**A Framework of Online Rapport-Building Behaviours: An Exploration of Twitter**

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**Abstract**

Online social media encounters are growing rapidly, yet there are few studies around establishing rapport with customers in online channels of interaction. To date, most research focuses on rapport-building in face-to-face and call centre channels. This research aims to identify the behaviours used by service employees to build rapport with customers during social media encounters. The study employs netnography to analyse 600 customer-employee conversations on Twitter obtained from twelve companies, who are leading exponents of this approach, in six service sectors. Findings suggest that Twitter is a unique medium of interaction making it ideally suited for rapport building. Four distinct rapport-building behaviours are used by service employees when interacting with their customers; emojional contagion, interjections, netspeak ‘lingo’, and tools of wider engagement. The study’s contribution lies in extending the concept of rapport to online channels of interaction and providing managers with insights into rapport-building behaviours that they can develop.

***Keywords****: rapport-building behaviours, employees, online, service encounters, netnography, Twitter*

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# Introduction

Rapport provides an indication of the quality of interaction between customers and service providers, and is important to service firms, since it increases sales revenues and interpersonal trust between customers and employees (Campbell et al., 2006; Newell et al., 2011). Customer-company interactions over social media platforms have been growing rapidly in the last few years (Kumar et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2017). The growth of social media resulted in the emergence of studies on relationship building in online channels of interaction addressing customer outcomes such as satisfaction (e.g., McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2017) and trust (e.g., Hajjat & Miller, 2017). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of research on how rapport develops in online service encounters, as most studies address rapport in offline channels (e.g., Hwang & Lee, 2019; Fatima et al., 2020; Kaminakis et al., 2019; Wang & Lang, 2019). Accordingly, this paper aims to identify service employee rapport-building behaviours in online encounters.

# Literature Review

Rapport is based on the reciprocal exchange of intimacy between two parties in an interaction (Bowden et al., 2015), and develops through dynamic two-way communications (e.g., Brodie et al., 2011). It is known to influence business performance and service outcomes (Hyun & Kim, 2014), and was found to have a significant impact on customer behavioural intentions in service failure situations (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

In social media, customer experiences are both affected and shaped by exchanges taking place with service providers, due to communication language (Bhattacharjya et al., 2016). This can foster rapport on the basis of enjoyment, harmony, and trust evoked between both parties (Crook & Booth, 1997; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Social media interactions can be either active or passive, as deemed appropriate by the interactants, so rapport can develop in a non-intrusive manner (Andzulis et al., 2013; Mitic & Kapoulas, 2012).

There is a dearth of research on how rapport develops between customers and service employees in online channels of interaction even though anecdotal evidence suggests that rapport can be built in online service encounters (e.g., Li et al., 2018; Luangrath et al., 2017). The rapid growth of online channels has led many customers to start using them and move away from conventional offline channels (i.e., face-to-face and call centres) to deal with service providers (Kujath, 2011; Kumar et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2017). The absence of physical and social cues from online channels and the increase of their use by customers for interaction with service firms warrant the need for understanding how rapport-building behaviours develop in online service encounters.

# Methodology

The study employs an exploratory research design (Saunders et al., 2009). Netnography is used as the main method of data collection and investigates interactions occurring in social media, where netnographic data are naturalistic, obtained unobtrusively, and portray customer realities (Keeling et al., 2013; Kozinets, 2015; Langer & Beckman, 2005). As the largest microblogging website, Twitter has around 330 million monthly active users (Statista, 2019), and is thus deemed appropriate for the study.

Six service sectors were chosen for this study that exhibited high service employee-customer interactivity on Twitter. The two leading companies from each sector were included in the sample based on the number of followers they have (Garcia et al., 2017). Appropriate exchanges on Twitter were identified involved through reading conversations between customers and service employees on verified company pages over a six-month period, August 2018 to January 2019 (Harwood & Garry, 2015). In line with prior studies (e.g., Murray et al., 2014), fifty exchanges from each company were examined, resulting in a sample of 600 exchanges (with 3-6 tweets per exchange on average). Data were analysed using thematic analysis, the most common approach for analysing netnographic data in marketing studies (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Table 1 provides a list of sectors, companies, and the average number of tweets per exchange for each company in the sample.

*Insert Table 1*

# Findings

Four themes emerged from the analysed data: emojional contagion, interjections, netspeak ‘*lingo*’, and tools of wider engagement. Table 2 shows examples of exchanges in support of the four themes. A discussion of these themes follows.

*Insert Table 2*

## 4.1. Emojional Contagion

Emojis are used as an alternative to nonverbal cues demonstrated in offline channels (e.g., body posture, tone of voice) in order to convey authentic emotions, adding meaning to the message. Service employees use emojis for specific purposes such as expression of emotions or delivering meaningful information, leading to the development of rapport as customers perceive employees as warmer when emojis are included in conversations. Emojis can also influence the receiver’s emotional state (Smith & Rose, 2018). This can be described as emojional contagion, as emojis stimulate a subconscious affect in both parties leading to this bond.

##  Interjections

Findings suggest that service interventions and benign intrusion are forms of interjection that take place in Twitter exchanges. Service interventions are unsolicited responses made by service providers in conversations already taking place between competitors and their customers. Benign intrusion happens when companies pry into dialogues and multilogues to build rapport with multiple customers simultaneously. When interjections elicit customer amazement with unsolicited posts, rapport is developed in online service encounters because unexpected company intrusions can result in positive encounters (Schamari & Schaefers, 2015).

##  Netspeak ‘*Lingo*’

Netspeak is used by service employees to evoke an image of the communicator’s facial expression, tone of voice, and body language, leading to a stronger and more realistic message. Abbreviations are used across several exchanges (e.g., ‘*fab*’ for fabulous and ‘*ASAP*’ for ‘as soon as possible’). Non-conventional punctuation (e.g., multiple punctuation marks) upgrades the content of messages, thereby improving relational aspects in online encounters. Such features display more proximity and closeness (Sampietro, 2019). Other examples of netspeak elements include intentional misspellings which are deliberately inserted into text to build a bridge between the interlocutors and emphasise the conveyed messages (e.g., ‘*YAS*’, ‘*Ooooh*’).

##  Tools of Wider Engagement

Not only do employees endeavour to build rapport with their customers at the personal level, they also aim to establish a connection with the general audience through tools of engagement on Twitter such as games (e.g., funny questions in polls), promotional hashtags (e.g., #DeliveringSmiles of Amazon, #GiftFace of Holiday Inn), and advertisements and news. These tools are utilised for the benefit of attracting the wider public (Page, 2014), and were found to be a common means of building rapport with customers in one-to-many exchanges.

# Discussion

With online service encounters growing rapidly, it is surprising that discussions around building rapport in online channels have been scarce. In terms of theoretical contribution, the study proposes a framework of online rapport-building behaviours used by service employees. For example, the absence of social cues makes it difficult to build rapport through the common behaviours used by employees in offline channels such as smiling (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006), eye contact (Kim & Baker, 2019), and tone of voice (Rueff-Lopes et al., 2015). Nonetheless, online channels present multiple substitutes that seem to be as much effective such as emojis (Luangrath et al., 2017) and hashtags (Zappavigna, 2011). Alongside the use of such behaviours, the absence of nonverbal forms of communication and the visual anonymity of individuals involved in online interactions seem to contribute to the development of rapport in online encounters faster than their offline counterparts (Jiang et al., 2011). Moreover, influence exerted by the interactants on social media seems to be powerful, as individuals tend to imitate and comply with the expectations of those with whom they interact (Cheung et al., 2011, Cheung et al., 2015; Li, 2011; Zhou, 2011). Thus, a customer is likely to respond positively to an employee’s attempt to build rapport and reciprocate with a similar behaviour in online encounters. By understanding how service employees develop rapport with customers in online encounters, business relationships can be maintained and organisational performance improved (Kim et al., 2010; Su et al., 2015).

For service companies, this study provides insights into developing relationship strategies with customers in online channels of interaction, based on the four rapport-building behaviours identified. For instance, managers can design training programs around these behaviours and train service employees to develop and improve the skills required to use these behaviours in online exchanges with customers. Employees should be encouraged to learn when and how to use each rapport-building behaviour, based on the situation, customer, and nature of exchange.

The study has some limitations that can provide grounds for future research. First, the study focused on Twitter as the main online channel of interaction, neglecting other online channels of interaction such as other social media platforms and online chat facilities. Future research could explore rapport-building behaviours in other online channels of interaction and identify whether rapport develops differently. Second, the study’s data include exchanges that take place in the public domain and are exposed to the ‘*overhearing*’ general audience only. Nonetheless, some features of online channels (e.g., webchats, private messages) allow interactions between customers and employees to take place privately and may have an influence on how rapport develops. Additionally, future research can investigate whether different service encounters, and the length of service relationship play a role in the rapport-building process in online channels of interaction.

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***Table 1.*** Sectors, Companies, and Collected Twitter Data in the Study

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Service Sector** | **Company Name** | **Twitter Handle** | **No. of Followers (12/01/2020)** | **Avg. No. of Tweets per Exchange** |
| Leisure, Hospitality, and Tourism | Holiday Inn Express | @HIExpress | 75K | 5 |
| Four Seasons  | @FourSeasons | 270.6K | 3 |
| Transportation | Southwest Airlines | @SouthWestAir | 2.2M | 6 |
| Virgin Trains | @VirginTrains | 465.1K | 5 |
| Foodservices | Chili’s Grill | @Chilis | 400K | 5 |
| McDonald’s USAMcDonald’s UK | @McDonalds@McDonaldsUK | 3.6M217.8K | 4 |
| Retail Services | Lush UKLush North America | @LushLtd@LushCosmetics | 201.6K307.9K | 5 |
| Amazon | @Amazon | 3.2M | 5 |
| Telecom services | Three UK | @ThreeUK | 167.3K | 4 |
| Sky UK | @SkyUK | 224.8K | 3 |
| Banking Industry | Barclays Bank | @Barclays | 277.5K | 5 |
| Bank of America | @BankofAmerica | 538.7K | 5 |

***Table 2.*** Examples of Twitter Exchanges

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Examples of Extracts** |
| Emojional contagion | ***Customer****: @ThreeUKSupport is there a problem in Twickenhm [sic]? My phone has just been going very slow at loading up data****Three UK Support****: slow speeds are never good,👎 fire over the full postcode and make/model of your phone – we’ll see what’s going on 📶🔍* |
| Interjections | ***Customer****: @VirginMedia absolutely disgusting services… cannot get any services****Sky UK****: Sounds like you’ve had enough...* 😞 *Feel free to drop me a PM & I’ll see if we can offer you a better customer experience with us.* 😄 |
| Netspeak ‘*lingo*’ | ***Customer****: I love u #FourSeasons ❤****Four Seasons****: Awww...thanks for the love. 😊 Hope you enjoyed your visit!****Customer****: Welcome FourSeasons❤❤* |
| Tools of wider engagement | ***Customer****: Ummm what’s happening to make y’all selll [sic] FREE bacon?!****McDonald’s****: We’re celebrating the Big Mac w/ Bacon, Quarter Pounder w/ Bacon & the arrival of our Cheesy Bacon Fries by having #BaconHour!* |