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From Psychology to Engagement: Tracing the Evolution of Customer Service Dynamics



Abstract: - This paper aims to explore the evolution of customer service through the integration of psychological and marketing theories, tracing its development from early organizational psychology to contemporary customer engagement strategies. The study employs a historical analysis of literature, examining key theories and models from psychology and marketing that have contributed to the evolution of customer service. It reviews seminal works and influential theories over several decades, highlighting their impact on understanding consumer behavior and service quality. The analysis reveals a significant transformation in customer service concepts, driven by insights from cognitive dissonance, equity theory, and expectancy disconfirmation, among others. The study highlights the emergence of service marketing in the 1980s, the shift towards customer-centric approaches in the 2000s, and the critical role of digital technologies and social media in facilitating customer engagement. These developments underscore the ongoing adaptation required to meet evolving consumer expectations. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of customer service, synthesizing insights from various fields to present a cohesive understanding of its trajectory. By connecting past theories with current practices, it offers valuable insights for academics and practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of modern consumer behavior and service management.

Keywords: Customer engagement, Customer experience, Customer satisfaction, Customer service.

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the evolution of customer service requires exploring its progression from foundational psychological theories to comprehensive customer engagement frameworks. Originating within organizational psychology, early efforts focused on decoding human behavior, particularly regarding personality, needs, and decision-making processes [1]. These insights laid the groundwork for understanding workplace dynamics and later consumer interactions, reflecting a move towards understanding subconscious factors influencing purchasing behavior [2]. The decades following the 1950s saw the introduction of pivotal theories which began shaping a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior beyond mere transactional exchanges [3]. The 1960s and 1970s marked significant strides in integrating psychological principles into marketing, highlighting equity and customer experience as crucial elements in purchasing behavior models [4]. The 1980s were pivotal in recognizing service marketing as a distinct field, illustrated the unique challenges posed by intangible offerings [5]. This period also birthed service quality models, underscoring service quality as a critical determinant of consumer perception and satisfaction [6]. By the 1990s, a transformation was underway, focusing on trust [7], commitment [8], and relationship quality [9] within marketing frameworks. Entering the 2000s, businesses shifted their focus from transactional strategies to customer-centric models [10], emphasizing sustained engagement over time. The concepts of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) [11] and Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) [12] emerged as key frameworks, underscoring the strategic importance of nurturing long-term relationships. The rise of social media during this period further transformed customer interaction [13], enabling real-time engagement and feedback [14]. Recent years have seen an increased focus on customer engagement [15], emphasizing active participation in value creation between customers and firms [16].

Despite the presence of papers discussing the development of customer service, few have fully explored the intricate evolution from foundational psychological theories to contemporary engagement frameworks in a comprehensive manner. Most studies tend to focus on isolated aspects, such as specific consumer satisfaction models or service quality metrics. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these various elements have collectively influenced the overarching strategy of businesses in adapting to modern consumer demands.

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The primary aim of this paper is to critically explore the historical progression of customer service evolution, shedding light on the intertwined role of psychological and marketing theories throughout this journey. It seeks to highlight significant theoretical advancements from the mid-20th century up to the current focus on digital engagement and value co-creation. Covering theoretical developments from the 1930s to the present, the paper addresses both well-established and emerging models. Rather than focusing on detailed case studies, it offers a high-level synthesis of key developments, organized chronologically from early psychological theories through to major marketing advancements.

This paper argues that the evolution of customer service is characterized by the progressive integration of psychological theories into marketing practices, leading to increasingly sophisticated approaches to consumer engagement and satisfaction. It will demonstrate that understanding this evolution is essential for adapting to modern consumer demands.

II. FROM PSYCHOLOGY TO MARKETING: EARLY FOUNDATIONS

The study of customer behavior can be traced back to the field of organizational psychology [17], which focused on understanding human behavior in workplace settings, where early psychologists like Allport & Vernon (1930) [18], and MASLOW (1943) [19], developed foundational theories about personality, needs, motivations, and decision-making processes [20]. As marketing became more consumer-centric, marketers drew heavily from these organizational psychology concepts and methods to gain insights into the underlying factors driving consumer choices and purchasing behaviors [21], as psychologists like Dichter (1949) [22] pioneered the use of in-depth interviews and focus groups to uncover the subconscious motivations of consumers, adapting techniques from clinical psychology.

2.1 *Theoretical Advancements of the 1950s: Cognition, Perception, and Relationships*

During the 1950s, several influential theories emerged in psychology and social sciences, focus was on understanding human cognition, perception, and interpersonal relationships, where the Cognitive Dissonance Theory was first proposed by social psychologist (Brehm & Festinger (1957) [23], this theory suggests that individuals experience psychological discomfort or conflict when they hold two contradictory beliefs or when their beliefs are inconsistent with their actions [24]. Also introduced in 1957 was the Contrast Theory, developed by Hovland et al. [25], the Contrast Theory is a psychological concept that seeks to understand how people perceive and evaluate stimuli by comparing them to other stimuli [26]. In 1959, John Thibaut and Harold Kelley introduced the Comparison Level Theory [27], this theory proposes that individuals have a comparison level or standard for what they believe a relationship should be like, and they compare their current relationship to this standard.

2.2 *The 1960s: Equity Theory and the Rise of Customer Experience*

In the 1960s, the equity theory was first introduced by Adams (1963) [28], which aimed to understand the factors influencing individuals' attitudes and behaviors in organizational settings, according to the equity theory, customers strive for fairness in the exchange process, seeking to maintain a balance between their inputs and outputs [29]. Additionally, the notion of customer experience originated in the 1960s as an integral aspect of models examining customer purchasing behavior [30], with Haines's model (1970) [31] being widely regarded as the most influential framework, emphasizing the importance of understanding the cognitive and emotional elements of customer experience to effectively influence consumer behavior.

2.3 *The 1970s: Pioneering Customer Satisfaction and Experience Management*

In the 1970s, the concept of customer satisfaction gained significant attention, with a focus on measuring customers' expectations, the disconfirmation between expected and actual experiences, and developing scales to assess satisfaction levels [32], also during this era, there was also a growing understanding and emphasis on customer experience (CX) management, which involved monitoring customers' attitudes and perceptions towards service and product offerings [30]. Oliver (1976) [33] introduced the Expectancy Disconfirmation Paradigm (EDP), a groundbreaking theory that suggested consumer satisfaction judgments are formed through a cognitive process that takes into account prior expectations and actual experiences, the EDP proposed that consumers have certain expectations about a product or service before making a purchase [34]. Building on this concept, Martilla & James (1977) [35] developed the Importance-Performance Model (IPM), that evaluates two key dimensions: performance

level (how well a company is meeting customer expectations for each attribute) and importance to customers (the significance of each attribute to customers) [36].

2.4 *The 1980s: Advancements in Service Marketing and Service Quality Models for Enhanced Customer Satisfaction*

The 1980s marked a pivotal period in the evolution of marketing theory and practice, as it witnessed the emergence of service marketing as a distinct field of study [37], this development was driven by the growing recognition that the marketing of services posed unique challenges and required a distinct approach from the traditional marketing of physical goods [38]. One of the earliest contributions to this emerging field came from Grönroos (1982) [39], who introduced An Applied Service Marketing Theory, providing a framework for understanding and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in marketing services [40], building on this foundation, Blois (1983) [41] highlighted the distinct organizational structure and marketing policies required for service firms, acknowledging that the intangible nature of services necessitated different approaches compared to traditional product marketing [42]. Furthermore, Parasuraman et al., (1983) [43] emphasized the importance of marketing skills and strategies specifically tailored for service firms, their study recognized that the unique characteristics of services required specialized marketing techniques, distinct from those used for tangible products [44].

The 1980s witnessed the development of several influential theories aimed at understanding and enhancing customer satisfaction, one such theory was the Value Percept Theory, developed by Westbrook & Reilly (1983) [45], this theory suggests that customer satisfaction is determined by customers' perceptions of value towards a product or service, influenced by factors such as perceived quality and price, rather than solely whether performance meets or exceeds their expectations, the theory argues that comparative standards other than just expectations are more likely to shape customer satisfaction [46]. Introduced in 1984 by Kano (1984) [47], the Kano Model is a framework that seeks to enhance customer satisfaction by identifying product or service attributes beyond basic needs, it classifies attributes into five categories through customer surveys: excitement quality (features that delight beyond expectations), performance quality (functionality aspects), basic quality (fundamental expected features), indifferent quality (neutral attributes), and reverse quality (aspects that decrease satisfaction), it aims to help prioritizing which attributes to focus on for improving satisfaction [48]. Another theory that also emerged during this period, is the Evaluative Congruity Theory (ECT) by Joseph Sirgy & Tyagi (1986) [49], the ECT examines the relationship between customer expectations, actual experience, and the degree to which expectations are confirmed, it states that satisfaction is influenced by the extent to which expectations align with the perceived performance [50], as when expectations are met or exceeded (positive congruity), satisfaction increases, when expectations aren't met (negative congruity), satisfaction decreases. The theory recognizes that satisfaction is not static, as changing expectations over time can significantly impact perceptions of quality and overall satisfaction with a product or service experience, as ECT identifies three congruity states: positive congruity when experiences exceed expectations, leading to higher satisfaction; negative congruity when experiences fall short of expectations, decreasing satisfaction; and zero congruity when experiences match expectations exactly [51].

The 1980s also witnessed scholars recognizing the importance of service quality and its impact on customer experiences [30]. Parasuraman et al. (1985) laid the groundwork for understanding dimensions of customer experience through their service gaps model and SERVQUAL instrument [52], they identified five key dimensions of service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, that contribute significantly to the overall customer experience [53]. Additionally, the Grönroos Model [54], [55], developed by Grönroos (1998,1990), emerged as a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing service quality, this model consists of three interrelated dimensions: technical quality, which refers to the outcome of the service; functional quality, which focuses on the process and manner in which the service is delivered; and image quality, which encompasses the overall perception and reputation of the service provider [56].

2.5 *The 1990s: Expanding Relationship Marketing and Refining Service Quality*

In the 1990s, research on the Relationship Marketing Theory [57] expanded over focusing on business marketing interaction & networks, marketing channels, services marketing, and database marketing & direct marketing [58], to include the customer's role in shaping their own experience [59], [60], [61], [62], [63], this led to the development of new dimensions, such as trust and commitment [64], switching costs [65], , and relationship quality [66] in understanding customer experiences, by considering the customer's perspective, researchers gained a deeper understanding of CX by examining emotions and perceptions associated with the overall experience [67]. The

1990s witnessed debates on the measurement of service quality, as Cronin & Taylor (1994) introduced the SERVPERF model [68], a modification of the SERVQUAL model, for measuring service quality. Whereas SERVQUAL focuses on the gap between perception and expectation, SERVPERF operates solely on perceived performance, omitting the assessment of gap scores since the expectation component is absent in the SERVPERF model [69]. Additionally, the 1990s saw the emergence of Customer Experience Theory [70], which focuses on the strategic management of customer touchpoints to foster positive and memorable interactions, this theory underscores the significance of experiential clues: functional (related to product performance), mechanic (concerning the environment), and humanic (pertaining to behavior) in influencing customer perceptions [67].

2.6 *The 2000s: Transforming Customer Management with CRM, CLV, and Value Co-Creation*

During the 2000s, businesses underwent a transformative shift in their approach to customer management, the primary objective evolved from merely facilitating transactions to strategically extracting value from customer relationships over their entire lifecycle, research during this period challenged the conventional wisdom that the length of a customer relationship directly correlated with profitability [71]. This paradigm shift was catalyzed by the emergence of new key concepts: Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Winer (2001)'s research [72] proposed a model that begins with the creation of a database, followed by analysis, customer selection, customer targeting, relationship marketing, addressing privacy issues, and incorporating relevant metrics [73]. The other new concept emerged during this era is the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV). Gupta et al. (2006)'s research [74] defined (CLV) and customer equity, as the aggregated lifetime values of a company's customers, CLV indicates the total revenue a business can reasonably anticipate from a single customer account over the course of their relationship, it serves as a forward-looking metric that assists businesses in evaluating the long-term value of their customers [75]. The other new concept that witnessed development during 2000s is the Customer Centricity where Shah et al. (2006) [76] pinpointed key issues and challenges that often prevent a firm from becoming customer-centric, primarily related to organizational culture, structure, processes, and financial metrics, additionally, they proposed a pathway to achieving customer centricity, which involves strong leadership commitment, organizational realignment, supportive systems and processes, and updated financial metrics [77]. The 2000s also witnessed a significant shift in understanding the role of customers, particularly with the emergence of social media platforms [78]. During this period, the Theory of Value co-creation gained prominence, emphasizing the importance of involving customers in the creation and refinement of products, services, and business processes, this theory, popularized by Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) [79] argued that value is not solely created by companies but is a collaborative effort between companies and their customers, the theory approach underscored the need for companies to actively engage with customers and provide them with opportunities to contribute their ideas, suggestions, and preferences. Value co-creation tools, such as online platforms, collaborative workshops, and customer feedback channels, facilitated this process, enabling customers to actively participate and companies to gather valuable insights [16].

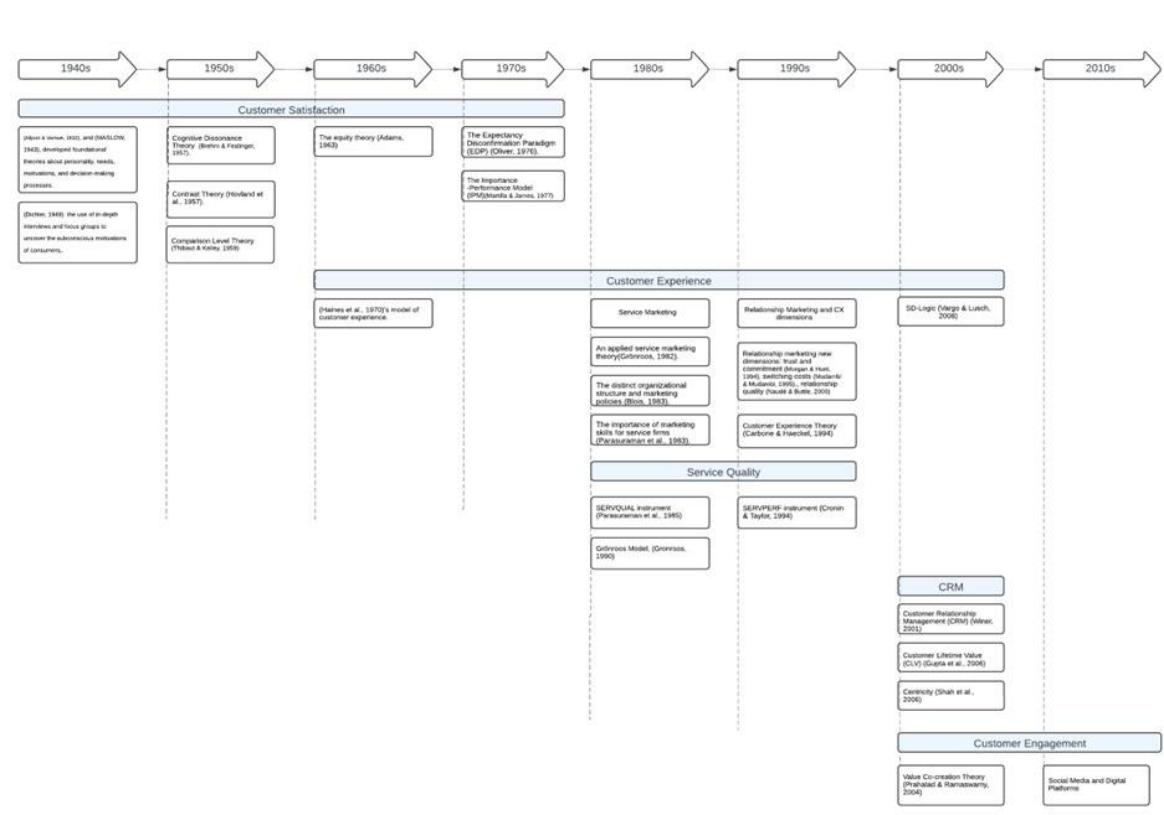
2.7 *Post 2010: Enhancing Customer Engagement Through Digital Channels*

In recent years, there has been a shift in focus towards gaining an understanding of customers' attitudes and behaviors that extend beyond the point of purchase [81], [82], this concept is commonly referred to as customer engagement, which implies active participation between the customer and the firm in value creation [83]. The concept of customer engagement has been a topic of interest in academic circles since the early 2000s [84], after 2010, it gained further prominence due to the rise of social media and digital technologies, as these platforms provided customers with new channels for engagement and communication, allowing them to connect with brands in real-time and share their experiences with a wider audience [15].

III. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of customer service development illustrates a clear shift in focus over the years. Initially, the emphasis was on customer satisfaction, aiming to meet or exceed consumer expectations to ensure their contentment [85]. As the field evolved, the focus shifted to service quality, prioritizing specific attributes such as reliability, empathy, and responsiveness in service delivery to ensure consistency and excellence in customer interactions [53]. Building on this foundation, the concept of customer experience emerged [86], encompassing not only the quality of service but also the emotional and cognitive responses at every touchpoint throughout the customer journey [87], [88]. More recently, the emphasis has shifted towards customer engagement [89], which

involves fostering ongoing interaction and relationship-building, encouraging active participation between customers and brands [90]. This evolution reflects the increasing complexity of consumer needs and the importance of creating a deeper, more proactive connection with customers [91]. The figure below depicts the evolution of customer service across the decades.



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