**Customer-Employee Rapport: A Dyadic Perspective in Multi-Channel Service Settings**

**Introduction**

Rapport represents one of the key constructs within the services marketing literature and is based on relational exchanges between customers and employees in service settings. Managing these relational exchanges is crucial to business performance (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Hyun & Kim, 2014), since these interactions are likely to have a significant impact on creating stronger relationships between customers and service providers (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Kim et al., 2010).

Previous studies on rapport (e.g., Delcourt et al., 2013, 2016; Kim & Ok, 2010) address the phenomenon in face-to-face retail settings with very little attention given to other channels (i.e., call centers, digital media), disregarding the fact that many service providers now employ other means of interaction with their customers (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Considering these channels is, therefore, crucial since the number of interactions between customers and service providers over digital media, in particular, have increased significantly over the recent years (Kumar et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2017).

Previous studies have also addressed rapport in a one-sided manner, even though it involves service interactions from two sides (i.e., it is a dyadic interaction). Thus, previous work focused on rapport either from a customer (Hwang et al., 2013; Hyun & Kim, 2014), or service employee (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Harris, 2013) perspective. No research to date has considered the perspectives of both customers and employees as part of the same interaction.

To address the limitations in previous research, this study aims to investigate the role of rapport in service settings by addressing the following research questions:

**RQ1**: What are the antecedents and consequences of rapport from the customer and employee sides of dyadic interactions in service settings?

**RQ2:** How does rapport vary across different channels of interaction (i.e., face-to-face, call centers, digital media) in service settings?

**Conceptual Development**

Rapport can be defined as “a customer’s perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants” (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 92). It is viewed as an indicator of the quality of customer-employee interactions (Delcourt et al., 2013), and consists of two dimensions: *personal connection*: the formation of social link between customers and employees, and *enjoyable interaction*: the affective evaluation of relational exchanges between both parties (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

The development of rapport could be based on a set of antecedents that apply to both sides of the interaction, such as: familiarity with the other side through information gathering to enhance personal connection (Gremler et al., 2001; Macintosh, 2009); mutual disclosure of common experiences, interests, and preferences (Hwang et al., 2013); perceptions of congruence and similarity (Jamal & Adelowore, 2008); and positive customer and employee emotions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006).

From the customer’s perspective, rapport increases satisfaction, commitment, loyalty, repurchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). It can also enhance customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2016), since it is likely to lead to better relationships between customers and service providers (Macintosh, 2009). On the employee side, rapport is likely to have a positive impact on commitment, and a negative influence on retaliation (e.g., punishing customers for their rudeness and misbehavior) and negative WOM (e.g., uncomplimentary comments about customers, other employees, or the employer) (Harris, 2013).

Furthermore, rapport is known to influence business performance and service outcomes (Hyun & Kim, 2014). For example, customer experiences are highly influenced by their interactions with service employees (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Kim et al., 2010; Macintosh, 2009). Rapport was also found to have significant impact on customer behavioral intentions in service failure situations. For example, pre-established rapport between customers and service employees could be part of the service recovery solution leading to higher post-service failure customer satisfaction, higher repurchase intentions, and lower rates of negative WOM (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

The use of digital channels, e-mails, and call centers for communication between customers and service providers has become more prevalent (Singh et al., 2017). These interactions do not require customers to be physically present during the service encounter, potentially altering the nature of rapport. Thus, customers’ increasing reliance on these channels means that it is important to understand customer-employee interactions when using them (Schumann et al., 2012). In particular, customer experiences could be affected and shaped by their interactions with service providers over social network sites (Bhattacharjya et al., 2016). Although personal connection tends to be lower in non-face-to-face interactions, it could still be affected by the communication language both parties use. This could help the development of rapport built on enjoyment, harmony, and trust between both parties in non-face-to-face settings (Crook & Booth, 1997; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Additionally, interactions over social media could be active or passive as deemed appropriate by customers and service providers, which help in the development of trust and subsequently rapport in a non-intrusive manner (Andzulis et al., 2013; Mitic & Kapoulas, 2012).

**Methodology**

An exploratory research design is employed to help clarify our understanding about the phenomenon under investigation (i.e., rapport across different channels) (Saunders et al., 2009). Given the complexity and dyadic nature of rapport, as well as its multiple dimensions, a qualitative interpretive approach is adopted in order to gain deeper insights within the social context (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Creswell, 2013). In-depth interviews will be employed to identify the antecedents and consequences of rapport during the dyadic service interactions. Given the multi-channel nature of interactions between customers and service employees, the study will investigate rapport in face-to-face retail, call center, and digital media (particularly Facebook) settings, taking a dyadic perspective.

Two service industries are chosen for this study; the retail banking and telecom service provider sectors. Both sectors are deemed appropriate in which to investigate rapport because they currently employ a wide range of interaction channels with their customers. For instance, banks rely heavily on online, mobile, and telephone banking because of the associated cost savings (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Lin, 2011). Likewise, telecom service providers often use their website ‘live chat’ facility and other digital platforms such as Facebook to interact with their non-business customers.

Data will be collected from both sectors in Egypt. In the last few years, banking and telecom services have become widely automated in Egypt. This is evidenced by an increase in the development of banks that have adopted more customer-centric initiatives, which were almost impossible to find a few years ago (Elsharnouby & Parsons, 2010). Likewise, the Egyptian telecom sector has been growing rapidly and this has resulted in the provision of new mobile and internet services. In accordance, interactions between customers and service providers over non-traditional retail settings have increased.

The sample has been chosen on a judgmental (purposive) basis and comprises Egypt’s three largest banks and three largest telecom service providers. Dyadic interactions from each channel will be considered for each company (i.e., two sectors, three companies per sector, three channels per company, and two interviews per interaction). Thus, the number of interviewees will be 18 customers and 18 service employees (36 interviews). Each customer will be asked to discuss a specific interaction with a service provider’s employee, namely their prior experiences with the employee and/or service provider and his/her view of the interaction. Similarly, the service employee will be asked to talk about the same interaction, namely their prior experience with the customer and how the interaction affected his/her performance. These interviews will be recorded and are expected to last about an hour each. Approval to conduct them has already been granted by all six participating companies, and ethical approval has been granted by our institution.

Data collection will take place from December 2017 to March 2018, and by the time of the SERVSIG conference, data will have been transcribed, analyzed, and coded using NVivo 10. This coding will be based on the emergent themes that are critical and relevant to the phenomenon to highlight the experiences of the participants (Daly et al., 1997).

**Expected Contributions**

This research is expected to contribute to services marketing theory in two main ways. First, the research will investigate rapport in retail and non-retail contexts by highlighting the varying antecedents and consequences across different channels (i.e., face-to-face, social media, call centers). As personal connections become less important in non-face-to-face channels due to lack of social cues, the role of interaction enjoyment could be magnified and become the primary source of establishing rapport (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Second, the adoption of a dyadic perspective to address rapport will provide a deeper understanding of customer-employee interactions about the same interaction, shedding light on which rapport-building strategy is preferred by each party (Ewing et al., 2001; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000).

From a practical perspective, the study will offer service providers insights into the effective management of customer-employee dyads through the identification of the most appropriate rapport-building strategies, matched to the channel of interaction. Accordingly, these insights can help to maximize the favorable outcomes of rapport during service interactions over various channels.

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