Avatar-mediated service encounter and its impact after COVID-19

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Purpose: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a serious influence to service industries, especially manual services with direct customer interactions. Under this situation, the need for remote interaction with customers is growing. Among frontline service technologies for assisting service encounters, experimental or business applications of avatar technology have been gradually becoming popular, for example in retails and other types of service facilities in Japan. After COVID-19 became pandemic, avatar technology gains more attention as a means for rich and safe customer interactions from a remote site, which is effective under the social distancing policy. Although several researchers have already highlighted avatar technology as an effective tool for creating novel service experiences in the existing study, its impact to service encounters and the whole service businesses especially after the pandemic are still understudied. This study aims at conceptualizing avatar-mediated service encounter and examining its impacts to customers, frontline employees and overall service businesses.

Study design/methodology/approach: This study first overviews the impact of COVID-19 to business practice and management in various service industries. Next, the existing study on frontline service technologies in general and the recent advancement of avatar technology is investigated. Based on the result, this study conceptualizes avatar-mediated service encounter in comparison with other types of service encounters such as direct human-human interactions and self-service technologies. In addition, this study conceptually categorizes several types of avatar-mediated service encounters and their features.

Findings: This study clarifies advantages and disadvantages of avatar-mediated service encounter from several aspects such as hospitality and productivity. These characteristics are also discussed from the aspect of the overall service business after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, this study illustrates different types of avatar-mediated service encounters based on technology types (virtual / robot) and main avatar users (employee / customer) with several examples. Moreover, this study attempts to extend the existing framework on frontline service technologies by exploring how avatar-mediated service encounter could affect other types of service encounters with more automated service technologies.

Originality/value: This study advances the understanding on the impact of avatar technology to service encounters, taking the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic into account. The result could contribute to the recovery of service industries which are heavily damaged by the pandemic.

Keywords: Avatar technology, service encounter, frontline service technology, COVID-19