

Customer advocates with a generous heart

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the fact that prosocial motivation is related to word of mouth (WOM), few studies have been conducted to investigate the psychological and behavioral processes that mediate the two constructs. This study aims to explore customers' relational interactions, specifically customer-to-employee interaction (via customer participation), customer-to-customer interaction and customer-to-brand interaction (via brand commitment), as mediators of the prosocial motivation–WOM linkage. Specifically, this paper examines the serial mediation model, in which prosocial motivation increases customer participation and customer-to-customer interaction, which in turn increase brand commitment and WOM sequentially.

Design/methodology/approach – This study collected survey data from two different samples, including higher degree research education and fitness gym services (highly interactive, people-processing service contexts), and used partial least square method to analyze the multiple serial mediations.

Findings – The results of this study show two serial mediating processes through which prosocial motivation influences WOM: 1. prosocial motivation → customer participation → brand commitment → WOM; and 2. prosocial motivation → customer-to-customer interaction → brand commitment → WOM.

Practical implications – The findings provide managerial insights into how marketers can foster a more interactive service environment to encourage prosocial customers to engage in WOM more effectively.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature on services WOM by illustrating the behavioral and psychological processes that underlie the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM.

Keywords Prosocial motivation, Brand commitment, Word of mouth, Customer participation, Customer-to-customer interaction

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The desire to help others, otherwise known as prosocial motivation, has been repeatedly identified as a key driver of word of mouth (WOM) (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Ho and Dempsey, 2010). Whether recommending a brand can benefit others is an important social consideration for customers (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013). Previous studies, thus far, have examined prosocial motivation as a direct driver of WOM; however, the mechanisms through which prosocial motivation influences WOM are not well understood. How do customers' desire to help others increase their WOM? A deeper understanding of the psychological and behavioral processes that mediate prosocial motivation and WOM would enable marketers to assert greater influence in influencing WOM creation and dissemination.

In the current study, we explore and test the theoretical and managerial significance of customers' relational interactions as the mediating mechanisms between prosocial motivation and WOM. From a theoretical perspective, the inclusion of relational interactions in understanding WOM is important, especially in highly interactive service contexts. Brand advocates provide valuable information, especially for customers purchasing a service because service outcomes are generally difficult to evaluate *prior* to purchase (Murray, 1991; Harrison-Walker, 2001). In highly interactive service contexts, service outcomes may be difficult to evaluate even *after* purchase when customers' contribution of time and effort during the service-consumption process influence service experience and outcomes (Mills *et al.*, 1983; Bitner *et al.*, 1997). Service outcomes are largely determined by customer-to-employee (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000), customer-to-customer (Moore *et al.*, 2005) and customer-to-brand interactions (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). In turn, service outcomes are critical for WOM intention and behavior (De Matos and Rossi, 2008). For instance, health and fitness

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services, educational services and gaming services provide a high degree of interactive opportunities to customers. The extent to which a gym member or a student achieves desirable service outcomes largely depends on his/her level of relational interactions during the service-consumption process. In such contexts, incorporating relational interactions with service employees, other customers and the service brand is crucial in understanding WOM.

Furthermore, *Kozinets et al. (2010)* explain that WOM communications are coproduced in consumer networks through relational interactions. Indeed, customer-to-employee interaction via customer participation (CP) (*Ramani and Kumar, 2008; Maru File et al., 1992; Raggio and Folse, 2009*), customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) (*Ferguson et al., 2010; Rahman et al., 2015*) and customer-to-brand interaction (via behavioral, cognitive and emotional brand commitment) (*Eisingerich et al., 2014; Verhoef et al., 2002; Gruen et al., 2000*) are significant drivers of WOM. However, these relational interactions have been neglected in previous research when examining the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM, although prosocial motivation has been shown to have significant implications for relational interactions by reducing barriers that people experience when interacting with others (*Van Lange et al., 1997*).

We argue that the three types of customers' relational interactions, namely, customer-to-employee interaction via CP, CCI and customer-to-brand interaction via brand commitment, are the key mediators of prosocial motivation and WOM in the context of highly interactive services. Specifically, we examine the extent to which customers interact with:

- *service employees* by providing or sharing information, making suggestions and becoming involved in decision-making during service co-creation and delivery process (CP);
- *other customers* by forming and enjoying interpersonal bonds such as friendships in the service environment (CCI) (*LeBaron and Jones, 2002; Moore et al., 2005; Arnould and Price, 1993*); and
- *the service brand* by engaging with the brand behaviorally, cognitively and emotionally (brand commitment) (*Allen and Meyer, 1996*).

Our research provides two main contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on the role of customers' prosocial motivation in increasing WOM (*Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Alexandrov et al., 2013; Ho and Dempsey, 2010*) by illustrating the behavioral and psychological processes that underlie the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM. We demonstrate that customers with high prosocial motivation engage in more positive customer-to-employee interaction via CP and CCI, which in turn assist in developing stronger commitment to the brand, and ultimately become brand advocates.

Second, by contextualizing the research in service contexts that are highly interactive in nature, we highlight the role that customers play in influencing their own WOM intention. By highlighting the importance of the interplay between customers' prosocial motivation and interactive behaviors in shaping their WOM, we contribute to the literature on value co-creation that recognizes the important role customers play

in shaping their own experiences (*Vargo and Lusch, 2004*). We show that involving customers deeply in interactive processes is key to turning prosocial motivation into WOM.

The remainder of the paper is organized into three parts. First, we discuss the prosocial motivation–WOM linkage and explain how the three types of service interactions – customer-to-employee, customer-to-customer and customer-to-brand interactions – mediate the relationship between prosocial motivation and WOM. Second, we explain the methodology and the results in two highly interactive, people-processing service contexts. Third, we discuss theoretical and practical contributions of the paper and its limitations and ideas for future research.

Theoretical framework

Prosocial motivation

Prosocial motivation refers to the desire to expend effort to benefit others (*Batson, 1987; Grant and Berry, 2011*). Prosocials pay closer attention to others' perspectives and their needs (*Grant and Berry, 2011*), expect others to be more cooperative (*Kuhlman and Wimberley, 1976*) and behave in ways that maximize others' outcomes (*Van Lange et al., 1997*). Thus, the desire to help other people is a significant driver of WOM both in online and offline contexts (*Engel et al., 1995; Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ho and Dempsey, 2010; Phelps et al., 2004*). In this research, we argue that prosocial motivation is an important characteristic of the customer, especially in the context of highly interactive, people-processing service contexts where service outcomes are largely influenced by the extent of interactions between the customer, employees and other customers.

Service interactions

Customers are increasingly demanding opportunities to “co-create more individualized, experiential and differentiated goods and services” (*Payne et al., 2008*). Moreover, services are characterized by ever-increasing interconnectedness between customers (*Libai et al., 2010*). These trends show that customer-to-employee, customer-to-customer and customer-to-brand interactions are crucial in shaping the overall service experience.

Summarizing the evolution of the literature on WOM, *Kozinets et al. (2010)* emphasize customers' interactions with employees, other customers and the brand as the central elements in the WOM theory development. Thus, this paper adopts this perspective and considers these three types of customers' interactive behaviors in unison in extending the theoretical and managerial understanding of WOM. In the following section, this paper introduces and clarifies the conceptualizations of CP, CCI and brand commitment and presents them as three important mediating constructs in the relationship between prosocial motivation and WOM in highly interactive service contexts.

Customer participation in service production vs service improvement

We present two distinct conceptualizations of CP found in the extant literature and provide justification for selecting one of

the two approaches. The current literature on CP is mainly divided into two distinct conceptualizations:

- 1 CP in service production (addressing customers as partial employees); and
- 2 CP in service improvement (addressing customers as organizational consultants).

The first presents CP as the level of effort that a customer, as a partial employee, expends to produce a service outcome (Dabholkar, 2015; Mills and Morris, 1986). Following this definition, Bendapudi and Leone (2003) present CP as situations when a customer participates in self-services such as assembling furniture, making travel reservations or shopping for food at a grocery store as opposed to an employee performing such tasks for the customer. Dong *et al.* (2015) also use CP as the extent of service customization that requires more work from customers and less work from employees. Notably, this definition of CP explains that, as customers become more involved in service production, less interaction is required between customers and employees (Meuter and Bitner, 1998; Troye and Supphellen, 2012). Many studies have also used this co-production of service outcome approach to describe CP (Lovelock and Young, 1979; Hubbert, 1995; Bitner *et al.*, 1997; Lusch *et al.*, 1992).

On the other hand, a more recent conceptualization of CP can be found in Chan *et al.*'s (2010, p. 40) study, which defines CP as "the extent to which customers provide or share information, make suggestions, and become involved in decision making during service co-creation and delivery process." This approach regards customers as organizational consultants who provide critical or useful suggestions and opinions to the service provider for the improvement of service outcomes. Such operationalization of CP is evident in many recent studies including those of Fuchs *et al.* (2010), Ngo and O'Cass (2013), Yim *et al.* (2012) and Ouschan *et al.* (2006). A recent example of this approach of operationalizing CP is "I make constructive suggestions to [business name] on how to improve its product offerings" (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2014). Clearly, providing suggestions or feedback on service improvement is very different from having to read the manual and set up the internet after signing up for a new internet service as in Dong *et al.*'s (2015) operationalization of CP. As Zhang *et al.* (2018) show, engaging customers in co-creative processes requires service employees to be helpful, polite and responsive and empathetic in their interactions with customers. CP, which is seen as a co-creation process, involves a high degree of interaction.

Based on Kozinets *et al.*'s (2010) call for incorporating customers' interactive behaviors as the central elements in the WOM theory development, we focus on examining the effect of customers' *interactive behaviors* with service employees on WOM. However, the "customers as partial employees" approach often entails a reduced level of customer-to-employee interaction, whereas the "customers as organizational consultants" approach entails a high level of customer-to-employee interaction (Table I). Therefore, we adopt the second approach (customers as organizational consultants) to operationalize and measure CP and examine the extent to which customers interact with service employees to express their needs, opinions and suggestions to the service provider. For example, we examine how much a gym member contributes ideas and suggestions to improve the service quality, rather than measuring the extent to which the member expends physical exertion to produce service outcomes of health and fitness.

Customer participation as a mediator between prosocial motivation and word of mouth

Prosocially motivated individuals are characterized by empathy (Hoffman, 1984), benevolence, universalism (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001) and concern for other people's goals and preferences (Meglino and Korsgaard, 2004). Their desire to help others motivate them to ask questions and listen carefully to obtain cues about how to help effectively (De Dreu *et al.*, 2000). Because CP in service contexts involves providing suggestions to help improve the quality for their experience as well as for the benefit of the firm, many characteristics of prosocially motivated customers are expected to be the important drivers of CP. Burger-Helmchen and Cohendet (2011) also show that customers have different levels of motivation in participating in co-development process. This paper expects that customers with high prosocial motivation are more likely to engage in CP.

In turn, the marketing literature suggests that CP[1] is a crucial customer-to-employee interaction activity that is highly influential in nurturing WOM (Ramani and Kumar, 2008; Maru File *et al.*, 1992; Raggio and Folse, 2009). Encouraging customers to share their suggestions and opinions regarding new product development and selection was also found to increase their WOM intentions (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, positive customer-to-employee interaction in general has been associated with customers defending the brand and providing negative comments about rival brands (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Fournier, 1998; Muniz and Hamer, 2001). Thus, when

Table I Two types of CP

Type of CP	Addressing customers as	Level of customer-to-employee interaction	Example
CP in service co-production	Partial employees	Low	A customer assembles furniture, makes travel reservations or shops for food at a grocery store, as opposed to an employee performing such tasks for the customer; kiosk at airport
CP in service improvement	Organizational consultants	High	A customer provides suggestions or ideas for new or improved service design

customers expend a lot of effort in providing and sharing their personal information and suggestions to a service employee, this paper expects that their WOM or the willingness to recommend and defend the brand will increase.

Customer-to-customer interaction

CCI is the extent to which customers form and enjoy interpersonal bonds such as friendships with other customers (Arnould and Price, 1993) and encounter friends in the service environment (LeBaron and Jones, 2002; Moore *et al.*, 2005). Using the definition of relational concerns from Kumashiro *et al.* (2008), CCI is regarded as the “behaviors that customers enact for their relationships, including time, effort and resources dedicated to gratifying relationship-oriented needs and to promoting relationship-oriented goals.” For instance, we can expect that the extent to which a student interacts with other students depends on how much the student wants to develop, maintain and nurture relationships with other students.

Research has shown that CCI is an important element of the service process, having a significant positive effect on service experience and satisfaction (Huang and Hsu, 2010; Bateson, 1985; Wilson *et al.*, 2012). Yet, customers generally do not expect that CCI would have a significant influence on their service experience or their attitude toward the firm, and many firms agree that nurturing CCI is beyond their control (Martin and Clark, 1996). In reality, CCI has been shown to be a key determining factor of customers’ enjoyment during service consumption (Arnould and Price, 1993; Yarnal and Kerstetter, 2005; Harris and Baron, 2004; Davies *et al.*, 1999). Also, nurturing harmonious CCI is proposed as a key dimension of relationship marketing model for strengthening the connection between the customer and the firm (Martin and Clark, 1996).

Customer-to-customer interaction as a mediator between prosocial motivation and word of mouth

The characteristics of prosocial individuals are associated with social harmony, good relationships (Twenge *et al.*, 2007), social acceptance (Parkhurst and Asher, 1992) as well as the number of friends (Hartup, 1993; Gest *et al.*, 2001). Prosocial motivation is frequently observed as an enabler of social interactions in brand communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006b, Mathwick *et al.*, 2008; Schau *et al.*, 2009). Thus, we expect that customers with high (vs low) prosocial motivation are more likely to engage in CCI.

The extant literature on brand community also illustrates CCI as an important contributor of WOM (Ferguson *et al.*, 2010; Rahman *et al.*, 2015) and loyalty (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2002; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). When a customer forms close friendships with other customers in a high personal contact service setting, the customer is more likely to be loyal to the service provider and spread positive WOM (Moore *et al.*, 2005). The important distinction between CCI and WOM is that CCI involves the interactions among existing customers; whereas, WOM involves the interactions between existing customers and potential customers. Based on these studies, we expect that CCI is a key interactive behavior that is conducive to nurturing brand advocates.

Brand commitment as a key mediator

How can customer-to-brand interaction be conceptualized and measured when brands do not have a physical presence? In this research, we present brand commitment as an important measure of customer-to-brand interaction. Interacting with a brand involves engaging with a brand at an emotional, cognitive and behavioral level. For instance, a customer may engage with a brand emotionally, think about the brand or invest economic and communication resources toward a brand. Such interactive investments can be described by brand commitment, which refers to the customer’s identification with, involvement in and emotional attachment to the brand (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Brand commitment indicates to a degree of engagement with the service brand beyond a fleeting feeling, involving a forward-looking, lasting emotional, cognitive and behavioral investment in the brand through a series of interactions (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). Such investment can create relational bonds that bind the individual to the brand and can often be evidenced when customers become resilient even in the face of less than stellar service performance.

Thus far, we have argued that customer-to-employee interaction (CP) and CCI are important mediating mechanisms through which prosocial motivation influences WOM. We further posit that customer-to-brand interaction is an important mediator in that prosocial motivation influences CP and CCI, which in turn stimulates customer-to-brand interaction (brand commitment) and WOM, sequentially. In other words, prosocial motivation does not directly influence brand commitment, but indirectly influences brand commitment via CP and CCI. When customers have a strong desire to help others, it is unlikely that they directly become more committed to the brand cognitively, affectively and behaviorally. We posit that, in the context of highly interactive, people-processing services, prosocially motivated customers are more likely to engage in CP and CCI, which in turn increase their brand commitment. Moreover, we explain that brand commitment plays a key role in understanding the process through which CP and CCI translate to greater WOM. Thus, we argue that brand commitment is an important mediator between CP, CCI and WOM.

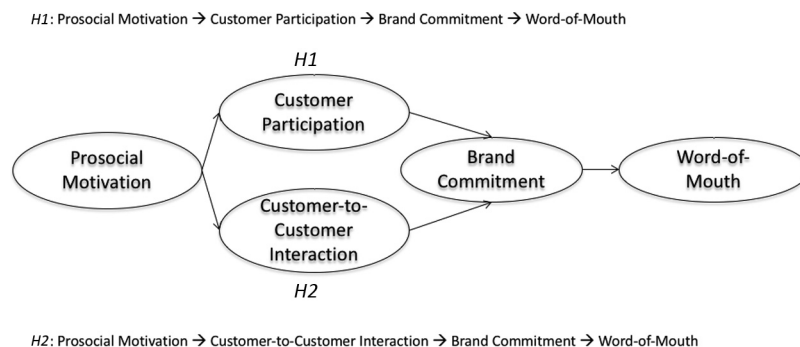
In the marketing literature, many studies show the positive effect of CP on behavioral, cognitive and affective interaction with the brand (Holland and Baker, 2001). CP increases the value that customer derive from the brand including both economic and relational value (Chan *et al.*, 2010). Involving customers deeply in the co-creation processes through customer-to-employee interactions is crucial for developing new products that will better satisfy the needs of customers (Khanagha *et al.*, 2017; Sembada, 2018), strengthening the collaborative relationships with them (Flores, 1993) and customer loyalty (Piyathanasan *et al.*, 2018; Kim and Lee, 2017). Engaging interactions with service employees also increase the extent to which customers identify with the firm (Moliner *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, customers are more likely to develop stronger commitment to the brand as they take more active role in providing suggestions and opinions to the service provider for the improvement of service outcomes.

Moreover, there exists ample evidence that suggests a positive relationship between CCI and customer-to-brand interaction (brand commitment). The literature on brand community shows that customers who feel strongly related to other customers will be more attached and committed to the brand (Zhou *et al.*, 2012; Scarpi, 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006a, 2006b; Stokburger-Saur, 2011). Social interactions with others help to shape self-brand connections (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Participation in brand community activities and a strong sense of connection with other customers of the focal brand increase brand-related behaviors (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006a). Moreover, many studies have found the correlation between CCI and satisfaction (Harris *et al.*, 1997; Arnould and Price, 1993; Wu, 2007). Increased CCI can also enhance a customer's feelings of comfort and security (Tsai *et al.*, 2012). When customers derive social benefits from interacting with other brand users, brand social currency is developed, which in turn increases brand trust, perceived quality and brand loyalty (Lobschat *et al.*, 2012). Thus, as relationships develop among customers, it is expected that they attach positive feelings and affection toward the brand, interacting with the brand at a behavioral, cognitive and affective level and experiencing greater commitment to the brand.

As prosocially motivated customers develop stronger brand commitment via CP and CCI, we expect that they will subsequently engage in greater WOM. Brand commitment has been shown to be a strong driver of WOM (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2014; Verhoef *et al.*, 2002; Gruen *et al.*, 2000). An individual becomes an advocate for the brand as a way to maintain those bonds and to provide support for the brand, its values and relationships (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Based on these arguments, this research hypothesizes that customers with high prosocial motivation are more likely to engage in greater CP and CCI, which in turn enhance their brand commitment and ultimately WOM. Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework. We hypothesize the following:

- H1.* The effect of prosocial motivation on WOM is serially (and positively) mediated by customer participation and brand commitment, respectively.
- H2.* The effect of prosocial motivation on WOM is serially (and positively) mediated by customer-to-customer interaction and brand commitment, respectively.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework



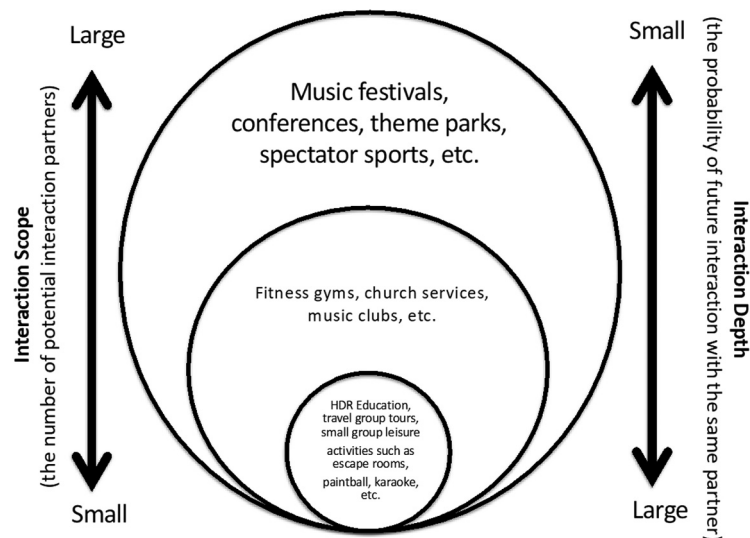
Methodology

Context

We examined the mediating mechanisms of the prosocial motivation–WOM linkage in highly interactive, people-processing services, where the services are directed at people via human interactions rather than at physical possessions (Lovelock, 1983; Silvestro *et al.*, 1992). For example, Lovelock (1983) suggests that services such as education, exercise clinics, health care, restaurants, hair salons and museums are directed at people through physical interactions, which require customers to be physically present throughout the service delivery. In this research, we limited the context of our research to these people-processing services, whereby physical interactions between customers and employees and between customers and other customers are frequent. In such high contact services context, perceptions of interaction are more critical to the overall service experience (Ganesan-Lim *et al.*, 2008). Also, customers' prosocial motivation is likely to have significant influence on the way they physically interact with employees, other existing customers and the brand. Specifically, we selected higher degree research (HDR) education services and fitness gym services, where opportunities for customers' repeated human interactions with service employees and other customers are substantial. These people-processing services contrast with services that are directed at physical possessions such as car wash or dry clothing wash service.

We propose that people-processing services can be further characterized by varying degrees of interaction scope and depth. For instance, when there are a few potential interaction partners in a social setting (small interaction scope), the opportunities to interact more frequently with one another in the future increase (large interaction depth). This means that the number of potential interaction partners negatively correlates with the probability of future interaction with the same partner (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981) (Figure 2). In other words, as the number of potential interaction partners increases, the opportunities for interacting with the same partners in the future decrease.

For example, in the context of HDR education, research students have a relatively small number of other students with which they can interact over the period of a few years during their research (small interaction scope). This context presents the largest probability of interacting with the same partners or other students (large interaction depth). In the context of

Figure 2 Increasing circle of interaction scope

fitness gym, there is a larger circle of potential interaction partners or other gym members, but the probability to interact with the same gym members may decrease. Large events such as music festivals, conferences, theme parks and spectator sports present the greatest interaction scope, but the smallest probability of future interaction with the same partner. The chance of interacting with the same partners (event attendees) in the next large event is very small.

Data collection

Prior to distributing surveys to the two samples, in-depth interviews were conducted with five research students and two expert judges from a major university in Australia to enhance the readability, clarity and measurement items' representativeness of their respective constructs. Their comments and suggestions were considered to make changes to the wording of questions and items.

First, 670 HDR students at a major university in Australia were contacted by e-mail by their respective postgraduate coordinators, and 191 completed surveys were returned (29 per cent response rate). Of the respondents, 53 per cent were female and 63 per cent were Australian citizens or permanent residents, and 37 per cent were international students. To minimize the nonresponse bias, multiple reminders with guaranteed anonymity of respondents were sent, and they were informed that the expected length of survey is less than 10 min. As the questionnaire examines the student-supervisor relationships, which can invoke social desirability response bias, the anonymity of responders was especially important to emphasize.

For the fitness gym sample, a gym receptionist asked fitness gym members to fill out the survey in person as they entered or exited the gym. A total of 300 surveys were distributed, and 142 completed surveys were collected. Of the respondents, 54 per cent were male and the average age of respondents was 34 years. No incentive was given to participants.

Measures

The measurement instrument was drawn from the literature and adapted to reflect the two service contexts. Multi-item measures were used for all constructs for greater reliability and less measurement error (Churchill, 1979). All items used seven-point Likert scales with anchors of 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree), unless otherwise indicated in Table II. Table II shows all items that were adapted across the two different samples. Prosocial motivation was measured as a context-specific construct. In addition, we controlled for the length of relationship, which may be an important driver of WOM.

In Table II, all items had acceptable indicator loadings and significance, indicating high indicator reliability, except for CP5 (indicator loading = 0.44) in the HDR student sample, "I am very much involved in deciding how my HDR service should be provided." However, we retained this item in the analysis because of the item's theoretical importance for the CP construct, which is verified with high indicator loadings in the other sample. The Cronbach's α reliability and composite reliabilities were above the recommended threshold of 0.50 and 0.60, respectively (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988), indicating acceptable internal consistency reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the 0.50 benchmark, indicating acceptable convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

In Table III, the square root of AVE for each latent construct, indicated by bold numbers, is greater than the construct's highest correlation with any other latent construct. Although this indicates acceptable discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio provides more powerful assessment of discriminant validity than Fornell and Larcker criterion (Henseler et al., 2014). Table IV shows HTMT ratios for all constructs in the model are below the conservative threshold of 0.8 (Kline, 2011). Also, none of the confidence intervals of all HTMT ratios includes 1, suggesting discriminant validity for all constructs used in this paper.

Table II Results of outer-measurement model

Constructs	Items	HDR students (sample 1)		Gym members (sample 2)	
		Loadings	t-value	Loadings	t-value
Prosocial motivation (PM) (adapted from Grant, 2008) Sample 1: $\alpha = 0.93$, CR = 0.95, AVE = 0.83, Sample 2: $\alpha = 0.95$, CR = 0.96, AVE = 0.86					
PM1	I care about benefiting other research students/gym members/gamers	0.90	51.46	0.90	40.53
PM2	I want to help other research students/gym members/gamers	0.93	79.10	0.96	109.43
PM3	I want to have positive impact on other research students/gym members/gamers	0.89	52.12	0.94	67.15
PM4	It is important to me to do good for other research students/gym members/gamers	0.91	37.77	0.92	49.89
Customer participation (CP) (adapted from Chan et al., 2010) Sample 1: $\alpha = 0.82$, CR = 0.87, AVE = 0.59, Sample 2: $\alpha = 0.90$, CR = 0.93, AVE = 0.72					
CP1	I spent a lot of time sharing information about my needs and opinions with my supervisor/fitness instructor/game developer	0.90	26.75	0.91	51.73
CP2	I put a lot of effort into expressing my needs to my supervisor/fitness instructor/game developer	0.81	11.63	0.93	68.75
CP3	I always provide suggestions to my supervisor/fitness instructor/game developer for improving my research/training/gaming experience	0.71	7.47	0.93	74.39
CP4	I have a high level of participation during my research/training/gaming	0.88	26.81	0.65	11.36
CP5	I am very much involved in deciding how my research/training/gaming services should be provided	0.46	3.88	0.78	14.76
Customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) , (adapted from Moore et al., 2005) Sample 1: $\alpha = 0.92$, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.80, Sample 2: $\alpha = 0.91$, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.80					
CCI1	I have developed friendships with other research students/gym members/online gamers	0.91	53.45	0.91	53.89
CCI2	I enjoy spending time with other research students/gym members/online gamers	0.92	61.89	0.95	82.85
CCI3	The other research students/gym members/online gamers make my time there more enjoyable	0.91	58.97	0.92	50.53
CCI4	There is a good chance I will run into one of my friends at my university/gym/game	0.89	28.21	0.79	14.17
Brand commitment (BC) , (adapted from Anderson and Weitz, 1992; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Kumar et al., 1995) Sample 1: $\alpha = 0.94$, CR = 0.96, AVE = 0.85, Sample 2: $\alpha = 0.93$, CR = 0.95, AVE = 0.83					
BC1	I feel like part of the family at my university/gym/game	0.88	42.09	0.88	35.17
BC2	My university/gym/game has a great deal of personal meaning for me	0.93	69.08	0.93	56.98
BC3	I feel emotionally attached to my university/gym/game	0.91	45.71	0.91	46.57
BC4	I feel a strong sense of belonging to my university/gym/game	0.96	142.30	0.93	60.76
WOM (adapted from Lobschat et al., 2012, Zeithaml et al., 1996, and Price and Arnould, 1999) Sample 1: $\alpha = 0.86$, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.78, Sample 2: $\alpha = 0.82$, CR = 0.90, AVE = 0.74					
WOM1	I feel the need to tell others how good my university/gym/game is	0.87	32.91	0.88	41.92
WOM2	If someone speaks negatively of my university/gym/game, I will defend it	0.89	42.76	0.86	28.80
WOM3	I will recommend my university/gym/game to other people	0.89	44.72	0.84	22.11

Common method variance and nonresponse bias

To reduce the effect of common method variance, we emphasized respondents' anonymity before they started the survey. After the data collection, a Harman's single factor analysis was conducted. The first factor accounted for 36.4 and 41.8 per cent of the variances explained in the HDR student and fitness gym samples, respectively. As the first factor did not account for the majority of the covariance among the measures, CMV was not a significant concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Next, the marker variable technique was conducted (Lindell

and Whitney, 2001). "I am confident in using Microsoft Word" was used as the marker variable that is theoretically unrelated to the criterion variable. The average absolute correlation between the marker variable and the key constructs in the model was 0.09 (rM) ($p = 0.29$). The average partial correlation after adjusting for the CMV contamination (rM) was 0.07, which indicates that common method bias is minimal. More stringent values of rM at 95th and 99th upper confidence intervals were used to calculate partial correlations, and more than half of the significant correlations remained significant. This adds greater

Table III Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Constructs	M	SD	AC	WOM	CCI	CP	PM	RL	95 (%)	50 (%)	5 (%)
HDR, N = 191											
AC	4.59	1.52	<i>0.92</i>						7	5	2
WOM	5.22	1.25	0.65	<i>0.88</i>					7	6	3
CCI	5.38	1.28	0.44	0.26	<i>0.89</i>				7	5.75	2.84
CP	5.19	1.33	0.22	0.13	0.11	<i>0.76</i>			6.91	5.5	2.5
PM	5.65	0.99	0.34	0.25	0.48	0.21	<i>0.91</i>		6.43	5	2
RL	2.76	1.41	0.18	0.15	0.21	0.08	0.00	<i>1</i>	7	6	2
Gym, N = 142											
AC	4.92	1.45	<i>0.91</i>						7	5	2.08
WOM	5.62	1.04	0.63	<i>0.86</i>					7	6	4
CCI	4.91	1.4	0.67	0.49	<i>0.89</i>				7	5	2
CP	3.99	1.44	0.41	0.42	0.28	<i>0.85</i>			6	4	1.09
PM	4.99	1.25	0.52	0.57	0.57	0.34	<i>0.93</i>		5	3.67	2.05
RL	3.02	1.60	0.40	0.17	0.40	0.09	0.05	<i>1</i>	7	6	4

Notes: CP (customer participation); CCI (customer-to-customer interaction); CP (customer participation); BC (brand commitment); WOM (word of mouth); numbers in italics are the square root of the average variance extracted; % indicates calibration membership scores

Table IV Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) ratios for discriminant validity assessment

Constructs	HDR student sample, N = 191			Gym member sample, N = 142		
	HTMT	CI 2.5(%)	CI 97.5 (%)	HTMT	CI 2.5(%)	CI 97.5(%)
BC-> WOM	0.72	0.62	0.80	0.72	0.61	0.83
BC-> CCI	0.48	0.34	0.61	0.72	0.61	0.82
BC-> PM	0.36	0.22	0.50	0.55	0.42	0.64
BC-> RL	0.19	0.05	0.33	0.42	0.27	0.57
CCI-> WOM	0.29	0.13	0.44	0.56	0.41	0.69
CP-> AC	0.22	0.12	0.37	0.43	0.30	0.57
CP-> WOM	0.16	0.09	0.32	0.49	0.34	0.64
CP-> CCI	0.12	0.07	0.25	0.31	0.16	0.45
CP-> PM	0.24	0.12	0.38	0.37	0.23	0.53
CP-> RL	0.08	0.04	0.24	0.12	0.06	0.29
PM-> WOM	0.28	0.13	0.44	0.64	0.51	0.77
PM-> CCI	0.52	0.37	0.65	0.61	0.46	0.71
RL-> WOM	0.16	0.03	0.32	0.19	0.07	0.36
RL-> CCI	0.22	0.06	0.36	0.42	0.27	0.59
RL-> PM	0.02	0.02	0.18	0.05	0.02	0.19

Notes: CP (customer participation); CCI (customer-to-customer interaction); CP (customer participation); BC (brand commitment); WOM (word of mouth)

support for rejecting common method bias. Finally, no differences between early and late respondents were found in relation to all key constructs of the study across the two samples, which indicates that nonresponse bias was not a significant problem (Armstrong and Overton, 1977).

Hypothesis testing

We tested the hypotheses for each service context using partial least squares structural equations modelling (PLS-SEM) with the software SmartPLS v. 3.2.0 (Ringle et al., 2015) given the model complexity (multiple serial mediations) and multivariate non-normality of data for both samples (Shapiro-Wilk test $p < 0.0001$). This method allows simultaneous testing of all hypotheses. This research involves predicting WOM as a key

target construct and attempts to extend an existing structural theory of the prosocial motivation–WOM linkage. The sample size for the two chosen samples is relatively small ($N < 200$). All of these conditions make PLS-SEM more appropriate over covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2011).

All hypothesis testing used bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. Table V shows path coefficients, t -values, adjusted R-square and Q-square (Stone–Geisser criterion). The adjusted R-square values range between 0.29 and 0.48, and Q-square values range between 0.20 and 0.34 for WOM, indicating acceptable model explanatory power and predictive relevance, respectively (Fornell and Bookstein, 1982).

In both models, prosocial motivation had significant positive effects on CP and CCI, which in turn positively influenced

Table V Structural equation parameter estimates (*t*-value)

Exogenous variables	HDR education				Fitness gym			
	CP	CCI	BC	WOM	CP	CCI	BC	WOM
PM	0.21* (2.82)	0.48* (6.41)	0.14 (1.69)	0.07 (0.88)	0.34* (4.41)	0.57* (9.24)	0.13 (1.75)	0.32* (3.73)
CP	–	–	0.15* (2.06)	–0.02 (0.32)	–	–	0.22* (3.77)	0.14* (2.24)
CCI	–	–	0.36* (4.99)	–0.08 (0.88)	–	–	0.54* (6.97)	–0.01 (0.11)
BC	–	–	–	0.66* (10.36)	–	–	–	0.44* (4.13)
Relationship length				–0.05 (0.75)				–0.03 (0.38)
<i>Indirect effects</i>								
PM → WOM				0.19* (3.05)				0.27* (5.13)
PM → BC			0.21* (3.82)				0.38* (6.37)	
CP → WOM				0.10* (2.10)				0.10* (2.74)
CCI → WOM				0.24* (4.17)				0.24* (3.39)
Adjusted R ²	0.04	0.23	0.23	0.41	0.11	0.33	0.51	0.48
Q ²	0.02	0.17	0.19	0.31	0.08	0.24	0.40	0.34

brand commitment and WOM in sequence. Across the two samples, the indirect effects of prosocial motivation on brand commitment and WOM were significant. Moreover, the indirect effects of CP and CCI on WOM were significant. These significant mediation effects support that the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM is serially mediated by CP and brand commitment (*H1*), as well as by CCI and brand commitment (*H2*). Relationship length did not influence WOM in both contexts.

As a robustness check, we replaced WOM with a number of friends that each customer has actually recommended the gym. In the gym context, the indirect effects of prosocial motivation on brand commitment ($\beta = 0.39$, *t*-value = 6.54) and WOM ($\beta = 0.20$, *t*-value = 2.88) remained significant. Finally, we ran an alternative model whereby CCI and CP influence brand commitment via prosocial motivation. However, the indirect effects for CCI and CP via prosocial motivation were insignificant (*p* value > 0.05). These results enhance consistency and robustness of the serial mediation model of WOM. The findings confirm the serial mediation model, in which prosocial motivation increases CP and CCI, which in turn, increase brand commitment and WOM sequentially.

Finally, we conducted partial least squares multi-group analysis (PLS-MGA) to examine whether differences of group-specific coefficients exist between the two samples (fitness gym and HDR education). The results show that both the total and the indirect effects of prosocial motivation on WOM are larger for the fitness gym context compared to the HDR education context (*p* < 0.05). In other words, the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM is significantly larger in the fitness gym context compared to the HDR education context. This finding shows that prosocial motivation may play a more influential role in service contexts where the interaction scope is larger (vs smaller), and the interaction depth is smaller (vs larger). It could be argued that it is relatively easier to engage in relational interactions when there are fewer people that the customer can interact more frequently (the interaction scope is small and the interaction depth is large) (e.g. HDR education). Prosocial motivation, as an enabler of interactions, may play a less important role in such context. In contrast, when there are many people that the customer can potentially interact but with

less frequency, it may be relatively more difficult to engage in relational interactions. In this context, prosocial motivation may play a greater role, fueling greater relational interactions with employees, other customers, the brand and potential customers through WOM. In fact, we confirmed that the extent to which customers develop friendships with other customers (interaction depth) is greater in the HDR education context ($M = 5.59$; $n = 191$), where the interaction scope is small compared to the fitness gym context ($M = 4.76$; $n = 142$) (Item: I have developed friendships with other research students/gym members. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Discussion

Educational HDR services and fitness gym services are some of many examples where relational interactions are actively encouraged to enhance service experience. These service environments are strongly characterized by repeated interactions among customers, and social bonds often eventuate. This provided a unique opportunity for assessing the three types of relational interactions including CP, CCI and brand commitment. Specifically, we investigated the role of these relational interactions in explaining the relationship between prosocial motivation and WOM in different contexts with varying degrees of interaction scope. We revealed that nurturing WOM is a complex process that involves multiple serial mediations in that prosocial motivation positively influences CP and CCI, which in turn influence brand commitment and WOM sequentially.

Contributions to theory and practice

Previous research has identified and replicated the effect of prosocial motivation on WOM (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013; Ho and Dempsey, 2010). However, no study has examined an important but neglected question of how prosocial motivation drives WOM. We contribute to this void by examining customers' relational interactions with service employees, other customers and the brand in highly interactive service contexts. Although prosocial motivation has been shown to stimulate relational interactions (Van Lange *et al.*, 1997), the processes of which prosocial motivation influences WOM via relational interactions have

not been investigated. Our study demonstrates how the three different types of relational interactions are affected by prosocial motivation, but also influence WOM across various service contexts.

In such contexts where service outcomes are influenced by relational interactions, customers rely heavily on the word-of-mouth information from brand advocates before purchasing because service outcomes are difficult to evaluate prior to and even after purchase. WOM is also determined by the extent of relational interactions in consumer networks (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). We provide further theoretical support to WOM theory by demonstrating the importance of customers' relational interactions as the mediating mechanisms between prosocial motivation and WOM in highly interactive service contexts.

In this paper, we have clarified the distinction between the two types of CP. We argue that one stream of literature on CP presents CP in service production as a process that requires customers to act as partial employees, requiring a higher level of effort to produce or customize a service outcome (Dabholkar, 2015; Mills and Morris, 1986; Bendapudi and Leone, 2003; Lovelock and Young, 1979; Hubbert, 1995; Bitner *et al.*, 1997; Lusch *et al.*, 1992; Dong *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, another stream of literature presents CP as a process that requires customers to act as organizational consultants, requiring customers to provide suggestions and opinions to the service provider for the improvement of service outcomes through a higher level interaction with service employees Fuchs *et al.* (2010), Ngo and O'Cass (2013), Yim *et al.* (2012) and Ouschan *et al.* (2006). This distinction and the choice of CP in service improvement (vs CP in service production) enabled us to focus on customers' relational interactions as a mediating mechanism between prosocial motivation and WOM.

Prior research on WOM has examined customers' relational interactions including customer-to-employee interaction via CP (Ramani and Kumar, 2008; Maru File *et al.*, 1992; Raggio and Folse, 2009), CCI (Ferguson *et al.*, 2010; Rahman *et al.*, 2015) and customer-to-brand interaction as significant drivers of WOM (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2014; Verhoef *et al.*, 2002; Gruen *et al.*, 2000). However, no prior research has examined these factors concurrently in a single study. Our study demonstrates the importance of CP, CCI in fueling greater cognitive, affective and behavioral interactions with the brand, which in turn influences WOM. These mediating mechanisms provide an important contribution to the theoretical understanding of WOM.

The findings also contribute to the value co-creation literature (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Our study demonstrates the role that consumers play in shaping their own interactive and relational experiences in service contexts, which in turn influence their WOM behavior. The current research shows that the outcomes of value co-creation and relational interactions extend to shaping customers' WOM intentions. Therefore, WOM is an important outcome of value co-creation, which should be taken into account in future studies that examine how marketers can better manage the processes of value co-creation (Payne *et al.*, 2008).

The existing literature provides several ways to classify services (Chase, 1981; Bitner *et al.*, 1997; Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Ng *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on the theory of the evolution

of cooperation (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981), our study extends this service classification literature by demonstrating the usefulness of characterizing services using two dimensions:

- 1 the number of potential interaction partners (the interaction scope); and
- 2 the probability of future interaction with the same partner (the interaction depth).

This interaction-based classification of services sheds new light on examining the relative importance of WOM drivers, which deserves further attention in future research.

Our paper provides initial evidence that prosocial motivation, as an enabler of interactions, may play a more important role in services that are characterized by larger interaction scope and smaller interaction depth. When the customer faces a large number of other customers, interacting with the same customers in the future becomes more difficult compared to service contexts where there are a small number of customers to interact. When repeated future interactions with the same customers become difficult, prosocial motivation may be especially more effective for stimulating greater relational interactions with employees, other customers, the brand and potential customers through WOM.

Our study has an important implication for marketers in that they can assert greater influence in prosocially motivated customers to generate greater WOM. A deeper understanding of the underlying mechanism through which customers' prosocial motivation influences WOM can assist marketers to better influence the WOM process. For instance, marketers can nurture more brand advocates by fostering a more encouraging and interactive service environment where prosocially motivated customers can freely and efficiently interact with service employees, other customers and the brand.

Specifically, marketers can assist prosocially motivated customers by providing various avenues for sharing their opinions and suggestions and further responding to customers' voices through greater relational interactions. Different communication methods including e-mail, SMS, social media and face-to-face channels should be made available for customers to easily provide suggestions for service improvements before, during and after the service delivery. The frequency and timing of requests for suggestions should be considered carefully to not only acquire new information about how to improve the service, but also to nurture the WOM of prosocial customers.

Greater attempts should be made to further encourage prosocial customers to engage in CCI. Marketers can design service environments including physical facilities, programs and activities to encourage greater CCI. Strategies for encouraging such interactions before, during and after the service delivery should be considered. For example, marketers can invest in customer-to-brand interactions by creating inspiring, meaningful and engaging brand related stories to encourage customers to discuss with other customers and better identify with the brand intellectually, emotionally and behaviorally. Investments in these relational interactions will enable prosocially motivated customers to develop stronger WOM.

Limitations and future research

Could CP have negative effects on WOM? Most previous research has focused on positive benefits of CP. A notable exception is the work of Chan *et al.* (2010), which found that customers with high collectivist and power distance value orientations perceive less economic value when they engage in CP. This indicates that culture has important implications for examining the effects of CP. Our study examines hypothesized relationships in both the USA and Australia, albeit in different service contexts. Future research may examine same service contexts in different cultures to deepen theoretical and managerial understanding of how the effects of WOM drivers change across different cultures.

Our study found evidence that facilitating CP and CCI is beneficial for nurturing brand advocates. However, examining specific strategies or platforms on which CP and CCI can be generated may be required for greater managerial insight. For example, when is the best timing for asking for customers' opinions and suggestions for service delivery? Is it best to encourage CP when customers exhibit high satisfaction or expertise during service consumption? Or should customers with low satisfaction be targeted for encouraging CP?

In terms of facilitating CCI, can firms calculate the return on investment in social events that are aimed at facilitating CCI? Which types of customers should be encouraged to interact more to maximize the benefits of interaction? Should new customers be encouraged to interact with experienced customers? Numerous questions regarding different strategies for facilitating CP and CCI provide fruitful areas for future research. Both longitudinal and experimental approaches would add to the increasingly important research of interactive services.

Note

- 1 In this paper, the term customer participation was used to refer to customer-to-employee interaction, as suggested by Chan *et al.* (2010) and Eisingerich *et al.* (2014).

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