

RAPPORT DEVELOPMENT IN ONLINE CHANNELS: A DYADIC CUSTOMER/SERVICE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

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Keywords: Dyadic, Online, Netnography, Rapport, Service encounter

Description: The paper proposes an Online Rapport Framework (ORF), which is the first comprehensive assessment of rapport development as a holistic process in the online channel that accounts for the reciprocal, dyadic nature of the concept.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

This paper addresses two main gaps in extant literature. First, prior research addresses rapport in offline channels; that is retail stores and call centers. No prior work has considered rapport in online channels, which is surprising given the growing importance of online channels for service encounters. Moreover, there is evidence that online service encounters are becoming the preference of many customers, with this trend magnified by the recent Covid-19 pandemic that limited most face-to-face service encounters. Second, prior research mainly

investigates rapport-building behaviors and outcomes from the customer's perspective, even though rapport is a dyadic concept that captures the perspectives of both interacting parties. Thus, it is a customer's perception of what rapport is, how it develops, and how it affects service encounters that have been dominant in the conceptualization and understanding of the concept. Addressing the perspective of service employees as well as customers is likely to provide a more complete picture of rapport and recognize the pivotal role service employees have in developing customer relationships. This paper's main research question is *How are online rapport-building behaviors initiated by service employees and by customers?*

Method and Data

We undertook a netnographic exploration of online service encounters to further understand rapport development from both customer and service employee perspectives. We followed a passive, covert netnographic approach and adopted the role of 'lurker' by remaining silent and reading public exchanges as a member of the social media platform's wider audience. Data collection was through the analysis of direct exchanges between customers and service employees on Twitter. Twelve service companies that are leading exponents of online interactivity on Twitter were identified from six service sectors (hotels, transportation, restaurants, retail, telecom services, and banking). The total number of conversations used was 600, with about 2,750 tweets being analyzed. We collected not only textual conversations, but also pictures, videos, animations, and paralinguistic cues (e.g., emojis) embedded within the tweets to get a more accurate picture of how rapport can be established in online service encounters. Data analysis was thematic and involved the identification of themes that are judged as important for the proper understanding of the phenomenon under study. Data was coded and re-coded (using both deductive and inductive coding methods),

and categories emerged after the codes were connected and revisited several times before the final themes were uncovered.

Summary of findings

Thematic analysis of customer-employee dyadic interactions on Twitter has resulted in the emergence of ten themes of rapport-building behaviors (six service employee-initiated and four customer-initiated). Service employee-initiated behaviors encompass three that are new to the online channel, 'emojional contagion', 'interjections', 'tools of wider engagement', as well as three that have been adapted from offline channels, 'netspeak lingo', 'use of humor', and 'expressive speech acts'. Customer-initiated behaviors encompass three new ones to the online channel, 'capturing the moment', 'graphics interchange formats' (GIFs), 'anthropomorphism', as well as one that builds on rapport in offline channels, 'proactive self-disclosure'.

Key Contributions

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on rapport development during service encounters. It is the first study to consider rapport in the online channel despite the growing prevalence of this channel as a means of communication between customers and firms. The study introduces the Online Rapport Framework (ORF), which portrays two sets of online rapport-building behaviors, one initiated by service employees and the other by customers. The ORF is the first comprehensive assessment of rapport development as a holistic process that accounts for the reciprocal, dyadic nature of the concept in the online channel. The framework demonstrates how rapport can develop quickly between customers

and service employees despite the absence of key social cues (e.g., facial expressions, vocal tones). This research applies to firms seeking to develop rapport with their customers during service encounters to create a competitive advantage. It focuses on online channels, which have become important over recent years with the growth of customer/firm communication over social media platforms. The rapport-building behaviors identified in this study can be used to help service employees to improve service encounters and ultimately customer relationships.