

Customers Relations Tools Preferences from Young Urban Digital Natives in Different Cultures – An Explorative Study

Preferências de Jovens Nativos Digitais Urbanos nas Ferramentas de Relacionamento com Clientes em Diferentes Culturas – Um Estudo Exploratório

Las Preferencias de los Jóvenes Nativos Digitales Urbanos en las Herramientas de Relación con el Cliente en Diferentes Culturas – Un Estudio Exploratorio

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine if cultural differences indicate user preferences for customer service tools, therefore providing insights about public communication channels and tools preferences. Through this research, any trends that might imply changes in user preferences of digital tools over traditional communication tools for customer relations are aimed to be identified. In order to research it, a quantitative questionnaire with participants from two metropolitan cities in Germany and India has been conducted. The cities Mumbai and Berlin were chosen as an appropriate representation of two comparable urban locations. The paper reports a current overview for users of customer service tools in their respective cities. The research found that culture does indeed influence user preferences and satisfaction for different communication tools. Users from Germany were more likely to prefer online customer service solutions while users from India were more likely to prefer in-person customer service solutions. The practical implications are to provide insights related to those preferences while doing customer care and associated communication plans and public relations strategies. As there has been very little research in this area, this study aims to fill the research gap in this context, especially by contributing with insights about the influence on cultural aspects of user preferences on customer service communication tools. This is considered an exploratory study that can after be applied in different context and circumstances, as well as in relationships dimensions across the public relations portfolio of planned communications.

Keywords: Public Preferences; Digital Natives; Digital Communication Tools; Customer Communication; Digital Transformation.

Resumo

O objectivo deste artigo é examinar se as diferenças culturais indicam as preferências dos utilizadores por determinadas ferramentas de serviço de atenção ao cliente, fornecendo, portanto, conhecimentos sobre os canais de comunicação e preferências por determinadas ferramentas. Através desta investigação, pretende-se identificar quaisquer tendências que possam implicar mudanças nas preferências dos utilizadores das ferramentas digitais em relação às ferramentas de comunicação tradicionais nas relações com os clientes. Nesta investigação foi realizado um questionário quantitativo com participantes de duas cidades metropolitanas da Alemanha e da Índia. As cidades de Mumbai e Berlim foram escolhidas como uma representação apropriada de duas localizações urbanas comparáveis. O artigo apresenta uma visão geral actual dos utilizadores de ferramentas de serviço de atenção ao cliente nas suas respectivas cidades. A investigação conclui que a cultura influencia de facto as preferências e satisfação dos utilizadores em relação a diferentes ferramentas de comunicação. Os utilizadores da Alemanha são mais propensos a preferir soluções de serviço ao cliente online, enquanto os utilizadores da Índia são mais propensos a preferir soluções de serviço ao cliente presencial. As implicações práticas consistem em fornecer conhecimentos relacionados com essas preferências, enquanto se desenham procedimentos de atendimento ao cliente, planos de comunicação associados e estratégias de Relações Públicas. Como tem havido muito pouca investigação nesta área, este estudo visa preencher a lacuna de investigação neste contexto, especialmente contribuindo com conhecimentos sobre a influência dos aspectos culturais nas preferências das ferramentas de comunicação do serviço de atendimento ao cliente. Este é considerado um estudo exploratório que pode depois ser aplicado em diferentes contextos e circunstâncias, bem como em dimensões de relacionamento em toda a carteira de comunicações planeadas de relações públicas.

Palavras-chave: Preferências do Público; Nativos Digitais; Ferramentas de Comunicação Digital; Comunicação com o Cliente; Transformação Digital.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es examinar si las diferencias culturales indican las preferencias de los usuarios por determinadas herramientas de atención al cliente, proporcionando así información sobre los canales de comunicación y las preferencias por determinadas herramientas. A través de esta investigación, se pretende identificar cualquier tendencia que pueda implicar cambios en las preferencias de los usuarios por las herramientas digitales frente a las herramientas de comunicación tradicionales en las relaciones con los clientes. En esta investigación se realizó un cuestionario cuantitativo con participantes de dos ciudades metropolitanas de Alemania e India. Se eligieron las ciudades de Bombay y Berlín como representación adecuada de dos lugares urbanos comparables. El artículo presenta un panorama actual de los usuarios de las herramientas de atención al cliente en sus respectivas ciudades. La investigación concluye que la cultura influye en las preferencias y la satisfacción de los usuarios hacia las diferentes herramientas de comunicación. Los usuarios de Alemania prefieren las soluciones de atención al cliente en línea, mientras que los de la India prefieren las soluciones de atención al cliente en persona. Las implicaciones prácticas consisten en proporcionar información relacionada con estas preferencias al diseñar los procedimientos de atención al cliente, los planes de comunicación asociados y las estrategias de relaciones públicas. Dado que se ha investigado muy poco en este ámbito, este estudio pretende llenar el vacío de la investigación en este contexto, especialmente aportando conocimientos sobre la influencia de los aspectos culturales en las preferencias de los usuarios por las herramientas de comunicación del servicio al cliente. Se considera un estudio exploratorio que luego puede aplicarse en diferentes contextos y circunstancias, así como en las dimensiones de relación a través de la cartera de comunicaciones de relaciones públicas planificadas.

Palabras clave: Preferencias de la Audiencia; Nativos Digitales; Herramientas de Comunicación Digital; Comunicación con el Cliente; Transformación Digital.

1. Introduction

Digitalization has led to diversification of tools being offered by organizations for customer service, to keep relationships and to implement public relations programs. There is no research found in terms of relationships with customers preferences between digital and analogic tools in digital natives and questioning if cultural background plays a role on preferences.

Some studies tend to research focused on a marketing-based approach — where pre-sales and sales are on the focus (Almeida & Alturas, 2015; Maia, 2022). Furthermore, correlation effects have been analyzed in Portugal, but not preferences between offline and digital one, or even general preferences (Almeida & Alturas, 2015). In this article, the relationship paradigm and the relationships management theory are taken as the understanding of public relations (Ledingham, 2003).

Therefore, the tools preferences of certain publics should be taken into consideration and, with it, this exploratory study is relevant to understand if organizations should consider cultural differences, besides the fact that certain groups use certain tools — meaning that digital natives use digital tools *per se*. Organizations provide their customers with a variety of customer service tools to encourage opportunities for customer feedback, a two-way dialogue and it also allows companies to customize their messaging and the opportunity of integrating all customer touchpoints of customer service (Day & Hubbard, 2003).

Despite chabots have been studied in terms of miscommunication and adoption (Sheehan, 2020), and acceptance in pre-purchase stage (Zhu et al., 2022), there is no research being spotted in terms of the preference for certain tools for customer services from native digitals and also if there are differences between cultures and among more or less human interaction characteristics of the tools. In Portugal, research has focus on social media and online communication platforms but from the perspective of the *communicators* needs, also in the discussion between technology and organizational communication (Ruão et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2016).

As discussed by Cook (2014), customer groups can access a wide variety of technologies as compared to the previous era and many of these groups grew up or were strongly influenced by digital technologies. These groups, termed as omni-channel customers, are mobile, have a strong digital network and are comfortable integrating technology into their everyday routines.

With the emergence and usage of new tools for customer service, users are adapting

to these new tools and experiencing customer service digitally. When companies deploy technology for optimizing customer interactions, it provides a 360-degree view of customer groups. Companies can thus, reflect on past interactions to ensure the future interactions are optimized (Chen & Popovich, 2003). Companies are using these new channels of customer service and are increasingly managing their user interactions with very little to no human contact (Anon, 2002).

Marc Prensky (2001) introduced the definition for “digital natives”. He classified digital natives as people who were born into the digital age and speak the “digital language” fluently. He also defined “digital immigrants” as people who were not born with access to the digital or internet boom but are adapting to the digital practices today. Digital natives prefer receiving the information they need, at a quick pace as compared to digital immigrants. They can easily adapt to parallel process and multi-tasking digitally. Companies must adapt to these behavior’s of digital natives, in order to provide more efficient and quick customer service tools and improve relationships.

De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) noted that personalities and the idea of one’s self is also affected by the cultural values they hold. They discussed that cultures that are individualistic are also low-context communication with a direct way of communicating. In contrast, collectivistic cultures base their identities on the social system they are a part of. The communication in collectivistic cultures is often in a non-direct style. When interacting with the sales or service executives, users from individualistic cultures prefer getting to the point quickly and users from collectivistic cultures prefer building a relationship and forming a connection as building trust is essential. Germany is an individualistic country with a score of 67 and India is a mix of both individualistic and collectivistic, with a score of 48 (Hofstede, 2018). This study will therefore take a closer look at these two different cultures and determine to what extent they differ regarding customer service preferences.

The overall objective of this research is to study whether cultural differences affect customer expectations and influence which tools of communication they prefer while interacting with customer service. With digital natives growing in each of the countries, it is key to observe any shifting trends in terms of offline and online tools for customer service. These problematics created a background for this research and the study now attempts to answer the following research question: To what extent does culture influence user-preferences for different communication tools (online messaging tools on website, chatbots or calling a call center) for customer service among young users in Berlin and Mumbai?

2. Theoretical framework

Customer relations can be framed within the marketing communication, although also serve public relations aims and, therefore, can be considered wider than the simple handling of customer queries. Through the integration of the communication, despite the internal operative division, the trend of touchpoints integrations is becoming imperative (Day & Hubbard, 2003).

A common definition for customer service in research is that it serves as a bridge between the company and the customer (Wouters, 2001). Lalonde and Zinszer (1976) also underline customer service as the whole process that starts with the finishing of the production and ends with the product arrival to the customer. With time, the expectations of customers towards the service, which a company should offer, increased. This led to the development of more aspects, which were considered for the definition of customer service. Wouters (2001) distinguishes between the “basic logistic performance and an organization’s communicative skills and commercial flexibility.” (Daugherty et al., 1994; Andraski & Novack, 1996; Maltz & Maltz, 1998, as cited in Wouters, 2001).

The definition of the similar term “service encounter” can be considered for the definition of customer service as well. Lewis and Mitchell (1990) define a service encounter as the “interaction between a service organization and its customers/clients, (which) may take varying forms: face-to-face, over the telephone, by letter, or by automated means” (p.11).

At the core of the word “customer” one can say, through simplification, that the customer is the “buyer of a product or service”. While the consumer, often used interchangeably is “the user of a product or service” (Frain, 1999, p.161). The challenging with selling services to customers, is that services are “intangible”. A service is not a manufactured product sold from factory to consumer. It varies from day to day from the person giving the service to the customer acquiring it. This brings the definition by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) that customers have a great importance in evaluating the service because they are the only judges of the quality of the service offered. The customer normally rates the service based on the outcome and process.

Therefore, the term customer relations (Oliveira, 2020) is mirroring the need of considering it from a both marketing and public relations perspective as goals such as trust, reputation and even legitimation are as well part of those communicative

processes. Over the last years we see a raise in automated and digital tools that are partly automated, without knowing much about the preferences on the publics on using those tools, or if the cultural context as a direct influence in how far those tools can be implemented without damaging the relationship with those publics.

Davenport and Beck (2001) in their discussion state that if we give attention to the customers, we get attention in return. But it is important to understand what giving attention means to a customer using call center services, which further involves an application or technology as an agent of attention and not the customer service executive. According to Lee and Allaway (2002), if the users use automated services, there are some difficulties involving for example, higher risk of perception or the service can be wrongly assessed even before using it. If the customers are made to believe that the automated services can give them more control over the customer service experience, it can be easier for them to adapt automated technologies. User preferences as an emotional and subjective experience, is uniquely personal and changeable with the customer product or service. Padgett and Allen (1997) referred to customer experience as a combination of a meaning which is representative with a customer's behavior, thoughts, and feelings during their customer service experience.

Burgers et al. (2000, p.156) examined the expectations of customers towards customer service. They found four factors to be especially relevant for the customer satisfaction: "adaptiveness", "assurance", "empathy" and "authority". "Adaptiveness" means the ability of the customer service to adapt to different situations and different customer needs, like for example the language. By "assurance" is meant that customer service needs to "provide clear information to the customer about procedures," in order to "comfort the customer and take away uncertainty." Another important aspect of "assurance" is that the customers information should "be handled confidentially".

Especially interesting for the comparison of customer expectation is the category "empathy" because here the difference between personal voice-to-voice customer service and chatbots is significant. According to Burgers et al. (2000) "empathy" means that the customer service should give the customer "the feeling of not being a number to the firm". According to this argumentation this can be achieved by catering to the customer's emotions.

The last category, "authority", expresses the customer's demand that the customer service definitely has to be in the position to handle their problems and questions (Burgers et al., 2000, pp.156–157). Additionally, Metehan and Zengin (2011) suggested that one of the ways to increase user satisfaction is by analyzing

the consumer characteristics of the society a company is operating in.

Nowadays, with digital technology, companies can reach their customers online. Either to inform, cultivate relationships with customers, expand their databases through customer relationship management or to provide post-purchase service online. This shift allows companies to move away from years of unsatisfied customers and use the tools that the Internet provides to improve customer satisfaction (Barnes & Cumby, 2002). Cultivating relationships with customers online has taken the forefront, with the top goals being to achieve contact with customers at multiple touchpoints and have the communication be direct and targeted to the customer, enough to start a conversation between the customer and organization, in hopes of creating a long-lasting relationship (Hennig-Thurau & Hansen, 2000).

Parise, Guinan and Kafka (2016) highlight how digital technology is changing the way customers interact with the organizations they are interested in. More customers than ever are searching for information online before buying a product/service. With the changing customer comes the “crisis of immediacy” which is defined as the need that customers must “receive content, expertise, and personalized solutions in real time during their shopping experience.” In this age of the “informed consumer”, a lot more consumers are willing to educate themselves about the products/services they are interested in buying. More so, around 50% of U.S. online consumers are adept at discarding any potential purchases if their questions are not quickly answered (Leggett et al., 2013). Because of this change, the role of the salesperson and customer service person whether on-site or online is transforming into that of correspondent who assists through giving valuable advice rather than only technical help.

In addition to that, due to the increasing growth of the e-commerce industry, online customer support is becoming progressively more important. “Online support typically involves a customer seeking service-related information from an employee via web-based media” (Turel et al., 2013, p. 99). If e-retailers can provide such a service, it is perceived very positively among customers, which is why many companies have integrated such a service into their websites.

Ekhlassi, Maghsoodi and Mehrmanesh (2012) discussed the need for companies to use digital tools for establishing a two-way relationship with consumers. By utilizing digital data and tools to create dialogues, customers are more likely to be retained and digital applications like online customer messaging tools or chatbots have opened new channels for aiding this two-way communication. Also noted in the study, many companies have started replacing the traditional customer service

channels with digital ones.

According to Jahanshahi et al. (2011), excellent customer service can be achieved if there is a structure or systematic communication plan within an integrated perspective. Customer focused procedures, corporate quality standards, consistent messages, management support and individual knowledge and skills are the core for excellent customer service. Lack of proper tools or no proper understanding of procedure can result in unproductive and profitless customer service. The ever-expanding demand for customer service being more flexible needs to be understood by the organizations. Integration of an effective communication and public relations strategy through trained representatives and a structured approach for customer satisfaction can help call centers to bridge the gap between expectations of the consumers and services offered. Failing to fully understand what customers expect could result in serious challenges.

With digitalization and emerging trends of chat tools used by contact centers, customers are being given scripted answers most of the times. This can directly affect the customer relationship with its organization. “Personalization” being an important aspect of communication, chat or messaging tools used by customer service can prove to be unhealthy due to two reasons, temporal responsiveness, and the relatedness of replies to users’ messages (Lew et al., 2018). On the other hand, customers can avoid e-mailing or waiting to speak to a customer care executive. In a time where fast answers are demanded from customers and with messaging tools, it is easier to keep up to those demands. Chatting can be successful in providing a desired result when done right, for example, live chats. It can be said that internet user’s preferences can be inclined towards messaging tools used by call centers whereas customers who are technically challenged might prefer calling and getting a personalized service. To believe, hope or trust are achievable when interacting to a person rather than receiving an automated reply or a text message.

A topic to consider for the company’s customer service is that online messaging tools imply the danger that customers might misinterpret a customer service employee chatting with them for a chatbot programmed with Artificial Intelligence (AI). In fact, chatbots were originally created as an alternative to a human contact between an employee of a company and the customer. The original aim was to “fool users that they were real humans” (Shawar & Atwell, 2007, p. 29).

For Shawar and Atwell (2007) chatbots can “help people, facilitate their work, and their interaction with computers using natural language”. But according to them it is important that they do not “replace the human role totally or imitate human conversation

perfectly” (p. 45). Adding a personal touch to the dialogue, for example with language or a picture of the chatting employee, might solve this issue for some customers, taken for granted that they even consider this to be an issue.

Another aspect to consider for satisfying customer expectations, is that they are shaped and influenced not only by personal preferences, but also by the culture of the customer. Consumers behave differently when interacting with service centers in different countries. It is sometimes difficult when call centers must face cross-cultural communication challenges. Youngdahl, Ramaswamy and Dash (2010) state that misunderstandings can be created when there are cultural differences while communicating as the expectations and perceptions of the customers vary from country to country, region to region, city to city. Dissatisfaction amongst call center users is highly likely during such circumstances. According to Hofstede (1983), we are considered as cross-cultural due to the following cultural dimensions: power distance (PDI), individualism (IDV), masculine/feminine (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO) (Hofstede, 1983, p. 46).

The power distance index explains to what extent is the inequality tolerated whereas individualism explains that how important personal goals are versus collectivism, where the goal is more about the well-being of the society or a group of people. Uncertainty avoidance is about how structured conversations are preferred over unstructured conversations. Masculinity talks about the distinctiveness in the gender roles, on the other hand, femininity is about the preference to remain fluid about the gender role rather than focusing on one gender. Apart from these highlights, Hofstede (1983), overall explains, how culture can have a great impact on work and life.

Presbitero (2017) identified the significance of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), for better performance of tasks and customer relations in a call center and customer service context. Two key factors discussed while dealing with demands and wants of customers from other cultures, are interest and efficacy. Through the study, it was also observed that while language proficiency is critical, satisfactory customer service depends on more individualistic factors. Motivational Cultural Intelligence is the motivation and drive to interact with culturally diverse groups and it is as important as the language abilities of the customer service representative. It also refers to the persistence that an individual offer despite differences in cultures and locations.

In summary it can be said that customer relations play a significant role in

customer satisfaction and therefore in the success of a company. To satisfy the customer it is important to know who your customers are and what expectations towards customer service they have. The literature on this topic provides a broad overview of the changes in expectations, which customers nowadays have towards a company's customer service. It can be seen a successful establishment of relationships between the company and its customers it is more than ever important to have multiple channels to communicate to your customers and to answer their questions as immediate as possible. As a result, digital tools for customer service like chats with employees of the company or chatbots programmed with AI have gained importance. In this regard the question to consider is whether these chatting tools are a suitable option for customers, or whether some customer's cultural backgrounds lead them to prefer personal contact via a call center or in-person contact at a customer service desk.

3. Hypotheses

Through the literature, it was understood that the influence of culture on perceived customer service can be significant due to multiple factors within the society such as uncertainty avoidance, individualism, collectivism, gender roles, etc. As this paper focuses on the two major metropolitan cities of India and Germany i.e. Mumbai and Berlin, the hypotheses were created, keeping in mind the cultural factors, the likeness of the perception and preference of the users using customer service tools. The two cities were also chosen due to their cultural differences according to cultural dimensions, but with probability of popular and frequent use of online tools by the groups in study; as well as the advanced application of the tools, specially messaging tools by the companies.

Furthermore, there were searched examples of cities that kept the call centers operational due to legislation, besides research pragmatic reasons like language and other accessibility factors were considered.

First hypothesis talks about the population of Germany and their likeliness to use customer service messaging tools over call center.

H1: The German population is more likely to prefer using customer service messaging tools.

The second hypothesis is about the population in India and their likeliness to use customer service call center over messaging tools.

H2: The Indian population is more likely to prefer using the customer call center.

4. Methodology

To assess the cultural impact on the preferences of the users regarding customer service tools, participants from two metropolitan cities of Germany and India, i.e. Berlin and Mumbai participated in a questionnaire. They were chosen because besides the fact they are metropolitan and therefore the use of this study has a comparative design which aims to make comparisons between two different countries. Comparison leads to better insights and understanding of two population groups. The similarities and differences can be evaluated in a better way when the results obtained are pre-defined into two different categories or in this case, two different cities.

The participants were chosen through relevance sampling as it aims at selecting relevant participants that can contribute answers to the research question. People from the age group of 18 to 30 years who are considered “digital natives” or people who are brought up during the age of digital technology, were the focus of this research. In total 68 complete questionnaires were used for data analysis and applied online through the platform google forms, invitations were done in various social media platforms and with direct random invitations with links to the google forms. The data was collected in 2019.

A questionnaire was considered to be the best method for analyzing the important characteristics like preferences and opinions for answering the research question. The questionnaire provided a way to obtain all the necessary information and structure them in categories which then gives an output that can be analyzed and interpreted. Though interviews can give a lot deeper personal insights, they are time consuming and would be rather a method suggested for future research regarding this topic. The questionnaire created encompassed topics of frequency of use, preference, satisfaction, likelihood of achieving solutions and preference of online versus offline customer service based on likert scales (Lee et al., 2002; Gliem & Gliem, 2003) with the aim of understanding whether there are differences between Indian and German cultures.

A pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with 10 participants to ensure the questionnaire quality; that the questions were understandable and in the right order; and finally, to get valuable feedback from the pre-test participants that led to changed. The final questionnaire included data collection on Demographics i.e. age and hometown functioned as filter questions, as the target sample group required individuals aged 18-30 from either Mumbai or Berlin. The following questions were based on five-point likert scales:

1. Which tools do the users use, to which the options were live chat customer service, email, chatbots (AI) and customer service call center.
2. Based on frequency scale, the customers were then asked as to how often they use the customer service tools.
3. The customers were then, based on satisfaction scale, asked how satisfied they are using the customer service tools in their own country.
4. Based on preference scale, users were asked how much they prefer using the customer service tools.
5. To measure how culture can influence trust factors while using customer service tools, the question of how much do they trust the tools was asked.
6. A question based on likelihood scale followed, by asking how likely users believe the tools can provide solutions.
7. Cultural impact being the most important aspect of this research, a question followed which asked whether a user would prefer getting connected to a customer service representative from his or her own country. This proves to be a problem in India where there are many different dialects and getting connected to a customer service representative from a different city with a different dialect can be problematic.
8. The final question was about another aspect of customer service, which is, customer service desks. The question was whether the customers prefer in-person contact with the customer service representative versus online solutions.

5. Results

Two types of tests within SPSS were chosen, both parametric and non-parametric. Parametric tests were chosen to compare the means of the two groups, Berlin and Mumbai. The question to be answered is if there is evidence of statistically significant difference between the means of the two cities. An Independent Samples t Test was chosen as the main parametric test. A non-parametric test in the name of Independent Samples Mann Whitney U-Test was chosen to analyze the data from the questionnaire's final question "To what degree do you prefer in-person contact at a customer service desk compared to online solutions?" because non-parametric tests handle ranked and ordinal data among small sample groups better.

An Independent Samples t Test was conducted to compare live chat preference in Berlin and Mumbai conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores

for Berlin ($M=3,42$, $SD=1,17$) and Mumbai ($M=2,52$, $SD=1,12$) conditions; $t(55)=2,98$, $p=0,004$. These results suggest that users from Berlin prefer live-chat customer service tool more than those from Mumbai.

Moreover, through the next Independent Samples t Test, e-mail as a customer service tool preference was compared in Berlin and Mumbai conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for Berlin ($M=3,18$, $SD=1,04$) and Mumbai ($M=2,39$, $SD=1,26$) conditions; $t(59)=2,68$, $p=0,010$. These results suggest that users from Berlin prefer e-mail as a customer service tool more than those from Mumbai.

Levels of satisfaction in relation to live-chat as a tool in Berlin and Mumbai conditions were compared through another Independent Samples t Test. There was a significant difference in the scores for Berlin ($M=4,04$, $SD=0,79$) and Mumbai ($M=3,46$, $SD=0,96$) conditions; $t(51)=2,37$, $p=0,021$. These results suggest that users from Berlin are more satisfied with live chat as a customer service tool more than those from Mumbai.

Furthermore, levels of satisfaction in relation to e-mail as a customer service tool in Berlin and Mumbai conditions were compared through an Independent Samples t Test. There was a significant difference in the scores for Berlin ($M=4,06$, $SD=0,84$) and Mumbai ($M=3,44$, $SD=1,16$) conditions; $t(55)=2,35$, $p=0,029$. These results suggest that users from Berlin are more satisfied with e-mail as a customer service tool more than those from Mumbai.

For the last Independent Samples t Test levels of trust in relation to live-chat as a customer service tool were compared in Berlin and Mumbai conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for Berlin ($M=3,74$, $SD=0,90$) and Mumbai ($M=3,13$, $SD=1,00$) conditions; $t(55)=2,39$, $p=0,021$. These results suggest that users from Berlin trust live chat as a customer service tool more than those from Mumbai.

The results from the Independent Samples Mann-Whitney U Test displayed the degree to which population from Berlin and Mumbai prefer in-person contact at the customer service desk as compared to online solutions from customer service tools. The null hypothesis that stated there is no difference between groups from Berlin and Mumbai, in terms of preference towards in-person contact versus online solutions, was rejected ($p=0,026$.) allowing partial support of our second hypothesis, that the Indian population is more likely to prefer personal contact.

These variables that were supported through analysis suggest that both hypotheses can be partially supported. The phrase “partially supported” is used because there were still multiple variables left behind that did not offer significant results.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the cultural influence on the preference of different customer service tools. For this, preferences of people from two different cultures, Indian and German, were compared. Two cities from these countries were selected as they represent two very different cultures in terms of individualism versus collectivism.

Although this is a good first step, future studies should extend the scope by examining the influence of other cultures. It would be especially interesting to analyze how Central Asian, African, or Middle Eastern cultures, mostly ranked as highly collectivistic cultures, compared to Western individualistic cultures.

With this research, there was an assumed relation between the individualism score of a country to the user's preference of customer service tool. Countries with low individualistic scores were assumed to prefer personal contact for customer service tools like countries with high individualistic scores were assumed to prefer non-personal, online solutions. In essences, people belonging to certain cultures that value individualism higher would rather choose a non-personal customer service option (e.g. chat) than a personal option (e.g. calling the customer service). For future research, it would be interesting to see if and to what extent Hofstede's other cultural dimensions (e.g. power distance, masculine/feminine, uncertainty avoidance and long term orientation) influence the user preference of different customer service tools.

Furthermore, this research focused only on a younger sample group as participants because the aim of this study was to analyze the preferences of digital natives. Future research could therefore include participants from other age groups also to make a comparison on how different age groups' preferences differ.

Lastly, this study is limited in terms of the participants and therefore only gives us an overview on this topic. To get a more detailed insight on the cultural influences' future research should ideally have a larger number of participants.

This research has contributed to gain insights about the connection between cultural influences and users' preferences towards customer service tools. Its aim was to highlight the differences between the preferences of German customers, as a representation of a culture, which ranked high on individualism, and Indian customers, as a representation of a culture which values both individualism and collectivism. The hypothesis, that the German population is more likely to prefer using customer service messaging tools, like e-mail, live-chat and chatbot services, could be partially

supported. This indicates that populations that are more individualistic tend to prefer non-personal customer service tools.

Moreover, the hypothesis, that the Indian population is more likely to prefer using the customer call center and in-person contact (e.g. at a customer service desk) could be partially supported. In contrast, the customer service tools, where there is no personal contact (through voice/in-person) are not as preferred in India. The dependent variables, which supported these hypotheses are the live-chat preference, the e-mail preference, the live-chat satisfaction, the e-mail satisfaction and the live chat trust.

However, the research illustrated that the younger generation of digital natives, seem to generally have a diverse approach to multiple growing options for customer service, as the young users from both countries used all possible customer service tools.

In summary it can be said that this research could confirm that German users and Indian users differ in their preferences of customer service tools. This implies a correlation between the cultural value of individualism and the preference of non-personal customer service tools. Future research in this area should however further explore the impact of cultural values on customers' expectations.

In terms of practical implications, we recommend that public relations practitioners consider that dimensions on the planning of public relations programs and within the implementation of customer services tools. Despite 62,5 percent of the world population uses internet nowadays and more than half use social media (Komp, 2022), it does not mean *per se* that the preference of the people in terms of customer care and relationships management is clearly on the new tools.

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