Distributors' Attitudes Towards AI Tools in Business-to-Business Sales Channels

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Abstract: This study explores B2B distributors' attitudes toward artificial intelligence (AI) tools, particularly chatbots, as part of digital self-service in sales channels. AI-powered chatbots enable distributors to independently access information and are becoming increasingly common in the B2B context. A survey of 83 global distributors revealed generally positive attitudes toward AI tools. Among the respondents, 60% were open to interacting with chatbots, 27% were neutral, and only 10% were opposed. A majority of respondents (69%) agreed that chatbots are useful for information search. Chatbots were valued for their speed, ease of access, and ability to reduce search time, though they were not seen as suitable for complex support situations. Most respondents preferred a combination of information channels in their search process, and over 80% agreed that digital tools cannot fully replace human support. The findings highlight the importance of offering flexible, hybrid service models when serving B2B distributor partners.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming how manufacturers deliver value to their distribution channels, particularly in after-sales services such as technical support and spare parts (Dombrowski & Fochler 2017). These technologies enable cost-effective, continuous service through digital channels, reshaping operations for both providers and customers. As expectations rise in competitive markets, service development must prioritize customer experience—not just provider efficiency.

The digital shift has also driven changes in sales automation and customer relationship management. The digitalization of front-end interfaces influences how services are experienced and how new practices emerge. E-commerce and real-time support at the point of purchase have become key differentiators.

A notable innovation is the rise of self-service technologies (SSTs), including AI-powered chatbots, which allow customers to manage service interactions independently. This study investigates B2B distributors' attitudes toward such AI tools, with a focus on chatbots as a form of digital self-service in B2B sales channels.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The digital transformation of information technology, together with electronic e-commerce business, has influenced the balance of power and interaction between companies across various sectors and industries (Vendrell-Herrero et al. 2017). Digitalization, along with the increasing utilization of artificial intelligence, enables new forms of support for customer organizations. The following sections examine the use of self-service technologies, online customer service chats, and chatbots as a form of self-service, as part of the digital experience offered to customers.

2.1 Self-Service Technologies

New service innovations and the rapid advancement of information technology are reshaping service delivery and the customer experience. Pujari (2004) noted a significant shift after the turn of the millennium from interpersonal service to computer-mediated digital self-services, especially in B2B environments. Widely adopted self-service

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technologies (SSTs) are transforming the relationship between providers and customers (Shin & Dai 2022).

Unlike traditional personal service, which requires the provider's presence and direct communication, self-service enables customers to act independently (Meuter et al. 2000; Kumar & Telang 2012). Chase (2010) identified SSTs and telecommunications as areas requiring a rethinking of traditional customer contact models. Information technology enables automated systems to interact with customers regardless of time or location, increasingly via SSTs (Sampson & Chase 2020).

According to Scherer et al. (2015), technology-based self-service channels have become central to modern service ecosystems. These channels are praised for their productivity potential and cost-efficiency. Numerous applications have been developed across industries to meet diverse needs. Research highlights benefits such as ease of use and improved accessibility (Collier & Kimes 2013). SSTs offer an efficient way to co-create value between sellers and customers.

Two key aspects emerge from prior research: first, self-service requires customer interaction with technology, without a company representative (Kumar & Telang 2012); second, customers must be more active in the service process, often interacting only with automated systems (Scherer et al. 2015). However, successful SST use assumes customers have the necessary resources and skills (Kelly & Lawlor 2019). Technology shapes customer experience and service encounters, making customers active participants in information retrieval (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2000). Organizations adopting SSTs recognize customers as co-creators of value, not just beneficiaries (Vargo & Lusch 2008).

Trust in both the partner company and technology is essential in B2B relationships. Given the complexity and high-value transactions in B2B markets, reliable systems are critical (Cooper & Jackson 1988). Therefore, customer-facing elements like portals and SSTs must be perceived as trustworthy and functional. Bhappu & Schultze (2006) emphasize the importance of service system design and understanding customer intentions when using different channels. Customer experiences with portals and interfaces significantly shape their perception of the company and brand.

Langer et al. (2012) note that more companies are not only adopting SSTs but also indirectly requiring their use by shifting services to self-service. Kumar & Telang (2012) view this as concerning, as research shows that traditional and self-service models offer different value and are not interchangeable. Buell et al. (2010) mention that customers may not be satisfied with SSTs but use them due to a lack of alternatives. Scherer et al. (2015) argue that SSTs can undermine customer loyalty when used as direct replacements for traditional service. Companies should evaluate SSTs and traditional services based on the value they provide throughout the customer lifecycle.

2.2 Online Customer Service Chats

Organizations recognize the importance of high-quality customer service as one of the most critical factors in maintaining competitiveness (Wang 2011). Online support via real-time chat provides customers with a direct channel to customer service representatives (McLean & Osei-Frimpong 2019). Customer service chat (CSC) is an internet-based service that enables real-time communication between a user and a service agent through an instant messaging application, often embedded in a company's website (Elmorshidy 2013).

Live chat is used for various purposes, including information retrieval and decision-making support (Turel et al. 2013). Organizations allocate significant resources to provide high-quality service (McLean & Osei-Frimpong 2019). The presence and functionality of live chat have been shown to increase interactivity in e-commerce, thereby improving customer relationships and experiences (Yoon 2010; McLean & Osei-Frimpong 2019).

Real-time chat functions simulate real-world service interactions and offer support when needed (Turel & Connelly 2013). In e-commerce, chat services are praised for enabling cost-effective personalization and social interaction during online shopping. They provide immediate answers to customer questions at the point of purchase (Elmorshidy 2013). McLean & Wilson (2016) describe online support as an affordable and efficient way to assist customers, enhancing satisfaction and overall experience through immediate and continuous support.

Customer expectations have risen, and long delays in email chains are no longer acceptable. Live chat options on websites or CRM platforms allow customers to get answers at the moment of purchase, contributing to increased satisfaction (Elmorshidy 2013). The adoption of new technologies, such as integrated instant messaging chats, has grown to better meet customer demands (Li et al. 2019). A successful live chat experience can lead to greater satisfaction, increased likelihood of repeat purchases, and reduced negative feedback (Martin et al. 2015).

Despite the growing use of real-time chat services, there is still limited understanding of what motivates users to rely on this form of online support (McLean et al. 2019). In online environments, chat agents can guide customers through problem-solving. Real-time chat enables direct and immediate communication, faster than email. Mero (2018) states that online communication is an effective form of customer service. Online chat research highlights three key functions: search support, navigational support, and basic decision support (Chattaraman et al. 2012).

2.3 AI-Powered Chatbots in Customer Service

Real-time chat services can be operated by humans or powered by artificial intelligence, commonly referred to as chatbots (McLean & Osei-Frimpong 2019). Chatbot platforms offer real-time live chat functionality and direct communication between customers and service providers without a human agent. Chatbots are considered a key form of self-service, where customers assist themselves in the service process. Currently, chatbots are defined as computer programs capable of interacting with users naturally, even on specific topics, via text or speech (Ashfaq et al. 2020).

Interest in chatbots has grown with advancements in AI technologies and algorithms like Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning (Rahman et al. 2017). The adoption of AI and machine learning technologies in organizations enables offering these capabilities to customers, leading to improved efficiency, satisfaction, and engagement (Prentice & Nguyen 2020).

AI involves machines mimicking human-like thinking, learning, and behavior (Awasthi & Sangle 2013). AI-based machines can learn tasks such as planning and language acquisition without human instruction (San-Martina et al. 2016). Machine learning, the technology behind AI, allows efficient data processing and decision-making. AI is seen as a powerful tool in CRM applications, with chatbots on websites being one example. AI and machine learning are replacing many simple manual tasks (Cuevas 2018). Chatbots are now used across industries in various customer service roles (Li et al. 2021).

The rapid development of AI is evident in predictions like Wirtz et al. (2018), who expected that by the end of 2020, 85% of customer interactions would be handled by chatbots. AI and machine learning have prompted companies to reconsider the strategic role of CRM and sales systems, focusing on modern ways to add value during the sales process, with chatbots being a key application (Blocker et al. 2012).

In practice, chatbots offer the same functionality as live chats. The key difference is that chatbots reduce the need for human agents, freeing employees for other tasks. Many customer service chats now include chatbot features, offering reliable and capable alternatives for initiating service interactions. According to Ashfaq et al. (2020), chatbots can provide product and service information and even process orders in real time.

Chatbots are primarily used to initiate and facilitate customer service processes. Baier et al. (2018) view them as a major technological trend, capable of natural communication (Sheehan et al. 2020). Typically, chatbots begin interactions by asking questions to assess support needs. Depending on the situation, they may provide direct assistance or escalate to a human agent for personalized service.
Despite their popularity, large-scale empirical research on customer experience with AI technologies is still lacking (Ameen et al. 2020). Customers often express skepticism due to impersonal interaction, technical issues, or perceived lack of usefulness. Nichifor et al. (2021) assess chatbot communication quality, noting issues with information quality and lack of personal interaction. Over half of users are hesitant to use chatbots. One in two online shoppers expressed aversion due to impersonal interaction, technical issues, or perceived lack of usefulness (Smutny & Schreiberova 2020).
Response time to customer inquiries is a key factor in improving service quality and satisfaction (Nichifor et al. 2021). The widely known Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) includes perceived usefulness and ease of use as motivation factors. Nichifor et al. (2021) expand this model with four variables: content quality, response time, relevance, and chatbot performance.

Chatbots are popular because they offer reliable performance and functionality, provided they are technically capable (Aoki 2020). When delivering high-quality and relevant information, trust in the technology increases, leading to more positive customer attitudes.

2.4 Challenges Related to AI-Powered Chatbots

Canhoto & Clear (2020) note that while self-service can improve efficiency, it may also undermine previously created value. Forced implementation of SSTs as the only option has not yielded good results. Empirical findings by Liu (2012) show that making

self-service the sole option leads to negative attitudes and behaviors toward both the service and provider (Shin & Dai 2022).

Nicholls (2010) states that technology-mediated services can reduce direct interaction. This does not necessarily reduce communication but alters the nature of the relationship. One of the disadvantages of SSTs may arise from feelings of lost control due to limited personal support (Dabholkar et al., 2003). In addition, achieving the benefits of self-service requires a new division of labor, with customers more involved in service creation process (Bhappu & Schultze 2006). This can be challenging for customers who find technology-mediated interaction unpleasant.

In offline environments, customer-service encounters are common (Micu et al., 2019). In such encounters, the selling company can control many elements of the experience. In contrast, online self-service leaves customers to construct their own experience. When it comes to the adoption of self-service technologies (SST), one of the most important aspects is trust in the online environment. Conversely, a lack of trust is a major barrier to SST adoption (Skard & Nysveen, 2016).

In B2B markets, interactions are more frequent and closer than in B2C, forming strong buyer-seller relationships (Lee & Park 2008). From this perspective, SSTs may threaten B2B service relationships (Bhappu & Schultze 2006). Therefore, as Meuter et al. (2005) suggest, providers should understand how SST adoption affects customer trust and loyalty.

3 METHOD

To study distributor attitudes towards chatbots in the B2B sales channels, an online questionnaire was used to gather information from B2B distributors of a Finnish company that operates globally. A total of 532 distributors were contacted, and 83 completed the questionnaire, yielding a 16% response rate.

The questionnaire included 13 questions, three of which were open-ended. The questionnaire included questions about attitudes towards adopting new technologies, questions regarding attitudes towards chatbots specifically, questions about information sources and preferences related to them as well as questions related to the benefits of chatbots. The overall goal of the questionnaire is to get a broad view of the distributors' attitudes towards AI-powered chatbots.

4 RESULTS

Based on the survey results, most distributors do not resist adopting and accepting new technologies like chatbots, and their attitude is mainly positive. When the distributors were asked the open-ended question, 'Do you anticipate resistance from your team, colleagues, or company in adopting a chatbot?', only 24 percent of the respondents were categorized as expecting a certain level of resistance. When the distributors were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I am happy to interact with AI and chatbot”. From the respondents, the majority (60 percent) strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement. Twenty-seven percent were neutral, and it is worth noting that 10 percent somewhat disagreed. Three per cent did not respond to the question. The distributors were also asked to respond to a statement “Chatbot is a great tool for information search”. Again, the majority (69 percent) strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement.

The distributors were asked how they would prefer to search for information on the seller’s products. The respondents were given five answer choices: searching online independently, contacting the manufacturer company, contacting their own (distributor) experts, using a self-service chatbot, or a combination of two or more, depending on the situation. Table 1 shows the answer frequencies of the respondents.

Table 1: Preferred method for information search (N=83).

Method of information search	**N**	**%**
Combination of two or more, depending on the situation	55	66 %
Searching online independently	49	59 %
Contacting own (distributor) experts	37	45 %
Contacting manufacturer company	33	40 %
Using self-service chatbot	26	31 %

The respondents were presented with a list of chatbots benefits and they were asked to pick those they considered the most helpful. The respondents

could pick up to three different benefits. Table 2 exhibits the most identified benefits chatbots could provide.

Table 2: Where can chatbots be most helpful (N=83).

Chatbot benefits	N	%
Faster retrieval of product information	60	72 %
Easier access to product information	51	61 %
Reducing search time	44	53 %
Improving overall customer service	22	27 %
Accuracy of product information	21	25 %
Reducing the need to contact the supplier	20	24 %

Table 2 shows that the distributors' responses were somewhat unevenly distributed across the different options.

A total of 60 distributors (72%) selected faster retrieval of product information as the area where a chatbot could most assist them. Similarly, 51 respondents (61%) chose easier and more effortless access to product information. The third most frequently selected benefit was reducing the time spent searching, chosen by 44 distributors (53%).

The three least selected options—where chatbots were seen as less helpful—were accuracy of product information (21 responses), reducing the need to contact the supplier (20 responses), and improving the overall customer service experience (22 responses). However, these were still chosen by about one in four distributors.

Based on the response options given, the perceived benefits of chatbots are primarily related to faster access to product information, reducing the time spent searching for any information, and easier access to product data when needed. However, the responses do not reflect strong trust among distributors that chatbot answers are always accurate and reliable.

Finally, when the distributors were asked to evaluate the statement: "Digital self-service tools can't replace human support" over 80 percent of the respondents either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (with over 50 percent strongly agreeing).

To conclude, distributors have a positive attitude towards chatbots. They are valued for speed, ease of access, and

support, they are not seen as a viable standalone option when compared to traditional contact methods. In addition, distributors prefer having multiple methods and channels available for information retrieval.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Distributors generally have a positive attitude toward AI-powered chatbots. Only 24 percent anticipated any resistance from their teams or organizations. Most respondents (60 percent) were happy to interact with AI and chatbot technologies. A majority (69 percent) also agreed that chatbots are useful tools for searching information.

The most valued perceived benefits were faster retrieval of product information, easier access, and reduced time spent searching. However, fewer distributors trusted the accuracy of chatbot responses. In addition, over 80 percent agreed that digital tools cannot replace human support. Distributors also preferred having multiple channels for information retrieval, such as online search, contacting manufacturers or internal experts, and using chatbots depending on the situation.

Based on these findings regarding training and communications, it is recommended to highlight the speed and convenience of AI-powered chatbots. These chatbots should also be positioned as tools that support human interaction, not replace it. Regarding marketing channels, the traditional support channels should remain available to meet different user preferences.

While AI-powered chatbots are generally welcomed by distributors in B2B marketing channels, they are not yet seen as standalone solutions. Distributors prefer a hybrid approach that combines digital tools with human support and multiple information channels.

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