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**From third-party to significant other for service encounters:**

**a systematic review on third-party roles and their implications**

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## From third-party to significant other for service encounters:

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – Dyadic interactions between customers and service providers rarely occur in isolation. Still, there is a lack of systematic knowledge about the roles that different types of non-technological third-parties – that is, other customers, pets, other employees, and other firms – can adopt in relation to customers and service providers during encounters. The present study aims to unravel these roles and highlight their implications for customers, service providers, and/or third-parties.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research relies on a systematic review of literature in the Web of Science, using a search string pertaining to the research objectives. In total, 2726 articles were screened by title and abstract using clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, thereby extracting 189 articles for full-text eligibility. The final sample consisted of 139 articles for coding and analysis.

**Findings** – The analyses reveal that other customers, pets, other employees, and other firms can adopt five roles: bystander, connector, endorser, balancer, and partner. Each role has different implications for customers, service providers and/or third-parties. Additionally, the five roles are associated with distinct constellations of the customer, the service provider, and the third-party. These roles and constellations are dynamic and not mutually exclusive.

**Originality/value** – This research contributes to the service encounter literature by providing a thorough understanding of the various third-party roles and their implications for customers, service providers and/or third-parties during encounters. As such, this research sheds light on the conditions under which third-parties become “significant others” in service encounters and identifies avenues for future research.

**Keywords** Third-party, service dyads, service triads, service encounters, systematic literature review

**Paper type** General review

## From third-party to significant other for service encounters:

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine Melissa arriving at the airport for a connecting flight. After delivering her luggage to a robot, she finds herself sitting among other passengers. To pass time, she visits a coffee shop at the airport, where a nice employee decorates her coffee with a smiley. Back at the gate, she checks her social media profile and reads a user review about the airport. Suddenly, an employee of the airline company calls out that her flight will depart from another gate due to the late arrival of freight from a cargo company. As she hurried to the other gate, she nearly ran into another passenger’s guide dog. As illustrated by this example, several third-parties may directly (here, robots, other passengers, coffee shop employee, and guide dog) or indirectly (here, other social media user, employee of the airline company, and cargo company) affect the service encounter between the airport and its customers.

Extant research suggests that third-parties may either deteriorate service encounters (Huang, 2010) or improve them (Park et al., 2014). In the example of Melissa, other waiting passengers can have a positive influence on her perception of the service encounter when they engage in a pleasant conversation. Alternatively, negative perceptions may emerge if one of these other passengers behaves in a loud or rude manner (Zhang, Beatty and Mothersbaugh, 2010). Conceptual work and review studies about the influence of third-parties on the service encounter merely focus on the roles of technological third-parties such as robots (e.g., Larivière et al., 2017). The roles through which different types of non-technological third-parties – such as other customers, pets, other employees, and other firms – affect the service encounter, however, remain unclear. In fact, most review studies on non-technological third-parties scrutinize the effect of other customers on the focal customer in a service encounter (e.g., Colm et al., 2017), thereby disregarding implications of other types of third-parties for the service encounter. Moreover, extant (review) studies do not consider the impact of third-parties on service providers (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2017), and/or customer-service provider interactions (e.g., Joosten et al., 2016), nor how third-parties are affected by customers and/or service providers involved in service encounters (e.g., Hogreve et al., 2019, Steinhoff and Palmatier, 2016, Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2013).

Although researchers and practitioners recognize that dyadic encounters between customers and service providers do not occur in isolation (De Keyser et al., 2019), we do not know of any research that disentangles how non-technological third-parties influence these dyadic encounters and how these third-parties are affected by customers and service providers in the encounter. Therefore, this research aims to explore (1) what roles different types of non-technological third-parties can fulfill in relation to customers and/or service providers and (2) how these roles affect customers, service providers, and/or third parties. By conducting a systematic review of the literature on non-technological third-parties in relation to customers and service providers involved in service encounters, this research advances the service encounter literature as well as the management of these encounters in manifold ways.

First, this research reveals five different roles that a third-party can perform in relation to service encounters between customers and service providers, thereby advancing the work of Colm et al. (2017). We enhance this prior research by not limiting the scope to “customer copresence” in the same physical environment (i.e., direct interactions), but also considering customers who are not in the same physical environment by reaching out to the focal customer and/or the service provider via technological channels (i.e., indirect interactions). Meanwhile, this research also considers the roles of other types of third-parties, thereby offering a role typology for future third-party research.

Second, by exposing the implications of the third-party roles for customers, service providers, and/or third-parties, this research provides insight into the conditions under which third-parties are influenced by or exert an influence on customers and/or service providers, and hence turn into “significant others”. As this study reveals the impact of various third-party roles on customers, service provider and/or the third-party itself, the service encounter literature is progressed beyond its dominant focus on the effect of other customers on the focal customer (e.g., Colm et al., 2017).

Finally, these insights are crucial for service managers as it can guide them in developing and evaluating managerial practices to deal with these third-party influences. In this regard, managers may want to facilitate specific roles for different types of third-parties if they are beneficial for the service encounter. In contrast, managers can install service recovery mechanisms to prevent distinct roles for specific third-party types, if these roles are harmful for the service encounter.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The subsequent section provides a brief overview of the third-party literature. Next, we elaborate on the systematic literature review approach. Subsequently, the findings are detailed with regard to third-party roles and their implications for service encounters. This study ends by discussing theoretical and managerial implications and future research opportunities.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

#### 2.1 From Traditional Service Encounters to Service Encounters 2.0

##### Service research acknowledges that interactions between customers and service providers – traditionally denoted as “service encounters” (Surprenant and Solomon, 1987) – are embedded in complex service networks or systems (Halinen et al., 1999, Hartmann and Herb, 2015, Siltaloppi and Vargo, 2017). Indeed, recent research suggests that the service encounter 2.0 encompasses “any customer-company interaction that results from a service system that is comprised of interrelated technologies (either company- or customer-owned), human actors (employees and customers), physical/digital environments and company/customer processes” (Larivière et al., 2017, p. 239). In the context of service encounter 2.0, interactions between two focal actors – such as a hairdresser and a client – do not occur in isolation. Prominent theoretical models and recent scholarly efforts in the service and marketing community also recognize that this type of dyadic encounters between customers and service providers is influenced by a wide range of third-parties at different stages of the service journey (that is, before, during, and after the delivery of services).

##### First, the “servuction model” (Eiglier and Langeard, 1977) and the servicescape model (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011) suggest that customers and service providers – such as hairdressers and their clients – evaluate their encounters in light of the direct interactions with the service provider and other customers in the same physical environment (here, the hair salon). With the notion of an e-servicescape, researchers emphasize that technological channels – such as the hairdresser’s website – allow service providers to shape their encounters with customers (Hopkins, Grove, Raymond, and LaForge, 2009), for instance, when they use their website to share information about COVID-19 measures in the hair salon. In more recent years, service encounter researchers have further explored the role of new technologies in relation to dyadic encounters between customers and employees, thereby arguing that new technologies – such as mobile applications – adopt an augmenting or substituting role (Larivière et al., 2017; De Keyser et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2020). This phenomenon where new technologies augment encounters (e.g., applications to visualize hairstyles) or substitute encounters (e.g., DIY hairstyle applications) is also labeled as “frontline service technology infusion” (De Keyser et al., 2019).

##### With this focus on new technologies, researchers and practitioners may forget that customers and providers in service encounter 2.0 can interact with a wide range of human actors and organizational processes and environments throughout the service journey. Hamilton et al. (2020), for instance, contend that customer decisions often occur in an interactive context of social relationships, ranging from close friends to anonymous customers on social media. As such, these researchers build upon the customer experience literature, which has long recognized that the social context shapes the way in which customers interact with and experience a brand or firm (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2009; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). Moreover, customer experiences with a brand or firm are also shaped by their interactions with other brands and firms, which constitute the market context (e.g., Tax et al., 2013; De Keyser et al., 2020).

##### In what follows, we elaborate on these non-technological third-parties in the social and/or market context, which may directly or indirectly interact with the customer and/or provider in the service encounter 2.0. Direct interactions occur in service encounters where customers, service providers and third-parties interact with each other in the same physical environment without the help of technological channels like a phone, video call or an online platform. As soon as one of these actors is not in the same physical environment, indirect interactions emerge. Indirect interactions thus take place when at least one of the actors in the service encounter is connected to the others via a technological channel.

#### 2.2 Types of Non-Technological Third-Parties in Service Encounters 2.0

##### In service encounters 2.0, a wide range of non-technological third-parties may – directly or indirectly – exert an influence on interactions between customers and service providers and even undergo the consequences of these dyadic interactions (Kowalkowski et al., 2016, Hartmann and Herb, 2015), as illustrated by the example of Melissa at the airport. First, dyadic interactions between a customer and a service provider may be affected by and affect *other customers*. Several researchers, such as Lopez-Lopez et al. (2014), distinguish between *other customers* known by the focal customer (e.g., family, friends, and acquaintances) and those who are unknown to the focal customer (e.g., other customers). Second, third-parties encompass *pets*, which include a wide range of domestic animals kept for pleasure or companionship by customers (Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018) or animals used for practical purposes at the workplace (Wells and Perrine, 2001). Third, researchers increasingly consider the role of *other employees* – such as coworkers, managers or leaders – who interact with customers and/or service providers. Finally, *other firms* may act as third-parties when service providers join forces with them (De Keyser et al., 2020). Restaurants, for instance, often collaborate with food ordering platforms, such as Deliveroo, to offer a food delivery service to the customer. Alternatively, customers can also complement the services of one provider (e.g., a hotel) with those of other firms (e.g., Uber) and hence constitute their own service system or network (Tax et al., 2013).

##### The aforementioned examples illustrate that service encounters between customers and service providers are – as also noted by Larivière et al. (2017) – often embedded in a complex service system or network, by which the smallest form of service systems or networks is a service triad between one customer, one service provider, and one third-party without technological channels to facilitate interactions among the three actors (Chandler and Vargo, 2011). These triadic interactions – which already induce high levels of complexity (Kowalkowski et al., 2016) – are further complicated when the actors use technological channels to interact with one another (e.g., Kowalkowski et al., 2016, Vedel et al., 2016, Siltaloppi and Vargo, 2017).

##### To date, multiple studies have independently investigated how different types of non-technological third-parties are influenced by and influence dyadic interactions between customers and/or service providers, whether or not facilitated by technological channels. However, a systematic review on third-party roles in relation to customers and/or service providers involved in an encounter is lacking. Moreover, the same goes for the way in which third-party roles affect these customers and/or service providers and vice versa.

##### Building upon the aforementioned research gap, this review study aims to gain insights into the conditions under which different types of non-technological third-parties affect or are affected by customers and/or service providers involved in dyadic interactions with one another. As such, this research aims to unravel under which conditions third-parties turn from arbitrary actors (i.e., not having much influence on other actors involved in service encounter) into significant others (i.e., having a significant impact on other actors in the service encounter). As we consider service encounters 2.0 in which the actors – that is, customer, service provider, and third-party – can interact both directly or indirectly, we did not exclude papers where these three actors use technological channels to interact with one another.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

We conducted a systematic literature review to identify the roles of non-technological third-parties and the different implications of each role for customers and/or service providers involved in dyadic interactions as well as the implications for the third-parties. As a systematic literature review is a replicable and transparent method that is more rigorous than a narrative review (Tranfield et al., 2003), service researchers have embraced this literature review method (e.g., Sengupta et al., 2018, Eloranta and Turunen, 2015, Lipkin, 2016). Our systematic literature review adopted – in line with Kranzbühler et al. (2018) and Mustak et al. (2016) – a three-step approach involving literature search, selection, and analysis.

#### 3.1 Literature Search

Building upon the four types of non-technological third-parties discussed in the conceptual background section, we created a search string with synonyms of other customers (e.g., “other shoppers”), pets (e.g., “animal\*”), other employees (e.g., “back-office employee”) and other firms (e.g., “competitor”). These synonyms of third-parties were used to generate comprehensive results on different types of third-parties. Additionally, the search string also included a more generic reference to triadic interactions (i.e., “triad\*”, “third part\*”, “third-part\*”, and “actor\*”). The aforementioned search terms were combined with synonyms of service encounters (i.e., “service exchange”, “service interaction” and “service encounter”). Figure 1 depicts the full search string in the first box. This search string was imputed in the Web of Science database, which provides a substantial academic database of social science articles (Falagas et al., 2008). Initial results included 20,983 articles.

#### 3.2 Literature Selection

To select the most relevant articles, we employed inclusion and exclusion criteria. The resulting selection process is delineated in Figure 1. In the inclusion criteria, we included business and management journal articles in English, hence excluding all other disciplines, conference papers, and editorials. After these criteria were applied, we retained 2,726 articles, which were screened for face validity. We specifically considered the titles and abstracts to include articles that refer to the impact of third-parties on customers, service providers and/or the third-party in any stage of the service journey.

The research members held several discussions after independent screenings of all articles to reconcile areas of disagreement. Afterward, we excluded another 2,547 articles due to a business-to-business (B2B) focus (e.g., papers with a focus on third-party logistics), the duplication of other papers or the absence of third-party exchanges. As a result, 179 articles were included for full-text consideration. We added 10 potentially relevant articles identified through snowballing (i.e., scanning references of the papers in our data sample), totaling the set to 189 articles. After we conducted full-text assessment of all articles, 50 articles were excluded for the following reasons: 23 articles had a dyadic focus or did not focus on the implications of third-parties for the service encounter; 21 articles had an actor-to-actor (A2A) or ecosystem orientation rather than a focus on customers, service providers, and third-parties; 4 articles centered on B2B contexts; and 2 articles focused on technological third-parties.

*-- Insert Figure 1 about here --*

#### 3.3 Literature Analysis

To analyze the 139 articles, we adopted a two-step approach. We first developed a detailed coding template with various categories along which we analyzed the full-text articles. Those categories included meta-data (e.g., authors, titles, year of publication, journal title, and research purpose) and data related to the research objective (e.g., type of third-party, channel through which the third-party affects/is affected by customers and/or service providers, details about the interactions between the customer and service provider, variables affected by third-parties, applied theory, research method, empirical setting, key findings, and contextual factors). The research team inductively coded the articles in relation to the aforementioned categories (Mustak et al., 2016), thereby ensuring that each article was coded by at least two team members to identify and discuss any inconsistencies. We proceeded to collect visuals (i.e., conceptual or empirical frameworks) associated with the selected articles (Folstad and Kvale, 2018). Moreover, we also made our own visualization of the triadic constellation for each article and identified five roles in which third-parties can engage. Table 1 gives an overview of the meta-data associated with the selected articles for each of the five third-party roles. The findings section provides a description and concretizations of each role and elaborates on their implications for customers, service providers and/or their interactions.

*-- Insert Table 1 about here --*

## 4. FINDINGS

The systematic literature review reveals that third-parties can perform five roles in relation to customers and/or service providers: bystander, connector, endorser, balancer, and partner. Please note that these roles are not static and may evolve over time. As a result, third-parties can adopt different roles throughout the service journey. We start by defining each role along with its concretization and then elaborate on their interplay (see also Table 2), before discussing implications of each role for customers and/or service providers involved in dyadic interactions as well as the implications for the third-parties (see also Table 3).

#### 4.1 Five Roles for Third-Parties

Table 2 gives an overview of the third-party roles identified throughout our literature review. In Panel A, we provide (1) our definition for each role, (2) visualizations of the constellations by which third-parties in a specific role relate to customers and/or service providers, and (3) details about the focus of previous research in terms of the types of third-parties (other customers, pets, other employees, and/or other firms) and the types of interactions (direct and/or indirect) considered in these studies. Panel B offers examples for each role per type of third-party and interaction channel. Based on the information in Panel A and B, the next sections introduce the five third-party roles in more detail.

*-- Insert Table 2 about here --*

#### *4.1.1 The Bystander Role*

A third-party adopts a bystander role when being present during and/or observing resource exchanges between the customer and the service provider. Hence, bystanders do not exchanges resources with customers or service providers, as visualized in Table 2-Panel A. An example is a teacher who allows a colleague to attend his/her classes with students without participating in the teaching activities. In this example, the colleague – which is another employee – adopts a bystander role. The colleague is a direct bystander if the class occurs in the physical learning environment, but an indirect bystander if the class takes place in an online learning environment. In this example, the colleague adopting the bystander role may both impact the teacher and/or students or may be impacted itself.

Further analyses revealed that the bystander role – which was present in 38 percent of the articles (see Table 1) – was studied almost exclusively in situations where other customers act as third parties (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2019). In those situations, a small number of studies focus on indirect bystanders (e.g., Bacile et al., 2018). Most researchers – such as Matilla et al. (2014) – consider other customers in the role of direct bystanders (see Table 2-Panel A). If studies consider other employees, the focus is on direct bystanders (e.g., Line and Hanks, 2019). To date, extant research did not focus on pets and other firms in a bystander role, even though they can adopt the role of direct and indirect bystanders (see Table 2-Panel B for examples per type of third-party).

Overall, direct and indirect bystanders can perform their role in two ways. First, bystanders can *passively perform their role by being present*. If bystanders are present in a passive way, resource exchanges between customers and service providers may or may not catch their eyes by chance. Other customers, for instance, perform a passive bystander role when sitting at another table at the restaurant (Huang et al., 2010) or standing very close to the customer and/or the service provider (Luck and Benkenstein, 2015). Although extant research does not focus on other firms in a bystander role, retailers may act as passive bystanders when noticing a social media campaign of a competitor by being part of the group or community to which the targeted customers belong. One may of course also envision situations where retailers actively monitor the social media campaigns of their competitors. In those situations, bystanders *actively observe and/or monitor* resource exchanges between service providers and their customers. Examples of actively observing and/or monitoring in previous research include third-parties watching the focal customer being served by a waiter in a restaurant (Mattila et al., 2014) or observing the non-response of a service provider to customer-to-customer (C2C) injustice on social media (Bacile et al., 2018). Overall, a third-party can solely act as a bystander when customers and service providers are already exchanging resources with one another.

#### *4.1.2 The Connector Role*

A connector role is performed by third-parties when they enable resource exchanges between customers and service providers. Third-parties can only adopt this role if they have a direct link with both the customer and the service provider, while the customer and the service provider are not yet linked to one another (see Table 2-Panel A). Third-parties can fulfill a connector role in direct interactions, as illustrated by a wedding exhibition that brings you in contact with a wedding planner or a pet that makes its owner visit pet-grooming services. In indirect interactions, firms in the role of connector can offer an online platform, so that their customers can engage in C2C interactions as such the firms perform the connector role (e.g., a platform to share pictures of wedding venues).

Only four percent of the coded articles scrutinize this role (see Table 1). These articles merely studied the connector role as being performed by other firms (e.g., Rauniar et al., 2009), other customers (e.g., Leino, 2017), and pets (e.g., Kylkilahti et al., 2016). As per Table 2-Panel A, several studies show that other firms can adopt the connector role in direct interactions (e.g., Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimothy, 2010) and indirect interactions (e.g., Benoit et al., 2017). The connector role performed by other customers and pets, in turn, is only studied in direct interactions (e.g., Leino, 2017, Kylkilahti et al., 2016). Examples of the connector role per type of third-party in direct and indirect interactions are listed in Table 2-Panel B.

If other firms adopt the connector role, they often engage in *offering online platforms* where customers and service providers interact with one another, such as C2C auction platforms (Rauniar et al., 2009) or C2C sharing platforms (Benoit et al., 2017). Additionally, firms can also engage in a connector role by *acting as a linking pin* between buyers and sellers, as illustrated by real estate agents connecting customers, who are buying and selling properties (Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimothy, 2010), and consumer agencies helping customers to get in touch with sellers when being confronted with service failures and/or bad recoveries (Baker et al., 2013). Similarly, other types of third parties can also act as a linking pin between customers and service providers, as exemplified by patients who bring their family members into contact with their physician (Leino, 2017) and pets who connect their owners through their preferences for a particular food brand in the store(Kylkilahti et al., 2016).

#### *4.1.3 The Endorser Role*

A third-party that provides informational, emotional, and/or practical resources to the customer and/or service provider that (intend to) exchange resources adopts an endorser role. Hence, there is not only a connection between the third-party and the customer or the service provider, but also between the customer and the service provider (see visualizations in Table 2-Panel A). In direct interactions, for example, other customers can take over the endorser role by offering advice to the focal customer on how to cope with a retailer, whether or not desired by the focal customer. An example of the endorser role in indirect interactions is a nurse playing a video of pets (i.e. third-party) to children who are undergoing treatments at a hospital.

Although the endorser role has been extensively studied in the literature (i.e., 47 percent of the coded articles – see Table 1), most studies focus on other customers as third-parties performing this role. Other studies also consider the endorser role in light of pets (e.g., Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018), other employees (e.g., Cook et al., 2002), and other firms (e.g., West, 2015). Table 2-Panel A shows that extant research explores the endorser role of other customers, other employees, and other firms in both direct and indirect interactions (e.g., Keh and Sun, 2018; Gegoire et al., 2015), while the endorser role of pets is only studied in direct interactions (e.g., Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2002). Table 2-Panel B provides examples of the endorser role per type of third-party in direct and indirect interactions.

Third-parties in an endorser role can offer *informational resources* by sharing experiences, advice, or information related to the service with the customer and/or the service provider. These resource exchanges occur when other customers give advice to the customer (e.g., Becker and Pizzutti, 2017) or when they write (online) reviews (e.g., Alexander et al., 2018). Additionally, other firms can share information with or advise customers and/or service providers, for instance, when reacting to online complaints about their competitors (Gregoire et al., 2015). Furthermore, service employees can receive information from senior managers on how to deal with a service crisis (Kimberley and Hartel, 2008). Second, endorsers can exchange *emotional resources* with the customer or the service provider. Examples include customers who share their positive or negative consumption emotions with a friend during an online chat (Lopez-Lopez et al., 2014) or ask a spouse to join them during a doctor’s visit (Buckley and Tuama, 2010). Alternatively, managers as endorsers can invest in relationship-building with their employees and thereby promote positive employee feelings which in turn lead to decreased employee hostility displayed towards the customer (e.g., Medler-Liraz and Kark, 2012). Third, endorsers can provide *practical resources* to the customer or the service provider (e.g., Camelis et al., 2013). This includes helping behavior of other customers or other employees oriented to the focal customer and/or the service provider, such as customers helping one another to use self-service technology (Yi and Kim, 2017). Likewise, managers as endorsers can offer practical support to employees by designing service encounters based on customer service scripts to achieve a good customer experience and reduce service failures (Cook et al., 2002).

#### *4.1.4 The Balancer Role*

The balancer role (four percent of the coded articles – see Table 1) involves third-parties mediating or reconciling suboptimal resource exchanges between customers and service providers. Suboptimal resource exchanges emerge when customers or service providers do not (optimally) meet each other’s interests and needs. They can even ignore one another’s needs and interests, which reflect imbalanced situations (see Table 2 for visualizations). In other words, balancers aim to restore the balance between customers and service providers. Third parties may adopt this balancer role in direct interactions, for example in situations where a manager is called to resolve a dispute between the focal customer and employee at the till. In indirect interactions, third parties may also act as balancer, like Paypal solving a payment dispute of a buyer who did not receive goods from an online retailer.

As shown in Table 2-Panel A, extant research provides examples of the balancer role performed by other employees in direct interactions (e.g., Kim et al., 2010) and other firms in indirect interactions (e.g., Joosten et al., 2016). Table 2-Panel B, however, shows that each type of third-party can engage in the balancer role in direct and indirect interactions.

Balancers can fulfill their role in two ways. First, balancers can *create rapport* among customers and service providers, for instance by encouraging customers and service providers to listen to one another (e.g., Kim et al., 2010). Second, balancers can *solve disputes* between customers and service providers, as illustrated by third-party arbitration (Joosten et al., 2016). Balancers can also defend customers or service providers involved in disputes, for instance through social media posts (e.g., Gregoire et al., 2015).

#### *4.1.5 The Partner Role*

Third-parties act as partners when they exchange resources with both the customer and the service provider who are also engaged in resource exchanges with one another (13 percent of coded articles – see Table 1). In other words, third-parties can only adopt a partner role when customers and service providers also perform this role. In those situations, service triads – which serve as the smallest form of service systems or networks (Chandler and Vargo, 2011) – emerge in which customers, service providers, and third-parties are dependent upon one another, as visualized in Table 2-Panel A. The partner role can occur in direct interactions, for example in a pet training center when the pet interacts with both the owner and the trainer during the training. If a retailer’s customer service follows up on the focal customer’s order by asking about their experience with the courier company via e-mail (i.e., indirect interaction), the retailer may turn into a partner by looking for a solution for customers who did not receive their order while helping the courier company to improve their delivery process.

Extant research showed that other customers (e.g., Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2011), pets (e.g., Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018), other employees (e.g., Carson et al., 1997), and other firms (e.g., Kranzbühler et al., 2019) can all act as partners in service triads (see also Table 2-Panel A). While this research demonstrates that each of these service triad actors can perform a partner role in direct interactions (e.g., Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2011), a number of studies also provide evidence for other customers and firms who use technological channels to perform a partner role (e.g., Benoit et al., 2016). Table 2-Panel B, however, shows that technological channels may enable the partner role among all types of third-parties.

Overall, third-parties can fulfill their role as partners in two ways. First, third-parties can *exchange resources with the other actors in the service triad* (e.g., Allred and Money, 2010), as illustrated by family members who support patients to deal with a disease while providing information about the manifestation of the disease to healthcare providers (Ahuja and Williams, 2010). Alternatively, third-parties act as partners by *engaging in shared practices* with all actors in a service triad (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Examples include situations where customers co-create services in group (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2011), engage in collaborative consumptions enabled by the service provider (Levy, 2010), or join forces to complain about the service (Zhou et al., 2014).

#### *4.1.6 Interplay among Third-Party Roles*

As shown in Table 1, the sum of the percentages of articles focused on the five roles exceeds 100%, because third-parties can adopt multiple roles along different stages of the service journey. A study about collaborative consumption, for instance, suggests that companies like Airbnb connect customers looking for a place to stay with landlords who want to rent out their property by providing an online platform (Benoit et al., 2017). As such, these companies adopt a connector role. Once customers and landlords are connected on their platform, these companies adopt an endorser role by offering – among others – ratings about properties to customers who book a place to stay.

The shift from a connector role to another role is not unique to the context of collaborative consumption. In fact, the connector role is often followed by an endorser, balancer, or partner role. Extant research, for instance, shows that pets are connectors by linking their owner to service providers like veterinaries (Kylkilahti et al., 2016). Pets, their owners, and the veterinaries may even turn into partners during a veterinarian examination (Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018).

Beyond shifts from a connector role to an endorser/balancer/partner role, we also observe that third-parties in a bystander role often engage in other roles. For example, if other customers witness customer’s mistreatment of employees, they may act as bystanders. These bystanders may turn into endorsers by showing supportive behaviors during subsequent interactions with employees, for instance, by leaving larger tips (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017).

Altogether, third-party roles are constantly redefined based upon changes in the situational context, which highlights the dynamic nature of third-party roles.

#### 4.2 Implications of Third-Party Roles

As shown in Table 3, several studies consider the impact of third-party roles on customers and/or service providers and some studies also explore how third-parties in a specific role are influenced by customers and/or service providers. In what follows, we discuss the implications of adopting a specific third-party role for other actors and – if applicable – how other actors affect third-parties in a specific role, thereby also referring to relevant theoretical mechanisms.

*-- Insert Table 3 about here --*

#### *4.2.1 Implications of the Bystander Role*

Bystanders can have an impact on customers and service providers engaged in interactions with one another, more particularly by affecting their experiences (e.g., Ngo et al., 2016), satisfaction (e.g., Afthinos et al., 2017) and behavior(al intention)s (e.g., Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Uhrich and Benkenstein (2012), for instance, show that other spectators watching a soccer game in a stadium with the focal customer may increase the customer’s affective responses toward the service encounter by contributing to the atmosphere with their density (i.e., number of third-parties) and appearance (e.g., wearing club merchandise). Additionally, the social servicescape in leisure-driven hotels was found to significantly affect customers’ behavioral intentions (Line and Hanks, 2019). Bystanders’ behavioral intentions (e.g. WOM and purchase intention) can also be affected by the interactions between the focal customer and service provider. For service recoveries, this influence was revealed for direct (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2013) and indirect interactions (Hogreve et al., 2019), in which other customers as bystanders observed the complaint handling of a focal customer.

#### To explain the strength of the aforementioned effects, several researchers refer to the importance of spatial proximity, similarity, and tie strength. Here, we define *spatial proximity* as the physical distance between people, which is a core concept in the theory of personal space (Sommer, 1969). In case of high crowding, several negative feelings – such as discomfort and privacy concerns – may emerge (e.g., Luck and Benkenstein, 2015). Very low crowding, however, may also generate negative experiences (e.g., Colm et al., 2017). *Similarity*, in turn, refers to the fit between the characteristics of customers/service providers and those of the third-party (Brocato et al., 2012). Drawing from social identity theories, extant research suggests that more similarity in terms of age, culture, racial mix, appearances, and appropriate behaviors strengthens the impact that bystanders exert on customers and/or service providers (e.g., Johnson and Grier, 2013). Similarly, extant research suggests that *tie strength* – i.e., the closeness of the relationship between people (e.g., friend versus stranger) – may foster positive outcomes, such as brand attachment, satisfaction (e.g., Pons et al., 2006) and duration of stay (e.g., Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). These positive effects are associated with a basic need for belongingness (e.g., Huang et al., 2018), which is not equally prominent in all service settings.

Finally, several studies consider how bystanders themselves are influenced by the customers and/or service providers, by which we discern implications for their experiences, evaluations, and behavior(al intention)s (e.g., Ludwig et al., 2017). If bystanders witness fellow customers mistreating employees, this may induce negative feelings and encourage them to engage in supportive employee-directed behaviors (cf. shift from bystander to endorser role) (e.g., Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). Negative feelings – such as jealousy – may also emerge when bystanders observe delightful experiences of other customers and perceive them as unreasonable, unjustifiable, or unfair (e.g., Ludwig et al., 2017). As illustrated by these examples, *fairness perceptions* – which are at the heart of equity theory (Adams, 1965) – are important mechanisms to explain the impact of customers and/or service providers on the bystander.

#### *4.2.2 Implications of the Connector Role*

Extant research suggests that connectors enable customers and service providers to co-create value, not in the least by offering online platforms (e.g., Benoit et al., 2017). If third-parties, for instance, allow sellers and auctioneers to start a commercial relationship by offering an online auction platform, they create value co-creation opportunities. Extant research, however, suggests that these opportunities only create value when sellers offer various products and auctioneers engage in timely auctions (e.g., Rauniar et al., 2009). In other words, the extent to which value co-creation opportunities induced by connectors result in the creation of value depends on (1) the *resources* that customers and service providers can exchange and (2) the *activities* in which they can engage. This evidence builds upon Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic), as proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2016).

The resource exchanges and activities between customers and service providers also explains the emerging research focus on customers and/or service providers’ well-being when third-parties act as connectors. A study in a healthcare context showed that the well-being of family members is improved when patients act as connectors by introducing their family to their physicians, who can then take the concerns of family members into consideration (Leino, 2017). Moreover, this study suggests that patients, family members, and physicians may even turn into partners after being connected to one another, which demonstrates that a connector may also influence the behaviors of other actors in the service triad.

#### *4.2.3 Implications of the Endorser Role*

As shown in Table 3, third-parties in an endorser role were found to affect how customers and/or service providers experience, and/or (intend to) behave and/or evaluate the service delivery process (e.g., Borges et al., 2010, Medler-Liraz and Kark, 2012). How these outcomes are influenced, however, depends on what resources endorsers offer to customers and/or service providers. If third-parties offer practical and/or emotional resources, extant research merely shows positive implications (e.g., Yi and Kim, 2017, Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2007). With regard to informational resources, better experiences, evaluations, and behaviors towards a service provider emerge if endorsers recommend a service provider based on their own experiences (e.g., Grainer et al., 2014). The opposite effect is observed when third-parties spread negative word-of-mouth (e.g., Nejad et al., 2016).

Further inquiry reveals that the impact of informational resources on customers and/or service providers is strengthened if third-parties are more *similar* to them, thereby relying on social identity theory (e.g., Bachleda and Berrada-Fathi, 2016). Moreover, the same goes for third-parties with whom customers and/or service providers have *closer ties*, thereby building on the theory of relationship quality (e.g., Lin, 2008). Direct advice by a third-party known by the customer, for instance, is perceived as more trustworthy than advice by an unknown third-party via an online platform (e.g., Harris and Dennis, 2011). Interestingly, this is also applicable to third-parties with more *expertise and credibility* (Sweeney et al., 2008, De Maeyer and Estelami, 2011, Ghose et al., 2012). In this regard, customers were found to trust third-party reviews more than the service provider’s content, which resonates with signaling theory (West, 2015).

Finally, Table 3 shows that extant research also considers the implications of third-parties who engage in the opposite of an endorser role, for instance, by misbehaving and/or showing incivilities towards customers and/or service providers. These negative behaviors may – in line with the affective event theory – increase the emotional labor among mistreated people (Spencer and Rupp, 2009). Meanwhile, mistreated people may also get support from others in an endorser role (Henkel et al., 2017), even though endorsement behaviors may also induce feelings of embarrassment for the mistreated people (e.g., Kim and Yi, 2017).

#### *4.2.4 Implications of the Balancer Role*

Several studies show that third-parties in the role of balancer can contribute to better relationships between customers and service providers because balancers can change how customers and/or service providers experience and/or evaluate one another. If employees create rapport with the customer, they may generate – in line with social exchange theory – affective commitment towards the organization and even encourage customers to adopt the role of endorser (e.g., Kim et al., 2010). In case of disputes, balancers may – in line with trust repair theory (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009) – contribute to better relationships by *showing respect* for the customer and/or the service provider. For example, if employees treat customers who are angry with the service provider with dignity when adopting a balancer role, they may alter how customers view the service provider (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2011).

Customers or service providers who perceive a loss of control during a service encounter may – as suggested by reactance theory – resort to a third-party to reassert control, such as third-party arbitrators (e.g., Joosten et al., 2016). If third-parties act as balancers by empowering one actor at the expense of another actor, the empowered actor may regain a feeling of *control* (e.g., Gregoire et al., 2015). In other words, we contend that feelings of control are important mechanisms to explain whether balancers generate positive or negative outcomes for customers and/or service providers.

#### *4.2.5 Implications of the Partner Role*

Third-parties who engage in a partner role affect the service experiences and evaluations of the other actors in a service triad (e.g., Carson et al., 1997). The adoption of the partner role may even lead to collective service experiences and evaluations, such as community feelings in a rafting or indoor soccer group (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2011) or co-created experiences among opera lovers (Caru and Cova, 2015). Drawing from the theory of interdependence, some researchers contend that the contributions of other actors in a service triad influence the third-party’s contributions (e.g., Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2011). The implications of these contributions for generating better experiences and/or evaluations are further improved if actors of the service triad are more *similar* to one another (e.g., Luther et al., 2016). Meanwhile, other researchers contend that the extent to which third-parties are willing and able to act as partners also affects service experiences and evaluations (e.g., Ahuja and Williams, 2010). Altogether, this evidence builds upon Service-Dominant Logic, which holds that the *resources and activities* of different actors lead to value co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

If third-parties adopt the opposite of a partner role in a service triad (e.g., boycotting value co-creation in service triad), negative experiences and evaluations are – as also shown in Table 3 – likely to emerge among other actors (e.g., Benoit et al., 2016). In case of negative experiences and/or evaluations, Kranzbühler et al. (2019) point out that service providers might benefit from moving away from a triadic constellation, for instance, by explicitly outsourcing a service to the third-party rather than presenting third-parties as partners. If service providers adopt this strategy, the experiences and evaluations of customers and service providers are, however, still dependent upon the third-party due to *attribution mechanisms* (Kranzbühler et al., 2019). In other words, attribution theory can explain the implications of not adopting a partner role.

## 5. DISCUSSION

**5.1 Third-Party Research Agenda**

The systematic literature review unraveled five roles in which non-technological third-parties can engage: bystander, endorser, connector, balancer, and partner. This review suggests that third-party roles evolve over time, as illustrated by studies showing that connectors can turn into endorsers, balancers, or partners (e.g., Rötzmeier-Keuper et al., 2018); and bystanders can become endorsers (e.g., Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). Building upon this evidence, future research might investigate how third-parties combine different roles over time along with its implications for customers, service providers, and/or third-parties.

Next, this review shows that each of the third-party roles can occur in direct and indirect interactions with customers and/or service providers involved in service encounters. In other words, extant research provides evidence for the different roles across different situations, going from situations characterized by direct interactions in the same physical environment to situations where interactions occur indirectly by means of technological channels. A closer look at the articles which consider the third-party roles in direct and indirect interactions, however, unraveled important gaps when taking the type of third-parties into consideration. Although all combinations of types of third-parties, types of interactions, and third-party roles are possible (see Table 2-Panel B), extant research only considers a subset of these combinations (see Table 2-Panel A).

Concerning *other firms*, existing research provides evidence for adopting the five roles in indirect interactions, except for the bystander role (see Table 2-Panel A). Future research might thus investigate how customers and/or service providers react when another service providing firm engages in a bystander role rather than adopting a more active role like connector, endorser, balancer, or partner. In direct interactions, future research endeavors might benefit from focusing on the implications of firms adopting bystander, endorser, and/or balancer roles. If a retailer, for instance, decides to start a new business in a shopping mall, this business may act as a bystander for those who shop at other retail stores in the shopping mall. Other stores, however, can also recommend the offerings of the new retailer to their customer, thereby adopting an endorser role. If a retailer aims to handle complaints of customers who visited other stores in the shopping mall, this represents a balancer role.

As most studies about *other employees* in a third-party role focus on direct interactions (see also Table 2-Panel A), future research can further explore how employees fulfill the third-party roles in indirect interactions. This research avenue resonates with Bowen’s (2016) call for further investigation of employee roles in an evolving service context characterized by growing technologies augmenting employees. In this context, future research can investigate whether and how employees can create value by adopting a bystander, connector, endorser, balancer, or partner role when indirectly interacting with customers and/or service providers. To provide insight into the endorser role in indirect interactions, for instance, future research can investigate how managers can endorse their employees before, during, and after encounters with customers via technological channels, which is particularly relevant in COVID-19 times where more employees are working from home.

With regard to *other customers*, the present research suggests that many studies have already explored how this type of third-party adopts different roles in direct and indirect interactions (see Table 2-Panel A). By showing how the third-party roles are performed by customers in direct and indirect interactions along with its implications, the present research concretizes the idea of customers as co-creator of value. Future research, however, may further explore other customers in a balancer role, for instance, by scrutinizing whether and how this type of third-parties can contribute to resolving disputes between customers and service providers, which are vented in direct (e.g., in the store) or indirect interactions (e.g., on Facebook).

When it relates to *pets*, as prior research solely looked at pets in their role as connector, endorser, or partner in direct interactions. A key question revolves around the implications of allowing pets to fulfill other third-party roles in service settings. Future research could investigate what happens if service providers – such as medical professionals – are accompanied by pets (even though they do not need these pets to complete their tasks). How do these pets – acting as bystanders – affect the customer experience? Likewise, future research could explore how the decision to allow pets at work affects the performance of other employees? Finally, researchers could also investigate whether pets can adopt third-party roles in indirect interactions, for instance, by playing an important role in Instagram posts.

Overall, the present research suggests that different types of third-parties – that is, other customers, pets, other employees, and other firms – engage in the same roles. This observation partly contrasts previous research, which emphasized the dissimilarities of actors by introducing different roles that are unique to a specific type of actor. The notion of co-producer, for instance, is often restrained to customers, while the notion of boundary-spanners is typically used when referring to employees. By presenting roles that are relevant for different types of third-parties and hence proposing a more generic role typology, this research builds upon Vargo and Lusch’s (2016) call to focus on the role of actors rather than the type of actors in terms of restricted predesignated roles like “customers”, “firms”, etcetera. Future research can further explore the generalizability of our role typology, for instance by investigating to what extent technological third-parties – such as chatbots and robots – can adopt bystander, connector, endorser, balancer, and partner roles.

When considering the settings/industries in which third-party research is performed, all aforementioned roles and their implications for customers, service providers, and/or third-partiesreceived major research attention in the hospitality, healthcare, and retailing sector (see Table 1). Therefore, future research might benefit from exploring third-party roles in a broad spectrum of service settings like transportation, mobile, and smart services. As several of the aforementioned service settings – such as hospitality, healthcare, retailing, and transportation services – are being transformed in response to the COVID-19 crisis, future research can also investigate whether and/or how this crisis affects the implications of different third-party roles. It is not inconceivable, for instance, that social distancing will become an important variable to explain how bystanders affect customers and service providers involved in dyadic interactions in the same physical environment. Thus, the role of bystanders e.g. in the context of tourism, restaurants or leisure activities should be reconsidered as it is likely that third-parties in a bystander role will be perceived differently in contexts in which they usually benefitted the service encounter (e.g. soccer games). Similarly, future research can explore how social distancing measures designed by firm affect dyadic interactions between customers and service providers.

**5.2 Third-Party Guidelines for Practitioners**

As the implications of third-parties for service encounters depend on their role(s), practitioners should unravel which roles turn third-parties into significant others (i.e., actors with a significant impact on other actors involved in service encounters). Table 2 – Panel B can serve as a helpful starting point, because this table depicts examples of the roles in which different types of third-parties can engage along service journeys. To conduct a more in depth analysis of the third-party roles along service journeys, practitioners may use service blueprinting techniques (Bitner et al., 2008). Specifically, practitioners can visualize at what points along the service journey third-parties come into play and may affect the customers and/or service providers involved in service encounters. This procedure seems advisable for both new and established services. For new services, third-party blueprinting allows the detection of potential (un)wanted influences of third-parties before their occurrence, which enables practitioners to select appropriate strategies to manage them. For established services, third-party blueprinting may identify sources of delight for customers and employees, but also service failures. In times of COVID-19, blueprinting might even be an effective tool to identify and avoid potential detrimental effects of third-parties for the health of customers and/or service providers involved in service encounters.

If managers have identified at what points along the service journey third-parties can become significant others, they can formalize third-party roles with positive implications for customers and/or service providers involved in encounters. Managers can, for instance, encourage service providers to group customers based upon their similarities in both physical (e.g., restaurants offering earlier dinner times to families) and digital environments (e.g., teachers grouping students in online break-out rooms based upon shared interests) and hence engage in compatibility management (e.g., Verhoef et al. 2009). As such, they can stimulate positive bystander effects. To formalize the endorser role, service providers can encourage customers to bring a friend to the service encounter, as endorsers with whom customers have close ties can contribute to better service experiences. Service providers in an online environment – such as banks who offer a banking application – can formalize the connector role by giving monetary compensations for customers, employees, or other firms who bring in new customers. The partner and balancer role, in turn, can be formalized when a service provider like a general practitioner respectively invites a patient with a complex health issue, his/her family caregivers and other healthcare and welfare providers to develop a healthcare plan together and intervenes when disputes emerge. In this connection, the meaning of pets, which has been widely neglected so far, should receive further consideration.

Finally, practitioners can benefit from designing suitable service recovery mechanisms when harmful third-party behaviors emerge. If practitioners become aware of such behaviors, they are well-advised to take over at least a share of the responsibility and recover the failure. In a social media environment, practitioners can implement tools to avoid future offensive posts and even offer compensation to those affected by third-party comments.

**5.3 Limitations**

Despite our systematic approach, this literature review also has a number of limitations. First, this literature review relied on the Web of Science to identify relevant research papers, as this platform provides a comprehensive portfolio of business and management journals (De Keyser et al., 2020). By only using this platform, the research team may have missed some relevant articles. Next, the same risk follows from the search string with the term “service” but not “services” or specific service sectors like retail, healthcare, or tourism and the selection of articles by screening titles and abstracts in the first round. To compensate for these risks, the research team engaged – as outlined in Figure 1 – in snowballing, but it is still conceivable that not all relevant articles are included in the final set.

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**Figure 1. Overview of Literature Search and Selection.**

|  |
| --- |
| Search in Web of Science database using:  TOPIC: ((“service” or “service exchange” or "service interaction" or "service encounter") AND ("triad\*” or “third part\*" or “third-part\*” or “actor\*” or "famil\*" or "friend\*" or "relative\*" or "household\*" or "influencer\*" or “co-customer\*” or “other customer\*” or "observer\*" or "bystander\*" or “other consumer\*” or “other user\*” or “other buyer\*” or “other shopper\*” or “other purchaser\*” or “other person\*” or “other individual\*” or "customer\*" or "consumer\*" or "user\*" or "buyer\*" or "shopper\*" or "purchaser\*" or "animal\*" or "pet\*" or "colleague\*" or "employee\*" or "staff\*" or "worker\*" or "back-office employee\*" or "management\*" or "Stakeholder\*" or "Board of director\*" or "shareholder\*" or "other service provider\*" or "freelancer\*" or "purchaser\*" or "agenc\*" or "supplier\*" or "broker\*" or "intermediar\*" or "partner\*" or "competitor\*" or "government\*" or "media\*")) |

|  |
| --- |
| 18257 excluded based on:   * No business/management focus * Non-English * Other document types than articles |

|  |
| --- |
| 20983 articles found |

|  |
| --- |
| 2547 excluded based on:   * Irrelevance (e.g., B2B; supply chain and third-party logistics; no focus on third-party exchanges) * Duplicate articles |

|  |
| --- |
| 2726 article titles and abstracts screened for face validity |

|  |
| --- |
| 10 articles included based on snowballing |

|  |
| --- |
| 50 excluded based on:   * Dyadic focus/ no focus on third-party implications (23) * Focus on ecosystems and A2A orientation (21) * B2B context (4) * Focus on technological third-parties (2) |

|  |
| --- |
| 189 articles assessed for full-text eligibility |

|  |
| --- |
| 139 studies selected for final analysis and coding |

**Table 1. Overview of Third-Party Studies from a Meta-Data Perspective.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Third-Party Role** | **% of Articles** | **Research Methods** | **Setting** |
| **Bystander** | 38% | * Conceptual research (e.g., Gregoire et al., 2015) * Qualitative research (e.g., Johnstone and Hooper, 2016) * Quantitative research with a dominance of experimental research(e.g., Weitzl and Hutzinger, 2017) | Variety of service settings, with a dominant focus on   * restaurant setting (e.g., Baker et al., 2008) * tourism (e.g., Casidy and Shin, 2015) * retail context (e.g., Lin and Liang, 2011) |
| **Connector** | 4% | * Conceptual research (e.g., Leino, 2017) * Qualitative research (e.g., Andersson-Cederholm and Gyimothy, 2010) * Quantitative research (e.g., Rauniar et al., 2009) | Variety of service settings with a focus on   * restaurant settings (e.g., Baker et al., 2013) * leisure settings in case of pets (e.g., Kylkilahti et al., 2016) |
| **Endorser** | 47% | * Reviews (e.g., Martin, 2016) * Qualitative research (e.g., Pinho et al., 2014) * Quantitative research (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2016) * Mixed-methods research (e.g., Camelis et al., 2013) | Variety of service settings, with a dominance of   * restaurants setting (e.g., Hanson and Yuan, 2018) * healthcare settings (e.g., Laing and Hogg, 2002) |
| **Balancer** | 4% | * Conceptual research (e.g., Gregoire et al., 2015) * Qualitative research (e.g., Benoit et al., 2017) * Quantitative research (e.g., Joosten et al., 2016) | Variety of service settings, with a dominant focus on   * restaurant settings (e.g., Kim et al., 2010) * bank settings (e.g., McColl-Kennedy et al., 2011) |
| **Partner** | 13% | * Conceptual research (e.g., Carson et al., 1997) * Qualitative research (e.g., Caru and Cova, 2015) * Quantitative research (e.g., Zhou et al., 2014) | Several studies are generic in nature or focus on   * healthcare settings (e.g., Ahuja and Williams, 2010) * collaborative consumption situations (e.g., Levy, 2010) |

*Note.* The sum of the percentages exceeds 100%, as some articles consider multiple roles.

#### Table 2. Five Third-Party Roles

#### *Panel A. Definition and Visualization of Third-Party Roles and Their Occurrence in the Dataset*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Third-Party Roles** | **Definition of Role** | **Visualization of Role of Third-Party (TP) versus Customer (C) and Service Provider (SP)** | **# Articles per Type of Third-Party and Type of Interaction** | **Other customers** | **Pets** | **Other employees** | **Other firms** |
| **Bystander** | … being present and/or observing resource exchanges between customer and service provider |  | **Direct** | 43 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| **Indirect** | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Both** | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Connector** | … enabling resource exchanges between customer and service provider |  | **Direct** | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Indirect** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| **Both** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Endorser** | … providing informational, emotional, and/or practical resources to the customer and/or the service provider |  | **Direct** | 28 | 2 | 3 | 0 |
| **Indirect** | 23 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| **Both** | 14 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **Balancer** | … mediating or reconciling suboptimal resource exchanges between customer and service provider |  | **Direct** | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| **Indirect** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| **Both** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Partner** | … exchanging resources with both customer and service provider |  | **Direct** | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| **Indirect** | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| **Both** | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

***Panel B. Examples of the Third-Party Roles per Type of Third-Party and Type of Interaction***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Third-Party Role** | **Type of Interaction** | | **Type of Third-Party** | | | |
| ***Other customers*** | ***Pets*** | ***Other employees*** | ***Other firms*** |
| **Bystander** | Direct | | A customer standing too close to focal customer in store in COVID-19 times. | A dog running around freely in a print shop frightening a customer. | Other employee in training following a technician from house to house. | Coffee shops in hallway of airport where passengers are walking. |
| Indirect | | A customer observing posts between a focal customer and a firm on Instagram. | A dog loudly barking next to its owner who conducts an online seminar. | Department director is in copy when department’s secretary sends an e-mail to PhD student. | A firm observing a social media post of a customer of a competing firm. |
| **Connector** | Direct | | Family member recommending a bridal store to the bride. | A pet urging the owner to involve a pet hotel during holidays. | A general practitioner sharing contact information of a personal trainer with a patient. | An event firm holding an exhibition where couples and wedding planners can meet. |
| Indirect | | A friend sharing the website link of a car wash service to the focal customer. | A picture of a pet on social media leading to advertising from pet-food firm to owner. | A French teacher introducing a student to language camps via email. | An online travel agent bringing customers into contact with hotels. |
| **Endorser** | Direct | A customer giving a compliment to focal customer trying on a dress in a store. | | A pet in the room of nursing home residents providing emotional support. | A cashier showing understanding to colleague that was mistreated by a customer | University offering students information brochure about public transport to campus. |
| Indirect | People liking negative customer review of hairdresser on social media. | | A video call with pet cheering patient during hospitalization. | An employee helping client of a colleague during its holidays with email query. | An IT-firm identifying flaws in a firm’s online interface for clients. |
| **Balancer** | Direct | Other customer resolving dispute between customer and employee at a coffee shop. | | A beauty salon owner’s dog diverting customers’ attention from long waiting time. | Branch manager of a bank mediating a customer’s argument with the clerk. | A mediation agency solving conflicts between customers and service providers. |
| Indirect | A customer helping to solve a dispute between focal customer and firm in a Facebook conversation. | | A cat reducing tensions when walking behind an employee during a difficult video call with a customer. | Another employee responding to a negative social media comment given by the customer about a colleague. | Other firms offering protection to secure customer’s online purchases from a seller if there are delivery issues. |
| **Partner** | Direct | A customer, other customers and the instructor cooking together during a cooking workshop. | | Service dogs at a hospital interacting with child patients and the hospital staffs during therapy. | A nutritionist and a trainer designing a complete fitness program for gym members. | Firm installing solar panels that a customer ordered via the government |
|  | Indirect | Fitness Club members interacting with one another and with the Club via an application. | | A customer and his dog following a pet trainer's e-training sessions. | Two lawyers with different expertise holding a virtual meeting with a client. | A customer tracking its package that was ordered at an online store via a courier's application. |

#### Table 3. Implication of Third-Party Roles.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Third-Party Role** | **Research Streams with regard to Implications of Third-Party Roles** | **Theoretical Mechanism** | **Theoretical Foundation** | **Exemplary Studies** |
| **Bystander** | Research on how third-parties in a bystander role affect **emotions/experiences** (e.g., anxiety, stress and affective experiences), **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., perceived severity of failure and satisfaction), **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., return intention, and citizen behaviors) of customers and/or service providers and **customer-provider** **relationship** (e.g., customer-company identification) | spatial proximity  similarity  tie strength | theory of personal space  social identity theories  belongingness | Zhou and Soman (2003), Meyer and Baker (2010), Afthinos et al. (2017), Line and Hanks (2019) |
| Research on how third-party **emotions/experiences,** **perceptions/evaluations** and **behavior(al intention)s** are affected by the quality of the interactions between customers and service providers | fairness perceptions | equity theory | Karaosmanoglu et al. (2011), Ludwig et al. (2017) |
| **Connector** | Research on how third-parties in a connector role affect **emotions/experiences** (e.g., felt emotions and consumption experiences), **perceptions/evaluations** (e.g., value judgments and well-being), and **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., platform activities and partnering) of customers and/or service providers | resources and activities | Service-Dominant Logic | Rauniar et al. (2009), Leino (2017), Benoit et al. (2017) |
| **Endorser** | Research on how third-parties in an endorser role affect **emotions/experiences** (e.g., gratitude and customer experience), **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., satisfaction and well-being), **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., loyalty, performance, and engagement behaviors) of customers and/or service providers and **customer-provider relationship** (e.g., trust and commitment) | similarity  tie strength  expertise and credibility | social identity theories  relationship quality  signaling theory | Yi and Kim (2017), Hausmann and Poellmann (2016), Schaefers and Schamari (2016) |
| Research on how third-parties in an opposite endorser role affect **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., justice perceptions, dissatisfaction) and **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., expressing warmth) of customers and/or service providers | embarrassment | affective event theory | Bacile et al. (2018), Huang and Wang (2014) |

#### Table 3. Implication of Third-Party Roles (continued)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Third-Party Role** | **Research Streams with regard to Implications of Third-Party Roles** | **Theoretical Mechanism** | **Theoretical Foundation** | **Exemplary Studies** |
| **Balancer** | Research on how balancers affect **emotions/experiences** (e.g., anger and customer experience), **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., customer evaluation of service provision and outcome fairness), **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., adopting endorser role) of customers and/or service providers and **customer-provider relationship** (e.g., affective commitment) | commitment  respect  control | social exchange theory  trust repair theory  reactance theory | McColl-Kennedy et al. (2011), Gregoire et al. (2015) Joosten et al. (2016) |
| **Partner** | Research on how third-parties in a partner role affect **emotions/experiences** (e.g., anger), **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., satisfaction), **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., performance and complaint intention) of customers and/or service providers and the **collective experiences** | similarity  resources and activities | interdependence theory  Service-Dominant Logic | Allred and Money (2010), Du et al. (2014), Karatzas et al. (2016) |
| Research on how third-party acting as non-partners affect **perceptions**/**evaluations** (e.g., evaluation of focal firm) and **behavior(al intention)s** (e.g., member participation) of customers and/or service providers | attribution | attribution theory | Benoit et al. (2016), Kranzbühler et al. (2019) |