

Preliminary thesis

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Introduction to the research topic

Gupta and Lehmann (2003) stated: “customers are intangible assets that should be valued and managed”. The interest in developing existing relationships with current customers is contingent on an in-depth understanding of the sources that drives value (Bolton et al., 2004). This development popularised the term customer lifetime value (hereafter CLV), which companies are able to track and analyse thanks to customer relationship management (CRM) systems. These systems offer to track customer behaviour, collecting real-time behavioural data and storing the information in dedicated business intelligence programs. The availability of behavioural data, along with financial measurements enables marketer to gain an in-depth knowledge to better understand the drivers of value.

One of the important dimensions of CLV is customer defection, which is also referred to as customer churn in the literature. Scott A Neslin et al. (2006) posits that churn figures directly into how long a customer stays with a company and the CLV to that company. The CRM also encompasses complaint handling, which can have a significant implication on the customer relationship. Lhoest-Snoeck et al. (2014) refers to supporting literature in stating that effective complaint handling can have a significant impact on customer satisfaction, churn rates, reduced negative-word-of-mouth and other factors. The same paper also warns of the implication of an inefficient complaint handling, which increases the likelihood of the customer switching to another provider. The value of defensive marketing strategies, which customer retention is categorized as in the literature, is justified by the potential reduction in total marketing expenses through reduction of offensive strategies (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). We posit that excellent complaint handling is tightly linked to reducing churn rates, which may contribute to an increase in CLV and consequently, company profitability.

Although there is extensive literature on churn and usage in a contractual setting, there is limited empirical research on usage in a contractual setting (Ascarza & Hardie, 2013). Our study is set in a contractual setting, where we include behavioural complexity to assess the implication it has on churn.

Objectives, theoretical background and hypotheses

We have structured this section by firstly explaining the main objective of the thesis, followed by an explanation of the dimensions of our conceptual model. Secondly, we explain the dimensions in detail, highlighting relevant literature and presenting our proposed hypothesis at the end of each section. Lastly, the we present our conceptual model.

Objectives

Knox and Van Oest (2014b) developed a customer base model to assess the effectiveness of recovery in preventing customer churn in a non-contractual setting. The main objective of the thesis is to include behavioural complexity, consisting of cross-category and multichannel usage, into a conceptual model to better understand its effect on customer churn. We will also address parts of Knox and Van Oest (2014b) suggestion for future research, namely dividing complaints into specific types or dimensions.

Dimensions and hypotheses

Complaints and complaint types

Complaints are associated with customer churn, call centres and win-back teams in a corporate setting. The literature proposes several definitions of a complaint, whereas we will focus on a selected few. Wright (2014) refers Singh and Widing (1991) defining a complaint “as a customer’s protest to a firm with the goal of obtaining an exchange, refund or apology”. Bell et al. (2004) defines a customer complaint as a negative customer feedback, while Knox and Van Oest (2014b) defines complaint as “customer-initiated expressions of dissatisfaction to the company (i.e., Landon 1980); they represent an opportunity for the company to remedy a problem (Bijmolt et al. 2010)”. Cho, Im, Hiltz, and Fjermestad (2002) refers to Fornell and Westbrook (1984) and Kelley and Davis (1994), stating that effective complaint management has a

dramatic impact on customer retention, that it may deflect potential word-of-mouth damage and that it can improve profitability. Tax et al. (1998) suggest that effective resolution of a customer problem is linked to customer satisfaction, trust and commitment. Eshghi et al. (2006) reinforces this point by relating customer complaining behaviour, defined as the tendency to report a problem with a company product or service, inversely to customer satisfaction, which influences switching behaviour. Furthermore, Cho et al. (2002) suggest that complaints are associated with an increase likelihood of a customer not buying anymore, depending on prior experience. Knox and Van Oest (2014b) states that prior purchases in fact, do reduce the effect of a complaint long-term, while prior complaints increase the magnitude of the effect in a short-term perspective. Therefore,

H1a: Prior complaints increase the likelihood of churn.

Estelami (2000) provides the major reasons for complaints in goods and service markets, in order of percentage of complaints in the study: Product defects, service failures, billing, scheduling, slow service, pricing, inappropriate employee behaviour, consumer did not like product anymore, product did not fit, product not compatible, delivery problem, poor repair work, product damaged in repair, poor product design. This study show that the nature of a complaint may have different underlying reasons for initiating it to begin with. The way a firm manages a complaint depends on the customer reaction. It is therefore reasonable to focus on the initial dissatisfaction of the customer, leaning heavily on Hirschman (1970) framework, which includes the terms exit, voice and loyalty. Exit response suggest that the customer will stop purchasing the goods or service and/or switch to another provider. The loyalty concept closely resembles brand loyalty (Dowding, John, Mergoupis, & Vugt, 2000), which can result in a passive, non-response. Wright (2014) interprets this as a “wait-and-see-approach”. Loyalty can also be linked to the customer level of commitment, which Moorman et al. (1992) define as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship. According to Larivet and Brouard (2010), we find complaints in the category of voice responses, which Crie (2003) refer to as a behavioural and public response type, or a “constructive response with an expectation of change in an organisations practice,

policy and responses". This leads us to believe that the nature of a complaint type differs in terms of the effect it has on the likelihood of churn. Therefore,

H1b: Complaints increases or decreases the likelihood of churn, contingent on the complaint type.

We define and propose a construct to address behavioural complexity, henceforth customer quality, comprising of three dimensions, namely renewal, multichannel and cross-category usage. The first dimension revolves around whether a customer renew their subscription. Multichannel usage dimension is related to whether the customer consumes the service through a single channel, online, or both, namely online and print. The third and last dimension is linked to the usage pattern of the customer, more specifically whether the customer consumes several categories.

Renewal

The first dimension of the customer quality construct, renewal, is included in our framework with the purpose of better understand the effect prior purchases have on the likelihood of a customer renewing their subscription (H2). According to Pansari and Kumar (2017), customer repurchases do have a direct impact of the firm performance. We believe that a satisfied customer is more willing to renew a subscription and to stay longer with a specific company than otherwise. This tendency is related to commitment, which Bolton et al. (2004) divide into two types, namely affective and calculative. The affective type is the desire to maintain a relationship based on emotional factors such as loyalty, while calculative is a rational approach, determined by switching costs and other price-related factors. In a contractual settings, the renewal of a contract is the action which marks the intent to continue with the relationship. W. Reinartz and V. Kumar (2003) conceptualised profitable relationship as function of the characteristics of the relationship, such as purchase frequency and purchase composition (single and cross-category). This mean that the more a customer purchase, the more profitable the relationship is. Consequently, we believe that it may reduce the likelihood of churn. Bolton et al. (2004) posit that earlier research suggest a positive

relationship between commitment and relationship duration. The longer the relationship, meaning more renewals, the more profitable the customer is for the firm, ultimately due to the reduced likelihood to churn and reduction of marketing costs related offensive strategies.

H2a: Prior renewals reduce the likelihood of churn.

Multichannel usage

The second dimension of the customer quality construct is multichannel usage. Consumers with multichannel purchasing behaviour are shown to be more valuable than single-category purchasing (Thomas & Sullivan, 2005). We are leaning on Scott A. Neslin, Vroomen, Verhoef, and Vroomen (2007) definition of a channel as “the customer contact point or a medium through which the company and the customer interact”. According to Ahlers (2006), there are four customer market segments, two of which are relevant for our study, namely “online-only” users, using online sources for consumption, and “multichannel users, which use offline sources roughly the same as online sources for consumption. We believe that this approach is feasible for the data set we are analysing, where multichannel usage refers to distribution channels. In other words, multichannel usage is related to where customers can access the product/service, either using an online source or using online and offline source. Multichannel customers are shown to buy more and contribute to an increase firm sales (Scott A. Neslin et al., 2007). The literature posit that customer who consume through multiple channels, are less likely to churn, primarily due to an increase in switching costs and/or an increase in customer satisfaction (Blattberg et al., 2009).

H2b: Multichannel usage decrease the likelihood of churn.

Cross-category

Lastly, the third dimension of the customer quality construct, cross-category usage. V. Kumar and R. Venkatesan (2005) found that multichannel customers are more likely to partake cross-buying (cross-category users in our case) and also are customers for longer periods (Scott A. Neslin et al., 2007). Similarly, customers who consume more than one category may be positively related to the likelihood to stay with the firm, because a “broader scope of interaction constitutes a stronger relationship” (W. Reinartz & V. Kumar, 2003). We believe that customers who consume more than one category, may be the most committed with the brand/service. Garbarino and Johnson (1999) referred to Moorman et al. (1992) definition of commitment in their paper, namely "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship". Bendapudi and Berry (1997) paper on commitment theory, argue that customers who have a higher level of commitment are more likely to seek greater relationship expansion and enhancement (W. Reinartz & V. Kumar, 2003).

H2c: Cross-category usage decrease the likelihood of churn.

Subscription length

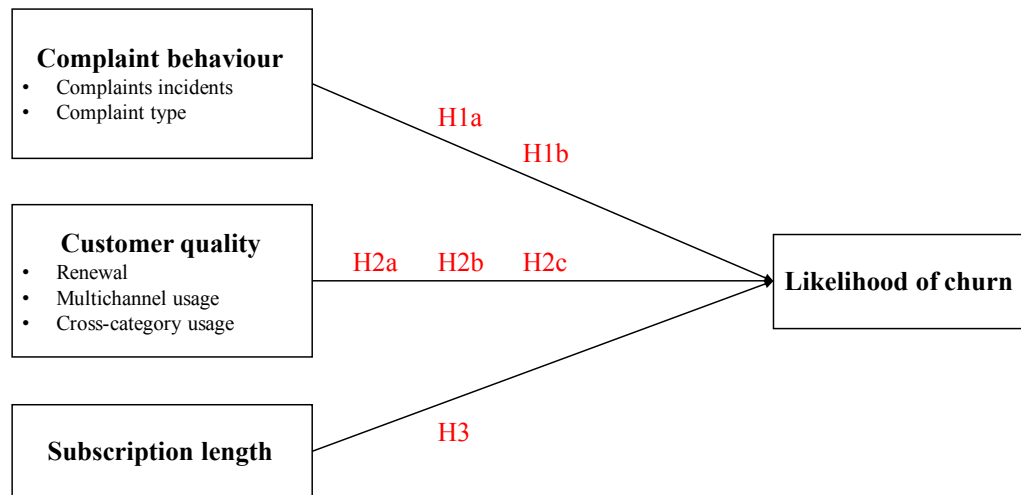
The fourth variable, subscription length, encompasses the possible subscription length, and how that affects the likelihood of churn. Coussement and Van den Poel (2008) found that variables related to subscription (e.g. length of the current subscription, elapsed time since last renewal, month of contract expiration) are the most important predictor of churn. H.-S. Kim and Yoon (2004) found that the subscription length, which they relate to the lock-in effect (e.g. switching costs, buyer inertia), is negatively associated with churn probability.

H3: The length of a subscription decreases the likelihood of churn.

Model description

The previously mentioned hypotheses are included in the conceptual model (Figure 1). The framework consists of a dependent variable, the likelihood of churn and three independent variables, namely complaint behaviour, customer quality and subscription length. The previously mentioned hypotheses are included in the conceptual model.

Figure 1: Conceptual model



Methodology

In the following section, we will present a description of the data set, measurement of independent and dependent variables, and lastly, the analysis method we propose to use.

Data set description

Our data is from one of the leading media groups in Scandinavia, with over 6 000 employees, ranked in “The World’s 54 largest Publishers” by Publishers Weekly (Milliot, 2017). The media group produces magazines, comics, book, educational material, movies and TV programs, which is distributed in both offline and online channels. Depending on the services in question, they offer non-contractual and contractual options for the customer to choose from. For this study, we will focus on data from a service which only offer a contractual and online option, due to the richness of the data available.

The media group provided five Excel files containing data from 30 003 unique customers. We have access to data from the first invoice date, December 12, 2014, until September 14, 2017, approximately two years and nine months since the initial invoice date. We have data about the subscription length and the number of renewals registered at different point in time. Another file contains data regarding cross-category usage from 26 675 customers, where the average customer subscribed to four out of eight possible categories. There is also data on customer channel usage, multichannel as in online only or online and offline use, where 16 201 customers use both channels. Similar to Knox and Van Oest (2014b), the data set include a complaint log file, identifying the customer, complaint dates (complaint start and end), codification of the complaints and a description of the complaint incident. There are 3 673 complaints recorded from 2 320 unique customers, and the average customer complaints 1,58 times. The original data set identifies 29 types of complaints (e.g. invoice issues, late delivery, system errors) but we believe using factor analysis to cluster and thereby reducing that amount is reasonable further analysis.

Measurement of variables

In the following table (Table 1) we present how we propose to measure the independent variables derived from the data set and the conceptual model (Figure 1).

Table 1: Measurement of dependent variables

Dependent variable			
Likelihood of churn			
Independent Variables	Measured as	Hypothesized	Directional
		Impact on Likelihood of churn	
Complaint incidents	Number of complaints	(+)	
Complaint types	Dummy variables	No directional hypothesis	
Renewal	Dummy variable: 1 = prior renewal, 0 = no renewal	(-)	
Multichannel usage	Dummy variable: 1= Online and Offline, 0 = only Online	(-)	
Cross-category usage	Dummy variables, 8 categories	No directional hypothesis	
Subscription length	Number of months passed since subscription date	(-)	

Analysis of the results

We propose the use of factor analysis to identify latent variables to reduce the number of variables, for example for complaint types, which there are 29 types of in the original data set. We are going to analyse the proposed hypotheses using logistic regression as the primary method of analysis. We expect that the proposed method of analysis is appropriate for testing the significance of all interactions in question. In order to validate the results, we will run the model using hold-out sample randomly selected from the data set.

Plan for thesis progression

Milestones

January 15 th	Preliminary report – Submission
February 1 st	Refinement of hypotheses and supporting literature
March 1 st	Data cleansing
April 1 st	Data analysis, testing hypotheses
May 1 st	First draft completed
June 1 st	Second draft completed
July 1 st	Final version - Submission

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