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## Scan it, buy it, pay it – Customers' psychological contracts as partial employees in retail

### Abstract

**Purpose:** Self-service technologies (SST) have become more and more pervasive in retail to facilitate autonomous checkout. In this context, customers play an active role and as such, can be considered as “partial employees”. Partial employees have to perform a wide range of tasks, get rewarded for their work, and need to understand the terms of the exchange, all without being subject to a formalized contract. In this research, we suggest that partial employees go through a process of organizational socialization that allows them to define the psychological contract they hold with the organization.

**Design/methodology/approach:** In order to investigate the psychological contracts of partial employees, 324 Canadian customers using SST completed an online questionnaire, in which we measured their SST use, psychological contract fulfillment, and organizational socialization.

**Findings:** Descriptive analyses highlight that customers as partial employees build a psychological contract with their most frequent retailer, as they perceive not only retailer inducements but also their own contributions. Multiple linear regressions suggest that organizational socialization favors psychological contract fulfillment, but that specific dimensions of organizational socialization are important for employer inducements vs. employee contributions. Moreover, results suggest that the frequency of use of SST as well as the patronage positively predict psychological contract fulfillment.

**Originality:** This research investigates a specific situation of unconventional employment – that of customers as partial employees with organizations. It contributes to the literature on the psychological contract by broadening its application to new relations and to the literature on customer management by reemphasizing the relevance of the psychological contract in this domain.

**Keywords:** partial employee, self-service technologies, psychological contract, organizational socialization

## 1. Introduction

The past decade has seen many changes in terms of service production, with information technology becoming more and more pervasive in the relationship between customers and organizations. In the field of retail, the development of technology has led to multiple innovations such as mobile commerce (Gross, 2015; Kourouthanassis and Giaglis, 2012), mobile payment (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Chen, 2008; Schierz *et al.*, 2010) and new forms of checkout (e.g. self-scanning and self-checkout) (Audrin, 2020; Demoulin and Djelassi, 2016; Lee, 2015; Meuter *et al.*, 2005).

Self-service technologies (SST) allow customers to perform scanning and check-out activities on their own without the intervention of employees, facilitating a better service delivery (Ahearne and Rapp, 2010; Curran and Meuter, 2005). In highlighting the particularly active role of this category of customers, the literature refers to these customers as “partial employees” (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004).

Research has suggested investigating the challenges associated with partial employees through a human resource management (HRM) lens by focusing on recruitment, selection, and motivation of partial employees (Bowen, 1986; Bowers *et al.*, 1990; Mustak *et al.*, 2016). One of the biggest underlying challenges in envisioning customers as partial employees is their lack of formal relationship to the organization. To overcome this limitation, Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) suggest using the concept of “psychological contract” (Rousseau, 1995), a tacit contract that unites the customer with the organization as an employer.

The literature identifies organizational socialization as a common ground between partial employee management and psychological contract development (Schein, 1988). Organizational socialization is a process through which customers as partial employees develop a sense of the tasks, values, and norms associated to their new role (Evans *et al.*, 2008; Mustak *et al.*, 2016), and a process through which they further develop their beliefs about the organization’s inducements and their contribution; in other words – their psychological contract (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Delobbe *et al.*, 2016).

To our knowledge, there has been no research that has specifically investigated the psychological contract of partial employees following Halbesleben and Buckley's (2004) suggestion. This area seems however more and more relevant, mainly for two reasons: there is growing involvement of customers in service production (Alzaydi *et al.*, 2018); and there are several calls from scholars investigating the psychological contract to study less traditional employment and alternative relations (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Knapp *et al.*, 2020; Kraak *et al.*, 2019). As such, extending the analysis of the psychological contract to the context of customers as partial employees seems of great interest and value.

The purpose of this research is to investigate if customers as “partial employees” build a psychological contract with the retailer they shop at. More precisely, the first goal of our paper is to investigate the relationship between customers using SST and retailers through the lens of the psychological contract. The second goal of this paper is to assess how organizational socialization impacts psychological contract development in partial employees. Finally, the third goal of our research is to assess how self-service technologies and their use impact psychological contracts of partial employees. This study is based on quantitative data collection by partial employees in Canadian retail and consists of 324 questionnaires. Results reveal the existence of a psychological contract between customers as partial employees and their most frequent retailer. Results also suggest that organizational socialization favors psychological contract fulfillment. More precisely, it suggests that the specific dimensions of politics, people and organizational goals and values play a central role in employer inducements whereas politics, people and performance proficiency are more important in respect to employee contributions. Finally, results show that the frequency of SST use and patronage positively predict psychological contract fulfillment. This research contributes to the literature on partial employees by operationalizing Halbesleben and Buckley's (2004) suggestion of a psychological contract for customers as partial employees, broadening the perspectives of this concept to customer management literature. It also contributes to the literature on the psychological contract by investigating a specific situation of unconventional employment / alternative relation.

We first present our theoretical framework, focusing on partial employees, the psychological contract, and organizational socialization. We then present our study, its model and measures, as well as its results, and consequently discuss its managerial implications as well as its contributions.

## 2. Literature review

Self-service technologies (SST) can be defined as “technological interfaces that enable customers to produce a service independent of direct service employee involvement” (Meuter *et al.*, 2000, p. 50). In an SST setup, customers play an active role in the service (Demoulin and Djelassi, 2016) through service co-production or cooperation (Dong *et al.*, 2008). From this perspective, customers’ involvement in service creation is high: customers carry out tasks, they take part in the organization’s activities and can therefore be defined as “partial employees” (Bowen, 1986; Dong *et al.*, 2008; Hsieh *et al.*, 2004; Mills *et al.*, 1983; Mills and Morris, 1986; Mustak *et al.*, 2016).

The concept of “partial employee” emerges in organization studies in the 1980s by authors such as Bowen (1986), Mills *et al.* (1983), and Mills and Morris (1986), but finds its roots in the 1930s through Barnard (1938, 1948) whose work invites organizations to manage customers’ contributions as a source of human resource (Novicevic *et al.*, 2006). Recent literature on partial employees has notably focused on the outcomes of their involvement in the service in terms of satisfaction (Zhuang *et al.*, 2019) and on their relationship with service employees (Choi and Lawry, 2020). Much of the research has focused on self-service technologies, where customer involvement is particularly high (Audrin *et al.*, 2021; Hilton *et al.*, 2013; Turner and Shockley, 2014).

The participation of customers in the service co-production confers them with the role of partial employees (Bowen, 1986; Evans *et al.*, 2008). The contribution of partial employees is measured in time and in work (Bettencourt, 1997; Lengnick-Hall, 1996), two components traditionally associated with contribution of “regular” employees. Scholars make a call to consider customers as partial employees in service management (Bowen, 1986; Keh and Teo, 2001). Challenges associated with customers’ mobilization as partial employees are related to the awareness of the tasks they have to perform, the ability to support customers in developing the necessary skills to perform these tasks, and the ability to provide rewards to motivate customers to perform these tasks. Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall (1999) draw a parallel between these challenges and the human resource management challenges associated with employee management and invite research to take a human resource management perspective by considering customers as partners of HR. Adopting this perspective equates to integrating customers and their participation and contribution, to the internal processes of the organization

(Brief and Bazerman, 2003; Russ-Eft, 2004). Arguably, this perspective goes beyond “traditional” customer relationship management that keeps customers outside of the organization. However, some parallels can still be drawn as both streams of research put an emphasis on performance management, whether it is at the individual level or at the firm level (Guerola-Navarro *et al.*, 2021; Soltani *et al.*, 2018; Valmohammadi, 2017).

Research on partial employees management has mostly focused on how to motivate customers to take part in the service production (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003). The literature nonetheless advocates for a more HR-driven approach on customers’ contribution in the service industry, by using traditional HRM tools to understand and develop that specific aspect of service management (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Hsieh *et al.*, 2004; Manolis *et al.*, 2001; Ulrich, 1992). Using HRM practices helps foster engagement and integration of partial employees in the internal processes of organizations (Bowen *et al.*, 2000; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Novicevic *et al.*, 2006).

The literature identifies three axes of focus from an HRM perspective in order to influence customers’ participation in the service co-production: 1) the understanding of the tasks that need to be carried out, 2) the ability to carry them out, and 3) the rewards associated with the performance in carrying out said tasks (Bowen, 1986; Bowers *et al.*, 1990; Mustak *et al.*, 2016). In terms of understanding the tasks, the focus is on planning and describing what customers’ tasks consist of, as well as understanding their needs, wishes, and interests (Bowers *et al.*, 1990; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Manolis *et al.*, 2001). In terms of task abilities, Bowen (1986) invites organizations to use similar approaches used with ‘standard’ employees, such as recruitment, selection, and training (Bowen, 1986). In this context, training can take many shapes and forms, with scholars emphasizing both the roles of traditional instruments (documents, handbooks, mentoring, and feedback) (Bitner *et al.*, 1997; Bowers *et al.*, 1990) and organizational socialization (Evans *et al.*, 2008; Goodwin, 1988; Kelley *et al.*, 1990; Mills and Morris, 1986). When it comes to rewarding performance, the first requirement is to define what performance consists of (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Halbesleben and Stoutner, 2013; Novicevic *et al.*, 2011). Bowen (1986) suggests that managers should clarify what the rewards for partial employees are – the same way they would for traditional employees, as rewards can reinforce behavior and performance (Goodwin, 1988; Kelley *et al.*, 1990; Manolis *et al.*, 2001). As an example, greater autonomy and a faster service are common rewards for partial employees involved in the service production.

Considering customers as partial employees raises a number of questions about relationship management. Given the fact that they participate in the service production and that their involvement with the organization increases, the customers' relationship towards the organization differs from a standard customer – service provider relationship. As co-producers, partial employees have an implied contract with the organization (Gouthier and Schmid, 2003; Keh and Teo, 2001), which some scholars refer to as a psychological contract (Novicevic *et al.*, 2006), in which partial employees get something back in exchange for their contribution (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Hsieh *et al.*, 2004; Kelley *et al.*, 1990).

This psychological contract can be presented as a mental schema that individuals hold regarding their employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995, 2001). The notion goes beyond the limitations of the legal contract of employment and presents a broader vision of people management that encompasses subjective elements (Arnold, 1996). Rousseau defines psychological contracts as “beliefs, based upon promises expressed or implied, regarding an exchange agreement between an individual, and, in organizations, the employing firm and its agents” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). These beliefs comprise the inducements that are promised by the organization and the contributions that are to be made in exchange (De Vos *et al.*, 2003). The cognitive, perceptual and individual dimensions of the psychological contracts are emphasized by scholars (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Hansen, 2019; Rousseau *et al.*, 2018).

Research on the psychological contract traditionally aims at understanding the content of psychological contracts, i.e., what the characteristics and terms of the exchange between both parties are, and how such contracts are formed (Conway and Pekcan, 2019). De Vos *et al.* identify two dimensions of psychological contracts: employer inducements and employee contributions (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; De Vos and Freese, 2011; De Vos and Meganck, 2009).

A common criticism of research on psychological contract is its static dimension, where most research focuses on psychological contracts at a t-time, without acknowledging the formation and evolution of the contract (Conway and Pekcan, 2019), as well as its main focus on traditional employment relationships. Rousseau *et al.* (2018) suggested a phase-model to address the challenges of psychological contract formation (De Vos *et al.*, 2003), and the influence of change and situational factors on the psychological contract (Freese *et al.*, 2011; Hansen, 2019; Pate, 2005). The authors state that their model initially focuses on the

employment dynamics, but also recognize that it “may be applied to other exchange contexts as well” (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018, p. 1082). Recently, there have been several calls for research on less traditional employment and alternative relations (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Knapp *et al.*, 2020; Kraak *et al.*, 2019) and recent studies have been investigating forms of employment / relations that stand out from the traditional ones, studying the cases of army recruits, volunteers, gig workers, and virtual employees (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016; Gazit *et al.*, 2021; Griep *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2020). These studies have shown the interest of using the psychological contract to conceptualize relations that go beyond traditional ones in order to better understand the obligations that are perceived (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016), the situations of breach (Griep *et al.*, 2020), the relation between psychological contract fulfillment and performance (Liu *et al.*, 2020), as well as career expectations (Gazit *et al.*, 2021). These studies also emphasize the stability of the concept of psychological contract and its relevance in alternative relations.

The literature on both partial employees and psychological contracts identifies the pivotal role of organizational socialization, which helps individuals adapt to values, norms, and expectations of an organization (Feldman, 1981). This can be directly linked to both partial employee management and psychological contract development, as said socialization is fundamental in the adaptation of partial employees into their role (Kelley *et al.*, 1990; Mustak *et al.*, 2016) and the development of newcomers’ psychological contracts (De Vos *et al.*, 2003; Delobbe *et al.*, 2016; Nelson, 1991). In terms of adaptation of a newcomer, socialization allows the development of appropriate role behaviors, necessary skills and abilities, and the adjustment to organizational norms and values (Feldman, 1981). In terms of relation development, socialization is a process through which newcomers acquire a sense of context and develop their perception of not only the organizations’ inducements, but also of their contribution (De Vos *et al.*, 2003). The process of organizational socialization itself is characterized by active information-seeking and knowledge acquisition (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016), as much as it is by its tacit and informal dimension (Evans *et al.*, 2008).

Recent research on organizational socialization has studied its development over time and its impact on the psychological contract of newcomers (Woodrow and Guest, 2020). Studies have also emphasized the role of specific stakeholders during the organizational socialization phase, such as managers (Ellis *et al.*, 2017), insiders and organizational support (Mornata and Cassar, 2018), and have also investigated the tactics of newcomers (Ellis *et al.*, 2017; Nasr *et al.*, 2019). Some recent research has been done on “unconventional” employment situations, investigating notably the socialization of volunteers (Livi *et al.*, 2020) and those of recent immigrant



newcomers (Malik and Manroop, 2017). In the specific area of customers, the concept of organizational socialization has been used since the 90s (Kelley *et al.*, 1992). Evans *et al.* refer to the phenomenon of organizational socialization of customers as “customer socialization” (Evans *et al.*, 2008). Recent research focusing on customer organizational socialization has focused on the tactics used by organizations in order to “socialize” customers (Liao *et al.*, 2017) and on cooperation behaviors (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Recent research tackles the topic of customer organizational socialization in SST using various other labels, most notably referring to customer “training” (Nicod *et al.*, 2020; Nicod and Llosa, 2018) or customer “management” (Secchi *et al.*, 2020), while still associating it with the concept of organizational socialization.

### 2.1. The present study

In this research, we seek to evaluate and measure psychological contracts in partial employees, focusing on customers who use self-scanning and self-service technologies (SST). More specifically, we are interested in assessing whether partial employees have a psychological contract, and if so, what the main characteristics of said psychological contract are in terms of retailer inducements and partial employee contributions. Based on the literature on psychological contract formation, we hypothesize that organizational socialization shapes psychological contract. We further hypothesize that SST use impacts the fulfillment of the psychological contract. Operationalized hypotheses are described in greater details in the data analyses section.

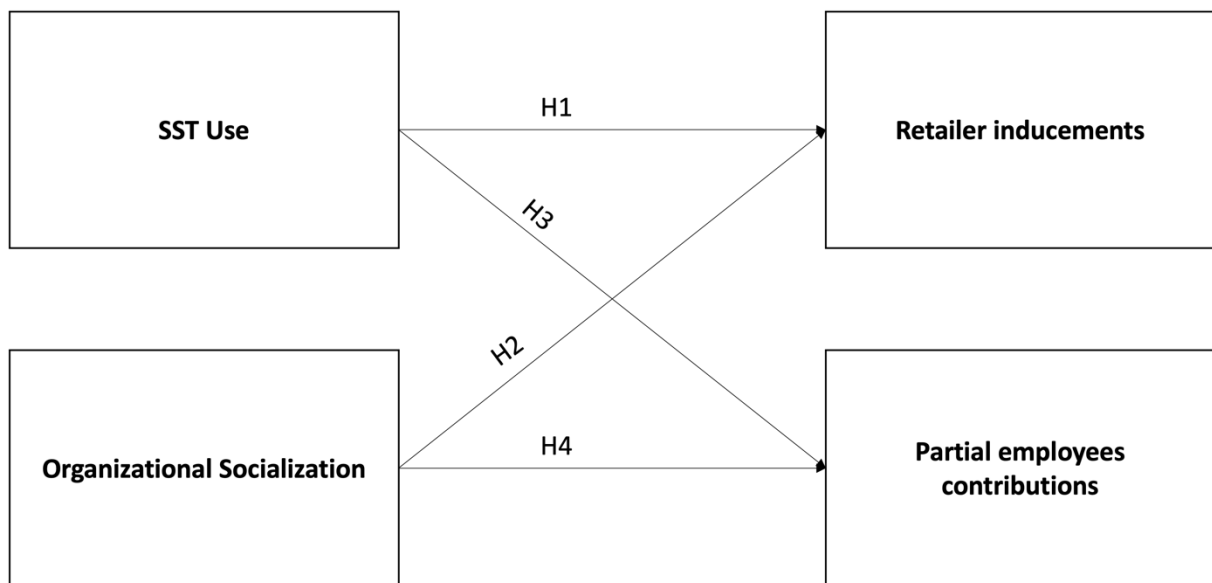


Figure 1: Hypothesized model

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and procedure

Participants were 324 respondents who self-selected to complete the study in response to a posting on the Mechanical Turk website (compensation = \$1.00). Although MTurk has suffered from several concerns and should not be used to make inferences at the population-level (Mellis and Bickel, 2020), several studies highlight that this tool represents a valuable option for data collection (Goodman *et al.*, 2013) and conclude that MTurk is an efficient and reliable tool (Mortensen and Hughes, 2018). Several studies in the context of SST have relied on MTurk for data collection (Dao and Theotokis, 2021; Wei *et al.*, 2016, 2017). The sample (median age = 30, SD = 10.19) included 55.56% male participants ( $n_{\text{male}} = 180$ ;  $n_{\text{female}} = 140$ , 43.21%; 2 participants did not want to specify their gender, and 2 participants did not answer the question). In terms of highest education level, 24.2% completed high school; 9.32% completed some college, technical training, or an associate degree; 46.7% completed a bachelor degree; and 19.1% completed a master degree or higher. Although MTurk respondents' self-reported demographics may be taken with caution (Aguinis *et al.*, 2021), the demographics in this research are comparable with other studies focusing on demographics of SST users (Lee *et al.*, 2010).

The study was presented using LimeSurvey, where the questionnaires were available in both national languages (French and English) such that all participants could answer. Most questionnaires were initially available in English, and a backward translation method was used to get the final questionnaires in French. Participants first provided their informed consent for the study, which was described as investigating people's use and perception of SST. Participants then completed all questionnaires listed in the measure section below. When answering the questions, participants were asked to think about the retailer where they most often use SST.

#### 3.2. Measures

##### 3.2.1. Psychological contract

Psychological contract fulfillment was measured using the questionnaire of DeVos *et al.* (2003). This questionnaire defines psychological contract as a two faceted concept. First, the questionnaire contains items assessing employer inducements ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ). In this facet, authors have defined items assessing 1) career development, 2) job content, 3) social atmosphere, 4) financial rewards and 5) work life balance. The second dimension refers to

employee contributions (alpha = 0.90), which entails 1) in and extra-role behavior, 2) flexibility, 3) ethical behavior, 4) loyalty and 5) employability. This scale is widely used in research on the psychological contract and has been used across various organizational setups in recently published research (Farnese *et al.*, 2018; Sheehan *et al.*, 2019; Tekleab *et al.*, 2020). In the specific context of this study, we adapted the two initial concepts to be able to measure retailer inducements' fulfillment and partial employee contributions. Participants were asked to which extent they agreed with the statements regarding the fulfillment of retailer inducements and their partial employee contributions on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Dimensions and items were adapted to fit the context of SST: for example, the dimension "financial rewards" was transformed to "rewards". In the same line of thought, some items were rephrased to fit the current context. For example: "Volunteer to do tasks that are strictly not part of your job if necessary" was changed to "Volunteer to do tasks that go beyond your usual range of tasks". Nine items were removed, as they did not make sense in the context of SST (e.g. "The opportunity to decide for yourself when you take your vacation"). Due to the specific context of SST, the dimension "career development" was removed.

### 3.2.2. Organizational socialization

Organizational socialization was measured with Chao *et al.*'s questionnaire (Chao *et al.*, 1994). This scale is widely used in research on the newcomer socialization and has been used as such or adapted in recently published research (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016; Jiang *et al.*, 2021; Nifadkar, 2020). We adapted the questionnaire to the context of SST. For example, the item "I know very little about the history behind my work group/department" was adapted to "I know very little about the history behind self-service technologies at the retailer". Three items were removed as they could not be adapted to the context of SST. Due to the specific context of SST, the dimension "language" was removed. Participants were asked to answer all the items on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### 3.2.3. SST Use

SST Use was measured using the 10 items presented by Lee (2015). The items referred to SST frequency of use (1 item), SST service quality (4 items), retail patronage intention (3 items) and SST usage intention (2 items). Participants were asked to answer all the items on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

### 3.3. Data analyses

Data analyses were conducted with R and consisted of two steps: descriptive statistics and multivariate linear regressions. We first report descriptive analyses on the prevalence of participants' psychological contract. More specifically, we report participants' perception of the fulfillment of the retailer's inducements' (i.e., task content, social atmosphere, rewards, work-life balance) and partial employee contributions (i.e., in and extra-role behavior, flexibility, ethical behavior, loyalty and employability). We further report Pearson's correlations between the subdimensions of retailer's inducements (Table I) and partial employee contributions (Table II).

Regarding the regression models, we wanted to test how SST Use and organizational socialization may be related to the fulfillment of the retailer's inducements (H1 and H2) and partial employee contributions (H3 and H4). To do so, we averaged the items measuring retailer inducements' fulfillment and partial employee contributions (DeVos *et al.*, 2003). We then averaged the items referring to each SST dimension – SST frequency of use, SST service quality, retail patronage intention, and SST usage intention respectively. Our operationalized hypotheses were that SST frequency of use (H1a), SST service quality (H1b), retail patronage intention (H1c), and SST usage intention (H1d) would positively predict the fulfillment of the retailer's inducements. Moreover, we hypothesized that organizational socialization would also positively predict retailer's inducement. We then aggregated Chao *et al.*'s (1994) items referring to history (H2a), politics (H2b), people (H2c), organizational goals and values (H2d), and performance proficiency (H2e) would positively predict retailer inducements' fulfillment. Regarding partial employee contribution, we hypothesized that SST frequency of use (H3a), SST service quality (H3b), retail patronage intention (H3c), and SST usage intention (H3d) would positively predict partial employee contribution. Moreover, we hypothesize that history (H4a), politics (H4b), people (H4c), organizational goals and values (H4d), and performance proficiency (H4e) would positively predict partial employee contribution.

Statistical assumptions associated with multiple linear regressions were examined. Plots of the residuals against the predicted scores of the dependent variables showed no major sign of heteroscedasticity. Residuals followed a normal distribution and were centered around zero. No multicollinearity between predictors was found (we computed the VIF score for all the independent variables in each model, and no values were above 3.07). Finally, the Cook's distance of all cases was examined and showed no undue influence of any case on the parameters. As such, the statistical assumptions of multiple linear regressions were met.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Psychological contract: evaluation of retailer inducements and partial employee contributions

As highlighted in Table I, partial employees are most positive about the fulfillment of promises relating to their task content ( $m = 4.5$ ,  $sd = 1.4$ ), the social atmosphere ( $m = 4.5$ ,  $sd = 1.5$ ), and work-life balance ( $m = 4.8$ ,  $sd = 1.4$ ). Rewards received the most negative evaluation ( $m = 3.8$ ,  $sd = 1.7$ ). Correlation coefficients highlight a significant link between task content and social atmosphere ( $r = 0.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and between task content and reward ( $r = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No further significant correlations were found.

In terms of contributions (Table 2), the partial employees are most positive about ethical behavior ( $m = 5.4$ ,  $sd = 1.3$ ) as well as in and extra-role behavior ( $m = 4.7$ ,  $sd = 1.2$ ). Loyalty received the most negative evaluation ( $m = 4.0$ ,  $sd = 1.2$ ). Correlation coefficients revealed one positive association between ethical behavior and loyalty ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but no further significant association between other component of contributions.

**Table I**

#### *Descriptive statistics of retailer inducements*

Subdimensions of retailer inducements	Alpha	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Task Content	.83	307	4.5	1.4	—			
2. Social Atmosphere	.90	307	4.5	1.5	0.76***	—		
3. Rewards	.93	307	3.8	1.7	0.19***	0.11	—	
4. Work-life balance	.70	307	4.8	1.4	0.04	0.00	0.08	—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table II**

#### *Descriptive statistics of partial employee contributions*

<b>Subdimensions of partial employee contributions</b>	<b>Alpha</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. In and extra-role behavior	.87	307	4.7	1.2	—				
2. Flexibility	.62	307	4.5	1.4	-0.03	—			
3. Ethical behavior	.85	307	5.4	1.3	0.03	0.01	—		
4. Loyalty	.55	307	4.0	1.2	0.05	0.07	0.32***	—	
5. Employability	.82	307	4.5	1.6	0.08	-0.02	0.03	0.02	—

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### *4.2. Impact of SST use and organizational socialization on the psychological contract*

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two multiple linear regression analyses on 1) retailer inducements and 2) partial employee contributions. In both models, we introduced SST use and organizational socialization as predictors.

Results for both models are depicted in Table III. Both models predict significantly retailer inducements ( $F(9, 293) = 31.5, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = 0.476$ ) and partial employee contributions ( $F(9, 293) = 36.2, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = 0.512$ ).

Results reveal that the frequency of use of SST ( $b = 0.14, p = .005$ ), perception of quality of SST ( $b = .14, p = .018$ ) and patronage ( $b = 0.15, p = .018$ ) positively predict retailer inducements' fulfillment. These results support hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c. This suggests that the more customers use and perceive SST as being of high quality and the more they intend on using them again, the higher they will perceive retailer inducements as fulfilled.

Regarding the dimensions of organizational socialization, results reveal that politics ( $b = .23, p < .001$ ), people ( $b = .30, p < .001$ ) and organizational goals and values ( $b = .28, p < .001$ ) positively predict partial employees' perception of retailer inducements' fulfillment. These results support hypotheses H2b, H2c and H2d. These results highlight that politics, people and organizational goals and values positively predicted employer inducements' fulfillment perception. The more partial employees perceive an understanding of the politics of the organization, the higher the inducements seem fulfilled. Regarding the "people" dimension, its positive significance highlights that the more partial employees perceive that they belong to the organization and that they are close to other partial employees and staff, the more the

inducements are fulfilled. Finally, the importance of understanding the values of the retailer is also a significant predictor of retailer inducements' fulfillment.

Regarding the importance of SST Use, patronage predicts employee contribution perception ( $b = 0.21, p < .001$ ). This supports hypothesis H3c, suggesting that the intention to shop again at the retailer is a positive predictor of employee contribution.

Regarding the importance of partial employee contributions, politics ( $b = .15, p = .044$ ), people ( $b = .27, p < .001$ ) and performance proficiency ( $b = .17, p = .018$ ) positively predict partial employee perception of their contribution. These results provide support for our hypotheses H4b, H4c and H4e. They reveal that the more partial employees perceive and understand the politics of the organization, the higher they perceive their contribution. In addition, feeling a part of the retailer and knowing how to perform their tasks is a positive predictor of partial employee contribution. Finally, the more partial employees are familiar with their tasks, the more they perceive that they fulfill their contribution.

**Table III**

*Linear regression results for the link between SST Use, Organizational Socialization and Psychological contract dimensions*

Effect	Retailer inducements				Partial employee contributions					
	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL				LL	UL	
Intercept	-.23	.40	-1.03	.57	.57	-.16	.32	-.80	.49	.64
Frequency of use	.14	.05	.04	.23	.005	.06	.04	-.02	.14	.14
Quality of SST	.14	.05	.02	.25	.02	.08	.08	-.01	.17	.09
Patronage	.15	.06	.03	.28	.02	.21	.05	.10	.31	.001
Usage intention of SST	-.02	.06	-.13	.10	.78	-.04	.05	-.13	.06	.44
History	-.06	.07	-.19	.07	.39	.04	.05	-.07	.14	.48
Politics	.23	.09	.05	.41	.01	.15	.07	.00	.29	.04
People	.30	.07	.16	.44	.001	.27	.06	.16	.38	.001

Organizational goals and values	.28	.08	.11	.44	.001	.13	.07	-.01	.26	.06
Performance proficiency	-.13	.09	-.30	.05	.15	.17	.07	.03	.31	.02

Note. Number of participants = 307, CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate if customers using SST, considered here as “partial employees”, build a psychological contract with the retailer they shop at. We hypothesized that partial employees may indeed have a psychological contract with retailers, and that such a psychological contract may be developed through organizational socialization and SST use. 324 Canadian customers completed an online survey, in which SST use, organizational socialization and psychological contract fulfillment were measured.

The first goal of our paper was to investigate the relationship between customers using SST and retailers. As hypothesized, our results reveal that partial employees build a psychological contract with retailers when using SST. Partial employees have a clear perception of the inducements they receive from retailers – task content, social atmosphere and work-life balance are clearly perceived. Interestingly, customers also have a clear perception of their own contributions as partial employees: they are conscious of their ethical behavior when using SST and report high willingness to work fast and efficiently as well as willingness to cooperate with the staff. This highlights that partial employees are not only satisfied with the inducements they receive from their retailer as a partial employer, but also that they are aware of their contributions to the service production.

The second goal of this paper was to assess how organizational socialization impacted psychological contract development. Our results suggest that specific dimensions of organizational socialization are differentially important for retailer inducements and partial employee contributions. More specifically, our results highlight that information regarding the politics, organizational goals and values and feeling of belonging are important dimensions that may favor a partial employee’s perception of retailer inducements. Our results also identify that a good knowledge of politics, a feeling of belonging to the retailer and being close to other



partial employees are also important for partial employees to develop an accurate perception of their contributions. Finally, partial employees' knowledge of performance requirements plays an active role in defining their contribution: the more partial employees are familiar with their tasks, the more they perceive that they fulfill their contribution.

The third goal of our research was to assess how self-service technologies and their use impacted psychological contracts. Interestingly, frequency of use, perception of quality of the SST and patronage positively predicted retailer inducements' fulfillment. These three dimensions of SST use can be linked to organizational socialization, as it highlights how frequently customers as partial employees are in contact with self-checkouts and with staff, which helps them get a better understanding of what they get when using SST. In contrast, patronage was the only dimension related to partial employee contributions. This can be explained by the fact that patronage tackles customers' attitudes towards retailers, resulting in higher relevance for this dimension.

Our research makes three interesting contributions to the literature. First, this study answers calls from scholars studying the psychological contract to challenge the concept and expand it to less traditional forms of employments (Baruch and Rousseau, 2019; Knapp *et al.*, 2020; Kraak *et al.*, 2019). This study contributes to this stream of literature by investigating a specific situation of unconventional employment / alternative relation, that of partial employees. By using this theoretical lens to study the relationship between partial employees and retailers, we provide new insights in the usefulness of the concept in novel areas of research. Our descriptive analyses grossly portray the main dimensions of the psychological contracts of partial employees with retailers, emphasizing the importance of task content for the fulfillment of the retailer's inducements and ethical behavior for partial employee contributions. The task content dimension focuses on expectations of partial employees regarding responsibility and autonomy in performing tasks. The dimension of ethical behavior emphasizes the perceived sense of responsibility, honesty, and compliance to policies as a critical element in the contribution of partial employees. This research gives an outlook on the potential of the psychological contract concept in unconventional employment contexts. This is in line with current research on the psychological contract that has investigated unconventional or alternative relations such as gig workers (Liu *et al.*, 2020), virtual employees (Gazit *et al.*, 2021), and in the military context (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016).

Second, this study provides an empirical investigation of the specific category of employees that are partial employees (Bowen, 1986; Bowers *et al.*, 1990; Mustak *et al.*, 2016). This research thus contributes to the literature on partial employees by articulating the notions of psychological contract and organizational socialization in the context of customers as partial employees, thus broadening the perspectives of using the concept of partial employees in customer management literature.

Our results are in line with recent research on customer / partial employee organizational socialization that focuses on customer training and management in an SST setup (Nicod *et al.*, 2020; Nicod and Llosa, 2018; Secchi *et al.*, 2020). We present useful insights on the challenges associated with dealing with partial employees: our results reveal that the process of organizational socialization plays a crucial role in establishing a realistic perception of retailer inducements and contributions from partial employees. Our research more specifically identifies the role of specific dimensions of organizational socialization such as politics, people, organizational goals and values, and performance as instrumental in providing the keys for partial employees to get a good understanding of retailer inducements and partial employees' contributions. This further emphasizes the crucial role of organizational socialization in helping partial employees to perform, in getting a good understanding of their tasks, and in developing a sense of belonging to an organization in a situation where no formal training or contract exist (Dong *et al.*, 2008; Evans *et al.*, 2008; Gouthier and Schmid, 2003; Mustak *et al.*, 2016). These results are also interesting for the literature on psychological contracts and on organizational socialization as they highlight a direct relationship between both. Where studies have adopted longitudinal setups to measure socialization and its impact on the psychological contract (De Vos *et al.* 2003) and the other way around (Delobbe *et al.*, 2016), this study directly evaluates the impact of the dimensions of socialization on psychological contracts. This approach is also fruitful as it helps identify which dimensions of socialization impact the psychological contract in a partial employee setup, whether it is on the dimension of inducement fulfillment or on the dimension of partial employee contributions. This study also identifies the specific role of politics and people for both dimensions of the psychological contract. This emphasizes the importance of making sure that partial employees not only know how things work at the retailer, but that they also feel welcomed and appreciated when using SST. These results can be put in parallel with recent research on SST that emphasizes the role of frontline employees in self-checkout setups (Sharma *et al.*, 2021).

By studying the psychological contract of partial employees, this research offers a different perspective than studies focusing on customer psychological contracts (Bi, 2019; Haicheng,

2006). Whereas these studies put the emphasis on loyalty, this research focuses rather on the inducements of retailers and contributions of customers as partial employees. Customer relationship management literature traditionally focuses on managing performance through technology and data use (Guerola-Navarro *et al.*, 2021; Soltani *et al.*, 2018). Using a partial employees' lens puts the emphasis on customers and their active participation in service production instead.

Third, this study emphasizes the impact of self-service technologies and their use on the psychological contract of partial employees. The scale used (Lee, 2015) tests both dimensions of self-service technologies: the customer side through usage and patronage, and the service side through perception of quality. The fact that perceived quality is positively related to retailer inducements' fulfillment highlights the importance of technological devices in fostering a psychological contract with the retailer. This emphasizes the active role of technological artefacts in managing the relationship between customers as partial employees and organizations. Our results are consistent with current approaches in organization studies that highlight the active role of technology in shaping organizational phenomena (Arnaud and Fauré, 2016; Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014; Orlikowski, 2010). In the present case, technological artefacts such as self-scanning devices or self-checkouts play an active role in the development of a psychological contract.

### *5.1. Practical implications*

This research provides practical implications for organizations that rely on the contributions of partial employees. First, it provides organizations with a novel perspective on customers in SST setups and on how to manage the relationship with them. By shifting from a purely service provider to a partial employer logic, we suggest that organizations reevaluate who their members are and give a more important role to customers. This has strong implications in terms of relationship management and collaboration, as it highlights the challenge associated with managing partial employees. Our research gives insights on how to develop partial employees' understanding of their tasks and sense of belonging through organizational socialization. In a typical partial employee / organization relationship, classical forms of training are impossible and organizational socialization must happen in different ways. Our results show that specific dimensions of organizational socialization (such as people and politics) have a strong impact on the psychological contracts of partial employees. Organizations wanting to unravel the potential of partial employees and to develop strong relationships with them should set policies

and less formal ways of training that particularly emphasize these dimensions of organizational socialization. Finally, organizations should assess the overall SST experience they create and evaluate the role of technological artefacts in developing and managing the relationship between partial employees and the organization. This means thinking of technological artefacts and of the SST experience beyond a simple service production to include a dimension more focused on the interface between the organization and partial employees. Adopting an HRM lens would complement the marketing perspective on customers and help develop new mechanisms of rewards and relationship building.

### *5.2. Limitations and future research*

This study has several methodological limitations. First, we begin by discussing the use of MTurk for data collection. Literature has shown that MTurk has proved to be a useful source of data in behavioral science (Mellis and Bickel, 2020) and is becoming increasingly popular in management research (Aguinis *et al.*, 2021). We are confident that this source of data is also relevant in situations of SST, as our results highlight that the demographics of our sample are similar to the demographics of SST users in other studies (Lee *et al.*, 2010). This study could still be replicated with another sample to check if the results would significantly differ.

Second, this study measures the fulfillment of partial employees' psychological contract at a t-time, without taking into account its evolution over time. The evolution of partial employees' psychological contracts over time is particularly interesting as their "partial employment" context is characterized by the constant evolution of technological artefacts and intense competition between retailers, which might influence the customer / partial employee experience and relationship to the retailer. Regarding the limitation toward our measurements, internal reliability indices suggest that items measuring flexibility and loyalty show low consistency, despite our use of previously validated scales. Future studies may assess how to measure adequately the subcomponents of retailer inducement and partial employee contributions.

Finally, another big challenge when studying partial employees is that they might hold multiple psychological contracts at the same time. The basic premise of our study is that our respondents had to think about their most usual retailer when answering the questionnaire, but this way of proceeding limits the interpretation of the multiple psychological contracts that partial employees might hold simultaneously.

This study has shed light on partial employees' psychological contracts but has not investigated the longitudinal evolution of these psychological contracts as well as the potential plurality of psychological contracts. More studies are needed to get a deeper understanding of the evolution of partial employees' psychological contracts over time, potentially by adopting Rousseau et al.'s model (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018). Further research on psychological contracts should tackle this issue of multiplicity and simultaneity of psychological contracts and develop instruments in order to grow beyond traditional employment relationships, such as gig workers and partial employees.

This study has shown the importance of organizational socialization but has not investigated the underlying mechanisms leading to this result. By adopting more qualitative and longitudinal designs, further studies could focus on the onboarding of partial employees and on the specific relationship building that takes place when self-service technologies are implemented. Further studies could also focus on the impact of organizational socialization on partial employees' role definition, as their understanding of their role is key for them to perform.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper focuses on the psychological contract between customers as partial employees and retailers in an SST setup. The results reveal that partial employees' perceptions of both retailer inducements and their own contributions are fulfilled. This research also suggests that both organizational socialization and SST use play an important role in developing the psychological contract. These results provide new insights in the psychological contract literature by broadening its application to unconventional forms of employment. They also offer a new research avenue for SST literature as they analyze the relationship between customers and retailers under a new lens. Moreover, our results give interesting leads for retailers willing to implement SST in order to better manage the relationship with customers as partial employees.

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