

CUSTOMER-INITIATED COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE SERVICE PROVIDER VIA PHONE CHANNEL - FACTORS AFFECTING BEHAVIORAL INTENTION

Ilona Bondos¹⁴¹

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the factors affecting intention to use phone channel at the after-sales service in service buying process. Author looks at the communication at post-purchase stage via phone channel as the customer-initiated communications with the service provider. Conventional phone channel has evolved towards the mobile marketing channel; however, some factors do not lose in importance – perceived media richness, consumer trust and perceived risk. In the article data from the questionnaire survey is used (research sample 1103).*

Keywords: *customer-initiated communications, CIC, marketing channel, post-purchase stage, after-sales support, communications via phone*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus among researchers that in multichannel retailing effective channel strategy is of great importance for every company [2] [38]. It is also argued that communications are an important factor of marketing channels [34]. As it was stated by [31, p. 36], communications can be described as the glue that holds together a channel of distribution. It is vital not only due to the possibility to obtain new customers but also due to the creation of consumers experience [28]. The distribution channels should be seen as a representation of a system of economic and social interactions [28]. Therefore, different types of communication can be identified and analyzed, business-to-business has its own specificity [8] as well as business-to-consumer. In the latter case customer-initiated communication (CIC) also merits attention. Taking the point of view of consumers, it is visible that the communication is a crucial element of the service experience [7]. As is stated in [46] [22] creation of superior customer experience is seen as one of the main goals of multichannel retailing. Due to learning and habit through the obtaining experience the probability of continuing to use the same channels from the past is rising [44].

In this article author focuses on after-sale service as the customer-initiated communication at the post-purchase stage in service buying process. The main research goal is to verify hypothesis about the influence of particular factors on intention to use phone channel¹⁴² at the post-purchase stage. By analogy to the definition presented in [39], in this article customer-initiated communications refer to any communication with a service provider that is initiated by a customer by phone channel at the post-purchase stage in service buying process.

¹⁴¹ Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Plac Marii Crie-Skłodowskiej 5, 20-031 Lublin, Poland

¹⁴² The research concept did not distinguish between type of phone used by customer – mobile phone or conventional stationary phone.

2. CONSUMER COMMUNICATIONS VIA DIFFERENT MARKETING CHANNELS

In general, communications refer to the amount, frequency, and quality of information shared between exchange partners [35]. Marketing communications can also be seen as the tool for differentiating and creating competitive advantage for itself and its products as well as the valued factors in building relations with customers [25]. Some authors put an emphasis on the importance of the integration of new electronic channels within an overall marketing strategy [13]. Madden and Perry [25] provide research findings that the quality of the communications with a particular institution is important to them. One of the elements of communications quality is duration of waiting for information. Prompt customer service (one of the elements is the information provision) is a competitive advantage in the market for service-oriented industries [32]. The speed of service has been associated with positive customer evaluation in terms of service quality and satisfaction. Constantly striving to improve customer satisfaction [41] seems to be a permanently crucial issue. However, as is stated by [1], every industry has its own critical success factor known as threshold resources, that are required for a firm to survive in the industry. According to the research literature, customer-initiated contact (CIC) are perceived as the valuable source of information about consumers' thoughts and problems. Therefore, CICs are one of the important elements of the process of customer management [3]. Undoubtedly changes in the field of information and communications technologies promote the growth of the importance of the CIC.

Taking into account the huge progress in the area of marketing communications, new marketing channels (e.g. mobile channel) should be perceived as the subsequent but not as substitute for traditional channels [30] in the process of communication with clients. As is indicated by researchers [12] [9] [10] the influence of mobile devices on customers' online shopping behavior is unquestionable. The issue truly important to marketing channels management is how retailers can steer customers to strategically important channels [18]. As is stated by researchers, communication can play a vital role in that area. Interesting findings are provided in [38]. These researchers have aimed to understand the process of choosing the available marketing channel by customers. In that research approach, authors put an emphasis on the two types of interactions such as purchases and communications. According to them the nature of each of interaction has an impact on customer behavior in multichannel environment. Finally, communications are seen as the area where there is higher effectiveness of marketing activities at driving channel choice.

In [45] it is noted that the main reason for choosing particular marketing channel is searching for the environment that supports their requirements for interaction the best. Therefore, service suppliers need to reflect on the role that communication channels play for the customer. Researchers note that consumer shopping value can be transferable from one retail venue to the other, further to another venue [16]. What is more, according to them, consumer shopping value is the key factor that can result in consumer satisfaction with shopping, as well as loyalty intention toward shopping. Not without a reason obtaining customer delightful is proposed as one of challenges in order to develop an integrated omni-channel customer experience [29]. Authors of [18] pay attention to the possibility to induce customers to switch to offline channel by communicating information about channel integration on their websites (online channel). The problem of customer migration toward online channel has been widely analyzed by [43]. These researchers provide findings that customer loyalty has an important meaning for the results of migration strategy. However, the main conclusion refers to the link between type of migration strategy and potential effects of this strategy. Authors of [33] also provide some arguments for redirecting clients to the target channel. The reason for such an attitude is higher

costs and unrealized opportunities to increase revenues. Instead, customers must be guided to the right mix of channels for each product or service.

Unlike the firm-initiated marketing communications that very often lead to a potential customer purchase [37], customer-initiated communications at after-sales service stage can lead to discussion with client, service recovery or additional purchase. Due to the potential consequences of poor contact with service supplier (dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, etc.) a special attention should be put on communication via phone. The main reason for using this type of remote marketing channel is a wide defined customer convenience. This marketing channel has evolved from conventional stationary phone enabling only the conversations through cell phone (SMS, MMS) towards smartphones (Internet access).

Due to the subject of analysis, that is phone channel in customer-initiated communications process, another important issue is perceived media richness of this medium. Since the Media Richness Theory (MRT) was firstly developed by Daft and Lengel [5] numerous other works have studied the phenomena of perceived media richness [17] [42] [4]. Media richness refers to the potential information carrying capacity of data [5]. Media richness theory explained media choice as a rational process resulting from a match between the task and medium characteristics [19]. It suggests that voice-based communication is ranked higher than text-based communication along the media richness continuum [5], however some additional findings have been also exposed. Several authors [21] [23] have noted that the medium itself does not necessarily determine its perceived media richness, however these findings were proposed in reference to online channel. As it was stated, communications media differ in the richness of the information processed. This division into lean and rich is based on characteristic as follows: feedback capability, the communication channels utilized, language variety, and personal focus. In general, the more a medium incorporates these characteristics, the richer it is [42]. In a traditional continuum of perceived media richness phone channel is seen as high in media richness, leaner only than face to face contact [42]. According to research [39], customer-initiated communications via phone channel is preferred when consumer faces an extended problem-solving (high perceived risk/low familiarity). Whereas, in case of routine problem-solving situation online channel is preferred. Thus, taking into account the specificity of after-sales service phone communication seems to be appropriate.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

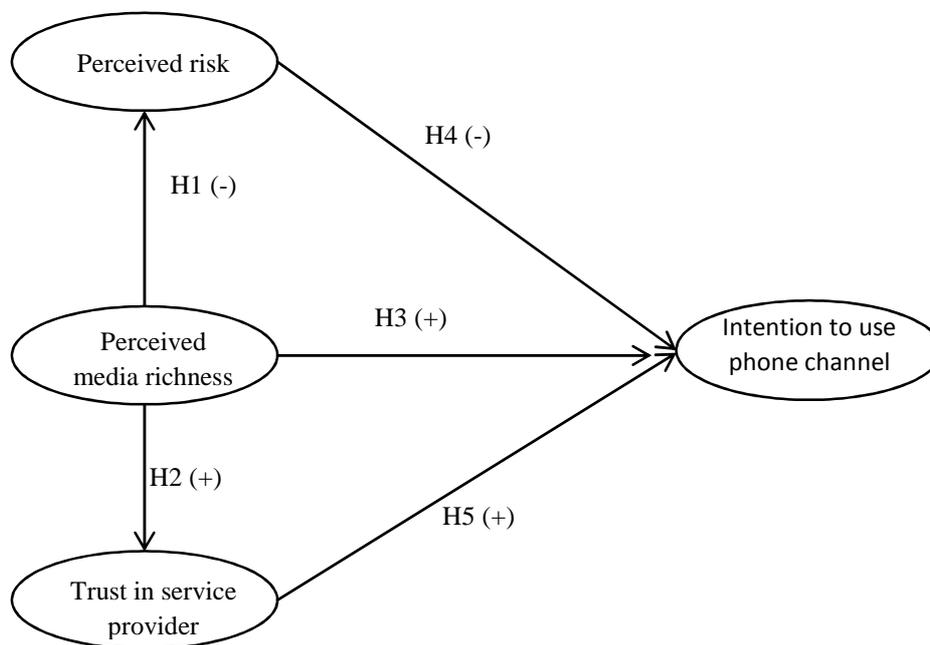
The study was conducted in September-November 2015 on a group of 1103 Polish respondents (including 357 from a Baby boomers generation, 390 from the X generation and 356 from the Y generation). The research sample was determined by quota-random method, quotas due to age and gender and the nature of the place of residence (city provincial, city other than provincial, village) – the structure of sample was preserved at the regional level (16 voivodships in Poland).

Much research effort has been devoted to examining the influence of some factors on behavioral intention in the environment. However, in author's opinion phone channel seems to be neglected in research analysis. For this reason, in this paper the research model (fig. 2) in reference to post-purchase stage (after-sales service) in service buying process and customer-initiated communications via phone channel will be tested.

Based on the literature the following research model is proposed (see Fig. 1). Five hypotheses derived from the model are as follow:

- H1: Perceived media richness has negative effect on perceived risk at the pre-purchase stage
- H2: Perceived media richness has positive effect on trust to service supplier at the pre-purchase stage
- H3: Perceived media richness has positive effect on intention to use phone channel at the pre-purchase stage
- H4: Perceived risk has negative effect on intention to use phone channel at the pre-purchase stage
- H5: Trust in service provider has positive effect on intention to use phone channel at the pre-purchase stage

Figure 4. The proposed research model – the post-purchase stage via phone channel



Source: Own research.

All measurement items for the principal constructs used in this study were based on seven-point Likert-type scales anchored at 1- strongly disagree, 4-neutral, and 7-strongly agree. Please refer to the items in the table 1.

Table 6. Items – detailed characteristic

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alfa
Trust (T) Adapted from [12]	T1: When getting after-sales service via phone channel I can trust to service provider. T2: I can rely on after-sales service via phone channel. T3: Service provider keeps his promises and commitments concerning after-sale service via phone channel T4: When getting after-sales service via phone channel I know that the service provider keeps my best interests in mind.	.915
Perceived risk (R) Adapted from: [27] [36].	R1: After-sale service via phone channel may lead to adverse consequences. R2: While getting after-sale service via phone channel I am afraid to disclosure of personal data.	.764

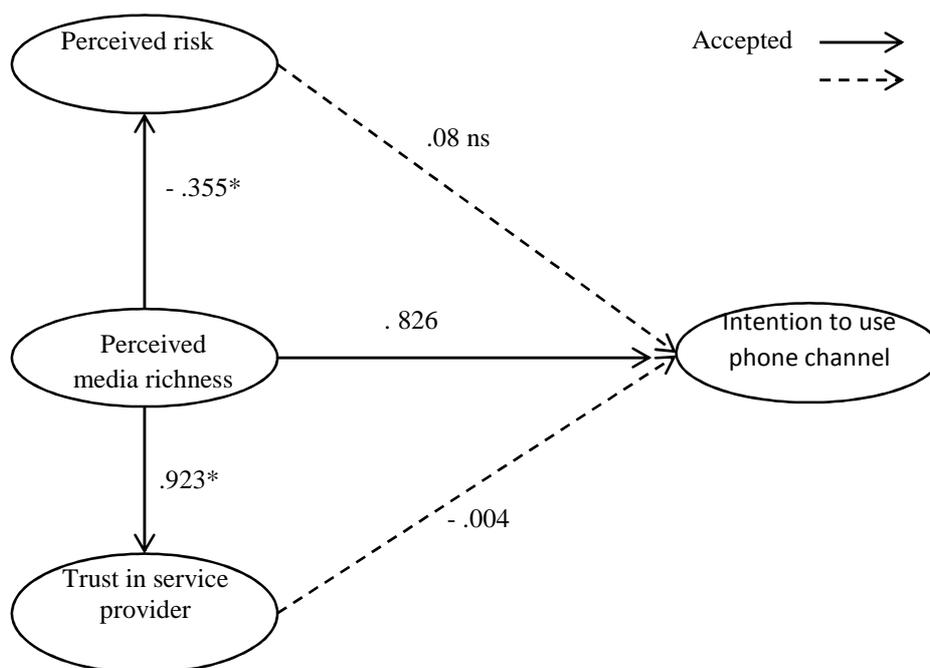
	R3: After-sales service via phone channel is risky.	
Perceived media richness (MR) adapted from [24].	MR1: While after-sales service via phone channel, I can get an immediate feedback; MR2: Contact via phone channel is suitable during after-sale service; MR3: While after-sale service via phone channel, I can get multiple types of information	.830
Intention to use online channel (IU) Adapted from: [40].	IU1: There is a good chance that I will use phone channel during after-sales service. IU2: Most likely I will use phone channel during after-sales service. IU3: I intend to use phone channel in the future in order to after-sale service.	.961

Source: own research.

Research Findings

Most of model fits have reached the expected level (see figure 2): CMIN/DF 2.699 DF = 60, GFI .977, AGFI .965, RMSEA .039 (LO 90 .032 – HI 90 .047), PCLOSE .993.

Figure 5. The research model



Note: * $p < .001$; ns – nonsignificant
Source: Own research.

4. DISCUSSION

Research findings put a strong emphasis on the importance of perceived media richness of phone channel. According to research model this characteristic of phone channel has both direct and indirect impact on behavioral intention. First, the perceived media richness of phone channel has significant influence on consumer trust to service provider in phone channel. What is more, in presented research model the perceived media richness explains explain 85% of consumer trust. Second, perceived media richness significantly affects perceived risk and to some extent mitigate its negative impact on intention to use phone channel at the post-purchase

stage. And finally, perceived media richness has strong positive direct impact on behavioral intention. The results concerning the lack of importance of trust must be considered as quite surprising and deserve for further attention. However, the lack of a significant impact of perceived risk on the intention to use phone channel can be justified by the strong impact of perceived media richness.

Provided findings can be seen as contribution towards better customer service at the post-purchase stage that is also very important to service buyers [20]. While m-commerce is still in its infancy, phone channel (smartphones) is preferred for pre- and post-purchasing activities [26]. In case of analyzing the intention to use phone channel in customer-initiated communications some important social (demographical) changes should be taken into account. One of the challenges that refer to contemporary society in high development countries is the information and communication technology revolution, as well as the demographic shift [15]. Another essential issue creates challenge for multichannel service providers is the integration of information accessible on mobile devices and on websites. Becoming customer centric should be the desire of every conscious service provider [29], if none of the available marketing channels can achieve the stated objectives. Even if digital marketing communications are seen as one of the most important industrial marketing communication tools [14], each marketing channel that is provided to customers should be managed and coordinated in the best possible way.

5. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEACH DIRECTIONS

Although the results of this study have useful implications, some limitations must be considered. First limitations refer to individual components of perceived risk as well as consumer trust. The perceived risk that was analyzed as a whole, not as a set of individual components of perceived risk. Author also resigned from analyzing the direct relationship between perceived risk and trust. Second limitation implies to the fact that a comprehensive set of factors affecting intention to use phone channel at the after-sales support have not been included. Omitted variables need to be addressed in future research. Finally, due to rising m-commerce popularity a specific research attention should be put on mobile phone with its advanced functionality based on ICT.

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