



“Paying it forward: The reciprocal effect of superior service on charity at checkout”[☆]



Efua Obeng^{a,*}, Chinintorn Nakhata^b, Hsiao-Ching Kuo^c

^a Howard School of Business, Howard University, United States of America

^b Department of Marketing, Penn State Harrisburg, United States of America

^c Department of Economics & Business, Washington & Jefferson College, United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Although donation requests at checkout have become commonplace, much remains to be learned about the store-level factors that impact shoppers' donation behaviors. This research, in part, fills this gap by studying the relationship between superior retail service and shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout. Drawing from social exchange theory, we hypothesize and show that shoppers who believe that they experienced superior service are grateful to retailers and reciprocate their gratitude by being more willing to donate at checkout than are other shoppers. We also identify two important boundary conditions by showing that the impact of superior service is weakened significantly when shoppers doubt the authenticity of the superior service or when they are asked to donate to victims of tragedies (e.g., a mass shooting).

1. Introduction

‘Tis the season of giving. Although giving and charitable behaviors are traditionally associated with the holiday season, retailers such as Lowe's and T.J. Maxx are challenging this norm by requesting donations throughout the year from shoppers at checkout (hereafter referred to as “charity at checkout”). As a result of these initiatives, American shoppers have donated more than \$3 billion at checkout over the past thirty years (Engage for Good, 2016). Although this statistic appears to tout the success of charity at checkout, a more comprehensive analysis of the American retail market suggests that this \$3 billion is a “drop in the bucket.” Given that 57 million shoppers made in-store purchases over the past thirty years, each shopper donated about \$52 at checkout over this period or a mere \$1.73 annually (The US Census Bureau, 2015). All things considered, this means that the shoppers' donations at checkout are rather trivial.

The shoppers' overall unwillingness to donate at checkout poses a problem for retailers because the retailers' support is necessary in order for charity at checkout to be successful. Retailers partner with charities to improve shopper satisfaction, increase brand equity, and strengthen their relationships with shoppers (e.g., Bolton & Mattila, 2015; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, retailers find it difficult to reap these benefits if shoppers do not donate to a charity at

checkout.

Obeng et al. speak to this difficulty by showing that charity at checkout creates an imbalance in the shopper-retailer exchange relationship, leading shoppers who are asked to donate at checkout less satisfied with retailers than are those shoppers who are not asked to do so. Simply put, charity at checkout strains the retailers' relationships with shoppers. Despite this overwhelmingly negative response to charity at checkout, shoppers who do donate experience a “warm glow”, which makes them more likely to revisit retailers than are those shoppers who do not donate (Giebelhausen, Lawrence, Chun, & Hsu, 2017). However, this same mechanism leads people who choose not to donate to exhibit particularly low levels of satisfaction (Giebelhausen, Chun, Cronin Jr., & Hult, 2016). Thus, the negative consequences of charity at checkout appear to be particularly strong for shoppers who do not donate.

Our research is motivated by this tension between retailers and shoppers. We seek to understand how retailers can increase the shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout and, by extension, achieve the benefits associated with aligning themselves with charities and having shoppers experience a warm glow. Extant literature has identified several individual product- (e.g., gender, income, and self-construal), brand- (e.g., hedonic and utilitarian), and charity-level (e.g., recognition) factors that impact the shoppers' willingness to donate (e.g., Piliavin & Chang, 1990; Strahilevitz, 1999; Winterich & Barone, 2011;

[☆] Note: The authors equally contributed to the present research.

* Corresponding author at: 2600 6th Street NW, 334 School of Business, Washington, DC 20059, United States of America.

E-mail address: efua.obeng@howard.edu (E. Obeng).

Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013). Additionally, Xia and Nada (2014) show that although offering shoppers large price discounts drastically increases their donations at checkout, small price discounts increase a shopper's sensitivity to the sacrifice associated with donating and lead to particularly low donation rates.

Despite its merits, this literature has placed relatively little emphasis on identifying *store-level* factors that impact the shoppers' donation behaviors. We, in part, fill this void by studying how the perception of superior retail service impacts the shoppers' responses to charity at checkout. Borrowing from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996), we conceptualize service quality as superior, inferior, or in between these extremes. Retailers who provide superior service tend to have attentive and engaged employees, offer reliable product and prices, are very credible, and deliver service in a way that exceeds the shoppers' expectations (Zeithaml et al., 1996). On the other hand, retailers marked by inferior service fail to meet the shoppers' expectations in the aforementioned areas (Zeithaml et al., 1996). While perceptions of superior service positively impact retail performance and shopper loyalty (Phillips, Chang, & Buzzell, 1983; Zeithaml et al., 1996), we argue that these positive benefits may spillover to impact third parties, such as charities, as well.

We find support for this argument across three studies. Specifically, we find that shoppers are grateful when they perceive they have experienced superior retail service and reciprocate by being more willing to donate to charities at checkout than are their counterparts (Studies 1 and 2A). However, this effect is weakened when shoppers question the authenticity of the service (Study 2B) and when they are asked to support victims of tragedies (Study 3). It is important to note that we focus on the shoppers' perceptions of service following particular transactions (rather than general service) since gratitude and its associated benefits decay over time (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechhoff, & Kardes, 2009). As a result, the gratitude that shoppers experience immediately following service encounters has a strong impact on their willingness to donate at checkout.

Collectively, this research contributes to the literature on charitable behaviors (e.g., Alcañiz, Cáceres, & Pérez, 2010; Winterich & Barone, 2011) and expands the field's understanding of the factors that impact the retailers' relationships with shoppers (e.g., Huang, 2015; Palmatier et al., 2009). We find that similar to word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, willingness to pay, and shopper loyalty, a shopper's willingness to donate at checkout signals the nature of their relationship with retailers. Furthermore, while prior research shows that superior service drives desirable marketing outcomes (e.g., increased sales, enhanced consumer loyalty, positive WOM), we find that it does not always produce a positive lift. Beyond these theoretical contributions, this research also provides charities with practical guidance in the selection of retail partners and provides retailers with more precise direction in the deployment of resources.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

2.1. Social exchange theory in the retail context

Social exchange theory is a paradigm that is used to explain interactions among parties (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to this theory, parties in social exchanges act in coordinated, complementary, and concerted ways to achieve mutually beneficial goals, which would be difficult to achieve without cooperation from the other party (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Therefore, rather than acting in isolation, parties act in a reciprocal manner in which an initial action by one is returned in kind by the other (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gergen, 1969; Johnson & Sohi, 2001).

Reciprocity not only encourages parties to forego their selfish interests and focus on mutually beneficial goals but also helps to maintain a balance in social exchanges (Lynn & Graves, 1996; Morales, 2005). Consider the following, "...if a salesperson spends a lot of time helping

a customer, the store's costs and consumer's benefits both increase. Inequity exists because of the imbalance between the costs and benefits of the store versus the consumer. In such cases...consumers are motivated to restore equity by rewarding the store at some cost to themselves, like buying more" (Morales, 2005, p. 806). Therefore, to maintain balance in the exchange, shoppers reward the retailers' extraordinary costs by engaging in extraordinary behaviors of their own.

2.2. The effect of superior service on willingness to donate at checkout

One way in which retailers can incur extraordinary costs and, as a consequence, motivate shoppers to reward them is by providing superior service. Superior service refers to the "application of specialized competences (operant resources—knowledge and skills), through deeds, processes, and performances" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008 p. 26) in a way that exceeds the shoppers' expectations at every point of contact (Zeithaml et al., 1996). To provide superior service, retailers must excel in the technical (e.g., security), functional (e.g., credibility and reliability), interactive (e.g., communication, competence, courtesy, responsiveness, and understanding), and physical (e.g., access and tangibles) aspects of their businesses (Chiou & Droge, 2006; Grönroos, 1984).

When shoppers receive superior service "... they receive increased value, their [social exchange] relationship becomes more important, and they invest more effort to strengthen and maintain it" (Palmatier et al., 2006, p.140). Such investments can take various forms, such as tipping very large amounts (Lynn & Graves, 1996), expressing a high willingness to pay (Morales, 2005), or spreading positive WOM (Maxham III., 2001). Willingly donating at checkout may be another way in which shoppers invest in their social exchanges with retailers. Therefore, we predict that the perception of superior service will increase the shoppers' willingness to comply with the retailers' donation requests. Thus, we propose the following:

H1. Shoppers who perceive the service to be superior will be more willing than other shoppers to donate to charity at checkout.

2.3. The mediating role of gratitude

Given the central role of reciprocity in social exchanges, we believe that gratitude (rather than another emotion) explains why the perception of superior service increases the shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout (Morales, 2005; Palmatier et al., 2009; Soscia, 2007). "Gratitude is the emotional appreciation for benefits received, accompanied by a desire to reciprocate..." (Palmatier et al., 2009; p.1) and often arises when people attribute a positive outcome to someone other than themselves (Soscia, 2007). Gratitude supports exchange relationships by compelling parties to maintain their obligations to return the benefits that they receive in kind (Blau, 1964; Palmatier et al., 2009).

Gratitude plays a particularly poignant role in exchanges when retailers invest in their relationships with shoppers. For example, "... after RM [relationship marketing] investments, customers may feel high levels of gratitude that result in their propensity to reciprocate..." (Palmatier et al., 2009, p.13). As a relationship marketing investment, superior retail service should produce similar feelings of gratitude and, as a result, increase a shopper's propensity to reward retailers (Morales, 2005; Palmatier et al., 2009). Because superior service reflects purposeful efforts on a retailer's part and does not occur by happenstance, shoppers are grateful to retailers that provide superior service (Morales, 2005). Since shoppers who perceive that they have experienced superior retail service are grateful to retailers, they will feel a stronger desire to reciprocate by complying with the retailers' requests to donate than will other shoppers. In other words, gratitude explains why shoppers who believe that they have experienced superior retail service will be more willing to donate at checkout than will other shoppers.

H2. Gratitude mediates the relationship between service quality and the shoppers' willingness to donate. As the feelings of gratitude increase (with increasing service quality), shoppers will be more willing to donate to charity at checkout.

2.4. The role of charity type

Although the perception of superior service has a strong positive impact on the shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout, we propose that such positive impact may be weakened for some types of charities. The extant literature is replete with examples that highlight the unique relationship between the shoppers' altruism and crises. For instance, victims of tragedies (e.g., mass shootings, house fires, and fatal accidents) are often identifiable, appear to be blameless and are presented in a way that makes them relatable to the general population (Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2012). As such, tragedies produce intense community responses and "... trigger unqualified sympathy and compassion and a subsequent desire to respond to the needs of victims" (Skitka, 1999, p.794). Because requests to donate to victims of tragedies motivate shoppers to abandon their self-interests, act altruistically, and demonstrate an unparalleled amount of empathetic concern (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Hawdon et al., 2012; Skitka, 1999), we argue that even when they perceive the service quality as average or inferior, shoppers will donate willingly to victims of tragedies. That is, when retailers ask for donations that support victims of tragedies, shoppers will donate willingly due to the enhanced altruism they feel. Hence, the impact of superior service would be weakened.

Comparatively, because social causes lack many of the aforementioned characteristics, in these situations, the perceptions of superior retail service will continue to impact the shoppers' willingness to donate. We use the term "social cause" to describe socially motivated, ongoing efforts that are designed to accomplish a specified goal. One such social cause is Cellphones for Soldiers, an organization that facilitates free communication and emergency services for active duty military and soldiers (Winterich & Barone, 2011). Despite their merits, social causes do not "tug on heart strings" and often produce relatively moderate responses (Ellen et al., 2000). Even so, "offering to help an ongoing [social] cause may arouse more skepticism and self-interested attributions for the company's [retailer's] participation" (Ellen et al., 2000, p.397).

Thus, we argue that when shoppers are asked to donate to tragedies, their empathetic concern for the victims will supersede the lift that retailers receive from providing superior service. Consequently, the effect of superior service quality will be weaker when donations are sought for a tragedy. However, perceptions of having experienced superior service will continue to drive the shoppers' willingness to donate when they are asked to support social causes.

H3. The positive impact of perceived superior service on the willingness to donate will be weaker when shoppers are asked to donate to tragedies but not when shoppers are asked to donate to social causes.

3. Study 1

To determine whether experiencing superior service positively impacts the shoppers' willingness to donate (Hypothesis 1), we conducted a one-factor, three-level (perceived service quality; superior, inferior, or control), between-subjects study. Before conducting the full study, we pretested our manipulations of superior and inferior services.

3.1. Pretest

We recruited 150 shoppers from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) ($M_{Age} = 37$; 53% male) to participate in a one-factor, three-level (service quality: superior, inferior, and control), between-subjects study, in

exchange for \$1. Participants were asked to imagine that they were on a shopping trip at a grocery store. Participants in the superior service condition were told that store employees were driven to serve and go above and beyond expectations to meet shoppers' demands, while those in the inferior service condition were told that employees were inattentive, combative, and lacked the necessary knowledge. The participants in the control group were simply told that they were shopping at a grocery store (service quality was not mentioned here). After reading their associated scenarios, participants rated their perceptions of the service quality by using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely poor, 7 = extremely good) and then answered demographic questions.

We conducted an ANOVA to determine if the manipulations worked properly. As expected, the results from this analysis indicate that the participants' perceptions of service quality vary across conditions ($F(2, 146) = 552.77, p < .001$). Participants in the superior service condition rate service quality significantly higher than do those in the inferior service condition ($M_{Superior} = 6.48$ vs. $M_{Inferior} = 1.23$; $t(146) = -32.94, p < .001$) and in the control condition ($M_{Superior} = 6.48$ vs. $M_{Control} = 4.92$; $t(146) = 9.11, p < .001$). Comparatively, those in the inferior service condition rate service quality significantly lower than do those in the control condition ($M_{Inferior} = 1.23$ vs. $M_{Control} = 4.92$; $t(146) = 9.11, p < .001$). Given the success of these manipulations, we will use them or close variations going forward.

3.2. Methods

We recruited 118 shoppers from MTurk ($M_{Age} = 37$; 52.5% male) to participate in a one-factor, three-level (perceived service quality; superior, inferior, or control), between-subjects study in exchange for \$1. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three retail service quality scenarios (superior, inferior, control). The study began by asking participants to name the grocery store where they shop most often. We adapted the vignettes used in the pretest to increase the external validity of our results; we substituted the "American Red Cross" for the term "a charity", and a participant's chosen store was used in place of "a grocery store."

At the end of their scenarios, participants were asked to donate to the American Red Cross at checkout. Participants subsequently indicated their willingness to donate by using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unwilling, 7 = extremely willing) and indicated the amount of money that they were willing to donate (\$0, \$1, \$3, \$5, or more than \$5); then, they provided open-ended reactions to the scenario, rated their perceptions of the service quality in their shopping scenario (1 = extremely poor, 7 = extremely good) and completed a 5-item cause involvement scale adapted from Mittal (1995) ($\alpha = 0.99$; The American Red Cross is irrelevant to me; The American Red Cross means nothing to me; The American Red Cross is of no concern to me; The American Red Cross means a lot to me; The American Red Cross is of concern to me; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Last, the participants indicated their typical donation frequency in a given year and provided demographic information. Since there was no evidence of entropy (e.g., incomplete responses), all participants were included in the analysis (Kara, Gunasti, & Ross, 2015; Zhu & Carterette, 2010).

3.3. Results

We conducted an ANCOVA with perceived service quality as the independent variable, willingness to donate as the dependent variable, and cause involvement, donation frequency, gender, age, and income as covariates. We included these covariates because they impact the shoppers' donation behaviors (Aquino & Reed II., 2002; Piliavin & Chang, 1990; Winterich & Barone, 2011). Of these covariates, cause involvement ($F(1, 109) = 30.85, p < .001$), past donation frequency ($F(1, 109) = 24.35, p < .001$), and age ($F(1, 109) = 6.89, p < .05$) impact the shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout. Older

Table 1
Summary of the ANCOVA results of Study 1.

	DV = willingness to donate	
	F-value	Sig.
Covariate		
Age	6.89	0.01
Cause involvement/importance	30.85	0.00
Gender	0.52	0.48
Income	0.69	0.41
Past donation frequency	24.35	0.00
Main effect		
Perceived service quality	7.67	0.00

participants, participants who are more involved with the American Red Cross, and participants who donate frequently in their daily lives are more willing to donate at checkout than are their counterparts. Note that the majority of participants rarely donate in a typical year (42% of the participants never donate, and 37% donate quarterly) and are, on average, unwilling to donate at checkout (average willingness to donate is 3.32 on a 7-point scale). Table 1 below summarizes our ANCOVA results.

Most importantly, we find that perceived service quality impacts the shoppers' willingness to donate at checkout ($F(2, 109) = 7.67, p < .01$). The planned contrasts indicate that participants in the superior service condition are more willing to donate at checkout than are those in the inferior service condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.35$ vs. $M_{Inferior} = 2.26; t(114) = 4.70, p < .001$) and those in the control condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.35$ vs. $M_{Control} = 3.15; t(114) = 2.77, p < .01$). These results provide preliminary support for Hypothesis 1.

We also conducted an ordinal regression to examine the relationship between perceived service quality and the amount of money that shoppers are willing to donate, while controlling for the aforementioned covariates. The results from this regression, as shown in Table 2, indicate that participants in the superior service condition are willing to donate nine times more money at checkout than those in the inferior service condition ($\hat{\beta} = 2.25, Wald = 11.96, p < .001$) and about two times more than those in the control condition ($\hat{\beta} = 0.94, Wald = 3.66, p < .10$). These results provide additional support for our argument that perceived superior service makes people disproportionately willing to donate.

3.4. Discussion

The results from Study 1 indicate that shoppers who experience superior service reward retailers by being more willing to donate at checkout than are those shoppers who experience inferior service. The participants who believe that retailers provide superior service not only respond more positively to charity at checkout than do those participants who perceive the service to be inferior but also respond more positively than do those shoppers in the control condition. We find that shoppers who experience superior service donate nine times more money at checkout than do those shoppers who experience inferior

Table 2
Summary of the ordinal regression results of Study 1.

Contrast	DV = amount willing to donate	
	$\hat{\beta}$	Wald statistic
Superior vs. inferior	2.25**	11.96**
Superior vs. control	0.94	3.66

** $p < .001$.
* $p < .05$.
~ $p < .10$.

service and two times more money than do those shoppers in the control condition. Therefore, the impact of perceived superior service on willingness to donate at checkout extends beyond the “typical” shopping experience.

4. Study 2

Building on Study 1, using different participants, we conducted two studies concurrently, to test the mediating role of gratitude. Study 2A directly tests our prediction that gratitude mediates the relationship between the shoppers' perceptions of service quality and their willingness to donate at checkout, while Study 2B indirectly tests gratitude's mediating role by examining whether the impact of superior service on willingness to donate at checkout disappears when gratitude is “turned off.”

4.1. Study 2A

4.1.1. Method

We recruited 108 shoppers ($M_{Age} = 33.96$; 64% male) from MTurk to participate in exchange for 75 cents in a one-factor, three-level (service quality; superior, inferior, or control), between-subjects study. We manipulated service quality by using the same vignettes that we used in the pretest for Study 1. After reading their randomly assigned vignette, the participants indicated their willingness to donate by using the same measures as before. Next, the participants rated their perceptions of service quality in their scenario (1 = extremely poor, 7 = extremely good) and completed the McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang's (2002) 3-item gratitude scale ($\alpha = 0.98$; I am grateful to the grocery store, I am thankful to the grocery store, I appreciate the grocery store; 1 = strongly agree, 7 = strongly disagree). The participants then provided open-ended reactions to their scenarios, after which they answered questions regarding their past donation behaviors and provided demographic information. As there were no signs of entropy, all participants were retained for the analysis (Kara et al., 2015; Zhu & Carterette, 2010).

4.1.2. Results

We tested gratitude's mediating role by using model 4 from PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). This model included gratitude as the mediator, perceived service quality as the independent variable, past donation frequency, age, gender, and income as covariates; we varied the dependent variable (willingness to donate and amount willing to donate) across the analyses. A 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on a 5000- bootstrap confirms that gratitude mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and the shoppers' willingness to donate (indirect effect [IE] = -0.539 , bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-0.842, -0.300]$). We followed the same method to determine whether gratitude mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and the amount that shoppers are willing to donate (indirect effect [IE] = -0.283 , bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-0.484, -0.131]$). Therefore, in support of Hypothesis 2, these mediation analyses indicate that the perception of superior service produces heightened feelings of gratitude and motivates shoppers to donate at checkout when they otherwise would not.

4.2. Study 2B

In Study 2B, we examine the mediating role of gratitude by “turning off” gratitude. If gratitude truly explains why the perception of superior service increases the shoppers' willingness to donate, then the positive impact of superior service will be attenuated when gratitude is “turned off.” In this study, we “turn off” gratitude by manipulating the

authenticity of a retailer's superior service.

The shoppers' gratitude decreases when the retailers' efforts appear unauthentic, pretentious, disingenuous, or self-serving (Henderson, Beck, & Palmatier, 2011; Morales, 2005; Schaefer & Pettijohn, 2006). With that said, shoppers may interpret superior service in commission-based settings as unauthentic since salespeople (and, as a consequence, retailers) benefit when shoppers spend a lot of money. This perception of unauthenticity may result in decreased gratitude and motivation to reward retailers. This means that in commission-based settings, the shoppers' motivation to reward retailers due to gratitude may be offset when the employees' behaviors appear to be disingenuous and self-serving (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Raggio & Folse, 2009). We test this argument in Study 2B.

4.2.1. Method

To show that the effect of perceived superior service on willingness to donate disappears in the absence of gratitude, we recruited 140 shoppers from MTurk ($M_{Age} = 33.6$; 59.3% male) to participate in a one-factor, two-level (turn off gratitude, control), between-subjects study, in exchange for \$1. The participants were asked to imagine that they were visiting a retailer in search of a new outfit. In both conditions, a store employee (Alex) provided superior service by being helpful, attentive, and committed to serving the shopper.

After obtaining all of the items that they needed, the shoppers were asked to imagine that they proceeded to checkout and were asked to donate to the American Red Cross. Participants in the "turn off" gratitude condition were told that Alex would receive a sales commission for helping them, whereas those in the control condition were simply asked to make a donation (as in Studies 1 and 2A). After reading their shopping scenarios, participants completed the same gratitude scale used in Study 2A ($\alpha = 0.97$) as a manipulation check, indicated their willingness to donate by using the same items as before, and provided open-ended reactions to their respective shopping scenarios. The study concluded by asking participants to answer demographic questions and to indicate their yearly donation frequencies. Again, since there was no evidence of entropy, all participants were retained for the analysis (Kara et al., 2015).

4.2.2. Results

The manipulation of gratitude worked as expected, with the participants in the control condition expressing more gratitude than those in the "turn off" condition ($M_{Control} = 4.90$ vs. $M_{Turn\ Off} = 4.27$; $F(1, 138) = 6.15, p < .05$). To test if "turning off" gratitude impacts the shoppers' willingness to donate, we conducted an ANCOVA with gratitude (turn off vs. control) as the independent variable, willingness to donate as the dependent variable, and past donation frequency, gender, age, and income as covariates. The results from this analysis are summarized in Table 3 below. As shown in this table, the past donation frequency is the only covariate that is significant ($F(1, 134) = 35.12, p < .001$), suggesting that altruistic shoppers are more willing to donate at checkout than are others. Most importantly, we find that "turning off" gratitude weakens the participants' willingness to donate,

Table 3
Summary of the ANCOVA results of Study 2B.

	DV = willingness to donate	
	F-value	Sig.
Covariate		
Age	1.89	0.17
Gender	0.33	0.59
Income	0.04	0.85
Past donation frequency	35.12	0.00
Main effect		
Gratitude (turn off vs. control)	4.33	0.04

even in the face of superior service; participants in the control condition are more willing to donate than those in the gratitude "turn off" condition ($M_{Control} = 3.94$ vs. $M_{Turn\ Off} = 3.32$; $F(1, 134) = 4.33, p < .05$), as summarized in Fig. 1.

We also conducted an ordinal regression to examine the relationship between gratitude and the amount of money that shoppers are willing to donate. The participants in the control condition are willing to donate about two times more than those in the gratitude "turned off" condition ($\hat{\beta} = 0.72, Wald = 4.39, p < .05$). Together, these results add credence to our argument that gratitude explains why shoppers who perceive superior service are more willing to donate than their counterparts are.

4.3. Discussion

Collectively, the results from Studies 2A and 2B add further credence to our theoretical framework, as we find both direct and indirect evidence that gratitude mediates the relationship between the shoppers' perceptions of superior service and their willingness to donate at checkout. The results from Study 2A indicate that the perception of superior service produces heightened feelings of gratitude and motivates shoppers to reciprocate their gratitude by being more willing to donate at checkout. In Study 2B, we provide further evidence for this mediation by showing that those in the control condition are willing to donate two times more money than are those in the gratitude "turned off" condition, indicating that even in the face of superior service, shoppers are largely unwilling to donate to charities at checkout when gratitude is "turned off." A participant in the gratitude "turned off" condition summarized this effect nicely by stating the following, "I felt a bit surprised but pleased that I was getting so much help in the store. However, when I found out Alex and the other employees were just doing this for the extra money, it all made sense to me. I still appreciated the help he showed, but it made it seem less genuine after I learned this."

5. Study 3

While we have shown that shoppers are more willing to donate at checkout when they perceive superior service, we argue that this relationship will be weakened when shoppers are asked to donate to victims of tragedies. However, we expect to replicate the main effect of superior service when shoppers are asked to donate to a social cause. We test this prediction here.

5.1. Method

We recruited 143 shoppers from MTurk ($M_{Age} = 37.3$; 54% male) to participate in a 3 (perceived service quality; superior, inferior, or control) x 2 (charity type as tragedy and social cause) between-subjects study, in exchange for 50 cents. The shoppers were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. We manipulated service quality by using the same scenarios as in Studies 1 and 2A and randomly assigned participants to one of two charities. One charity was described as raising money to help victims of a tragedy (the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School), while the other was described as raising money for a social cause (Susan G. Komen).

After reading their scenarios, participants indicated their willingness to donate by using the two measures used in the earlier studies. Participants then indicated whether they were previously aware of the tragedy/social cause featured in their scenario (yes, no), rated the extent to which supporting victims of their associated tragedy/social cause was important (1 = extremely unimportant, 7 = extremely important), provided demographic information, and specified their yearly donation frequency. Since there were no signs of entropy, all participants were retained for the analysis (Kara et al., 2015; Zhu & Carterette,

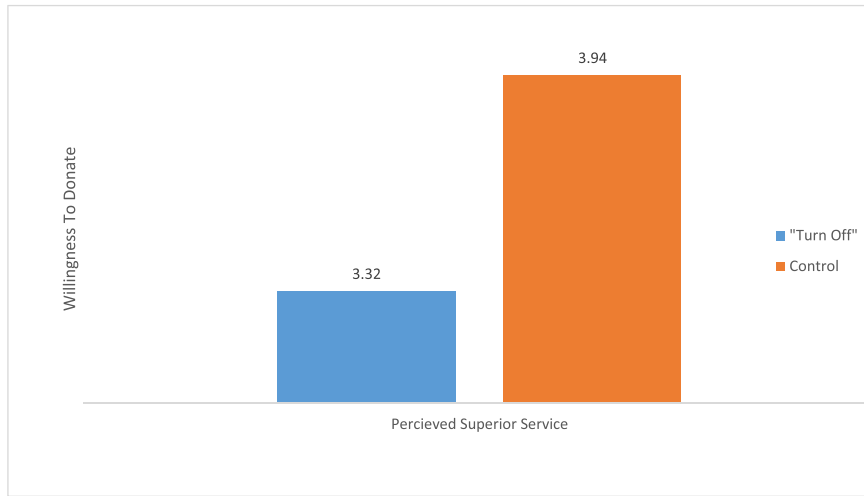


Fig. 1. The effect of “turning off” gratitude on shoppers’ willingness to donate (Study 2B).

2010).

5.2. Results

We conducted an ANCOVA with perceived service quality and charity type (tragedy, social cause) as the independent variables, willingness to donate as the dependent variable, and the awareness of the tragedy/social cause, perceived importance of the tragedy/social cause, past donation frequency, age, gender, and income as covariates. Please refer to Table 4 for a full summary of these results.

Of the covariates, only the perceived importance of tragedy/social cause influences the participants’ willingness to donate ($F(1, 129) = 38.68, p < .001$), although past donation frequency has a moderate influence ($F(1, 129) = 2.99, p < .10$). We also find a significant main effect of service quality ($F(2, 129) = 10.95, p < .001$). Replicating the results from Study 1, participants in the superior service condition are more willing to donate than are those in the inferior service condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.29$ vs. $M_{Inferior} = 2.84, t(141) = 3.60, p < .001$) and those in the control condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.29$ vs. $M_{Control} = 3.50, t(141) = 2.00, p < .05$). These main effect results and those from Study 1 are graphically reproduced in Fig. 2 (below). The results from the ordinal regression, summarized in Table 5 below, indicate a similar pattern. The participants in the superior condition are willing to donate about seven times more than are those in the inferior condition ($\hat{\beta} = 2.00, Wald = 16.14, p < .001$) and about four times more than are those in the control condition ($\hat{\beta} = 1.29, Wald = 8.32, p < .05$).

Additionally, for charity type, we find a significant main effect indicating that shoppers are more willing to donate to tragedies than to social causes ($M_{Tragedy} = 4.32$ vs. $M_{Cause} = 2.83, F(1, 129) = 35.98, p < .001$). Additionally, although the interaction between perceived service quality and charity type is not significant ($F(2, 129) = 1.02, ns$), we perform planned contrasts to test our argument that the impact of superior service will be weakened when shoppers are asked to support tragedies but not ongoing social causes (Hypothesis 3).¹

Tragedy. To test Hypothesis 3, we first examine the condition in which shoppers were asked to donate to a charity collecting money for victims of a tragedy (the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High

¹ This process is consistent with Herr et al. (1991, p.458), who argue that “Planned comparisons should be performed instead of overall F- tests when interactions involving differences between specific cells are predicted.” Matilla and Wirtz (2001), Yeung and Wyer Jr. (2004), Kim, Rao, and Lee (2009), Kharae, Labrecque, and Asare (2011), and others follow this process by presenting planned contrasts, despite interaction effects that are not significant.

Table 4
Summary of the ANCOVA results of Study 3.

	DV = willingness to donate	
	F-value	Sig.
Covariate		
Age	0.95	0.33
Cause awareness	0.21	0.65
Cause involvement/importance	38.68	0.00
Gender	2.51	0.12
Income	0.10	0.75
Past donation frequency	2.99	0.09
Main effect		
Perceived service quality	10.95	0.00
Charity type	35.98	0.00
Interaction effect		
Perceived service quality × charity type	1.02	0.36

School). The results from this analysis indicate that participants in the superior condition are only marginally more willing to donate than those in the inferior condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.72$ vs. $M_{Inferior} = 3.76; t(138) = -1.97, p < .10$) and express a willingness to donate similar to that of those in the control condition ($M_{Superior} = 4.72$ vs. $M_{Control} = 4.36; t(138) = 0.8, ns$). Therefore, in the case of tragedies, shoppers who experience superior service are no more willing to donate than they normally would be. The results from the ordinal regression display a similar pattern. The participants in the superior condition are willing to donate only moderately more than are those in the inferior condition ($\hat{\beta} = 1.13, Wald = 3.12, p < .10$) and those in the control condition ($\hat{\beta} = 1.07, Wald = 2.86, p < .10$). Collectively, these results suggest that the perception of superior service has a relatively weak impact on the shoppers’ willingness to donate to victims of tragedies. Thus, we identify a limit to the “lift” that companies receive from providing superior retail service.

Since we believe that gratitude explains why shoppers who perceive that they experienced superior service are more willing to donate than are other shoppers, we examine here gratitude’s mediating role. Following Hayes’ (2013) procedure, we find that gratitude does not explain the relationship between perceived service quality and the shoppers’ willingness to donate (indirect effect [IE] = 0.1981, [CI₉₅] = [-0.0677, 0.5085]) or the shoppers’ donation amount to the victims of tragedies (indirect effect [IE] = 0.1182, [CI₉₅] = [-0.0586, 0.3369]).

Social cause. We further tested our Hypothesis 3 for the social cause condition by performing the same aforementioned comparisons. The results from this analysis perfectly replicate the results of our previous

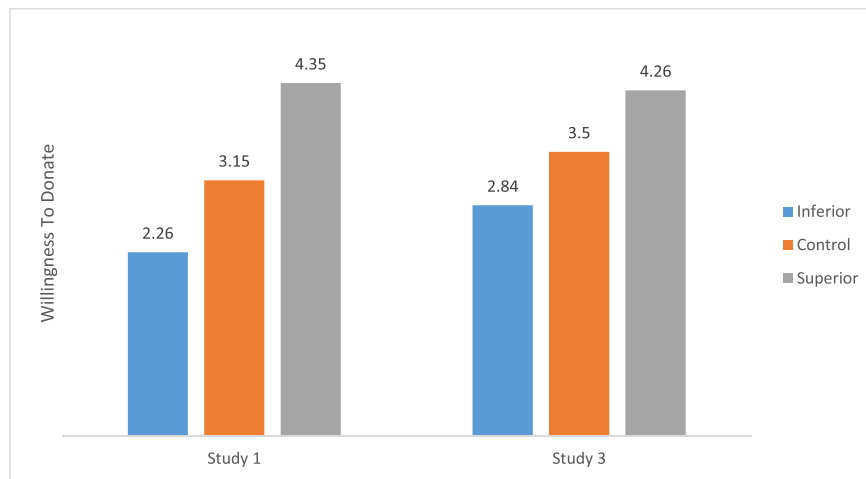


Fig. 2. The main effect of perceived superior service on shoppers' willingness to donate.

Table 5
Summary of the ordinal regression results of Study 3.

Contrast	DV = amount willing to donate					
	Study 3		Study 3 (tragedy)		Study 3 (social cause)	
	$\hat{\beta}$	Wald Statistic	$\hat{\beta}$	Wald Statistic	$\hat{\beta}$	Wald Statistic
Superior vs. inferior	2.00**	16.14**	1.13	3.12	2.83*	11.95**
Superior vs. control	1.29*	8.32*	1.07	2.86	1.42*	5.15*

** $p < .001$.
* $p < .05$.
^ $p < .10$.

studies. Participants who perceive superior retail service are more willing to donate than are those who believe that the service quality is inferior ($M_{Superior} = 3.81$ vs. $M_{Inferior} = 1.95$; $t(138) = 3.51$, $p < .01$) and those in the control condition ($M_{Superior} = 3.81$ vs. $M_{Control} = 2.57$; $t(138) = 2.38$, $p < .05$). Similarly, participants who believe that their retail experience involves superior service are willing to donate seventeen times more than are those who perceive the service to be inferior ($\hat{\beta} = 2.83$, Wald = 11.95, $p < .01$) and four times more than are those in the control condition ($\hat{\beta} = 1.42$, Wald = 5.15, $p < .05$). Therefore, we find support for our argument that the perception of superior service influences shoppers' willingness to donate to social causes.

To add credence to our gratitude-based argument, we conducted a mediation analysis following the aforementioned process. A 95% bias-corrected confidence interval based on a 5000 bootstrap confirms that gratitude mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and the shoppers' willingness to donate (indirect effect [IE] = 0.4177, [CI] = [0.0909, 0.7930]) and the shoppers' donation amount to social causes (indirect effect [IE] = 0.1831, [CI] = [0.0393, 0.3515]). This result replicates the results of our previous studies, showing that shoppers express greater gratitude when experiencing superior service and, therefore, become more likely to donate to social causes at checkout.

Comparison of Cohen's D. Finally, to better understand how the impact of superior service varies given the charity type (and provide more evidence for our Hypothesis 3), we calculated Cohen's d effect sizes for both conditions. For both the tragedy and the social cause conditions, we compared the impact of superior service with that of the control condition. The results from this analysis indicate that the impact of superior service is medium when donations are collected for a social

cause (Cohen's $d = 0.67$) but small when donations are collected for victims of a tragedy (Cohen's $d = 0.17$) (Cohen, 1992). Therefore, again, in support of Hypothesis 3, the perception of superior service is not only more important for social causes than it is for tragedies but it also has a significantly weaker impact in the latter case.

5.3. Discussion

The results from this study provide important insights. First, we replicate the main effect result that experiencing superior service motivates shoppers to donate. It is important to note that the perception of superior service impacts the shoppers' donations to social causes (e.g., American Red Cross and Susan G. Komen) and unspecified charities but not their donations to victims of tragedies. Therefore, rather than universally motivating shoppers to act altruistically, superior service has a marginal impact on the shoppers' donations to victims of tragedies. In line with Hypothesis 3, the impact of perceived superior service is weakened when shoppers are asked to donate to tragedies. To highlight the difference in the shoppers' willingness to donate to social causes and tragedies, we created Fig. 3 (below). Finally, note that we show that gratitude explains the shoppers' responses to social causes but not their responses to tragedies.

6. General discussion

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Although retailers collect donations at checkout to strengthen their relationships with shoppers, the shoppers' willingness to support these programs by donating is low at best. Given this tension, our research studies how retailers can leverage superior service to encourage shoppers to donate at checkout. Towards this goal, we conducted three studies (which are summarized in Table 6) to highlight the positive relationship between superior retail service and the shoppers' willingness to donate. We find that shoppers who perceive service to be superior are grateful to retailers and reciprocate by being more willing than other shoppers to donate at checkout. Consistent with these findings, a shopper in the superior service condition stated the following: "I would feel sort of obligated to donate if asked, seeing that I had received such a good experience so far."

These results have significant implications for marketing theory. While extant literature has identified various shopper-, brand-, charity-, and product-level factors (Alcañiz et al., 2010; Winterich & Barone, 2011) that impact the shoppers' donation behaviors, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to identify a store-level factor that does so. Therefore, we begin the process of explaining how retailers can

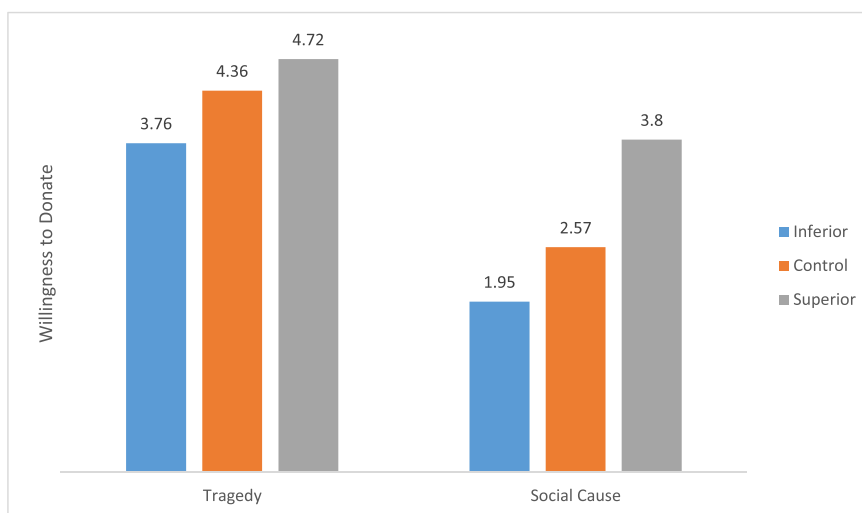


Fig. 3. Comparing shoppers' willingness to donate: tragedies vs. social causes.

leverage their resources to encourage shoppers to donate and, as a consequence, can glean the benefits associated with being perceived by shoppers as socially responsible.

We find that the perception of experiencing superior retail service encourages shoppers to act prosocially. However, beyond simply finding the existence of this effect, we capture the transformational power of superior service: although shoppers are not naturally charitable, the perception of having experienced superior service negates their reluctance to donate. Therefore, rather than simply moving shoppers from neutral to positive states, superior service moves shoppers from negative states to positive ones and motivates shoppers to transform their behaviors.

Furthermore, while it is well established that shoppers' emotions may influence their perceptions of service quality (Chebat, Filiatrault, Gelinias-Chebat, & Vaninsky, 1995), we find that perceived service quality may influence the shoppers' emotions (their gratitude, in particular), as well. Additionally, we find that the willingness to donate is yet another way in which reciprocity manifests itself in exchange relationships. Therefore, similar to WOM, share of wallet, and loyalty, willingness to donate may be an important predictor of the shoppers' future behaviors. Our research also draws a nice contrast between charities that collect donations for victims of tragedies and those that collect donations for social causes. More specifically, shoppers forego their selfish inclinations to support victims of tragedies and are willing to donate, even when their retail experiences are “average.”

Finally, we corroborate Lichtenstein et al.'s (2004) finding that exchange relationships have residual effects on third parties. Therefore, rather than being discrete and separate, exchanges form networks and their consequences reverberate. Beyond simply corroborating this result, we also identify a store-level factor that spills over to impact third parties. Arguably, our most important finding is that unauthentic employees mute the positive lift that retailers expect to receive from providing superior service. Although Morales (2005) shows that unauthenticity leads shoppers to respond less positively than expected to high-effort retail activities, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to explicitly identify boundaries to the positive effects of superior service.

6.2. Managerial implications

This research has important implications for retailers, as well. First, because shoppers are not altruistic, retailers may be better served by making their own donations, encouraging their employees to donate, and engaging in other socially responsible activities that do not involve

shoppers. Retailers that nevertheless sponsor charity at checkout must understand that perceived superior service increases the shoppers' willingness to donate. Accordingly, retailers should create signage to showcase positive shopper reviews and service-based accolades throughout their stores, draw attention to the employees' areas of expertise, work to minimize stock outs, maintain clean environments, and make other efforts to highlight their superior service during charity at checkout campaigns. Even so, retailers should give personal attention to shoppers, listen and respond to their feedback, and make comparable efforts to induce shopper gratitude. Strategically emphasizing superior service (and, as a consequence, inducing feelings of gratitude) will not only facilitate fundraising but will also encourage shoppers to respond more positively in other aspects of the exchange relationship.

Furthermore, we suggest that certain retailers should avoid charity at checkout. Recall that gratitude drops in commission-based settings, even in the presence of superior service, leading shoppers to respond less positively than expected to charity at checkout. This is not to say that retailers such as Lulu's and Foot Locker, where employees work for commissions, should forego corporate social responsibility (CSR) but, instead, that they themselves should donate, take strong stances on community and environmental issues, encourage their employees to donate, and engage in CSR activities that do not involve shoppers. However, to boost shopper gratitude and, as a consequence, increase their willingness to donate, such retailers must ensure that their employees are transparent, express empathy, display emotional and social intelligence, and engage in other activities that promote employee authenticity. Retailers whose employees work for a commission should also ask employees to check out shoppers whom they have assisted (rather than asking shoppers to identify employees who assisted them) to make employee commissions less salient if maximizing shoppers' donations is their goal. Finally, retailers should view raising donations for natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes), national tragedies (e.g., mass shootings), and comparable events (e.g., disasters, accidents) as an opportunity to fundraise at a high level and strengthen their relationships with shoppers. Additionally, to increase shopper support, in the absence of such events, retailers should frame social causes in a manner that mimics tragedies. Towards this end, retailers should create vivid images of human suffering and adopt other strategies to “pull on heart strings” when requesting donations for social causes.

6.2.1. Supplementary analyses

To generate additional managerial insights, we ran a logistic regression by using data from Study 1. The results from this analysis, which uses perceived service quality as the independent variable and

Table 6
Summary of findings.

Study	Related hypothesis	Result	Theoretical implications	Managerial implications
Study 1	Hypothesis 1	Perceived superior service motivates shoppers to donate when they otherwise would not.	Perceived superior service can impact third parties such as charities.	Retailers should invest in employee education, ensure that their stores are clean, work to minimize stock outs, and make other service-based improvements to encourage prosocial shopper behaviors.
Studies 2A & 2B	Hypothesis 2	Feelings of gratitude mediate the relationship between perceived superior service and willingness to donate. In the absence of gratitude, shoppers who perceive superior service are not particularly willing to donate.	Gratitude explains why shoppers who perceive that they experienced superior service are more willing to donate than are other shoppers. Perceived service quality can influence the shoppers' emotions (e.g., gratitude). Perceived superior service does not always encourage shoppers to adopt prosocial behaviors. The type of charity influences the shoppers' willingness to donate.	Charities should partner with retailers that are noted for providing superior services. Retailers who request donations should give shoppers personal attention, listen and respond to their feedback, and make other comparable efforts to make shoppers feel grateful. Retailers who solicit donations must ensure that their employees are transparent, express empathy, display emotional and social intelligence, and engage in other activities that promote employee authenticity.
Study 3	Hypothesis 3	In the case of tragedies, perceived superior service does not motivate shoppers to act significantly more altruistically than normal.		To encourage shoppers to donate and reap the rewards of being viewed as socially responsible, retailers should solicit donations for tragedies.

donation behavior (\$0 or > \$0) as the dependent variable, suggest that shoppers who believe that their retail experiences involved superior service are three times more likely to donate at checkout than those who perceive inferior service ($\beta = 1.113$, Wald = 11.00, $p < .01$). Furthermore, a chi-squared analysis (again using data from Study 1) indicates a significant relationship between perceived service quality and donation behavior (donate vs. not donate) ($\chi^2(2) = 19.35$, $p < .001$). Sixty-six percent of shoppers who experienced superior service are willing to donate to charities at checkout, whereas a mere 17% of shoppers who experienced inferior service are willing to do so, as shown in Fig. 4. Additionally, 16% of shoppers who experienced superior service are willing to donate \$5 at checkout, though only 3% who experienced inferior service are willing to donate that amount.

Beyond reiterating that a positive relationship exists between the perception of superior service and the shoppers' willingness to donate, these supplementary analyses have important implications for charities. Traditionally, retailers seek out partner charities (as charity at checkout is a portion of their corporate social responsibility). However, our findings suggest that if maximizing shoppers' donations is, in fact, their goal, charities should move beyond participating passively in this process to purposefully seeking out partner retailers that provide superior service (e.g., Costco and Nordstrom) rather than partner retailers such as Big Lots, Ross, and others known for providing inferior service (American Customer Satisfaction Index, 2016).

6.3. Limitations and future research

This research is not without limitations. For instance, our scenario-based experiments do not account for groupthink (Janis, 1982), shopper—employee dyadic relationships (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000), and other social factors that influence the shoppers' in-store decision-making. Furthermore, we only consider brick and mortar stores, although variations in service quality may be less salient in online contexts where there is less emphasis on personnel-delivered services and on the tangible aspects of the retail environment (Kolesar & Galbraith, 2000; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005). Additionally, although we study retail situations involving the exchange of goods, it is likely that the interaction between superior service quality and willingness to donate at checkout will be particularly strong for service-based retailers (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, & Rust, 1997). In addition, this research includes a very subjective independent variable—perceived retail service quality. However, shoppers' perceptions of retail service may vary greatly. Superior service in one context (e.g., Macy's) may be viewed as standard in another (e.g., Nordstrom). While accounting for these factors is outside the scope of this research, doing so will increase the external validity of our results. Additionally, while we identify the important role of gratitude when shoppers are asked to donate to social causes, future research should explore the mechanisms that explain the shoppers' donation behaviors towards tragedies and other charitable causes.

Beyond addressing the aforementioned shortcomings, future research should identify additional store-level factors, such as ambient features (d'Astous, 2000), corporate image (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006), and employee satisfaction (Bernhardt, Donthu, & Kennet, 2000), that impact the shoppers' donation behaviors. Future research should also identify other instances in which the positive effects of superior service are attenuated. For instance, Nordstrom has had the top service rating for years (e.g., ACSI). As such, Nordstrom's shoppers (and those who shop at the retailers with high ACSI ratings) may have become accustomed to its superior service and less responsive to this service quality as a result. Even so, shoppers may be less sensitive to superior service in utilitarian shopping situations, in which they tend to be very goal oriented and focused on efficiency (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001). Additionally, future research should study the impact of superior service in instances in which shoppers are asked to donate to

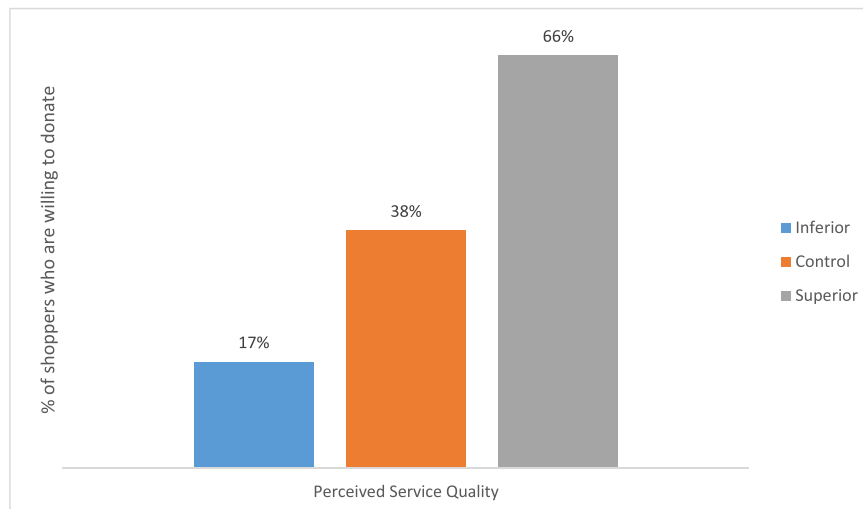


Fig. 4. Results of the chi-squared analysis.

multiple causes. Quite possibly, the effect of superior service will diminish with each request.

Finally, future research should consider the ethical implications of gratitude-induced reciprocity (Palmatier et al., 2009). It is quite possible that the shoppers' gratitude may transition into feelings of indebtedness and obligation when shoppers feel that they are repeatedly unable to reestablish equilibrium in the exchange. If such feelings do in fact arise over time from activities designed to induce gratitude, an ethical dilemma arises.

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Efua Obeng graduated from The University of Pittsburgh's Katz Graduate School of Business in 2013 and is now an Assistant Professor at Howard University. Of particular interest to Efua is studying the idiosyncratic nature of retail competition and identifying the strategies retailers can use to achieve competitive advantage. Thus far, Efua's research has identified the resources and capabilities underlying retail advantage and explaining the dynamics of competitive overlap between retail players. Her research has been published in the *Academy of Marketing Science Review* and *Journal of Retailing*. Her *Journal of Retailing* article the lead for the issue.

Chinintorn Nakhata (PhD, 2014, University of South Florida) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Penn State Harrisburg. Her research interests include behavioral pricing, retailing, services, and direct/interactive marketing. Her research was published in several marketing journals including *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, and *Logistics Research*. She is currently on an editorial review board for *Journal of Consumer Marketing*.

Hsiao-Ching Kuo (PhD, 2015, University of South Florida) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Washington and Jefferson College. Her research interests include social influence, services, and consumer privacy. Her research was published in several marketing journals including *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, and *Journal of Consumer Marketing*.