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Journal of Service Research 2007; 9; 257

DOI: 10.1177/1094670506295851

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When Customers Receive Support From Other Customers

Exploring the Influence of Intercustomer Social Support on Customer Voluntary Performance

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Service establishments would relish the opportunity to have their customers display customer voluntary performance (CVP) behaviors, which refer to helpful, discretionary customer behaviors that support an organization's service performance and quality. This article draws on resource exchange theory to offer an explanation as to why some customers display CVP in the form of customer citizenship and customer care behaviors. The data reveal that customers who receive social-emotional support and, to a lesser extent, instrumental support from other customers in a service establishment reciprocate by exhibiting CVP toward the establishment and to customers in the establishment. This article demonstrates that socially supportive service environments are beneficial for customers' health and for organizational profitability.

Keywords: *social support; commercial friendships; intercustomer support; customer voluntary performance; empathy*

“When men are thus knit together, by a love of society, not a spirit of faction, and don't meet to censure or annoy those who are absent, but to enjoy one another: when they are thus combined for their

own improvement, or for the good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and cheerful conversation, there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments.”

Joseph Addison

(as quoted in Oldenburg and Brissett 1982, p. 268)

It is 4:30 a.m. on a dark and cold January morning in Chicago. Six older-aged men each sit in their parked cars outside a neighborhood diner. Harriet, a morning waitress, arrives a few minutes later. The men follow Harriet into the restaurant, and they begin their daily routines. One of the men fills the saltshakers, and one fills the sugar containers. Another man assembles the crayons for each child's menu, and another fills the ketchup bottles. By 5:30 a.m., Harriet and the men have completed their tasks, and the restaurant opens for business. The men take their usual positions at the counter, order breakfast, and kibitz among one another. The men begin to depart at 9 a.m., knowing that they will meet again the following morning.

Many service organizations would relish the idea of customers not only displaying loyalty to their firms but also voluntarily performing helping behaviors that improve their firms' service performance and quality.

Indeed, Bettencourt (1997) deemed such helpful discretionary behaviors, which are performed by customers and that support the firm's ability to deliver service quality, as customer voluntary performance (CVP; Bailey, Gremler, and McCollough 2001; Hsieh, Yen, and Chin 2004). Bettencourt envisioned CVP as behaviors in which customers promote a service establishment by exhibiting loyalty (i.e., spreading positive word of mouth; WOM), by offering an establishment suggestion for improvement (i.e., participation) or by displaying courtesy to an establishment's employees and customers (i.e., cooperation).

Bettencourt (1997) demonstrated that a customer's satisfaction with and commitment toward a service firm are antecedents of CVP. Similarly, Bailey, Gremler, and McCollough (2001) argued that a relationship exists between the emotional value of a service encounter and a customer's propensity to display CVP. Although these findings are insightful, a question worthy of further exploration pertains to why some customers display CVP. Although many customers may indicate their satisfaction with and loyalty to a firm, not all of them display CVP. To investigate why some customers demonstrate CVP, we turn to resource exchange theory (Brinberg and Wood 1983; Foa 1971; Foa and Foa 1974; Hirschman 1987; Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, and Berthon 2003).

Foa's (1971) resource exchange theory posits that people exchange six types of resources with one another: love (i.e., an expression of affectionate regard, warmth, or comfort), status, information, money, goods, and services. These resources are organized on two dimensions: concreteness versus symbolism and particularism versus universalism. Concreteness refers to the degree of tangibility (e.g., concrete goods vs. symbolic information) related to a resource, and particularism refers to the value of the resource in relation to the person who delivers it (e.g., exchanging love with a particular individual vs. exchanging money with an unknown individual). Foa contends that resources that are proximal to one another in terms of concreteness and particularism are more likely to be exchanged than more distance resources. For example, a person who receives love is likely to return love to that person, as opposed to returning money.

By extending resource exchange theory to the marketplace, as some marketing researchers have requested (Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, and Berthon 2003), we propose that CVP provides a means by which customers can express an affectionate regard to a service establishment and to people in the establishment who provide them with love in the form of social support.

Adelman and Ahuvia (1995) conceptualized social support as a service provider's verbal or nonverbal communication to a client that facilitates an exchange. Although social support is communicated to people, this stance fails

to capture the human needs that social support satisfies or to expose its influence on a person's health (Hawkley et al. 2003; Stroebe and Stroebe 1996) and longevity (Giles et al. 2005). For example, psychologists conceptualize social support as "the perception or experience that one is loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and part of a social network of mutual assistance and obligations" (Taylor et al. 2004, pp. 354-55). Similarly, health researchers view social support as "the social resources that persons perceive to be available or that are actually provided to them by nonprofessionals in the context of both formal support groups and informal helping relationships" (Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood 2000, p. 4), such as a customers who regularly meet in a commercial establishment.

The purpose of this article is to investigate social support as an antecedent of CVP. More specifically, this article explores the relationship between the frequency with which members of a Gold's Gym receive social support (i.e., emotional support, companionship, and instrumental support) from other members, or intercustomer social support (Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin 1994), and the extent to which they demonstrate CVP in the gym.

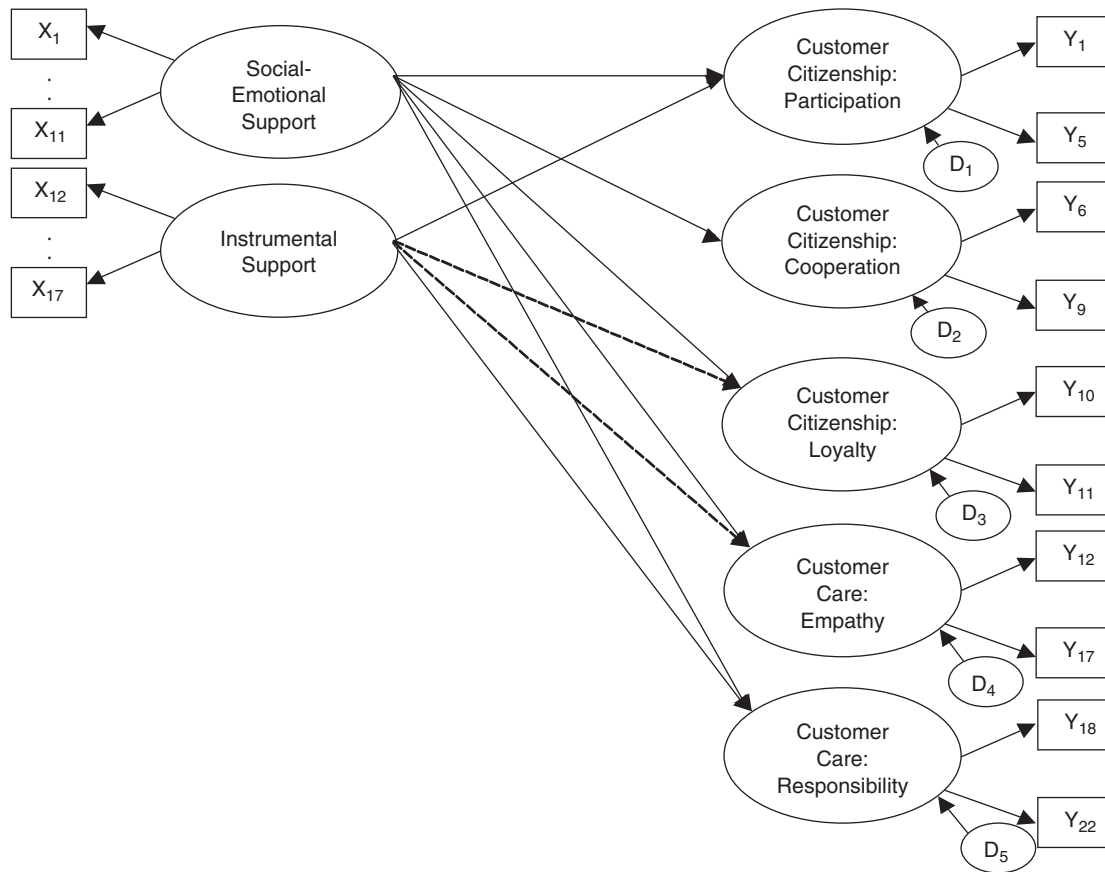
Although it is possible for customers to receive social support from employees (Kang and Ridgway 1996) or from friends who shop together (Hayko and Baker 2004), we investigate intercustomer support among customers who primarily interact with one another in a gym. We do so because relatively little is known about intercustomer support (Clark and Martin 1994; Guenzi and Pelloni 2004), and the sample site is ideal for exploring customer relationships that form in the gym. Thus, we analyze the influence of commercial friendships, as opposed to "purchase pals" (Woodside and Sims 1976), on CVP.

FRAMEWORK AND CONTRIBUTION

Figure 1 represents the guiding framework of our examination. The framework illustrates that customers may receive two types of social support from other customers in a service establishment: social-emotional support (i.e., companionship and emotional support) and instrumental support. We believe that the frequency with which customers receive social support from other customers in an establishment influences the extent to which they display CVP.

Bettencourt (1997) originally viewed CVP as consisting of three behaviors: loyalty, participation, and cooperation. We concur with Bettencourt but also draw on the organizational citizenship paradigm (Organ 1988) and deem loyalty, participation, and cooperation as examples of customer citizenship. Organ (1988) conceptualizes organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) as individual

FIGURE 1
Hypothesized Relationships Among Social Support and CVP



NOTE: CVP = customer voluntary performance. Dashed paths are not significant at $p < .05$.

(e.g., employee) helping behaviors and gestures that are organizationally beneficial but are not formally required. Organ defines OCB as “behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (p. 4; see also Van Dyne, Graham, and Dienesch 1994). Thus, we extend Organ’s concept into the services literature by considering that customers may display OCB not only to organizations in which they are employed but also to establishments where they purchase products and services.

We further expand on Bettencourt’s (1997) work by considering that customers may display CVP by demonstrating feelings of empathetic concern (i.e., helping with the goal of benefiting the other person; Post et al. 2002) and by having a personal sense of responsibility to help other customers in a service establishment. This extension is based on the empathy dimension of the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry

1988). This dimension suggests that customers evaluate a service firm on the basis of its employees’ abilities to extend empathetic concern to them. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2005) point out that empathetic people also possess a sense of moral responsibility and internalized social responsibility to help others. Thus, we conceptualize customer altruism and personal responsibility as examples of customer care. In summary, we suggest that CVP entails a customer voluntarily displaying helping behaviors by demonstrating customer citizenship and customer care.

The primary contribution of this article to the services literature is that it offers a theoretical explanation as to why some customers proactively display CVP behaviors toward a service establishment and to other customers in the establishment. As a result, this examination clarifies why some customers assume the role of partial employees in service settings and why they display OCB. Both of these topics are extremely germane to contemporary service research (Bove 2006).

Although marketing researchers have explored commercial social support in some depth (e.g., Adelman and Ahuvia 1995; Price and Arnould 1999), the services, marketing, and product/brand community literatures focus on the companionship bonds (i.e., friendship) that develop between service providers and their clients or on the characteristics (e.g., consciousness of kind, shared rituals, transference of product knowledge) and dynamics (e.g., geography, social context, community characteristics) of product/brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) rather than on highlighting the rich, social supportive bonds that often form among customers in service settings. Indeed, beyond exploring companionship bonds among otherwise satisfied customers who participate in brand/product communities, few marketing researchers have examined the influence of emotional support on customer behavior (cf. Rosenbaum 2006). Ironically, emotional support is more closely related to a person's health and well-being than any other type of social support (Stroebe and Stroebe 1996).

This article addresses this chasm and offers managerial insights into how socially supportive service environments represent win-win situations for both customers and service organizations. All service organizations can benefit from understanding why some customers opt to act as partial employees, which offers firms financial and service quality benefits. Finally, this examination heeds Kelley, Donnelly, and Skinner's (1990) request for researchers to consider both customers' technical and functional quality when exploring customers acting as partial employees. Although customer technical quality consists of what a customer provides to the encounter (e.g., customer citizenship), functional quality evaluates the humanistic manner in which customers behave in consumption settings (e.g., customer care).

We organize the remainder of the article as follows: First, we conduct a literature review to define concepts and to develop hypothesized relationships. Second, we empirically test the hypotheses from data collected from members of Gold's Gym. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most service encounters represent social encounters (Berry 1995) in which employee interpersonal skills affect customer satisfaction, perceived service quality, and approach behaviors (Baker, Levy, and Grewal 1992; Beatty et al. 1996; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). However, because marketing researchers traditionally explore the dyadic interface of companionship

between one service provider and one client (Goodwin and Gremler 1996; Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998; Price and Arnould 1999), little is known about the influence of supportive bonds that may form between customers in a setting.

Goodwin (1997) developed a classification schema regarding customer-customer interactions, suggesting that customers in service settings form relationships with other customers, whereby they act as strangers, friends, or quasi-family members. It might be considered that intercustomer support is nonexistent between customers as strangers but present as companionship between customers who are friends. As customers become quasi-family members, the social support they receive from each other is likely to be analogous to the type of support that people often receive from traditional family members.

Customers as Strangers

McGrath and Otnes (1995) conducted research on the influence of unacquainted customers who engage in short-lived, fleeting interactions with one another. They exposed the existence of a Janus effect among strangers in that although customers often help other customers in retail settings, they also sometimes hinder them. The Janus effect is also evident in Harris, Baron, and Radcliffe's (1995) empirical findings. They found that although 25% of IKEA shoppers believed that their short-lived conversations with unacquainted customers enhanced their shopping enjoyment, 50% of shoppers believed otherwise.

However, interaction between unacquainted customers in settings in which they can engage in conversation for a large amount of time (e.g., trains, Harris and Baron 2004; recreational tours, Arnould and Price 1993; medical waiting areas, Gross 1986) may assuage dissatisfied customers by lowering their anxiety associated with a service exchange, by having other customers facilitate the service process by acting as partial employees, and by supplying them with social interaction that alleviates boredom during their waiting in queue.

Customers as Friends

Customers who enter service establishments or shopping centers with friends, or so-called purchase pals (Woodside and Sims 1976), often do so because they use shopping as a means to obtain companionship from their friends (Hayko and Baker 2004). Although purchase pals obtain hedonic pleasures from socializing in climate-controlled malls, such relationships do not necessarily represent a financial boon to retailers. For example, adolescent males, or so-called mall rats, often linger in mall corridors and food courts (Lewis 1989), and two thirds of

senior citizens practice “malingering,” which refers to going to shopping centers without a desire to purchase anything (Graham 1991). However, many adolescent females, who tend to shop with girlfriends, often return with their mothers to purchase (Hayko and Baker 2004), and purchase pals often encourage their friends to buy (Woodside and Sims 1976).

Customers as Quasi-Family Members

Some customers may enter the marketplace to fulfill not only consumption needs but also companionship or emotional support needs (Rosenbaum 2006). House (1981) states that people typically rely on their family and friends for support. However, many sociologists contend that a by-product of modern society, which is characterized with mobile populations, double-income wage earners, and planned suburban communities, is that people, especially older-aged adults, find it increasingly difficult to obtain sufficient social support from traditional sources (Forman and Sriram 1991; Miller 2002; Putnam 2000). Despite these difficulties, people remain social beings who require interaction with others; “isolated, we shrivel up and die” (Vanier 1999, p. 2).

On one hand, many consumers find it difficult to form and maintain supportive relationships in the contemporary marketplace (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999). On the other hand, Oldenburg (1999) conceptualizes “third places” as public places, such as a diner (Rosenbaum 2006), a beauty salon (Price and Arnould 1999), or a gym (Unger and Johnson 1995), in which some people often gather to engage in sociability. Thus, third places represent locales in which customers may sustain socially supportive relationships with other customers and receive resources that most people receive from family, friends, and coworkers.

Receiving Social Support in Service Establishments

Although researchers have conceptualized the existence of various types of social supportive resources that people exchange (Wills and Shinar 2000), the majority of taxonomies conclude that three resources—companionship, emotional support, and instrumental support—are essential to human well-being (Fyrand et al. 2002; Helgeson 2003). Companionship provides people with a partner for activities. Emotional support provides people with outlets for discussing their feelings and expressing their concerns and worries. Instrumental support provides people with practical help, assistance with mundane activities, or financial aid. Of the three support types, companionship and emotional support are perceived as the most essential to a person’s health (Sorkin,

Rook, and Lu 2002). Indeed, Suurmeijer et al. (1995) merge companionship and emotional support into a single dimension: social-emotional support.

Demonstrating Appreciation for Support Through CVP

By receiving social-emotional and instrumental support, people can remedy some of the negative symptoms associated with loneliness (Rosenbaum 2006) as well as illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, or other immune-deficiency diseases (Steptoe et al. 2004; Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser 1996). Thus, we posit that when customers receive social-emotional support or instrumental support from others in a service establishment, they demonstrate their appreciation to the establishment by exhibiting CVP.

Our speculation is based on resource exchange theory (Foa and Foa 1974). As mentioned previously, this theory posits that people exchange six types of resources (i.e., love, status, information, goods, services, and money) according to their degree of similarity. We speculate that if customers receive social support from others in an establishment, which provides them with feelings of concern and love, they will reciprocate by engaging in CVP behaviors that aid the firm in fulfilling its mission and its customers.

CUSTOMER CITIZENSHIP

Bettencourt (1997) conceives of CVP as voluntary customer behaviors that assist an organization, such as customers acting as partial employees (i.e., participation), promoting the organization through WOM (i.e., loyalty), and cooperating with employees (i.e., cooperation). Partial employees refer to customers who contribute to the development and delivery of an organization’s service quality, similar to an organization’s employees (Bowen 1986; Hsieh, Yen, and Chin 2004; Keh and Teo 2001; Mills and Morris 1986). Gremler and Brown (1999) deem WOM as communication about a service provider that is offered by a customer who is not trying to obtain monetary gain by doing so. Cooperation pertains to services that are simultaneously produced and consumed. Consequently, because customers are often present during the service production process, they may have the ability to assist in a positive way in the service process (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2006). For example, customers may bag their own groceries or present identification for check-writing purposes without being asked to do so.

We suggest that customers who display CVP through loyalty, participation, or cooperation are actually exhibiting OCBs. Therefore, customer citizenship is a form of CVP in which a customer willingly spreads positive

WOM about a service establishment, acts as the establishment's partial employee, and cooperates with the establishment's employees.

Hypothesis 1: The frequency with which a customer receives social-emotional support and instrumental support from other customers in a service establishment positively influences his or her willingness to exhibit CVP through

- a. participation
- b. cooperation, and
- c. loyalty.

CUSTOMER CARE

Drawing on resource exchange theory, we posit that customers who receive social support in a service establishment will respond by providing other customers in the establishment with feelings of love and of genuine concern. A key theme in the services marketing literature is that customers' perceptions of service quality are influenced by the extent to which employees extend interpersonal empathy to them. For example, the SERVQUAL scale evaluates the importance of this behavior under the "empathy dimension" (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988; Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2006). However, customers may also extend empathy to other customers in a service setting by exhibiting helping behaviors that are not the result of a reward or a desire to avoid some punishment (Davis 1996; Post et al. 2002).

To further understand empathetic customers, we draw on the work of Lee et al. (2005), who found that "exemplary altruists" also display a sense of internalized social responsibility to help other people who are experiencing difficulties. Lee et al. state that altruists possess a keen ability to recall difficulties that they experienced in situations and to assist other people in overcoming experienced obstacles. Notably, marketing researchers have explored social responsibility in terms of corporate behavior (Maignan and Ferrell 2004) rather than considering that customers may possess an internalized "prosocial" responsibility (George and Bettenhausen 1990) to help other customers.

Although myriad customer care behaviors exist, the literature supports the conclusion that customer care is characterized by customers performing at least two behaviors: expressing empathy and expressing a sense of personal responsibility to other customers in a service setting.

Hypothesis 2: The frequency with which a customer receives social-emotional support and instrumental support from other customers in a service establishment positively influences his or her willingness to exhibit CVP through

- a. customer empathy and
- b. customer responsibility.

METHOD

Sample

We obtained data through self-administered questionnaires from a sample of 207 members of a franchised Gold's Gym located in a major metropolitan city. The gym permitted one of the authors to set up a table near the front door of the gym over a 1-week period for data collection purposes using convenience sampling. Each respondent who volunteered to participate in the study, which required approximately 10 min for completion, received a Gold's Gym calendar that was valued at \$5. Of the respondents, 104 were male, and 99 were female. Four respondents failed to indicate their sex on the questionnaire. The average age of the respondents was 35 years, with a minimum of 18 years and a maximum of 65 years.

Measures

Social support. We assessed the frequency with which the members received social support from other nonrelational gym members with the Social Support Questionnaire for Transactions (SSQT; Doeglas et al. 1996; Suurmeijer et al. 1995). The SSQT comprises 23 questions that ask respondents to indicate the frequency (1 = *seldom or never*, 2 = *now and then*, 3 = *regularly*, and 4 = *often*) with which they receive support from other members. The questionnaire asked respondents to consider their relationships with other members in the gym who were not related to them, and they were verbally told this before receiving a questionnaire.

Because the SSQT has limited exposure in the marketing literature (Rosenbaum 2006), we verified the dimensional structure of the SSQT with factor analysis. We subjected the 23 SSQT items to principal axis factor analysis (promax rotation, which we employed because of expected correlation between the factors; Thompson 2004). The first analysis retained all items in a three-factor solution, which accounted for 59% of the variance. After we removed items with low pattern coefficients or cross-loadings, the final analysis retained 17 items in a two-factor solution, accounting for 65% of the variance. A parallel analysis confirmed a two-factor solution (O'Connor 2000); in addition, Rosenbaum (2006) found a two-dimensional structure when employing the SSQT in a commercial setting.

Following Suurmeijer et al.'s (1995) conceptualizations for the SSQT, we labeled the first factor *social-emotional*

TABLE 1
SSQT Items, Pattern Coefficients, and Reliability Estimate

<i>Item (1 = seldom, 2 = now and then, 3 = regularly, 4 = frequently)</i>	<i>F1: Social-Emotional Support</i>	<i>F2: Instrumental Support</i>
Social-Emotional Support Scale		
How often do members in the gym reassure you about things?	.84	.02
How often do members in the gym tell you not to lose courage?	.82	.13
How often do members in the gym perk you up or cheer you up?	.79	.02
How often do members in the gym give you advice in the right direction?	.79	.09
How often do members in the gym lend you a friendly ear?	.78	.02
How often do members in the gym show their understanding to you?	.76	-.03
How often do members in the gym sympathize with you?	.74	-.06
How often do members in the gym give you information or advice?	.63	.16
How often are members in the gym friendly to you?	.63	.06
How often do members in the gym make you feel at ease?	.62	-.06
How often can you rely on other members in the gym?	.58	.18
Mean = 28.57, standard deviation = 6.97, Cronbach's α = .93		
Instrumental Support Scale		
How often do members from the gym lend you small amounts of money?	-.07	.88
How often do members from the gym drop in to your home for a pleasant visit?	-.02	.87
How often do members from the gym help you do odd jobs such as helping you move furniture, drive you somewhere, etc.	.01	.86
How often do members from the gym lend you small things, like tools, or something like that?	.00	.80
How often do members in the gym lend you valuable things?	-.05	.80
How often do you do things like walking, shopping, going to the movies or sports, etc. together with other members from the gym?	.14	.65
Mean = 8.12, standard deviation = 3.31, Cronbach's α = .90		

SOURCE: Doeglas et al. 1996; Suurmeijer et al. 1995.

NOTE: SSQT = Social Support Questionnaire for Transactions. Principal factor analysis (promax rotation). Total variance explained = 63.29%. Correlation between the factors = .49.

support and the second factor *instrumental support*. We created two support scales by summing together the items that were representative of each factor. The coefficient alphas were .93 and .90 for the Social-Emotional and Instrumental Support scales, respectively, indicating internal consistency (Nunnally 1978). Table 1 illustrates the SSQT items, pattern coefficients, and alpha coefficients.

Customer citizenship. We performed a principal axis factor analysis (varimax rotation) on 11 items that assess customer citizenship behaviors. We adapted the citizenship items from Bettencourt (1997); however, we eliminated 6 of Bettencourt's original items that were applicable primarily to consumer behaviors at grocery stores (e.g., items regarding shopping carts, bagging, and check writing). Similar to Bettencourt's results, the final analysis retained 79% of the variance in a three-factor solution (i.e., Participation, a 5-item scale; Cooperation, a 4-item scale; and Positive WOM/Loyalty, a 2-item scale). Next, we assessed scale reliability by calculating coefficient alpha and by analyzing item-to-item correlation. Reliability estimates were .90, .77, and .84 for the Participation, Cooperation, and Loyalty scales, respectively (Nunnally 1978). The scale items,

pattern coefficients, and alpha coefficients appear in Table 2.

Customer care. We created an original 11-item scale to measure the extent to which customers extend feelings of empathetic concern to and personal responsibility for other customers. We derived 7 items from Davis's (1996) Empathetic Concern scale. Although the Empathetic Concern scale evaluates feelings of empathy, concern, and sympathy toward others, it fails to evaluate the extent to which people sense a personal responsibility to protect or to aid others. Therefore, we generated 4 new items to evaluate the extent to which customers feel responsible for the well-being of other customers in a retail setting. We assessed each item from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

To analyze the factor structure of the scale, we subjected the items to principal axis factor analysis (promax rotation). The analysis retained 55% of the variance in a two-factor solution. The analysis of the pattern coefficients resulted in our retaining 11 items. A parallel analysis confirmed a two-factor solution (O'Connor 2000). On the basis of the pattern coefficients, we labeled the first factor *customer empathy* and the second factor *customer responsibility*.

TABLE 2
Customer Citizenship Scales^a

	<i>F1: Customer Participation</i>	<i>F2: Customer Cooperation</i>	<i>F3: Customer WOM/Loyalty</i>
Customer Participation Scale			
If I notice a problem at the gym, I inform an employee, or customer, even if it doesn't affect me.	.92	.20	.15
I make constructive suggestions to the gym's employees on how to improve its service.	.91	.21	.14
I let the gym's employees know of ways that they can better serve my needs.	.90	.17	.13
I have shared a useful idea on how to improve the gym with its employees.	.88	.18	.15
When I experience a problem at the gym, I let an employee know.	.85	.14	.13
<i>M</i> = 17.26, <i>SD</i> = 8.28, Cronbach's α = .90			
Customer Cooperation Scale			
I try to help keep this gym clean (e.g., pick up towels that may not be yours, wipe equipment).	.26	.80	.23
I give the gym's employees my full cooperation.	.26	.79	.19
I go out of my way to treat the gym's personnel with kindness and respect.	.15	.78	.09
I carefully observe the rules and policies of this gym.	.06	.77	.08
<i>M</i> = 16.49, <i>SD</i> = 5.87, Cronbach's α = .77			
Customer WOM/Loyalty Scale			
I encourage my friends and relatives to work out at this gym.	.21	.14	.90
I say positive things about this gym to others.	.17	.28	.87
<i>M</i> = 10.88, <i>SD</i> = 8.79, Cronbach's α = .84			

NOTE: Principal axis factor analysis (varimax rotation). Total variance explained = 79.36%. WOM = word of mouth.
a. 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.

We created scales by summing together the items that were identified by their pattern coefficient values as being representative of a specific factor. We assessed scale reliability by calculating coefficient alpha. Reliability estimates were .80 and .82 for the Empathy and Responsibility scales, respectively, indicating adequate internal consistency (Nunnally 1978). Table 3 illustrates the items, pattern coefficients, and alpha coefficients. It is worth noting that the customer citizenship and customer care items were presented to the respondents in a random order to prevent respondent bias and to lessen potential fatigue.

FINDINGS

Path Analysis

To prepare the ordinal data for structural equation modeling, we normalized the data in PRELIS (du Toit et al. 2006), which enabled better estimates for maximum likelihood estimation. We used structural equation modeling to estimate the theoretical model depicted in Figure 1. After we removed two nonsignificant paths, the fit for the corrected model was acceptable (root mean square error of approximation = .08, comparative fit index = .94, standardized root mean square residual = .09; Hu and Bentler 1999), especially given the small sample size. Table 4 shows the parameter estimates for the relationships depicted in Figure 1.

Relationships

Customer citizenship. In terms of participation, both social-emotional support ($\beta = .45, p < .01$) and instrumental support ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) emerge as significant predictors of the extent to which gym members exhibit participatory or partial employee behaviors, with social-emotional support being a more powerful predictor. Thus, the results provide support for Hypothesis 1a. For cooperation, both social-emotional support ($\beta = .59, p < .01$) and instrumental support ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) represent significant predictors of a member's propensity to cooperate with the gym's employees; however, social-emotional support again is a more significant predictor than instrumental support. Thus, Hypothesis 1b is supported. Given the predictive strength of social-emotional support frequency over instrumental support frequency, the finding that social-emotional support is solely predictive of a respondent's WOM/loyalty ($\beta = .55, p < .01$) is not surprising; Hypothesis 1c is partially supported.

Customer care. The relationship between social-emotional support and the extent to which a member displays empathic concern toward other members was significant ($\beta = .54, p < .01$), but the relationship between instrumental support and empathic concern was not significant. As a result, Hypothesis 2a is partially supported. In terms of people feeling responsible for other customers,

TABLE 3
Customer Care Scales^a

	<i>F1: Customer Empathy</i>	<i>F2: Customer Responsibility</i>
Customer Empathy Scale		
I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person to other members in the gym.	.85	-.03
I am touched by things that I see happen to other members in the gym.	.69	.08
Other members' problems in the gym do not usually disturb me a great deal. ^{RC}	.65	-.02
When I see a member in the gym being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective toward them.	.64	-.08
I don't feel very sorry for other members in the gym when they have problems (e.g., using equipment). ^{RC}	.54	-.08
When I see a member in the gym being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel much pity for them. ^{RC}	.51	.11
<i>M</i> = 29.01, <i>SD</i> = 6.47, Cronbach's α = .80		
Customer Responsibility Scale		
I often feel that I have a special responsibility to assist other members in the gym when they need help. ^b	.04	.79
Other members have done things for me that I feel I am responsible for repaying them. ^b	-.17	.73
I frequently look for opportunities to help other members in the gym. ^b	.17	.65
I often have tender, concerned feelings for customers in the gym who are less fortunate than me.	-.04	.64
I try to stay aware of when other members in the gym are having difficulties at the gym. ^b	.03	.63
<i>M</i> = 29.01, <i>SD</i> = 6.47, Cronbach's α = .82		

NOTE: Principal axis factor analysis (promax rotation). RC = reverse coded. Total variance explained = 51.30%. Correlation between the two factors = .56.
a. 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.
b. A new item; all other items are from Davis (1996).

TABLE 4
Standardized Parameter Estimates for CVP Measures

<i>Relationship</i>	<i>Unstandardized Coefficient</i>	<i>Standardized Coefficient</i>	<i>t</i>
Social-emotional support → Participation	2.92	.45	5.19**
Instrumental support → Participation	0.62	.29	3.83**
Social-emotional support → Cooperation	3.63	.59	5.66**
Instrumental support → Cooperation	0.34	.17	1.99*
Social-emotional support → WOM/loyalty	7.51	.55	6.01**
Instrumental support → WOM/loyalty	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	
Social-emotional support → Customer empathy	1.94	.54	5.11*
Instrumental support → Customer empathy	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	
Social-emotional support → Customer responsibility	2.09	.54	5.37**
Instrumental support → Customer responsibility	0.28	.22	2.68**
<i>R</i> ²			
Customer participation	.45		
Customer cooperation	.49		
Customer WOM/loyalty	.30		
Customer empathy	.30		
Customer responsibility	.48		

NOTE: CVP = customer voluntary performance; WOM = word of mouth.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

both social-emotional support ($\beta = .54, p < .01$) and instrumental support ($\beta = .22, p < .01$) emerge as significant predictors, supporting Hypothesis 2b. However, consistent with the preceding statistical results, social-emotional support emerges as the more dominant predictor.

These findings illustrate that social support is indeed an antecedent of CVP; however, social-emotional support, not instrumental support, represents the primary driver

regarding the extent to which customers willingly display CVP. Emotional support has been found to have more influence on a person's health than any other type of social support (Stroebe and Stroebe 1996), and companionship is also essential to human well-being. As a result, the finding that the combined influence of emotional and companionship support has a greater influence on CVP than does instrumental support is understandable.

TABLE 5
Means and Standard Deviations

Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)	Male Members		Female Members		Infrequent Social Support in Gold's Gym		Frequent Social Support in Gold's Gym	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Customer citizenship								
Demonstrate participation	3.51	1.70	3.35	1.64	2.66	1.55	4.04**	1.41
Demonstrate cooperation	4.18	1.39	4.01	1.53	3.97	0.88	4.67**	0.75
Demonstrate WOM/loyalty	5.34	1.45	5.51	1.52	4.83	1.53	5.80**	1.26
Customer care								
Demonstrate empathy	4.63	1.01	5.03*	1.06	4.42	1.09	5.03**	0.87
Demonstrate responsibility	3.31	1.29	3.43	1.26	2.79	1.15	3.75**	1.08

NOTE: WOM = word of mouth.
 * $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Gender Analysis and Cluster Analysis Procedures

To assess the impact of social support on a member's CVP in more depth, we performed two additional procedures. First, we conducted a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine the impact of gender on five dependent CVP variables (i.e., Participation, Cooperation, Loyalty, Empathy, and Participation scales). We found significant differences among the member types on the measures (Wilks's $\Lambda = .94$), $F(5, 181) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda indicted a medium effect at .06. Table 5 contains the means and standard deviations on the dependent variables. The follow-up analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on each variable indicated that gender differences existed only on one measure, namely, customer empathy, $F(1, 185) = 7.40$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Overall, female members ($M = 5.03$) are more likely than male members ($M = 4.63$) to demonstrate empathy to other members; however, the effect of gender on empathy is quite mild.

Second, we performed a two-step cluster analysis (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 2005) to evaluate the frequency with which gym members receive intercustomer social support, regardless of the support type, and its effect on CVP. The data set comprised gym members' responses to the 17 purified SSQT items. On the basis of the Bayesian information criterion, we classified the respondents into two groups. Of the respondents, 88 (42.5%) were placed in the first cluster, which we labeled *infrequent support*, and 92 (44.4%) were placed in the second cluster, which we labeled *frequent support*. A total of 27 (13.0%) respondents were unclassified.

Mean Analysis

We conducted a one-way MANOVA to determine the effect of the frequency with which respondents receive social support from other customers on the aforementioned five dependent CVP variables. We found significant differences among the member types on the measures (Wilks's $\Lambda = .74$), $F(5, 153) = 11.01$, $p < .001$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks's lambda was strong at .27. Table 5 contains the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables.

We conducted ANOVAs on each variable as follow-up tests. To minimize Type I errors, we tested each ANOVA at the .01 level. The ANOVAs on participation, $F(1, 157) = 76.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$, cooperation, $F(1, 157) = 19.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$, WOM/loyalty, $F(1, 157) = 37.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, customer empathy, $F(1, 157) = 14.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and customer responsibility, $F(1, 157) = 36.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$, were all significant. Thus, the analysis supports the findings that the gym members demonstrate their appreciation for the social support they receive from other members by displaying customer citizenship and customer care.

DISCUSSION

This study draws on Foa and Foa's (1974) resource exchange theory to advance a theoretical perspective that posits that customers who receive social-emotional support and instrumental support from other customers in a commercial establishment may reciprocate their appreciation to the establishment and to customers in the establishment by displaying CVP in the forms of customer citizenship and customer care. Thus, this study

demonstrates the applicability of resource exchange theory to contemporary marketplace issues (Murgolo, Pitt, and Berthon 2003). In addition, the study expands on Bettencourt's (1997) and Bailey, Gremler, and McCollough's (2001) CVP research by explaining a consumer's motivation to display these voluntary helping behaviors.

Theoretical Implications

Marketing researchers are increasingly realizing that service establishments may transcend their commercial intent (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998) by becoming the focal point of a consumer's personal life and social experience. Researchers have shown that older-aged and elderly consumers, the socially and emotionally isolated, and marginalized ethnic consumers often seek human interaction in commercial establishments. This study is important because it illustrates that members of Gold's Gym, who are typically younger-aged men and women in prime health, also receive social support from other customers. We might speculate whether consumers who participate in customer communities centered on the ownership of high-ticket products (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Oliver 1999) are motivated to do so by a universal human need for social support.

This article also reveals the potential influence of service establishments on consumers' lives. Social psychologists and health researchers have espoused the notion that people often find adequate sources of support from their family, friends, and coworkers. However, support from these sources may be inadequate in contemporary society as people's ability to engage in frequent, sociable encounters with other people is hampered by planned suburban communities that lack open areas, by long commutes, and by life that shifts between work and home. Furthermore, the rise of double-income households and working parents has resulted in people having less time to participate in civic or group organizations (e.g., bowling groups, reading groups) that facilitate supportive camaraderie (Putnam 2000). Consequently, the quality of many people's lives depends almost exclusively on the quality of a narrow band of relationships that they have with family and coworkers (Oldenburg and Brisett 1982).

This is not to say that the gym members initially sought support through membership. Personal observations reveal that most Gold's members joined the club because of its location, price, and equipment. New members initially express some distance from other members, until greetings transform into complete sentences, which in turn transform into statements of concern (e.g., "you're lifting wrong") or support (e.g., "lookin' good"). The transference of social support between customers still requires time to germinate because each

member must decide whether he or she wants to become involved in a socially supportive customer network.

Given their accessibility and willingness to listen when consumers want to talk, service employees often represent "natural neighbors and informal care givers" (Cowen 1982, p. 386). However, it might be speculated whether customers perceive an employee's supportive overtures as a prerequisite for the employee's position (Hochschild 1985), as an intrusion (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), as means to secure a purchase order (Swan et al. 2001), or as an attempt to secure a higher tip (Price and Arnould 1999). Thus, researchers may want to explore whether customers view intercustomer support as more genuine than employee support.

Implications for Service Organizations

Commercial establishments may realize financial and service benefits by encouraging their customers to form supportive relationships. However, caveats exist to hosting these relationships. First, although CVP enhances an establishment's service quality, social support is transmitted from people in a place. Thus, customers will always be loyal first to the social relationships that are housed in a commercial establishment rather than to the place per se.

Second, customers who display CVP are likely to be regulars, or customers who frequent an establishment on a near-daily basis. Oldenburg (1999) discusses how regulars give a place character and transform it into their turf. However, franchises and national chains must provide their customers with consistency, regardless of an operation's location. As such, many managers can ill afford to have their establishments transformed into turfs by regulars. In response, managers may designate specific areas of an establishment for regulars by using tables that accommodate larger groups of customers or by encouraging customers to mingle in an area that is less trafficked by nonregular customers.

Third, we doubt that retailers of large mass-merchandising operations can foster intercustomer relationships because myriad people patronize these establishments at various times; therefore, customers never have the ability to develop meaningful relationships with other customers. We are not suggesting that big-box retail organizations convert their premises to third-place-like structures. Although some researchers may view big-box retailers as the antithesis of meaningful social interaction (Aubert-Gamet and Cova 1999), we question whether consumers even patronize these establishments to obtain support from customers or employees.

Fourth, the population segments that are at risk for social support deficits from traditional sources and that may receive commercial support include the elderly; the

unmarried, divorced, widowed, and retired; and those whose ethnicity places them apart from their neighbors. Although these consumers may enjoy human togetherness in commercial establishments, firms that cater to these segments will most likely alienate other customers.

Research Limitations

Although Gold's Gym is part of a franchised chain, it is possible that some unexplored findings in this study are specific to it. Furthermore, the SSQT is just one of many methods that have been developed for assessing an individual's supportive network (see Wills and Shinar 2000). In addition, the proposed model is static, whereas the process by which customers form supportive relationships with other customers in retail establishments is actually dynamic and occurring over time.

Another limitation of this study, which also plagues many environmental studies (for a discussion, see Bitner 1992; for an exception, see Rosenbaum 2006), is that we did not employ humanistic methodological techniques. These techniques would have provided additional insights into the evocative role that commercial social support often assumes in consumers' lives. In addition, we encourage future researchers to explore whether other variables exist (e.g., income, ethnicity, frequency of interaction, loneliness in life) that would encourage customers to form supportive relationships with other customers. Despite these limitations, this article suggests that service establishments may enhance their competitiveness by encouraging their customers to form social supportive relationships with other customers.

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