Special Issue Call for Papers:

“Rise of the Machines?: Customer Engagement through Automated Service Interactions”

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Proposed Special Issue topic

The service sector has seen significant developments in recent decades, including the increasing adoption of automated (computerized) forms of interactivity in service delivery, customer relationship management, and back-end processing activities (e.g. automated booking systems; Ostrom et al. 2015; Bitner et al. 2000). Each of these trends reflects the adoption of particular emerging technologies, including service robotics or intelligent assistants (Teixeira et al. 2017; Van Doom et al. 2017), which are predicted to be increasingly adopted in service-based customer-firm interactions (Kumar et al. 2016). While automation has traditionally implied a degree of standardization of service processes and/or offerings (Kurzweil 2005), automated service interactions in today’s world offer a growing opportunity for service personalization, while simultaneously capitalizing on the benefits of service automation (e.g. enhanced service efficiency, reduced variability; Glas et al. 2017; Rabbitt et al. 2015). Not surprisingly, various commentators acclaim the vast future potential for engaging customers through automated service interactions (e.g. Foster et al. 2017; Hollebeek et al. 2017). For example, IBM (2017) predicts that by 2020, 85% of customer-firm interactions will be conducted via computerized technologies, without human involvement. Customer engagement enabled through automated customer-to-machine interactions is thus forecast to increase, and may even replace specific forms of traditional customer-to-employee service interactions altogether (Shi et al. 2015; Singh et al. 2017).

Various examples exist in today’s marketplace that illustrate firms’ increasing use of automated service interactions. For example, the Henn-na Hotel in Nagasaki, Japan is the world’s first hotel to be entirely staffed by humanoid robots, which take the physical likeness of humans (and in some cases, animals) in service delivery (Scassellati 2002). Customers’ engagement with the hotel’s frontline service delivery staff, including receptionists and waiters, room service personnel and gym operators occur via automated interactions deploying service robots (Singh et al. 2017; Murison 2016). Further illustrations include hotels using robots to deliver room service (e.g. Aloft Cupertino, Residence Inn, Holiday Inn), Royal Caribbean’s Quantum of the Seas’ Bionic Bar with robot bartenders, KLM’s Spencer that offers customer service at Schiphol Airport (Cabibihan et al. 2014; Murison 2016), McDonald’s automated kiosks, and IBM’s Watson or Apple’s Viv (acquired by Samsung; Kharpal 2016). In each of these examples, automated interactions can reliably assist customers with low-level service tasks. A key benefit of automated interactions is freeing up employees’ valuable time that can be applied to more core, or complex, service activities, thus generating cost savings (Kumar et al. 2016; Wood 2016). Similarly, non-humanoid technologies including self-driving cars, chatbots, and electronically enabled passage (e.g. at international airports) are increasingly used to facilitate service delivery (Blut et al. 2016; Narla 2013). Thus, a clear trend is emerging whereby firms adopt automated interactions that facilitate the development of customers’ engagement with their offerings. Initial academic research suggests that firms adopting such technology will be able to achieve more personalized, effective and/or efficient service execution (Erden and Jonkman 2012), thereby contributing to firm-based value creation (Van Doom et al. 2017; Rifkin 2014). However, this work is in its infancy and further scholarly attention is required.
Despite its acclaimed benefits, however, sceptics question the long-term effects of increasingly (or fully) automated customer-firm interactions on ensuing actor (e.g. customer/employee) outcomes, including engagement, satisfaction, social capital, and wellbeing (Anderson and Ostrom 2015; Brodie et al. 2011). For example, automated interactions may spawn limited customer preference or acceptance (Castro-González et al. 2016), lack a personal touch (e.g. through limited frontline service assistant communication, empathy or ability to detect or respond appropriately to customer sarcasm or different linguistic dialects; Giebelhausen et al. 2014), or incur an increasing reliance on electrical power supply. Automated interactions are also more susceptible to being hacked, causing potential security or privacy issues (Van Doom et al. 2017), and may raise job security concerns (e.g. lower-skilled service workers’ jobs that are being increasingly replaced by automated forms of service provision; Frey and Osborne 2017). Therefore, whether automated service interactions’ net effect on customers’ and other actors’ wellbeing will be positive (e.g. consumers’ enhanced problem-solving skills through interacting with intelligent agents), negligible, or negative (e.g. actors’ loss of self-esteem/value through one’s intellectual capabilities becoming increasingly under-utilized, or obsolete, in automated service interactions) remains an open question. These are important micro- and macro-level issues that remain unexplored and undocumented in the literature, which need to be addressed to fully leverage the opportunities of automated service interactions to firms and customers.

In response to this identified research gap, this Special Issue seeks to explore ways in which automated service interactions engage customers and create customer and firm value. We invite submissions that investigate key drivers, dynamics, outcomes, and challenges associated with engaging customers through automated service interactions. We welcome conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions from researchers deploying diverse methods and grounded in various service research traditions. Papers considered for the Special Issue may focus on topics including, but not limited to, the following:

- How can firms successfully automate specific parts of their service interactions to augment their employees’ capabilities, and enhance overall service productivity?
- Which types of service companies (e.g. small/large, B2C/B2B) are most likely to benefit from adopting automated service interactions, and what are the respective success factors and challenges characterizing these interactions?
- How do consumers respond to automated interactions with particular service firms?
- Which are the key customer-based (e.g. personality), service-related (e.g. resource availability), particular interaction technology (e.g. service robot)-related, and environmental (e.g. market-based) factors that optimize customer/firm value ensuing from automated interactions?
- What are the key pros (e.g. fewer mistakes) and cons (e.g. impersonal nature) of technology-enabled customer engagement? Do these vary by context and service setting?
- Under what firm/market-based conditions are the intended benefits of automated service interactions best achieved?
- How can technology-enabled customer engagement be leveraged to drive customer purchases and loyalty throughout the customer journey, and how does it fit within the firm’s relationship marketing program?
- What ratio of customer-to-employee/customer-to-machine interactions optimizes customer engagement, purchases and loyalty for specific service offerings?
- Are automated service interactions more effective for retaining existing, or attracting new, customers?
- In which particular service tasks/activities do automated service interactions create optimal value?
- What are the best design elements to include in automated service interactions to ensure favorable customer responses to the new technology?
- What is the return-on-investment (ROI) of particular automated service interactions? What factors influence such ROI?
- How can various emerging technologies, including the Internet of Things, smart devices, or wearables, be integrated with automated service interactions to create optimal value?
- Do service firms’ traditional strategies or tactics require rethinking to thrive in environments characterized by increasingly automated service interactions?
- How does machine learning affect technology-enabled customer engagement?
All manuscripts must strictly follow the guidelines of the *Journal of Service Research*, which are available at: [https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal-of-service-research/journal200746%20#submission-guidelines](https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal-of-service-research/journal200746%20#submission-guidelines). The closing date for submissions is November 15, 2018 for expected publication in late 2019. Manuscripts must be submitted through the *Journal of Service Research* website: [https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/journsr](https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/journsr). When submitting your manuscript, please ensure to select the correct Special Issue from the drop-down menu on the Manuscript Submission page.

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