparison of the results in different cultures might be possible. For the comparisons of the results from the different cultures, cross-cultural analysis tools such as Bayesian Confirmatory Factor Analysis are recommended. Although we incorporated the concept of participation as one of the constructs influencing loyalty, it would have made the research model more theoretically sound if we had divided the participation into firm-level and the business ecosystem-level participation. Thus, a future study including the business ecosystem level customer participation is suggested. Also, due to time limits, this study captured primarily a cross-sectional view of model constructs. Thus, a longitudinal study would be helpful as a future study. Despite the limitations, we believe this study provides useful insights for online service management and evoke new research approaches in customer socialization in online firms.

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