

# INVESTIGATING THE ANTECEDENTS OF CUSTOMER-TO-CUSTOMER INTERACTION

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## ABSTRACT

An increasing amount of attention is being paid to the ways customers contribute to their own service "experience" through participation in the service delivery process (for a review see Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert, and Zeithaml 1997). This "contribution" can take many forms, although, historically, research has tended to focus upon the use of customers as productive resources or "partial employees" (Mills and Moberg 1982) through the encouragement of their "physical" participation, typically in self-service settings (for example Bateson 1985). In general, however, it is not just physical participation upon which services depend, but also oral participation. Despite conceptual awareness of this dependency, there has been little empirical research in the area.

To date, most research into consumer participation through spoken interaction is focussed upon customer-employee encounters. Nevertheless, other (limited) research has shown that, during the service delivery process, customer-to-customer oral interactions are able to influence customers' service experiences, both positively and negatively (Harris, Davies, and Baron 1997; Martin 1996; Harris, Baron, and Ratcliffe 1995; McGrath and Otnes 1995; Grove and Fisk 1992).

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the antecedents to these oral interactions through using diary

research (see Robson 1993; Stewart 1988). 100 participants agreed to keep a diary over a week long period in order to record all instances of spontaneous conversation outside the home and work place. By analyzing these diaries, we will be able to categorize the factors that stimulate oral interaction. By understanding the stimulants, service providers can attempt to manage the interactions to the benefit of their clients.

In addition, from the pilot stage of the research, a number of other findings have come to light. One of the most interesting being the amount of interaction that takes place in *commodified* space in comparison to *public* space. It would appear that strangers are much more likely to interact in services such as retail outlets, restaurants and surgeries than anywhere else. In some cases, this may be a source of potential conflict as the objective of many services is to generate profit and efficiency gains from the space that they own and manage, not to provide a safe environment to chat. This is a potential conflict set to intensify as the increasing commodification of services places its untrammelled demands on public space (Johnson and Varley 1998). In addition, due to the risks associated with the remaining public space from crime, this may well mean that the only time that we will talk to a stranger is in space owned and managed for commercial gain. In which case, service providers may find themselves with an increasing responsibility to society in this area.

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