



Introducing employee social identification to customer satisfaction research

Introducing
employee social
identification

A hotel industry study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the concept of linkage research and propose the addition of social identity theory as an important consideration in managing employee-customer interactions and customer satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – Following the creation of a conceptual model, this study used an employee questionnaire based on the incorporation of service climate (SERV*OR) and employee identification factors. A total of 314 individual surveys were collected from four hotels in Australia. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine the effects that demographic factors, service climate and different levels of employee identification would have on predictions of customer satisfaction.

Findings – Service climate factors most closely linked to customer-centric organizational practices were the significant predictors of customer satisfaction perceptions, as was employee identification at the superordinate (company) level.

Practical implications – The framework proposed and the findings of this study provided management with useful information about the important role of service climate and the way in which managers can capitalize on employee identification to enhance organizational practices, which can flow on to customer outcomes.

Originality/value – There is limited previous literature that attempts to incorporate social identity theory as a valuable dimension in the management of employee-customer interaction.

Keywords Service climate, Customer satisfaction, Research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and background

The quality of employee-customer interactions (also known as “service encounters”) has been recognized as a key strategic competitive weapon for service organizations (e.g., Kelley, 1992; Mattila and Enz, 2002). In many cases, customer-contact employees are the first and only direct representation a customer has of a firm – customers often base their impressions of the firm on the service received from these employees (Hartline and Ferrel, 1996; Hartline *et al.*, 2000; Kandampully, 2002). It is therefore important for service managers to understand, and then find ways to effectively manage, these interactions.

Employee-customer interactions have been examined from many perspectives in the literature. For example, some researchers suggest that the quality of interactions is determined by human variables – including motives, attitudes and social habits – of both the service provider and the customer involved in the exchange (Lockwood and Jones, 1989). Others suggest that service encounters vary on three dimensions –



temporal duration of the interaction, emotional content and spatial proximity (between customer and service provider) (Price *et al.*, 1995). Still others view service encounters from an emotions perspective (Mattila and Enz, 2002).

Regardless of the perspective, one conclusion that can be drawn is that managers cannot directly control every service encounter. Compounding this challenge are some of the commonly understood unique characteristics of services. Such characteristics include inseparability, where the customer cannot perceive the difference between the production and delivery of a service (Lovell and Wirtz, 2004), and the relative heterogeneity of services, which suggests that service delivery, because of the human element, can result in no two services being identical (Schneider and White, 2004). Some current thinking (e.g., Vargo and Lusch, 2004) questions the merit of differentiating goods and services management, suggesting instead that a services management and marketing perspective is the more “dominant logic” for all management and marketing thinking. This logic suggests that service encounters will increase in importance as traditionally goods-based firms utilize service for competitive advantage.

Customers also evaluate service based on service clues (Berry *et al.*, 2006, p. 45). These clues can be functional (the technical quality of the offering), mechanistic (the sensory presentation of the service) or humanistic (behavior and appearance of service providers). The humanistic clue suggests that a service provider’s choice of words, tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, body language and appropriateness of dress all lead to the way a service is experienced, and reveal “much about an organization’s commitment to understanding and satisfying customer needs and wants”.

The human factor in service delivery remains one of the great challenges for managers of service. One way forward is to identify elements of a work environment, as perceived by employees, which are linked to critically important organizational outcomes. A body of research known as linkage research examines these links (e.g., Johnson, 1996; Schneider *et al.*, 1998; Wiley, 1996; Wiley and Brooks, 2000). Linkage research examines the relationship between how employees describe their work environments against critically important performance success factors. Early linkage research studies were performed in connection with service climate research and confirmed direct correlates between employees and customers (Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Schneider *et al.*, 1980). It was concluded that management could apply a more indirect approach to managing employee-customer interactions by focusing on aspects of the atmosphere or climate that provide the circumstances to encourage service-minded behavior (Schneider *et al.*, 1994).

Organizational psychologists would suggest another important consideration in managing service quality – the notion of groups – and how affiliation and attachment to social and work related groups affects the way employees think, feel and behave (Haslam, 2001). The ways in which workers define themselves (employee identification) within the context of their work group identities have been shown to play a role in their subsequent attitudes and behaviors (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004). This paper hypothesizes an important role for employee group identification in the study and management of service enterprises and particularly in the understanding and more effective management of employee-customer interactions.

The purpose of this study is to introduce a conceptual model that incorporates employee identification as a useful and important measure for predicting and managing customer service outcomes. This will be achieved by first outlining the important role

played by front-line service personnel in services, then by examining the nature and role of a climate for customer service. The linkage research model is then outlined, which provides conceptual and empirical links between employee and customer perceptions. A model is offered which suggests a role for employee identification in services research. A preliminary examination of this link is tested using hierarchical regression analysis from employee data from four hotels in Australia.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Boundary spanning (front-line) workers

Service organizations are characterized by frequent encounters between employees and customers. Interactions with service employees are the experiences that customers remember best, and employees who are uncomfortable in dealing with customers, or who lack the training and expertise to meet customer expectations, can cause customers to retain unpleasant memories of a service experience. Service employees are thus the primary resource through which service businesses can gain a competitive advantage (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004; Schneider and Bowen, 1993).

Any employee who comes in direct or indirect contact with a customer influences customer satisfaction, customer-perceived quality and firm revenues (Heskett *et al.*, 1997). The concept of the “part-time marketer” (Gummesson, 1991, p. 60) suggests that because of the nature of service encounters in services, all customer-contact employees are, in effect, marketers. This simple fact has rather significant implications for service managers, starting with the need for the development of a service atmosphere particularly among those employees who are on the front line of customer contact.

There is a problematic paradox in many service industries in that the skills needed to provide service quality often are not in alignment with the skills usually found in industry front-line positions (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). This disconnect presents an array of challenges for industry, as the lesser-skilled, lesser-experienced and lesser-paid employees are the ones who contribute most to the customer experience. Many other factors not addressed in this paper are acknowledged to be important in relation to service delivery, such as personality traits (e.g., Chait *et al.*, 2000; McBride *et al.*, 1997), emotions (Mattila and Enz, 2002; Singh, 2000; Wirtz and Johnston, 2003) and organizational commitment (Kelley, 1992).

Climate for service

The study of organizational climate is one that focuses on the way the internal life of the organization functions, with an emphasis on the perceptions of the individuals in the workforce (Schneider, 1973; Tagiuri, 1968). Climate research is used to study organizations in terms of what employees report they experience in relation to an array of dimensions (Schneider *et al.*, 2000). Climate has been described as an organizational approach that views the organization through the perspective of the employees (or “actors”), such that the perspective makes certain assumptions about how employees process the world around them and how they attach varying levels of meaning to the organizational processes (Schneider and White, 2004). The relevance of such studies in service businesses seems self-evident, as quality perceptions are defined by actual employees and their actions and attitudes.

Benjamin Schneider has been the key researcher in investigating service climate (e.g., Schneider, 2004; Schneider *et al.*, 1996; Schneider *et al.*, 1980; Schneider *et al.*, 1997,

1998). Schneider concluded that generic climate measures are too broad and inclusive to be easily understood or interpreted and he proposed that climate questionnaires should not attempt to measure generic organizational climate, but rather should aim to measure a specific kind of climate (Schneider and Reichers, 1983). Schneider and White (2004) argue that a climate for service measure should focus specifically on leadership behaviors directly related to service (goal-setting, planning), rewards and recognition designed to encourage service behaviors, and the degree to which customer service quality is emphasized in all aspects of training within the particular organization. This construct should not be mistaken for other similar constructs, such as worker attitude studies (Lee-Ross, 2000), which posit the need for certain positive service dimensions toward service provision as being an internal predisposition of front-line employees.

Service climate might best be described as an employee's view about management practices across a range of disciplines – such as human resources, leadership and marketing. It represents the degree to which all of the functionings of an organization focus on service quality and customer satisfaction. Schneider and White (2004, p. 100) summarize it this way:

So, when employees perceive that they are rewarded for delivering quality service *and* when employees perceive that management devotes time, energy, and resources to service quality *and* when employees receive the training they require to effectively deal with diverse customers, *then* a positive service climate is more likely to be the theme or meaning attached to these experiences.

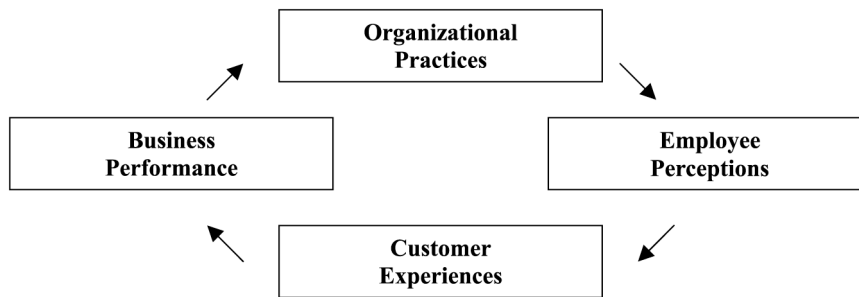
When all of the aggregate conditions exist for excellent service to be provided to customers, a positive climate for service is said to exist. A link between what employees perceive and what customers perceive was hypothesized in earlier streams of research (Albrecht and Zemke, 1985; Parkington and Schneider, 1979; Schneider *et al.*, 1980) and pioneered the conceptual integration between them within the services management literature. This earlier research was predominately concerned with employee perceptions about the quality of service as perceived by customers, and found a possible relationship between employee and customer perceptions of service (Albrecht and Zemke, 1985; Johnson, 1996; Parkington and Schneider, 1979; Schneider and Bowen, 1985). This link was further examined in the conceptualization of linkage research, discussed below.

Linkage research

Service climate is a vital research area because of the links between employee perceptions of the internal functioning of an organisation, and external criterion measures of various outcomes – such as customer perceptions of service quality, customer satisfaction and financial measures. Linkage research (see Figure 1) has been defined in this way:

Linkage research involves integrating and correlating data collected from employees with data in other key organizational databases... the purpose of linkage research is to identify those elements of the work environment – as described by employees – that correlate, or link, to critically important organizational outcomes such as customer satisfaction and business performance (Wiley, 1996, p. 330).

Heskett *et al.* (1997) labeled the connection between employee and customer experiences the “satisfaction mirror”, and related the outcomes of a series of studies that demonstrate the relationships in companies such as Xerox, MCI and Southwest



Source: Adapted from Wiley and Brooks (2000)

Figure 1.
Author's conception of the
linkage research model

Airlines. The earliest linkage studies (although not named as such) were primarily focused on service climate, with the outcome variables such as customer perceptions embedded into the studies (e.g., Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Schneider *et al.*, 1980; Schneider *et al.*, 1992; Schneider *et al.*, 1998). Other studies have found relationships between employee and customer attitudes, but have not specifically examined relationships between service climate themes (Tornow and Wiley, 1991; Wiley, 1991).

Alternative views cast some doubt on the simplicity offered by the linkages between internal organizational policies, practices and procedures and customer outcomes. The general acceptability of the service-profit chain and linkage research models have been questioned (e.g., Rosenthal, 1997, No. 840; Dean, 2004, No. 662). In particular, the antecedents, and specific dimensions of the earliest links in the models that link employee perceptions to customer outcomes. From the perspective of a firms' attempts to create or enhance employee commitment to customer service, Peccei and Rosenthal (1997, p. 68) allude to the simplistic approach taken in this literature, arguing that a "somewhat patchy treatment" has been given in the relevant literatures in relation to the nature, antecedents and consequences of internal organizational factors that create a customer service focus. These researchers suggest that the internal factors necessary for employees to become more likely to engage in customer service behaviors are primarily a non-calculative phenomenon, driven more by affective, normative and altruistic concerns rather than traditional human resource practices which often focus on control, structure, bureaucracy and hierarchy. While offering to further assess these conceptual models that tie together service quality and customer satisfaction, these researchers instead propose research that examines in more detail each link in these conceptual chains (similar to Dean, 2004).

Employee identification

Many service organizations consist of working groups, in the form of work teams, departments and shift groups (Baker and Huyton, 2001; Chon and Sparrowe, 1995; Lashley and Lee-Ross, 2003; Riley, 1996). These departments all have interrelated activities. Failing to understand, consider and proactively manage the linkages between departmental functions can often leave "broken chains and tribal warfare" (Gummeson, 1991, p. 65). This negative internal perception by employees can spill across the satisfaction mirror and negatively impact customer perceptions.

Research by social and organizational psychologists suggests that, in order to understand perceptions and interactions in an organizational context, it is important to

study how people define themselves in terms of group memberships (Haslam, 2004). Social psychologists are particularly interested in the way the psychological process of individuals are affected by organizational life (Haslam *et al.*, 2003). Mutual support among and between employees has been suggested as one essential precursor to the effective provision of a service-quality environment (Berry, 1995; Gummesson, 1991; Lashley and Lee-Ross, 2003; Schneider and White, 2004). Thus, a bridge is suggested between the study of individuals and organizations.

Service climate is primarily an individual approach, where individual perceptions are aggregated at various levels in an organization. This approach, however, fails to give direct consideration to the role of co-workers, work groups, other social groups or the organization as a whole in a person's perceptions. According to social identity theory (SIT), an individual's concept of self is built on personal identity (one's unique characteristics as an individual) and social identity (derived from memberships in salient social groups and categories). Social identity is defined as the individual's knowledge that they belong to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to them of the group membership (Tajfel, 1974). Through categorization processes, people order and simplify their social environment by forming meaningful groups or categories of individuals. Furthermore, individuals identify with the groups or categories in which they see themselves as members, and identify with other persons they perceive as prototypical members of that group or category. Consequently, an individual's identity is based in part on the groups to which they belong, and identification with these groups forms part of an individual's self-concept. An individual's membership of, and identification with, such social groups is crucial to understanding that person's attitudes and behavior and subsequent work performance (Haslam, 2001; Hogg and Terry, 2000a).

Within organizational contexts, employees are members of a number of groups, all of which are potential targets of identification. These groups include the organization itself, divisions, departments or work units, as well as management teams, project teams, professional groups or other informal groups. It follows that organizations can be the object of identification, just as other social categories are based on nationality, race, class, occupation, sex and religion. That is, employee identification is simply one type or classification of social identification. One of the outcomes from research in social identification is the demonstration that, when the achievement of individual and collective goals are placed against each other, those who identify in terms of the collective group may sacrifice their individual self-interest in the pursuit of what seems best for the group by taking, for example, blame for a group's failure (Paulsen, 2003).

Given the interdependent nature of organizational arrangements, employees rarely function in isolation from their group or team contexts. In many service organizations, dynamics such as these are inevitable (Lashley and Lee-Ross, 2003; Solnet and Paulsen, 2005). The patterns of employee identification are likely to influence attitudes, perceptions and commitment to customer service.

Organizations are often hierarchically structured, and work teams and departments with which employees identify are often embedded into a higher order superordinate category – the company or the organization (Jetten *et al.*, 2002). Previous research has found that employees with strong superordinate identification have a lower likelihood of intention to leave, show better performance and are often more cooperative (Allen, 1996; Ellemers *et al.*, 1998). Jetten *et al.* (2002) found evidence that high initial organizational

identification protected long-term organizational commitment, and that high subgroup identification created more negative feelings, particularly about change. They also found that higher superordinate identification reduced negative feelings about change.

A range of studies have shown that the external prestige of the organization has a significant effect on its salience among employees. In a recent study, researchers measured status of and identification with the subgroup, and as expected there was a significant association between status of the organization and respective identification (Lipponen *et al.*, 2005). The impact of external prestige on group identification has been studied in other field settings with similar results (e.g., Mael and Ashforth, 1992).

Many researchers have argued for the value of applying social identity perspectives to organizational studies (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ellemers *et al.*, 2003; Haslam, 2001; Haslam *et al.*, 2003; Hogg and Terry, 2000b). The use of this approach has been studied in relation to favorable organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover, lower levels of burnout, increased motivation, job satisfaction and an increased willingness to make decisions that are favorable to the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Haslam, 2004). However, little attention has been paid to tying social identification to customer and organizational outcomes. In addition, the literature has paid very limited attention to a social identity perspective specifically within a service industry or context.

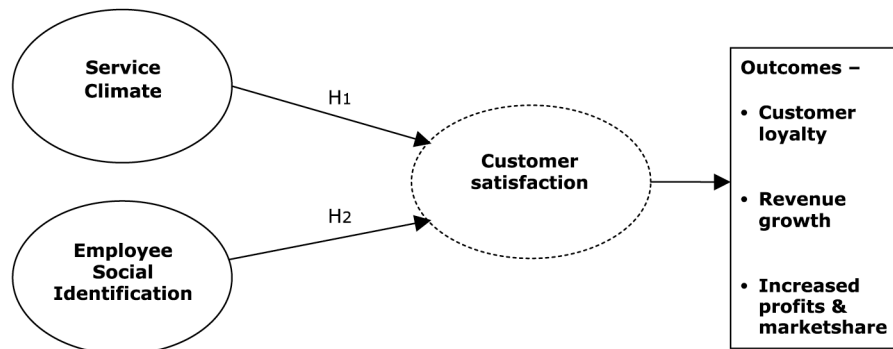
This section has provided a case for employee identification as a construct that can be used to enhance understanding of organizational processes. The more strongly employees identify with their organization or a subgroup within the organization, the more likely their behaviors will be guided and they will act in accordance with the organization's best interest (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Mael and Ashforth, 1992). As Haslam *et al.* (2003) argue, once a particular organizational identity has become salient for a particular group of people, it will have an impact not only on the psychology of the individuals, but will also translate into the collective goods and services that the organization offers. Research shows that the factors that increase a sense of social identity (as a member of a team or organization) make people:

- more willing to communicate;
- more open to others' communications; and
- more likely to interpret communicative actions in similar ways (Haslam *et al.*, 2003).

Service climate has been shown to be conceptually and empirically linked to customer satisfaction (Johnson, 1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1985), and employee identification has been linked to employee attitudes and behaviors (Haslam *et al.*, 2003; Mael and Ashforth, 1995). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed, as illustrated by Figure 2.

- H1.* The aggregate measure of service climate will positively predict employee perceptions of customer satisfaction.
- H2.* Employee identification will positively predict employee perceptions of customer satisfaction.

Figure 2.
Conceptual model linking
adding employee
identification to the
linkage research model



Source: Adapted from Solnet and Paulsen (2005)

Method and measures

To remain consistent with previous research, the measures were selected from previous studies in the relevant disciplines (marketing, management and organizational psychology). Surveys were distributed to approximately 460 employees in four different hotels in Australia. Each of the hotels were either four- or five-star and each belonged to either a regional or international chain. Hotels were chosen because of the high levels of customer-employee interaction in the hotel industry, and because hotels represent a prototypical service business (Hartline *et al.*, 2000; Kandampully, 2002; Mattila and Enz, 2002). In total, 323 unique responses were received from the employees of different departments in each of the hotels across departments in similar proportion to the population of each hotel. Of these, 314 surveys were usable, representing a response rate of 68.2 percent. Response rates varied from 52.6 percent to 83.1 percent. These response rates falls well within what would be considered a reasonable and representative sample (Tabachnick and Fidel, 2001).

Service climate

In this study, the SERV*OR instrument developed by Lytle *et al.* (1998) was utilized to measure service climate. SERV*OR was chosen for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the most recent service climate scales comprehensively developed and validated through a fully detailed research program that included focus group interviews, multiple rounds of pretesting, multisampling assessment and multi-industry replication. Another benefit of SERV*OR is that the items purport to measure 10 dimensions, thus the analysis can be facilitated by assessing various aspects of a service climate rather than a global service climate scale. Finally, Lytle *et al.* (1998) challenged researchers to examine the scale in different international settings. The scale has been used successfully in other research (e.g., Lee *et al.*, 1999; Lynn *et al.*, 2000; Lytle and Timmerman, 2006), and this research context provided an opportunity to test the usefulness of the SERV*OR instrument in the hotel industry.

The service climate measure (SERV*OR) was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis for two primary reasons. First, the relatively small sample size coupled with the large number of factors and dimensions found in the original application of the SERV*OR instrument suggested a low likelihood of factor replication (Tabachnick and

Fidel, 2001). Second, because the SERV*OR instrument had not previously been applied specifically to the hospitality industry, an exploratory rather than confirmatory factor analysis was a justifiable course of action.

The 34 items of the SERV*OR instrument were subjected to a factor analysis using SPSS FACTOR, Principal Axis Factoring. The initial solution yielded a scree plot suggesting between 3 and 5 factors, accounting for between 59.5 percent and 64.9 percent of the variance, respectively. A substantive theoretical reading of the factor structures suggested that the 5-factor solution was the most meaningful of the set, indicating that while differing from the original factor set, the differences made conceptual sense. Accordingly, 5 factors were submitted for rotation because the results of factor extraction, if unaccompanied by rotation, are often hard to interpret (Tabachnick and Fidel, 2001). In orthogonal rotation, the factors are generally uncorrelated, whereas in a circumstance where the researcher is convinced that underlying processes are correlated, an oblique rotation can be justified.

In order to determine which rotation method would yield the most interpretable results, both orthogonal (i.e. varimax) and oblique (i.e. oblimin) methods were applied. Inspection of loadings suggested that the oblique solution yielded the most interpretable and simple structure of the two methods. Table I shows the 5 factors along with factor loadings, values of Cronbach's alpha for the resulting unit-weighted composites derived from the factors, and the total factor variances. The result of this factor analysis did not directly replicate the original scale structure found by Lytle *et al.* (1998). However, the structure was similar to the original and the 5-factor structure made conceptual sense.

Employee identification

Employee identification was measured using an established, reliable and valid four-item scale developed by Doosje *et al.* (1995). Two of the questions relate to perceived membership of the group of interest and the other two items reflect strength of identification with the group. Two sets of questions were included, each containing four identical questions with a slight word change to reflect the different sources of identification of interest to the study (e.g., "I am pleased to be an employee of this hotel" and "I am pleased to be a member of my department). Although the Doosje *et al.* (1995) measure was utilized to measure employee identification at two levels (hotel and department), the measure did not function unidimensionally at the hotel level in the present research. Therefore, the measure for assessing employee identification with the hotel was divided into two measures, as outlined below (see Table II).

Employee identification – hotel employees

The analysis of these items as a set indicated that the four items were not unidimensional. A factor analytic scree plot demonstrated that a 2-factor solution was feasible. Accordingly, two items ("I see myself as an employee here" and "I am pleased to be an employee here") were grouped together on substantive grounds to form a dimension labeled employee identification – hotel property (alpha = 0.799). This dimension appears to measure the way in which employees see themselves as employees of the specific hotel property. The other dimension from these original four items contained two items ("I feel strong ties with others here" and "I identify with others in this hotel") (alpha = 0.82) and appears to measure the way in which

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Attribute	Item	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Factor variance
Service systems	Customer information is shared with employees	0.621	0.911	0.490
	Internal standards are communicated and understood by all	0.591		
	Follow-up calls are regularly provided to customers	0.572		
	We use problem-solving groups to rectify service problems	0.551		
	We have explicit complaint-handling systems	0.514		
	Performance measures are well communicated	0.469		
	Departments understand standards of other departments	0.370		
	Customer centricity	Employees go out of their way for customers		
	Employees go out of their way to prevent problems	0.804		
	We head off problems rather than react to them	0.756		
	Employees provide "first rate" care for customers	0.684		
	Employees are noticeably more friendly here	0.596		
	Employees actively listen to customers	0.573		
	Decisions are made close to the customer	0.534		
	Employees think we exist to serve customers	0.473		
	Employees have freedom to act independently	0.360		
	Customers are seen as opportunities to serve	0.337		
Service leadership	Management constantly gives of themselves	0.915	0.940	0.595
	Management provides service quality leadership	0.798		
	Management constantly measures service quality	0.770		
	Management provides necessary resources for service	0.756		
	Management spends time "on the floor" with staff	0.727		
	Management constantly communicates about service	0.660		
Service technology	We use technology to support front-line staff	0.908	0.934	0.626
	We use state-of-the-art technology	0.889		
	We use technology to help improve services	0.872		
Service training	We use training simulation to improve service quality	0.850	0.930	0.648
	We use exercises to improve attitudes toward customers	0.826		
	Employees received personal skills training	0.809		

Table I.
Service climate factor
analysis (as revised from
SERV*OR)

Dimension	Name/sample description of items	Cronbach's alpha
Employee identification	I see myself as an employee here	0.799
Hotel property	I am pleased to be an employee here	
Other employees of hotel	I feel strong ties with others here I identify with others in this hotel	0.824
Subgroup/department	I see myself as a member of my department I am pleased to be a member of my department I feel strong ties to others in my department I identify with others in my department	0.894
Employee perceptions of customer satisfaction	Customers of this hotel are generally satisfied Customers of this hotel receive excellent service	0.883

Table II.
Employee identification
and outcome measures

employees see themselves in relation to the rest of the employees of that particular hotel property. This new dimension was labeled employee identification – hotel employees. Subsequently, the present research utilized two measures of employee identification with the individual hotel property. The two distinct scales indicate the degree to which employees identify with:

- (1) the actual hotel property in which they work (i.e. The Brisbane Hilton); and
- (2) the employees of that particular hotel.

Employee identification – department

Strength of employee identification with their department (or workgroup) was measured using the same scale as above (Doosje *et al.*, 1995). The analysis of these items as a set indicated that the four items were unidimensional (in contrast to the same questions above regarding identification with the hotel) (alpha = 0.894). The level of analysis for this study is targeted at the department level, hence this result was not unexpected. Departmental identification was measured and analyzed using this 4-item measure.

Employee identification – company

In order to ascertain the extent to which employees identified with the parent company that managed the hotel, a further question was asked in relation to the way the respondent identified with the company. This level of identification was ascertained with a single item (“I am pleased to be an employee of this company”) (mean = 5.66, s.d. = 1.49).

Employee perceptions of customer satisfaction

The survey also included two questions asking employees to estimate levels of customer satisfaction. Similar service quality research has argued for the importance in measuring quality via the workers’ own attitudes and perceptions, based on a proximal reasoning philosophy (Lee-Ross and Pryce, 2004). In addition, previous research has shown a positive correlation between employee and customer perceptions of service quality (Borucki and Burke, 1999; Johnson, 1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Wiley, 1991). The two questions asking for employee perceptions (“In my opinion, customers of this hotel are generally very satisfied”, and “In my opinion, customers of this hotel receive excellent

customer service”) were highly correlated ($r = 0.78$) and were combined to form a scale to measure employee perceptions of customer satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Data aggregation

In order to check the effect of the multilevel structure of the dataset, in which persons were nested within hotels, a variance components analysis was run using MLwiN 2.0 software. This approach provides separate estimates of the variance represented at each level of the sampling design. It provides estimates of the appropriate Intraclass Correlation (ICC) values. For perceived customer satisfaction, the analysis showed that 16.67 percent of variance was represented at the hotel level (i.e. $ICC = 0.1667$). Conversely, 83.33 percent of the variance was represented at the person level (i.e. $ICC = 0.8333$). For perceived change, the respective proportions of variance were: 24.20 percent of variance at the hotel level (i.e. $ICC = 0.2420$) and 75.80 percent (i.e. $ICC = 0.7580$) at the person level. These values are well within generally accepted ICC values from the relevant literature (Dietz *et al.*, 2004; Liao and Chuang, 2004). It was therefore concluded that the aggregation of data was justified and the original data was used for the present research. Finally, the main regression analyses reported below were checked within the multilevel framework and these analyses confirmed that the aggregation of data across hotels provided a similar pattern of results to a multilevel approach.

Results and discussion

Table III provides the results of a hierarchical regression analysis of the service climate variables and employee identification variables as predictors of employee perceptions of customer satisfaction. Results indicate that the prediction of customer satisfaction was significantly improved at each step of the analysis. First, the demographic variables in total provided a significant contribution toward the prediction of customer satisfaction (R^2 Change = 0.06), with sex (females higher) ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < 0.001$) providing a significant prediction of customer satisfaction, while tenure (full-time higher) ($\beta = 0.10$; $p < 0.05$) also contributed to this prediction. None of the other demographic variables contributed significantly.

In relation to *H1* (the aggregate measure of service climate will positively predict employee perceptions of customer satisfaction), a major improvement to the prediction over and above demographic variables occurred on the second step when service climate dimensions were entered into the equation (R^2 Change = 0.47). In other words, 47 percent of the unique variance in perceptions of customer satisfaction was explained by the collective dimensions of service climate. This result is not surprising. The elements of service climate that predict perceptions of customer satisfaction are those that relate directly to aspects of employee contact and the perceptions that employees have about the importance placed on this issue by the organization. The customer-centricity dimension included such customer-related aspects as perceptions of service encounter practices, empowerment, service failure prevention, and service vision. This result highlights the importance that employees place on the way in which the firm focuses and prioritizes customer-centric service factors. When this focus is salient in the organization, these same employees believe that the firm’s customers are satisfied. Therefore, the linkages found in this study suggest that it is the dimensions related to the firm’s perceived customer-centricity that are the most important in predicting customer satisfaction.

Variables	B	Beta	Sr ²	
Step 1				
Age	0.03	0.03	0.007	
Sex	0.37	0.14***	0.001	
Department	0.01	0.05	0.000	
Tenure	-0.08	-0.10*	0.007	
Employment status	0.10	0.04	0.001	R^2 Change = 0.064 $F_{5,300} = 4.091$ ***
Step 2				
Service systems	-0.04	-0.05	0.000	
Customer centricity	0.62	0.50***	0.076	
Service leadership	0.08	0.10	0.003	
Service technology	0.02	0.02	0.000	
Service training	0.04	0.05	0.001	R^2 Change = 0.473 $F_{5,285} = 60.256$ ***
Step 3				
Identification – workgroup	0.01	0.08	0.000	
Identification – hotel	-0.05	-0.04	0.001	
Identification – employees	-0.01	-0.01	0.000	R^2 Change = 0.033 $F_{4,291} = 5.57$ ***
Identification – company	0.22	0.26***	0.027	

Notes: Sr = squared semipartial correlation; regression weights when all variables entered in the equation; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; $n = 314$; betas indicated only after all variables where entered

Table III.
Hierarchical regression
on customer satisfaction

The other service climate dimensions (service systems, leadership, technology and training) did not add to the prediction of employee perceptions of customer satisfaction. This is explainable, as employees might not see the “process” components of service (such as service systems, technology and training) as direct contributors to customer satisfaction. This may explain why employee perceptions of these dimensions do not predict perceptions of customer satisfaction in this study. It was surprising that leadership perceptions did not add to the perceptions of customer satisfaction. One possible explanation is that the hotel leaders could be one step removed from employee perceptions of customer-centricity. Future research could examine whether customer-centricity has a mediation effect on leadership perceptions in predicting customer satisfaction.

H2 suggested employee identification will positively predict employee perceptions of customer satisfaction. The addition of the employee identification variables to the regression did indeed significantly improve the prediction, although the addition of these variables was modest as a main effect (R^2 Change = 0.03). The significant beta weight indicates company identification to be the primary significant contributor to this prediction (beta = 0.26; $p < 0.001$).

This result is not surprising in that employee identification with various levels of an individual’s work organization has been linked with many favorable organizational outcomes in previous research, such as organizational commitment, reduced intentions to leave, in-group cooperation, job satisfaction, motivation, and others (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, 1998; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Haslam, 2001; Mael and Ashforth, 1995; Paulsen, 2003). Although research into employee identification has not previously been applied in a hotel industry context, nor has it been performed with customer outcomes as the target variable, this finding does contradict some previous research which suggests that the department is the primary target of identification in organizations (Paulsen, 2003; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2002; van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000).

In this study, the degree to which hotel employees perceived themselves as members of their company (e.g. Accor) made the only significant contribution to the prediction of customer satisfaction perceptions. Thus, it appears that the company identification is a more important source of identification for employees in the context of this particular analysis. This might be further explained by the perceptions that certain brands (e.g., Hilton, Marriott) are equated to high levels of customer service and customer satisfaction. In other words, a person’s identity drawn from their belonging to a known successful hotel company or brand appears to enhance that person’s perceptions about the satisfaction levels of customers.

Conclusion and managerial implications

The aim of this paper was to introduce a social psychological dimension to existing research which links employee perceptions of internal factors with important business outcomes – in this case customer satisfaction. The present research was underpinned by the challenge of managing employee-customer interactions, and the ongoing need for managers, despite the lack of direct supervision, to improve these interactions. The basic idea underlying the social identity stream of research is that belonging to a social group confers on members a sense of identification with other members in a group and a sense of difference from those not in the group. Service climate and linkage research were also introduced and explained as foundational factors for this paper. A model was

proposed which hierarchically tested whether employee identification could improve the prediction of customer satisfaction over and above the service climate variables.

This research provides important implications for managers. First, this research provides further evidence that managers would benefit from the use of regular and ongoing attention to service climate as an important diagnostic tool. Those specific dimensions chosen by a firm to measure its service climate can be utilized as drivers to ensure an unwavering customer-focused organization. Although service climate measures should not be a pure substitute for direct customer research, the linkage research literature and the findings from this study provide evidence of direct links between aspects of service climate and customer satisfaction.

When an organization promotes an atmosphere for its employees that is fundamentally conducive to serving customers, this effort will result in higher levels of positive customer experiences, which in turn will lead to other positive customer outcomes (Schneider and Bowen, 1993). Results from this study support this contention. The findings are consistent with research from the linkage model, which suggests that positive customer perceptions of service quality are found in those organizations that emphasize and demonstrate conviction toward listening to customers and creating conditions where exceeding customer expectations is the norm (Schneider *et al.*, 1998). Managers cannot afford to ignore these elements of service climate.

In addition, it is important for managers to remember that a service-oriented climate does not exist unless it is perceived by the workforce. Managers must ensure that their own actions do not contradict the firm's orientation to serve customers. This point is particularly salient in service businesses where face-to-face service encounters take place regularly.

In relation to employee identification, this research has demonstrated that managers cannot afford to ignore the importance that social attachments and identities have on employee attitudes and their subsequent behavior. The literature provides compelling evidence that employee attitudes, behavior, commitment and motivation are all affected by attachment to social groups at varying organization levels. This particular study found significant empirical connections between a persons' identification with their company (superordinate identification) and perceptions of customer satisfaction. Previous research has shown links between a firm's external prestige perceptions and employee identification. Therefore managers can capitalize on this, particularly managers of businesses with positive brand affiliation. However, managers of smaller businesses (for example a local or regional hotel) can realize that improving their community image can have positive effects on employee identification. These improved perceptions then float across the satisfaction mirror to customers.

In addition, managers can use employee identification strategically in their internal practices. For example, identity may be conveyed and strengthened by non-verbal means. Uniforms and dress codes may signal status or expertise and can also cement individuals into their roles or work teams. Past research has shown that clothing and uniforms indeed convey normative cues that affect both an audience and the participants wearing them. If managers can understand the way employees identify with various social aspects of their work environment (shift teams, occupational groups, outside interests), they can integrate their actions and their communications accordingly and break down barriers that exist in the workplace. Reduced barriers and increased identification can enhance camaraderie and attachment to the workplace.

These outcomes have been shown to reduce employee turnover, enhance communication, facilitate commitment to the organization and facilitate improved organizational outcomes.

This research has shown that these considerations should not be ignored by managers of service organizations, particularly when employee-customer contact is an important aspect of service quality perceptions. Managers should interpret the limited role of work group and lower level organisational identification in this study with caution because the predominance of previous research suggests that the role of identity is prevalent on many levels of organizational life. The use of a different measure or a larger sample might have shown closer alignment to previous research, which suggests identification strength at workgroup and organizational levels.

Limitations and future research

Sampling limitations are acknowledged. The study was limited to hotels in Australia, which might not be generalizable to other markets. However, given that the hotels were from various regions around Australia, and from different hotel groups, it is possible that the results could be generalized across the hotel sector.

Another acknowledged limitation is the use of employee perceptions of customer satisfaction rather than responses taken directly from customers. While employees have shown the ability to offer a reasonable assessment of customer satisfaction (Johnson, 1996), the inability to gain direct access to customers made it impossible to make a direct measure of customer satisfaction.

The outcomes of this research suggest a number of possible ways forward. Firstly, further examination could be undertaken to assess the effect of service climate dimensions on various customer outcomes, employee perceptions and, in particular, on firm financial performance. The literature suggests a direct link between customer satisfaction and firm financial performance, but direct tests of this influence in a hotel or hospitality context would make useful further research. Additionally, the lack of hotel industry-specific service climate measures provides an impetus for future research to undertake rigorous scale development and testing of service climate measures specific to the hotel industry.

This research framework could also be applied in a longitudinal research design. In such as design, research could examine the nuances of employee perceptions of service climate and employee identification during change processes in order to diagnose the effectiveness of change. Qualitative research could also be used to complement the findings and to offset the limitations of self-report, cross-sectional survey designs.

While service climate and employee identification have been topics of research for many years, there has been limited application of these constructs in a hospitality industry setting. Although this paper was primarily a conceptual one, which proposes a useful link for social identity theory to be applied in service organizations, the findings have been one attempt to redress this shortcoming.

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