

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND COMMITMENT: CONSIDERING RELATIONAL INVESTMENT AND RAPPORT IN CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Customers who experience positive customer service interactions tend to feel high levels of satisfaction with the service and commitment to the service provider. This study suggests that investment in the interpersonal relationship that occurs during the rapport-building process in service encounters should be considered when measuring service outcomes. More specifically, items from the Investment Model (Rusbult 1980) were adapted to broaden the ways in which rapport, satisfaction, and commitment have all been measured and connected to describe customer service exchanges. Participants responded to an online survey designed to capture a recent service transaction experience. Results of this study demonstrate significant correlations between variables representing rapport and customer satisfaction and rapport and customer commitment. Each variable construct included relational investment-focused items. This study provides evidence that relationship dynamics both evolve from and encourage relationship investment and can connect enjoyable interaction and personal connection to customer satisfaction and relational commitment. Implications for organizational strategies that more specifically focus on rapport and relationship-building to account for recent shifts in organizational landscapes are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal encounters between employees and customers can play a significant role in the outcome of service transactions. Organizational successes often rely heavily on the relationships that service providers are able to form with their customers (Gremler and Gwinner 2000), though research typically focuses on the outcomes of those relationships rather than the nature of those relationships themselves. One of the most common constructs used to develop employee-customer relationships is rapport, which is illustrated by the characteristics of an interaction and the level of connectivity displayed between the service provider and customer (Gremler and Gwinner 2008). Previous research has extensively analyzed the rapport process and the effect it can have on an organization's bottom-line, emphasizing that effectively building rapport can help to ensure organizational success (e.g., Gremler and Gwinner 2000; Gremler and Gwinner 2008; Placencia 2004; Sabiote and Roman 2009). However, customer-employee rapport research often focuses solely on service outcomes and does not often focus on the influence of the relationship that is established as rapport is built. To that end, this study utilizes the Investment Model of interpersonal relationships (Rusbult 1980), characterized by interdependence theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978) and social exchange theory (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, and Hall 2017), to provide relationship-focused context to customer-employee interactions. Building more relationship investment-focused characteristics into measures of rapport, satisfaction, and commitment is an important step toward understanding and emphasizing how the relationship dynamics of investment processes serve an important purpose for understanding customer behaviors through the lens of interpersonal or relational motivators.

As organizations fight to remain competitive in an increasingly automated, digital, and globalized world, attracting and retaining customers is imperative. Many organizations were forced to radically adjust customer-facing practices and organizational structures as they navigated the challenges that arose during the Covid-19 pandemic. Recognizing the ways in which rapport-building connections that mimic close interpersonal relationships often lead to an invested customer is essential for surviving and thriving in a consumer-driven world full of options and alternatives. The Investment Model provides relationally-focused insight into the types of rapport conditions that might influence an individual's commitment to, and satisfaction with, an organization. Focusing on the interdependent nature of relationship-building communication such as rapport further defines the experiences of customers involved in meaningful service exchanges. While much of the research that focuses on rapport emphasizes its close relationship to customer satisfaction and commitment, it does not isolate the ways in which perceptions of relationship investment influence customer experiences. Although the idea of establishing relationships with customers has been studied in a variety of ways, the specific relationship dynamics that represent interpersonal investment exchanges are still underrepresented in customer-focused research. Results of survey research designed to gauge the investment characteristics of rapport are discussed and paired with practical implications for service and organizational contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer-Employee Rapport

The concept of rapport has been characterized in a variety of ways; as the ability to establish and maintain friendly relations (Aston 1988), as the quality of a relationship distinguished by effective communication and mutual understanding (Carey, D'Lisa, and Biggers 1988), and as the bond between individuals marked by agreement, consistency, and unity (Bernieri, Gillis, Davis, and Grahe 1996). Scholars typically use attributes such as mutual attentiveness, mutual friendliness, and interpersonal coordination as primary qualities of rapport (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). Additionally, definitions of rapport generally include two basic features; that rapport can only be produced during social encounters of two or more people, and that it typically is used as a measure to define the effectiveness and quality of a dyadic relationship (Grahe and Sherman 2007; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). Gremler and Gwinner (2000) define service rapport as a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, such as having a positive experience during a transaction, or when a customer has an affective interpersonal experience, such as a strong bond (e.g., sharing similar interests, having comparable backgrounds, mutual caring), characterized by a perceived personal connection. Typically, if both of these dimensions are established during a service encounter, it is likely that rapport has been established.

The process of establishing rapport has been researched extensively. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) concluded that there are several basic rapport-building behaviors, including attentive behavior, common grounding behavior, connecting behavior, courteousness, and information sharing. Attentiveness can be illustrated in a variety of ways, such as when people go out of their way to help others, show that they have a personal interest in what someone has to say, or simply recognize an individual. When practicing common grounding behavior, individuals seek to find commonalities with one another by doing things like identifying mutual interests or mimicking the behaviors of one another (Grahe and Sherman 2007; Gremler and Gwinner 2008). Connecting behaviors, on the other hand, are typically employed when a person deliberately sets out to establish rapport by, for example, using humor or displaying unusually high levels of friendliness.

The final two rapport-building behaviors developed by Gremler and Gwinner (2008) include courteousness and information sharing. Individuals who are able to express genuine courteous behavior, such as honesty and civility (i.e., being especially friendly, pleasant, polite and/or helpful) often find it easy to establish a bond with other people. During information sharing interactions, sharing information with (or gathering information from) others leads to a better understanding of that individual. Behaviors such as giving advice, imparting knowledge and/or asking questions to gain an understanding of a particular individual all fall under the category of information sharing.

Gremler, Gwinner, and Brown (2000) found that the key to building a strong employee-customer relationship is through using one or more of the basic rapport behaviors to establish trust, confidence, reliability, and integrity. The rapport-building behaviors outlined above can facilitate strong bonds and have been explored in numerous ways. Consumers typically desire a partnership with employees during service transactions, hoping to be understood and have their values taken into consideration (Stern, Thompson, and Arnould 1998). When customers experience these types of positive interactions, they may be more likely to continue to engage with and recommend the service or service provider to acquaintances. Organizations that focus on these types of rapport-building strategies can use them to attract and retain a committed customer base. The reasons a customer might be more motivated to engage when rapport-building takes place have not been as closely studied. This study will further define the dynamics of that process through the lens of investment.

Rapport and Service Outcomes

Building positive customer rapport can lead to several positive customer service outcomes. A number of studies provide evidence for the impact of rapport, consistently citing its relationship to service experiences and outcomes such as customer satisfaction and commitment (Delcourt, Gremler, van Riel and van Birgelen 2013; Fatima, Razzaque and Mascio 2015; Kim and Ok 2010; Kim and Baker 2017; Macintosh 2009), revisit intentions (Han, Choo, Lee, and Hwang 2017), and positive word-of-mouth behaviors (Han et al. 2017; Macintosh 2009). Satisfaction in customer-service provider transactions can refer to the positive versus negative affect experienced by the parties in an interaction, with the specific level of satisfaction influenced by the way a partner fulfills an individual's needs. Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1997) suggest that individuals who feel satisfied are often willing to put significant effort into maintaining their relationships. Similarly, customers who develop a sense of commitment tend to continue to purchase services, recommend the service to others, and increase connections in a relationship, all of which can also be described as loyalty (Hallowell 1996). For this study, customer loyalty behaviors are represented through the construct of commitment. This commitment is defined by Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard (1999) as intent to remain with an organization's services, while Price and Arnould (1999) suggest that commercial friendships may actually form in service settings and can influence things like customer satisfaction and commitment. Much of this research suggests that service outcomes such as satisfaction and a sense of commitment can predict other outcomes, though the literature does not emphasize the nature of the customer-service interactions that create conditions for such outcomes.

Often, high-contact customer-employee interactions can feel quite intimate, as they can be long, involve exchanging content-rich information, and include a range of emotions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). Emotional experiences can be a very central component to the relationships that form during interactions between customers and service providers, as Delcourt

et al. (2013) found that emotional competence can be positively linked to both customer satisfaction and loyalty, with rapport serving as a partial mediator. The customer-employee interactions that occur in these settings (especially in those that are high-contact) contain many of the same characteristics of interpersonal relationship processes, which can create conditions for outcomes such as increased satisfaction or commitment. Ultimately, the idea that rapport-building can create positive outcomes in customer-employee interactions is well-supported in existing research; this study suggests that the desire to engage in and maintain such relationships can be derived from perceptions of investment in service encounters.

Customer Investment Dynamics

The Investment Model was originally developed to explore interpersonal relationships, but its applicability across organizational contexts has been demonstrated in organizationally-focused studies (Bügel, Buunk, and Verhoef 2010; Huang, Cheng, and Farn 2007; Jiang, Chou, and Tao 2011; Le and Agnew 2003). The model is considered one of the most influential theories of relationship commitment (Tran, Judge, and Kashima 2019), highlighting investment, satisfaction, commitment, and quality of alternatives as primary factors in relationship maintenance (Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew 1998). Interdependence theory serves as a foundation for the investment model, emphasizing the impact of comparing one's expectations with outcomes that have occurred (Etcheverry, Le, Wu, and Wei 2013) and satisfaction as a positive affect process that influences dependence (Kelley and Thibaut 1978). In addition, interdependence theory characterizes relationship commitment as a product of one's investment in a relationship (Webster, Laurenceau, Smith, Mahaffey, Bryan, and Brunell 2015), setting the conditions for repeat desired outcomes over time that would be lost if the relationship were terminated (Etcheverry et al.). Rusbult's (1980) claim that a satisfying relationship can be directly related to individual expectations reflects such assertions.

Investment is characterized by the relationship dynamics that both result from and propel interpersonal interactions, and include the resources brought into a relationship by all parties involved, with the goal of using those resources to establish and maintain a relationship (De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci 2001). Quite simply, relationship investment can help to develop and enhance customer relationships (De Wulf et al. 2001). Previous research has focused on this process by exploring either the customer's perception of their own levels of investment, or what they perceive the partner's investment to be, but often not both (Zainol, Omar, Osman, and Habidin 2016). This study includes investment items that focus on both the customer perspectives of their own investment and those of the service provider. Zainol, Yasin, Omar, Hashim, and Osman (2015) found that customers with a positive impression of the investment made by the partner (in this case, the organization) felt compelled to make significant investments in the relationship in return. This tendency can be described through the lens of social exchange theory, which posits individuals will feel compelled to reciprocate actions in order to remain in a relationship as long as they benefit from doing so (Cropanzano et al. 2017). That reciprocation helps to foster continuity in the relationship and can include both tangible and intangible resources. In other words, a customer who perceives a strong and favorable social investment tends to perceive strong emotional connections, which can make them feel obligated to return the favor. Experiencing higher levels of social investment in this way increases the customer's tendency to contribute as the relational partner. The more they invest in a relationship, the greater the cost of terminating, which establishes another motive to remain committed (Rusbult 1980).

Framed in this way, relationship investment can be characterized as a type of psychological attachment to a relational partner and a long-term orientation toward that relationship (Le and Agnew 2003, Rusbult and Buunk 1993). Investment, then, is a condition that influences outcomes such as satisfaction or commitment and loyalty. Satisfaction is often influenced by the amount of fulfillment felt by individuals participating in a relationship and can often be connected to, or even predict, relationship commitment (Etcheverry et al. 2013). Commitment can also develop as individuals perceive investment from the relational partner and seek to reciprocate those investment actions. Much of the previous research describing this relationship focuses on marketing techniques that create commitment and satisfaction conditions to make customers feel more invested in a brand (Hess, Story, and Danes 2011). However, customer perceptions of investment can be a predictor of intention to establish and maintain a relationship with a partner or brand (Sung and Choi 2010), serving as a catalyst for participating in the relationship and transforming more individualistic goals into relationship-service motives, thus motivating the individual to continue to develop and maintain the relationship further (Kelley & Thibaut 1978). To that end, Brooks, Ogolsky, and Monk (2018) claim that the investment model itself “has explanatory power regarding relationship commitment and predictive power for staying or leaving behavior” (p. 2687) and should be utilized to understand how relationship investment dynamics can serve as a condition for service outcomes.

Customer-Employee Rapport and the Investment Model

Though often mentioned in the same conversations, research does not often situate rapport, investment, and customer outcomes together in a way that emphasizes the relationship that develops among parties involved in rapport-building and customer service exchanges. This study explores the idea that focusing on the relationship dynamics in customer-employee interactions may be essential for establishing and maintaining long-term investment connections, especially as organizations seek to renew customer relationships in the wake of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Developing close relationships, in many ways, mimics the process of developing a brand or service loyalty, especially as service options become more easily customizable and personalized. Rapport, then, may so often be linked to customer satisfaction and commitment because it engages customers in a relationship-building process that is familiar to them. Many scholars have noted that maintaining a competitive advantage requires developing and sustaining stronger relationships with customers (Carter 2008; Hess and Story 2005; Louis and Lambert 2010; Zainol, Yahaya, and Osman 2018). From the perspective of the investment model, the attachment that an individual feels to a relational partner influences their needs, expectations, and decisions to remain loyal to the relationship. Thus, the nature of the relationship itself should be considered a catalyst for the outcomes.

Relationship investment can take multiple forms (Le and Agnew 2003) and has been described as a “multidimensional construct [that] should not be overlooked” (Zainol et al. 2018, p. 85). Perceived partner investment (such as putting in extra effort, paying close attention, and contributing important resources) can lead to positive service outcomes, such as satisfaction and commitment (De Wulf et al. 2001). The actions that are often cited as rapport-building strategies for customer-facing employees (such as attentiveness, grounding and connecting behaviors, courteousness, and information sharing) demonstrate these types of investment and can trigger the customer to reciprocate. When a customer reciprocates, it engages both parties in relationally-focused communication behaviors that are often linked to positive service outcomes.

Additionally, conceptualizing customer-service relationships as a form of friendship may provide additional insight into relational investment. While there are several different ways to categorize friendships, two in particular speak to the types of conditions under which customer-service relationships may mimic friendship. Utility friendship, characterized by the potential benefits that can be gained during an exchange, is linked to interdependence theory (Van Lange and Rusbult 2012). Pleasure friendship, characterized by enjoyment or pleasure (Cooper, 1977), speaks to the ways in which friendship can lead to satisfaction and positive emotion (Wrzus, Wagner, and Neyer 2012). Both friendship categories can be connected to factors that are important to understanding investment. Experiencing a relational exchange that contains potential benefits and enjoyment may encourage reciprocation and create a sense of interdependence and commitment to the relationship.

Service outcomes, such as satisfaction, likely matter as relationships develop. Cronin, Brady, and Hult (2000) state that customer satisfaction is associated with value, which is based on several potential service quality attributes. Butcher, Sparks, and O'Callaghan (2001) suggest that relationship-building between customers and service providers can result in a sense of ownership of the service process, creating a sense of closeness that can influence loyalty. When positive feelings and ownership are reinforced, customers may see this as a sign to continue to maintain the relationship and patronage. According to Rusbult et al. (1998), it is easier to maintain a committed relationship when it is associated with positive feelings, such as when a sense of rapport or affiliation develops between customers and service providers. When customers feel satisfied with the rapport in their relationship with a service provider, they may feel a sense of closeness that is common in more intimate relationships (e.g., romantic or friendships) and feel a stronger sense of commitment to that person or organization. Customers who feel satisfied with their relationship with a service provider may then begin to expect the same satisfaction from the actual service. Thus, the investment-focused attributes of rapport-building processes during customer service interactions are likely contributing factors to outcomes such as satisfaction.

Additionally, Agnew et al. (1997) argue that the Investment Model Theory extends the idea of commitment in relationships as a psychological experience, suggesting that individuals begin to consider themselves part of a collective unit as their feelings of commitment grow. Kanter (1968) determined that people orient themselves to situations emotionally, intellectually, and positively and negatively. Customers willing to reciprocate the energy in a relationship with their service provider may do so because they feel dependent on the relationship through increased positive rapport. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) argue that the presence of rapport in customer-employee interactions may provide a relational foundation. Feelings of commitment encourage persistence in relationships and are often strengthened under conditions of high satisfaction, leading to the formation of psychological attachment (Rusbult et al. 1998). In customer service settings, customers seek fulfillment of their basic needs from service providers, much like employees seek fulfillment of basic needs from their employer or couples seek fulfillment of needs from their partners. Such affiliation needs, or the desire to feel a sense of involvement and belonging, are often connected to an increased sense of investment and higher levels of commitment (Stum 2001). As a cornerstone of human relationships, affiliation needs (at least in part) can be fulfilled by common rapport-building strategies and may elevate levels of relational satisfaction and commitment among customers. Storbacka, Strandvik, and Grönroos (1994) posit customer commitment can in fact be defined by a desire to have a relationship with the provider. Such relationally-focused characteristics can be further characterized by research that utilizes an investment lens.

This study suggests that investment influences relationship dynamics in service transactions, which impacts outcomes of those service transactions. Previous research has not specifically emphasized the importance of the dynamics of the relationship itself, nor has it situated both the perception of customers' perceived self-investment and their perception of the organization's (or organizational member's) investment as the relational partner in the same study. Focusing on customer perceptions of investment from both angles helps to further support the idea that relationship-focused communication is an important condition for creating positive customer behaviors. This study suggests that the influence of rapport-building on service outcomes may be related to a felt or perceived relationship between the customer and the service provider during the service transaction (either a single interaction or several over time). The feelings that emerge from these customer-employee relationships may influence how satisfied a customer feels about the service, prompting specific reactions and intention to maintain the relationship by repeating business. Thus, it is the specific act of engaging in relationship-building investment dynamics that may influence the customer service experience. In the case of customer-employee interactions, satisfaction and commitment levels of customers may be rooted in feeling invested in a relationship.

As an exploratory step toward using relational investment to link rapport, commitment, and satisfaction, the present study offers the following hypotheses:

H1: *Individuals who experience (a) enjoyable interaction and (b) personal connection in customer-service exchanges will report high levels of relational satisfaction with the encounter.*

H2: *Individuals who experience (a) enjoyable interaction and (b) personal connection in customer-service exchanges will invest high levels of relational commitment to the service provider.*

Using an invested relationship context to frame these variables is a step toward providing more practical and applicable strategies for improving customer satisfaction and commitment. In previous research, the specific impact of relationship-mimicking behaviors that are present in rapport-building interactions is often implied but not explicitly stated. The relational focus of the Investment Model highlights small, but important, factors for expanding what is understood about the customer service experience.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 146 individuals who reported to have recently completed a service transaction. Of the 146 individuals, 61% identified as female and 38% identified as male (an additional one percent did not disclose gender). The average age of the participants was 32 years ($SD = 14.84$); however, there was a great range in age, spanning 18 years to 74 years. Many participants indicated that they were familiar with the type of service they were thinking of for the survey, with 28% reporting a high level of familiarity with the service and 56% frequently utilizing the service. The levels of familiarity coincided with the reported frequency of the service use, as 38% of respondents utilized the service monthly and 28% weekly; a total of 32% of respondents only used the service yearly, less than once a year, or less than once every few years. The majority of respondents focused on a service transaction that had occurred within the past month (20%),

within the past week (25%), or within the past few days (53%). Most of the individuals (88%) reported purchasing a product during the service transaction, as the typical services reported were retail and food/beverage. See table 1 for a summary of service characteristics.

Procedures

Participants were recruited to participate in an online survey. Students in several introductory communication courses were offered extra credit for completion of the survey. Participants were asked to forward the survey link to 10 additional people, which resulted in a mixed snowball sample of college students and business professionals. Respondents were asked to think of their most recent service transaction and indicate the degree to which they agreed with the survey items.

Measures

Participants were asked to think about a recent face-to-face service transaction, type the name of the organization, and indicate the industry the organization belonged to, how long ago the transaction occurred, and whether or not they purchased the product or service. Aside from demographic measures, all scales included response options that were arranged on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Table 2 includes the items used to measure each of the variables.

Items from the Investment Model Scale were adapted and included in several of the measures. These items were chosen to represent variables from the perspective of investment in the relationship. While the Investment Model Scale has primarily been used to analyze the foundations of interpersonal and romantic relationships, its purpose in this study was to provide additional insight into the relationship-mimicking behaviors that may form between a customer and a service provider representative. The inclusion of these items extends conceptualizations of rapport and service outcomes by attempting to explain the way customers become invested in the service *and* the relationship that may form, even if only to a small extent, when participating in the service interaction.

Rapport. Two measures of rapport were included: (1) a five-item assessment of the degree to which the transaction was enjoyable ($\alpha = .92$) and (2) a five-item measure of the participant's perception of their connection with the service provider ($\alpha = .91$). All items were adapted from Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) measures of customer-employee rapport in service relationships. An additional item, *I feel comfortable disclosing personal information about myself with my service provider*, was adapted from Rusbult et al.'s (1998) Investment Model Scale and added to the personal connection scale.

Satisfaction. Customer satisfaction was measured using an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .94$). Six of the *satisfaction* items were adapted from Voss, Parasuraman, and Grewal's (1998) measure of satisfaction in a service setting. An additional item, *The service was close to ideal*, was pulled from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) and another, *My choice to use this service provider was a wise one*, from Gremler and Gwinner (2000).

TABLE 1: Service Characteristics

	Frequency	Percentage
Type of Service Provider		
National Chain	97	65.5
Locally-owned	48	32.4
Type of Industry		
Retail	64	43.2
Food/Beverage	57	38.6
Healthcare	16	10.8
Financial/Banking	6	4.1
Level of Familiarity with the service		
I have a high level of experience with the service.	42	28.4
I utilize the service frequently.	83	56.1
I am not very familiar with the service.	20	13.5
How often do you frequent this service provider?		
Daily	4	2.7
Weekly	38	27.7
Monthly	56	37.8
Yearly	12	8.1
Less than once a year	17	11.5
Less than once every few years	18	12.3
Where does the service transaction take place?		
Face-to-face	138	93.2
Online	5	3.4
How long ago did the transaction occur?		
Within the past few days	78	52.7
Within the past week	37	25.0
Within the past month	29	19.6
More than a month ago	3	2.0
Did you purchase the product/use the service?		
Yes	130	87.8
No	16	10.8

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Survey Items:
Satisfaction, Commitment, and Rapport (EI & PC)

Variables and item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Satisfaction	4.18	1.00	0.94
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service was close to ideal. • The service provider did a good job of fulfilling my service needs. • This organization satisfied my high expectations for quality service • The organization provided me with good service. • The organization provided me with service that was of poor quality. • I felt satisfied with the outcome of this customer service transaction. • I'm not happy with the outcome of this customer service encounter. • My choice to use this service provider was a wise one. 			
Commitment			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my service provider. • I would feel very upset if I were unable to utilize the service provider in the near future. • It is likely I will change service providers within the next year. • I am willing to go the extra mile to remain a customer of this service provider. • I will be a repeat customer for this organization. • I would continue to do business with this organization even if the prices increased somewhat. • I intend to continue doing business with this service provider over the next few years. • I feel loyal toward this service provider. 	3.89	0.86	0.88
Rapport – Enjoyable Interaction			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoy interacting with this employee. • This employee has a good sense of humor. • This employee creates a feeling of “warmth” in our relationship. • This employee relates well to me. • I am comfortable interacting with this employee. 			
Rapport – Personal Connection			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel comfortable disclosing personal information about myself with my service provider. • I feel like there is a “bond” between this employee and myself. • I look forward to seeing this person when I visit the service provider. • I strongly care about this employee. • This person has taken a personal interest in me. • I have a close relationship with this person. 			

Commitment. Customer commitment was measured using an eight-item scale ($\alpha = .88$), including *I intend to continue doing business with this service provider over the next few years* (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000), *I will be a repeat customer for this organization*, and *I would continue to do business with this organization even if the prices were increased somewhat* (Voss et al., 1998), as well as five items from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis one predicted that (a) enjoyable interaction and (b) personal connection would be positively related to customer satisfaction. A Pearson's correlation analysis revealed that customer satisfaction was positively correlated with the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport, $r(143) = .69, p < .05$, as well as with personal connection, $r(143) = .48, p < .05$. Hypothesis one was supported, and the exceptionally strong correlation between enjoyable interaction and satisfaction is particularly noteworthy.

As a component of rapport, enjoyable interaction is a primary factor influencing feelings of customer satisfaction. Enjoyable interaction was operationalized with items featuring a sense of humor, feelings of "warmth," feeling like the service providers could relate to the customer, and feeling comfortable interacting with the service provider. Additionally, the Investment Model states that individuals will be satisfied with a relationship if their needs are fulfilled and they are pleased with the relationship. Relational needs (such as feeling a sense of comfort and warmth) paired with being able to relate to employees mimic the types of characteristics of close friendships. Though relatively little research connects friendship, closeness, and humor (Gordon 2014), the results of this study suggest that these factors may meaningfully connect to create the types of enjoyable interaction experienced during rapport-building exchanges. Indeed, humor may help to enhance the quality of relationships and can play a role in bringing people together (Gordon). These aspects of enjoyable interaction connect directly to the idea of utility friendship, where something can be gained or accomplished through the interaction, and pleasure friendship, where the exchange feels enjoyable. Customers in this space, then, may feel compelled to reciprocate such behaviors - a key characteristic of investment dynamics. That such a strong correlation exists between enjoyable interaction and satisfaction suggests that the affective nature of service exchanges matters to a great extent.

Having an enjoyable experience is clearly the strongest indicator of satisfaction, but personal connection is also significantly and positively related to satisfaction as well. Rapport-building skills (attentiveness and grounding or connecting behaviors) can create feelings of personal connection, mimicking intimacy or closeness and creating conditions for the relationship to feel particularly warm, comfortable, or relatable. Simply put, when an employee caters to a customer's service *and* interpersonal or affiliation needs to foster a sense of short- or long-term relational intimacy, such conditions can create a sense of investment in the relationship and, in this case, overall customer satisfaction increases. These findings support Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) claim that a positive service transaction will influence satisfaction toward the entire service organization. The relationship between personal connection and satisfaction helps to bolster the overall importance of both of the findings from hypothesis one, pointing further toward the importance of considering relational investment in the measurement of these constructs.

Hypothesis two stated that customers will feel greater levels of commitment if they experienced enjoyable interaction and personal connection in customer-service exchanges. A Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between customer commitment and

the (a) enjoyable interaction, $r(144) = .50, p < .05$, as well as with personal connection, $r(144) = .47, p < .05$. Hypothesis two was supported (see Table 3).

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables

	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Commitment
Enjoyable Interaction	.69*	.50*
2. Personal Connection	.48*	.47*
* $p < .05$		

It is important to note that all of the constructs were operationalized in part by statements modeled after the Investment Model Scale. Thus, each of the constructs in this study are relationship- and investment-focused, which illustrates the significance of interpersonal dynamics of customer-service provider exchanges. Often, there are strong relationships among the concepts of rapport, satisfaction, and commitment; that these variables are positively correlated in this study after they have been adjusted to include investment-focused items helps to fill in some of the gaps to explain *what*, specifically, about the rapport-building process leads to positive service outcomes. That such processes may encourage customers to mimic relationship-building behaviors, which are inherently embedded with investment-focused characteristics, sheds light on the actual conditions that are created within customer-service provider exchanges to create positive outcomes.

Situating investment-focused communication more soundly within the conversations around service outcomes is essential for understanding the conditions that contribute to positive customer experiences. Additional conditions related to the service characteristics of the encounters may also be useful. To determine whether there were statistical differences in satisfaction, commitment, and rapport scores across certain characteristics of the service encounter such as frequency of the service encounter, industry, level of familiarity, and organization type, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. At the $p < .05$ level, there were significant effects on satisfaction related to frequency of the service encounter [$F(5, 139) = 3.03, p = 0.013$], industry [$F(3, 139) = 4.14, p = 0.008$], and organization type (locally-owned versus national chain) [$F(1, 143) = 6.50, p = 0.005$]. Similarly, at the $p < .05$ level, there were significant effects on commitment related to frequency [$F(5, 139) = 7.23, p = .0000$], familiarity [$F(2, 142) = 7.57, p = .0008$], and organizational type [$F(1, 143) = 10.33, p = .0016$], and on rapport related to frequency [$F(5, 139) = 13.91, p = .0000$], industry [$F(3, 139) = 3.22, p = .0246$], familiarity [$F(2, 142) = 30.27, p = .0000$], and organizational type [$F(1, 143) = 47.76, p = .0000$]. See Table 4 for summary data.

Since the ANOVA indicated statistical differences, Tukey *post hoc* analyses were conducted to establish where the scores were different. Table 5 summarizes the significant differences in satisfaction, commitment, and rapport scores. Participants who utilized the services more often were more satisfied, more committed, and reported higher levels of rapport than those who utilized the service less frequently. On the surface, this is not surprising, but it does provide some evidence that increased opportunities to engage in and be exposed to investment-focused behaviors may be an underrecognized component of customer satisfaction and commitment. Viewing these results through the lens of investment provides additional explanation for *why* these types of customers may feel more satisfied or committed. Similarly, those same personalized experiences may potentially occur more frequently in locally-owned business interactions, during which participants reported experiencing higher levels of rapport-building behaviors and generally felt more satisfied and committed (when compared to national chains). Locally-owned businesses

Table 4. Results of ANOVA – satisfaction, commitment, rapport.

Satisfaction		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frequency of visit	Between groups	18.8463	5	3.7693	3.0269	.0126
	Within groups	173.0918	139	1.2453		
	Total	131.4730	142			
Industry	Between groups	10.7726	3	3.5909	4.1353	.0076
	Within groups	120.7004	139	0.8683		
	Total	131.4730	142			
Familiarity	Between groups	8.9884	2	4.4942	2.4512	.0898
	Within groups	260.3558	142	1.8335		
	Total	269.3442	144			
Local vs. Chain	Between groups	6.5023	1	6.5023	8.0679	.0052
	Within groups	115.2512	143	0.8060		
	Total	121.7535	144			
Commitment		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frequency of visit	Between groups	53.0298	5	10.6060	7.2288	.0000
	Within groups	203.9392	139	1.4672		
	Total	256.9690	144			
Industry	Between groups	1.9620	3	0.6540	1.1856	.3176
	Within groups	76.6738	139	0.5516		
	Total	78.6358	142			
Familiarity	Between groups	12.8634	2	6.4317	7.5707	.0008
	Within groups	120.6360	142	0.8495		
	Total	133.4994	144			
Local vs. Chain	Between groups	15.7341	1	15.7341	10.3287	.0016
	Within groups	217.8359	143	1.5233		
	Total	233.5700	144			
Rapport		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Frequency of visit	Between groups	70.5598	5	14.1120	13.9112	.0000
	Within groups	141.0060	139	1.0144		
	Total	211.5658	144			
Industry	Between groups	11.9009	3	3.9670	3.2237	.0246
	Within groups	171.0495	139	1.2306		
	Total	182.9504	142			
Familiarity	Between groups	61.2537	2	30.6269	30.2668	.0000
	Within groups	143.6892	142	1.0119		
	Total	204.9429	144			
Local vs. Chain	Between groups	82.2025	1	82.2025	47.7557	.0000
	Within groups	246.1479	143	1.7213		
	Total	328.3504	144			

Table 5. Tukey *post hoc* analysis of differences

Satisfaction					
(I)	(J)	Mean Diff (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Freq: Weekly	Less than every few years	1.14	.0064	0.2173	2.0627
Freq: Monthly	Less than every few years	0.99	.0165	0.1163	1.8637
Ind: Healthcare	Food/Beverage	0.88	.0059	0.1945	1.5655
Type: Local	Chain	0.45	.0052	0.1369	0.7631
Commitment					
(I)	(J)	Mean Diff (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Freq: Daily	Less than yearly	2.03	.0353	0.0849	3.9751
	Less than every few years	2.14	.0209	0.2052	4.0748
Freq: Weekly	Monthly	0.89	.0082	0.1544	1.6256
	Yearly	1.39	.0090	0.2310	2.5490
	Less than yearly	1.42	.0013	0.3987	2.4413
	Less than every few years	1.53	.0003	0.5285	2.5315
Exp: Very familiar	Not familiar	0.97	.0005	0.3769	1.5631
Exp: Familiar	Not familiar	0.60	.0267	0.0562	1.1438
Type: Local	Chain	0.70	.0016	0.2695	1.1305
Rapport					
(I)	(J)	Mean Diff (I-J)	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Freq: Daily	Less than yearly	1.79	.0208	0.1726	3.4074
	Less than every few years	2.20	.0017	0.5912	3.8088
Freq: Weekly	Less than yearly	1.26	.0005	0.4108	2.1092
	Less than every few years	1.67	.0000	0.8372	2.5028
Freq: Monthly	Less than yearly	1.45	.0000	0.6441	2.2559
	Less than every few years	1.86	.0000	1.0714	2.6486
Exp: Very familiar	Familiar	0.99	.0000	0.5389	1.4411
	Not familiar	2.06	.0000	1.4127	2.7073
Exp: Familiar	Not familiar	1.07	.0001	0.4766	1.6634
Type: Local	Chain	1.60	.0000	1.1424	2.0576

may have an advantage when it comes to opportunities for engaging in investment-focused rapport behaviors.

The Tukey *post hoc* analysis identified that customers who reported on their experiences with a healthcare service felt more satisfied than those reporting on food and beverage services; traditionally, healthcare service encounters offer increased opportunities for relationally-focused communication. The typical markers of relational investment (effort, attention to detail) are exactly the types of exchanges that occur during patient-care provider interactions. Interestingly, industry was not significant in the commitment or rapport conditions, where instead familiarity was significant, which was not significant in the satisfaction condition. Perhaps satisfaction translated more clearly in terms of one's relationship to a specific industry, whereas familiarity translated more effectively to more behaviorally-focused constructs such as rapport-building and commitment. This pattern provides support for the importance of further isolating relationship-mimicking behaviors as they relate to customer perceptions of investment.

The Investment Model emphasizes that variables such as commitment can be meaningfully connected to feeling a sense of enjoyment during the customer-service exchange and experiencing a sense of personal connection with the service provider. Perhaps customers feel a sense of comfort in the ways in which service transactions mimic some of the best qualities of our affiliative needs, perceiving the formation of a relationship to some extent. Items such as being unlikely to change service providers, feeling upset if unable to utilize the service provider, and being willing to go the extra mile to remain a customer can reflect a sort of allegiance and commitment to the conditions experienced just as much as they might reflect the service provider itself. These same feelings are likely born from the process of investing time and energy into establishing a relationship with someone, which occurs the more frequently a customer engages with the service provider. In all, the study provides evidence to suggest that when customer needs are met and an interpersonal bond or relationship has been formed with the service provider, their loyalty to the organization is likely to follow. As Sabote and Roman (2009) suggest, customers will have a predisposition to return to businesses that have employees who display behaviors along the lines of friendliness, familiarity, caring, politeness, responsiveness, trustworthiness, helpfulness, and understanding.

IMPLICATIONS

Results of this study demonstrate that rapport is an important component of customer satisfaction and commitment, which is not surprising; such claims have been researched and supported for years. However, this study does offer evidence that more investment-focused measures of rapport, satisfaction, and commitment may provide insight into the relationally-motivated behaviors of customers. A very strong correlation between customer satisfaction and rapport as an enjoyable interaction also points towards the continued importance for considering what service interactions *feel* like. At the very least, such a strong finding provides additional, meaningful evidence of the relationships that are important to consider in the world of customer service and relationship-building. Beyond this, such a significantly strong correlation points confidently in a very specific direction for considering rapport as investment and satisfaction with customer experiences. Utilizing the Investment Model shifts the focus of rapport as an enjoyable interaction from a general set of pleasantries to the types of relational characteristics that typically create invested interactions between friends. Humor, closeness, affiliation, and a sense of investment in both the customer and the specific relationship with that customer as a person may elevate the types of consumer relationships necessary for organizational success.

The other significant results of this study offer support for considering the relational investment that occurs in customer-service provider exchanges. Although technological innovation has made convenience a key feature of many service exchanges, the results of this study suggest that customers are still looking for opportunities to connect with service providers in a way that is enjoyable and feels familiar. The customer experience matters - perhaps even more so as consumers navigate the complex consumer-service provider relationship that has developed from the challenges of providing a service during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, the results of this study also support and elevate the importance of rapport-building in interpersonal friendship or romantic relationships. More specifically, it holds that perceptions of investment can influence general satisfaction in such relationships, which likely hinges on the extent to which the interactions feel enjoyable and potentially leads to other factors such as increased commitment or tendencies to speak positively about that relationship to others (connected loosely to other rapport-based findings on positive word-of-mouth behaviors). Relational satisfaction, in this case, may very well depend on the extent to which individuals enjoy the relational interactions and perceive a sense of investment. Perhaps what we understand about customer-service provider relationships is just as essential, and should be elevated as such in other types of relationships.

Implications in Practice

Beyond contributing to both customer satisfaction and relationship research, the results of this study should be considered by organizations looking to demonstrate investment in their relationships with customers. Cultivating a satisfactory relationship with customers requires creating an environment that motivates positive customer behaviors and increases favorable reputation. Cultivating that relationship can take many forms. Strategically, organizations should focus on relationally-focused goals in three key areas: hiring, training, and brand promotion.

First, organizations should consider adjusting hiring practices to include personality traits such as emotional competence and emotional intelligence. Rather than focusing solely on skills- or experience-based qualifications, asking prospective employees to complete emotional intelligence testing can be an important screening tool for finding the right candidates specifically for facilitating the relationally-focused investment behaviors that customers respond to. According to Delcourt et al. (2013), emotionally competent employees are more likely to succeed in building rapport in high-contact service encounters. Hiring employees who can lead high-quality interactions, even in moderate-contact service encounters, will be important for many organizations looking to rebuild or reestablish customer bases, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hiring the right employees for their abilities to navigate relationally-focused customer interactions and training them to be more aware of, and utilize, relationship-focused communication skills is essential. Often, training focuses on the ability to perform basic tasks in order to succeed in the role, or might feature role-play scenarios to teach employees how to handle difficult situations. What is equally as important for organizations who wish to demonstrate a sense of relational investment through interpersonal exchanges is training employees to pay close attention to the customer - noticing the details, paying attention to what is important, and working to build those details into interactions so that customers will respond to the effort and attention given to them during the exchange is key, along with emphasizing fulfilling affiliation needs to initiate and maintain relationship-building. It is useful to assess what is important to stakeholders and focus on strategies that express those characteristics so that consumers can identify with the organization and its members.

Finally, organizations can build on interpersonal relational investment techniques with larger-scale communication efforts designed to mimic investment behaviors. Popp, Wilson, Horbel, and Woratschek (2016) describe the utility of co-creating value by engaging customers through communication platforms such as social media. More specifically, organizations can promote their brand by highlighting their investment in their customers. Using social media to highlight customer profiles, ask for feedback or ideas, and provide opportunities for customers to like and share messages that are focused on their interests and priorities aligns with the types of interpersonal actions that demonstrate effort and attention to detail, which are key investment behaviors. Promoting a brand by linking it to customer experiences and values creates a perceived psychological sense of belonging, especially if it mimics the relational dynamics of interpersonal or face-to-face interactions that occur during service interactions.

Overall, the study backs up the claim that customer-employee rapport can lead to positive service outcomes. Customers who feel that organizations are investing in a relationship with them may feel compelled to reciprocate that investment. These findings are particularly significant when considering the increased use of automated customer service systems (during which customers rarely interact with a human being). Technological innovations and trends lead many organizations *away* from the use of person-to-person interactions. Managers and leaders in organizations should consider that, although customers often expect quick, efficient service, it does not necessarily mean such services should be automated and self-performed. In fact, if an organization wishes to retain its customer base, it might consider how to incorporate interpersonal experiences into technologically-enhanced customer service transactions. The results of this study offer new insight into the experiences of customers and highlight the impact of investment-focused behaviors on customer experiences. In addition, these results extend current knowledge of customer service settings and the literature on customer-service provider interactions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study emphasized the importance of creating a sense of investment through enjoyable, relationship-focused exchanges in customer service encounters, but the cross-sectional data set represents self-reported, general perceptions of service experiences, not actual observed interactions. Future research should assess specific service encounters that occur under a variety of conditions (one-time, sporadic, repeated, or prolonged) to assess both the short- and long-term relationship processes and the impact of service exchanges. Additionally, studies that focus on developing a measure of customer perceptions of both their own investment and the relational partner's investment will help to flesh out an understanding of the micro-level relationship dynamics at play; isolating and measuring investment as a condition for service outcomes will help to differentiate the construct from the outcomes and add an important missing link in the way customer relationships are understood. Data was also collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which means this study may not have fully captured more present-day concerns regarding service encounters. It is important to consider, however, that investment and enjoyable rapport may become even more central to the customer experience, as many organizational landscapes will continue to shift in the aftermath of the pandemic. Future research should examine those experiences across industries and consider the impact of organizational size and structure. The successes and failures of many small or locally-owned businesses may hinge on the relationships they have created with their customers, situating rapport at the center of organizational conversations in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The strong correlation between enjoyable interaction and rapport is a significant result that, on its own, is a meaningful contribution to customer rapport and satisfaction research. In addition to this finding, there are other significant relationships between rapport and constructs that were adjusted to include more relational- and investment-focused factors. Significant correlations between variables where investment has been used to broaden constructs indicate that more research is needed to identify what, specifically, about invested relationships matters in customer service settings and under what conditions such relational connections impact the exchanges. In fact, the extent to which customers feel invested in their service relationships may impact, or have already impacted, the survival of organizations throughout and after the Covid-19 crisis. Organizational shifts that occurred to account for the pandemic also impact customer experiences. This study suggests that organizations should consider how to continue to focus on rapport-building so that they have the opportunity to continue to provide their service. In a world where options and alternatives for similar products and services abound, investing in the customer experience makes a difference.

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