

THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SELF-SERVICE TECHNOLOGY ON COMPANY PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: While technology boosts company performance and improves customer relationships, automation and customer self-service have put considerable pressure on B2B salespeople. The current paper offers a novel perspective on a rarely studied transactional business-to-business market. The coexisting presence of automated customer self-service and personal selling is explored to offer empirical data regarding the impact of transactional B2B on company performance. The novelty of the current study lies in the fact that the concurrent use of human-to-human and technology-mediated sales systems has scarcely been investigated concurrently. Three hypotheses are derived from transactional cost and social affect theories on responses from 202 professional buyers combined with company data. The results reveal that despite using technology in transactional B2B, the human touch is required in customer relationships. Companies should include salespeople in mediated customer transactions to achieve short-term (e.g., sales) and long-term (e.g., propensity to recommend) goals.

Keywords: B2B selling, automated channels; human touch, self-service, relationship quality

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has transformed most (if not all) of sales processes. ICT improves external and internal communication, facilitates access to information and knowledge, increases market reach, and boosts efficiency (Pantano, 2014; Anderson and Swaminathan, 2011). From a customer perspective, thanks to enhanced communication and increased convenience, ICT improves customer relationships (Flavián and Guinalú, 2005) and customer satisfaction (Notomi et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the research on the technology in sales remains scarce, and investigation of human-technology interaction in customer relationship management is encouraged (Crittenden et al., 2010). The growing use of technology along with ever-increasing competitive pressure posits the balance of “high tech” and “high touch” on the forefront of strategic growth drivers.

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The current paper investigates the concurrent presence of automated customer self-service and personal selling company performance. New technologies combined with human skills on the forefront with customers can offer selling companies a competitive advantage. Buying organizations could benefit from the improved experience and lower risk of human-centric technologies (Hoar 2017). As Flaherty et al. (2018) write, “the human element of sales continues to be critically important in the building and maintenance of buyer-seller relationships” (p. 417). This study offers empirical evidence on how company performance (both short-term and long-term metrics) on a transactional market is affected by automated channels.

Literature review

Introduced in the 1980s, Relationship Quality (RQ) defines a relationship between a selling organization and a customer, predominantly described through the level of trust, satisfaction and commitment (Oluyomi and Moore, 2017). Sellers typically maintain a portfolio of diverse relationships with their customers. In its very essence, technology acceptance is interrelated with trust, satisfaction, reputation, and value for the customers (Loureiro et al., 2014). Commitment, trust and reliability are key factors to enhance relationship marketing efforts. Technology utilization in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and mobile CRM systems for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) requires commitment and capabilities (i.e., human and machine interactivity) to reach better performance levels (Powell et al., 2018). According to Holloway et al. (2013), Sales Force Automation (SFA) adoption and usage would affect performance mainly because technology’s application supports broader sales organization initiatives.

Sales technology refers to company-provided technologies that can facilitate sales tasks’ performance (Powell et al., 2018). Salespeople use salesforce SFA, sales-based customer relationship management (CRM), online social networks and mobile technologies. Self-service Technology (SST) is a hardware or software technology that provides a specific service requiring customers’ performance (Marzocchi and Zammit, 2006). The literature points out that the investment in technology tools, such as SFA and CRM, will help companies and their sales representatives financially (Rapp et al., 2008). However, some reports show unsuccessful SFA projects as well (Jelinek et al., 2006).

Several studies suggested that an unsuccessful or incomplete acceptance of technology can be the root cause of mixed results (Jelinek et al., 2006). As organizations move toward a more customer-centric selling model, broad strategies that emphasize building closer customer relationships are implemented (Sheth and Sharma, 2008). Organizations gradually replace traditional service delivery models by applying different kinds of technological advancement (Lee and Yang, 2013), including both information and transaction-related technologies. Various methods through SSTs in service delivery have been adopted to optimize sales efficiency and increase customer satisfaction (Notomi et al., 2015). At the same time, most customers choose these technologies because of the timesaving benefits (Rapp et

al., 2008). Arguably, a higher utility might be the main reason behind SSTs becoming increasingly more accepted.

In the context of B2B selling, social networking sites are preferred for B2B purchases as they optimize market research, product comparison and salespeople’ relationships (Andzulis et al., 2012). Organization-customer interactions increase relationship marketing benefits while customers exist in complex systems (Mitussis et al., 2006). The value proposition and relationship performance depend on generating a positive environment along with personalization strategy settings. Online relationships in internet-based businesses develop in parallel with available technologies, such as social media, artificial intelligence, IoT, AR/VR (Steinhoff et al., 2019). This resulted in adopting hybrid approaches in global businesses driven by new technology initiatives and led by humans.

To better understand the impact of human-mediated and technology-driven transactional B2B on a company’s performance, three economic exchange theories, Transaction Cost (TC), Social Affect (SA), and Relational Exchange (RE), are discussed in the present study. TC treats the relationship between parties as emergent transaction-specific assets and does not explain a more subtle exchange element, i.e., relationships, particularly in a technology-mediated environment (Robertson et al., 2016). SA provides explanations for such emerging relationships by adding an emotional dimension and suggesting how relations can affect value (Lawler, 2001). Relational Exchange theory (RE) focuses on long-term relationships based on trust, commitment and exchange (Heide and John, 1992).

So far, little is known about how the above theories apply to low-involvement (i.e., transactional) markets, in which relational expectations are expected to have a marginal role (Kwiatek et al., 2020). This is particularly interesting for SST, which per se binds a customer with technology rather than in a human-to-human interaction (Robertson et al., 2016). Since commodity-like markets benefited the most from introducing SSTs, the interplay of SST and human-to-human interaction affects company performance (sales, share of wallet, propensity to recommend, and customer tenure) is investigated. The research proposes that the relationship quality mediates the effect of customer buying behavior on a company’s performance. The conceptualization of the study is depicted in Figure 1.

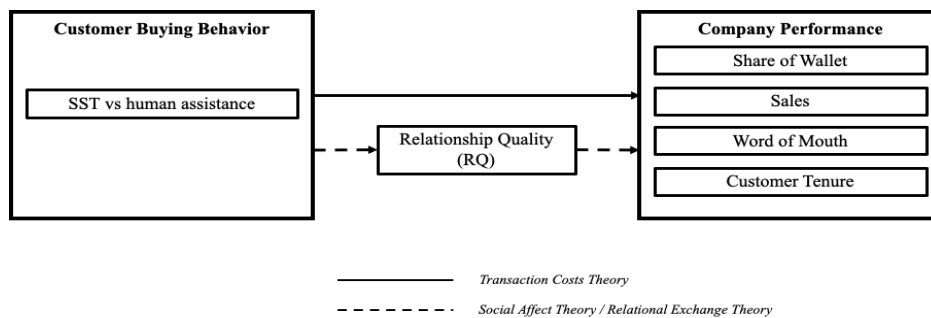


Figure 1: Conceptual model

The level of sales is one of the most popular metrics of company performance. However, Reinartz et al. (2004) advocate using additional measures, like Share of Wallet (SOW). SOW is a measure of a customer's spending with a focal company in a given category of products relative to total spending. Previous research suggests that RQ is essential for increasing sales and SOW (Keiningham et al., 2007). Similarly, a positive experience with a supplier leads to a longer relationship duration (Reinartz et al., 2004) and an increased likelihood of customer referrals (Huntley, 2006). Therefore, the first hypothesis states:

H1: Relationship quality positively affects a) relationship duration, b) sales, c) customer share of wallet and d) customer's willingness to recommend.

Hypothesized relationships are shown in Figure 2.

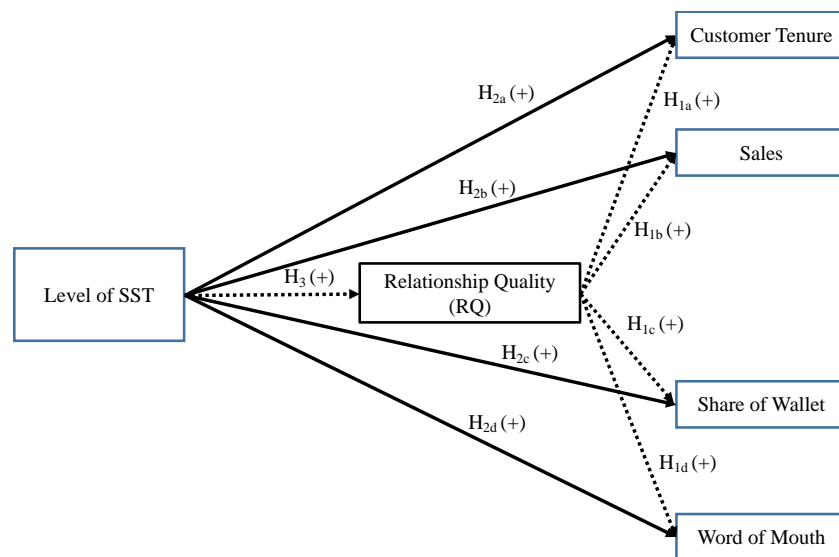


Figure 2: Research model

TC theory suggests a high level of inseparability between technology and customers' satisfaction in SSTs (Robertson et al., 2016). Sales-related information systems are designed to collect and process information (Nguyen et al., 2015). These systems allow companies to analyze customer wants and desires and predict the volume and type of future sales, resulting in increased sales and customer share of wallet. Along with an increase in the customer's convenience, more recommendations and longer customer tenure are expected. The second hypothesis states:

H2: The use of SST positively affects a) relationship duration, b) sales, c) customer share of wallet and d) customer's willingness to recommend.

Because of the ease of ordering, fast and accurate information delivery, order tracking and management that SST offers to customers, it is expected that

technology will enhance the quality of the relationship between buyers and sellers. In return, customers will respond by favoring the focal company. SA theory views relationships as social units and proposes that a generalized relationship produces more trust, commitment and positive effect than reciprocal relationships (governed by TC) (Lawler, 2001). According to RE, there is a contract between transacting parties. This contract governs transactions based on present communication of commitment and evaluation of reciprocity in the exchange. Accordingly, the third hypothesis is framed as follows:

H3: Relationship quality mediates the impact of technology on a) relationship duration, b) sales, c) customer share of wallet and d) customer's willingness to recommend.

Methodology

Data collection

The choice of market to empirically test the hypotheses was based on the following criteria: B2B commodity type of market, the market's maturity and SST adoption level. The office supply market in Poland fits the criteria of choice. First, it is served predominately by established suppliers that operate country-wide and hold together 78% of the market. The focal supplier company is the third company in terms of market share. It offers (similarly to competitors) online automated channels (ordering supplies, monitoring orders, chats) as well as personal selling and human assistance. The company has been in operations for two decades. The digital realm transition started for the company in the early 2000s by introducing an online product catalog and simple online shopping. By the end of 2014, the company implemented a new strategy based on providing human service to mid and big accounts and shifting smaller accounts to SST. This resulted in slashing 50% of sales representative positions and restructuring sales processes. Call center capabilities were expanded to offer customer support as a part of SST. The lower mid-ground accounts were able to use all means of ordering from the company (SST, phone, salesperson). Consequently, this group was sampled for the study.

The data were collected through structured telephone interviews with people responsible for ordering office supplies. Out of 2238 customers, 300 were randomly contacted, and 217 agreed to participate in the study (67.3%). Customers were interviewed by telephone (CATI) in September 2019. In total, 202 interviews were completed. In addition to primary data collection, access to annual sales data and information on customer tenure was obtained from the company.

Measurement

RQ indicators were measured as single, overall items because of the mode of data collection and limited sample size (Bergkvist, 2015). Clarity and uniformity of the construct were validated through face validity checks with randomly selected customers. Trust was measured as the credibility of an exchange partner, commitment was measured as both affective and calculative, and satisfaction as a positive overall evaluation of a company's performance (Fornell, 1992).

Customer's use of technology (SST) was measured as a relative share of purchases made through automated channels versus through human assistance.

Two dependent variables were measured in the survey using a 5-point Likert-type scale (from 1- lowest / not at all to 5- highest/very much). These variables were people's willingness to recommend (Reichheld, 2003) and the self-reported share-of-wallet (Keiningham et al., 2007). Actual annual sales to customers and customers' tenure (measured in months since the first transaction) were obtained directly from the company's records.

Results

Descriptive statistics, construct properties and correlations are presented in Table 1. Relationship duration spans from 3 to 90 months ($M = 38.28$ months, $SD = 17.76$). Customers spent on average 600.86 PLN (approx. 130 Euro) and were mainly sourcing supplies from one company ($M = 84.32\%$, $SD = 10.66$). SST was rescaled using the min-max normalization to reflect the use of technology on a 0 to 1 scale. For RQ, both AVE (.64) and CR (.84) present satisfying values (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The theorized model was analyzed using SmartPLS 3.2. Fit statistics and confidence levels were calculated using the full bootstrap method (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Properties, and Correlations

	M	SD	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. RD ^{ab}	38.28	17.76	-	-	-	-				
2. WOM ^a	40.46	6.13	-	-	-	0.06	-			
3. RQ	4.03	.58	.84	.84	.64	0.16	0.67	0.80		
4. SOW ^a	84.32	10.66	-	-	-	0.11	0.15	0.31	-	
5. Sales ^{a, b}	600.86	616.19	-	-	-	-0.05	0.11	0.17	0.16	-
6. SST ^{a, b, c}	.64	.48	-	-	-	0.26	0.03	0.16	0.04	-
										0.13

Note: RD = Relationship duration; WOM = Willingness to recommend; RQ = Relationship quality; SOW = Share of Wallet; SST = relative share of purchase through automated channels; a = measured as single item; b = obtained from company records; c = min-max standardized.

The variance explained (46.4%) in the attitudinal variable (WOM) is considerably higher than in behavioral variables. Specifically, it can be seen in RD (9.2), SOW (10.8) and Sales (16.2). A blindfolding algorithm was run to assess Stone-Geisser's predictive relevance (Q^2). All Q^2 values range from 0.03 to 0.35 are above the "0" threshold as suggested by Chin (1998) to verify if a model demonstrates good predictive relevance. The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR=.06) is below the cut-off value of .08 and reflects a good fit. A post hoc power test for the smallest R^2 (.09) in the model indicates the power level of .95 ($f^2 = 0.113$, $\alpha =$

0.05, N = 202), which exceeds the .80 threshold as suggested by Cohen (1988) to verify sufficient statistical power.

Table 2. Hypotheses testing

Hypothesized Relation	β	t-values	Decision
H1a: RQ \rightarrow RD	.124 n.s.	1.501	rejected
H1b: RQ \rightarrow Sales	.193**	3.113	accepted
H1c: RQ \rightarrow SOW	.314**	4.302	accepted
H1d: RQ \rightarrow WOM	.688**	12.767	accepted
H2a: SST \rightarrow RD	.236**	3.458	accepted
H2b: SST \rightarrow Sales	-.162 *	2.298	accepted
H2c: SST \rightarrow SOW	-.015 n.s.	.208	rejected
H2d: SST \rightarrow WOM	-.085 n.s.	1.499	rejected

Note: RD = Relationship duration; WOM = Willingness to recommend; RQ = Relationship quality; SOW = Share of Wallet; SST = relative share of purchase through automated channels. Standardized path coefficients are shown. ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; n.s. = not significant.

For Hypothesis 1, RQ positively affects Sales ($\beta=.19$, p<0.01), SOW ($\beta=.31$, p<0.01) and WOM ($\beta=.69$, p<0.01) but has no significant direct impact on RD ($\beta=.12$, n.s.). Thus, the hypotheses H1b, H1c and H1d are supported while H1a is not. Hypothesis 2a is supported because RQ positively affects RD ($\beta=.24$, p<0.01), whereas hypotheses H2c ($\beta=-.02$, n.s.) and H2d ($\beta=-.09$, n.s.) are not supported. The direct effect of ICT on Sales is significant, but contrary to the research's expectations, the coefficient is negative ($\beta=-.16$, p<0.05). This finding implies that the more a customer is buying through automated channels, the lesser are the sales. The mediation hypothesis (H3) is verified by analyzing bootstrapped and bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Table 3. Indirect Effects

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Indirect Effects Bootstrapping		
		Estimates	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
SST	RD	0.021	-0.002	0.078
SST	Sales	0.110	0.009	0.220
SST	SOW	0.051	0.006	0.122
SST	WOM	0.032	0.003	0.087

Note: RD = Relationship duration; WOM = Willingness to recommend; SOW = Share of Wallet; SST = relative share of purchase through automated channels. Standardized path coefficients are shown. Standardized path coefficients are shown. Confidence Intervals (CIs) are based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

As shown in Table 3, the 97.5% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals include zero for RD, while it does not account for the remaining dependent variables. In conclusion, SST transmits its effect on Sales, WOM and SOW through RQ but affects RD directly. In other words, sales, recommendations and customer share of wallet are higher only if SST is supported by personal selling. However, personal selling is not essential for the company to retain customers. This finding is managerially viable. If personal selling is omitted, one unit increase in customer purchasing through SST will lower company sales by 0.16 units. However, with an increase of buying through SST by 10%, customers tend to stay longer with a company by 2.4%.

Discussions and managerial implications

According to SA theory, relationships can take on value due to underlying emotional exchanges between actors. These exchanges may result in a relationship co-creation process (Lawler, 2001). In the current study, the hypothesized influence of relationship quality (the human-binding factor, sales, willingness to recommend and SOW) was confirmed. This is an important finding and an insight into the discussion on digital transformation in sales. The human factor's importance in relationship-based settings (Robertson et al., 2016) is also viable in a commodity market. Thus, the study extends the current knowledge of SSTs in sales to an often-neglected section of transactional and commodity-based B2B.

The effects of self-service on company performance in the study are questionable. The direct impact is significant and positive for relationship duration, whereas the direct impact on sales is negative. The direct effect on SOW was not significant, and neither was it for the willingness to recommend. These two outcomes were attitudinal variables in this study. Along with a non-significant direct effect of SST on SOW and WOM, these results seem to undermine the positive aspect of implementing technological mediators in sales. This is pronounced even more when compared to the effects of RQ on dependent variables.

A possible explanation of the results may exist in the underlying customer motivation and resulting segmentation of customers. For example, a study by McKinsey revealed that the majority of B2B decision-makers claim using SST for reordering and simple interactions rather than directly communicating to a sales representative. Similarly, the Polish food market research conducted by Kwiatek et al. (2011) identified two distinct segments of buyers. The majority of professional buyers form a transaction-oriented segment (58.1%) that is focused on price (actively seeking the lowest prices) and ease of ordering (interested in minimum effort). The second segment (41.9%) considers prior experience with a supplier and puts relatively less emphasis on transactional aspects.

The results of the current study favor the human touch for stronger customer relationships. Previous studies investigated the implementation of technology in sales from an internal perspective (e.g., through the technology acceptance model). Nevertheless, this research suggests that the efficacy of SSTs may be customer-

bounded. How customers relate to sales technology versus salespeople (especially if they have prior experience with them) could be a decisive factor in successfully implementing such technologies. In digital transformation and successful implementation of technology, managers should be cautious in propounding efficiency and forgoing the human touch.

Conclusions

The study suggests that to obtain short-term (e.g., sales) and long-term (e.g., propensity to recommend) results, companies should design customer relationships focusing on humans. Business buyers often reach out to salespeople after the market research is complete (Andzulis et al., 2012). Then, salespeople initiate personalized relationships implementing emotional components in business transactions (Shen and Ball, 2009). The current research offers evidence to support the critical role of salespeople in sustaining company growth during digital transformation. Humans are vital to establish rapport and help customers feel that they can be heard. The competitive edge, even in transactional markets, may lie not in the sales technology itself but rather in how the technology is incorporated into existing relationships between salespeople and customers. Companies should not entirely rely on self-service technologies. Instead of ‘replacing’ one with the other, it seems that coexistence should yield better outcomes in terms of company performance.

Limitations and further research

The present study shows that in a commodity B2B context, automated (self-service) selling should be carefully crafted. Enhanced customer experience may produce different results, such as more sophisticated SST set-ups. Future research can investigate the effect of customer experience in the proposed model. The current study has not taken into account costs associated with providing human versus technology-based service. Future studies can consider the costs (investment and maintenance) and compare them with sales and profits. The present research has been carried out in one industry and one country. It would be beneficial to consider other countries and industrial contexts in the future to validate the findings.

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WPLYW JAKOŚCI RELACJI I TECHNOLOGII SAMOOSŁUGOWEJ NA DZIAŁALNOŚĆ FIRMY

Streszczenie: Choć technologia zwiększa wydajność firmy i poprawia relacje z klientami, automatyzacja i samoobsługa klienta wywarły znaczny nacisk na sprzedawców B2B. Obecny artykuł oferuje nowatorskie spojrzenie na rzadko badany rynek transakcyjny

między przedsiębiorstwami. Bada się współistniejącą obecność zautomatyzowanej samoobsługi klienta i sprzedaży osobistej, aby zaoferować dane empiryczne dotyczące wpływu transakcyjnego B2B na wyniki firmy. Nowość obecnego badania polega na fakcie, że jednocześnie stosowanie systemów sprzedaży typu „człowiek dla człowieka” i systemów sprzedaży opartych na technologii nie zostało zbadane jednocześnie. Trzy hipotezy wywodzą się z teorii kosztów transakcyjnych i wpływu społecznego na odpowiedziach 202 profesjonalnych nabywców w połączeniu z danymi firmy. Wyniki pokazują, że pomimo wykorzystania technologii w transakcyjnym B2B, w relacjach z klientami wymagany jest ludzki dotyk. Firmy powinny włączać sprzedawców do pośredniczących transakcji z klientami, aby osiągnąć cele krótkoterminowe (np. Sprzedaż) i długoterminowe (np. Skłonność do polecenia).

Słowa kluczowe: sprzedaż B2B, zautomatyzowane kanały; ludzki dotyk, samoobsługa, jakość relacji

关系质量和自助服务技术对公司绩效的影响

摘要:虽然技术可以提高公司绩效并改善客户关系,但自动化和客户自助服务给B2B销售人员带来了巨大压力。当前的论文为很少研究的企业对企业交易市场提供了新颖的视角。探索了自动存在的客户自助服务和个人销售的并存关系,以提供有关交易性B2B对公司绩效的影响的经验数据。当前研究的新颖性在于,几乎没有同时研究过人与人和技术为中介的销售系统的并发使用。从交易成本和社会影响理论得出的三个假设来自202位专业买家的回应,并结合了公司数据。结果表明,尽管在交易型B2B中使用了技术,但在客户关系中仍需要人与人之间的联系。公司应将销售人员纳入中介的客户交易中,以实现短期(例如,销售)和长期(例如,推荐倾向)目标。

关键字:B2B销售,自动渠道;人性化,自助服务,关系品质