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The role of language, appearance, and smile on perceptions of authenticity versus rapport

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ABSTRACT

Today's environment is multiethnic and businesses try to attract customers to ethnic services. Both verbal elements, such as language spoken, and nonverbal elements, such as appearance and smile, influence customer perceptions. While some elements may be seen to increase perceptions of authenticity, others may come at the expense of perceived rapport. Therefore, this research investigates language spoken, ethnic appearance, and smile on customer perceptions of authenticity and rapport using two between-subjects experimental design studies. In addition, as employees and other customers in the social servicescape can affect the focal customers' experience, this research examines both employee and other customer perceptions in the two separate studies. Results from the two studies find that ethnic appearance and smile significantly affect customer perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction. Language spoken by employees also significantly affects customers' authenticity perceptions. Surprisingly, language use and ethnic appearance do not negatively affect perceptions of rapport.

1. Introduction

Customer communication involves not only what is said, but the language in which it is said, and the body language that support the message. Ethnic oriented services, such as dining, not only attract customers from the referent ethnic group, but also those outside the referent ethnic group (Grier et al., 2006) and service companies are increasingly marketing ethnically themed services (Wang and Mattila, 2013). Examining ethnic servicescapes is a critical yet under-researched topic as they can be ideal environments for observing perceptions and behaviors of consumers in this increasingly global market (Elliot et al., 2013). Studies providing empirical examinations of consumers' language preferences in service encounters are limited and even fewer consider language spoken as well as body language (Holmqvist et al., 2017). Specifically, there is a call for future research to examine the effects of language and ethnicity in an ethnic context such as restaurants (Azab and Clark, 2017). The examination of the social context in service settings would provide a rich extension to the service literature by exploring how the presence of other customers impacts evaluations (Azab and Clark, 2017). This is critical as the managerial implications of understanding language use in service contexts is far reaching (Holmqvist et al., 2017). Therefore, this study first seeks to address these gaps in the literature by examining the influence of language spoken in ethnic servicescapes.

Both language use and body language (such as facial expressions and ethnic appearance) provide crucial cues for customer perceptions during the service exchange. From the body language perspective, there are a lack of studies that examine employee appearance (Kim and Baker, 2017a) despite the concern that service industries should have employees who possess proper aesthetics that align with the brand image. In addition, few studies examine how an observable characteristic of an employee, such as ethnicity, can influence customers' perceptions of an organization (Hekman et al., 2010; Kim and Baker, 2017a). From a managerial perspective, it is imperative that foodservice operators understand the dining preferences of multicultural markets because psychological factors play a considerable role in ethnic food selections (Magnini et al., 2011). As such, this research next seeks to fill the current gaps in the literature by examining the influence of nonverbal language (ethnic appearance and smile) on customer perceptions to build upon theory.

Next, one main attribute that is critical to ethnic services is authenticity. Customers prefer services that exemplify authenticity and throughout numerous industries, authenticity has overtaken quality as a prevailing purchase criterion (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). However, other research suggests that customer-employee rapport is considered the critical factor in capturing customer's perceptions of the service delivery and service organization (Grenler and Gwinner, 2000). Customers use various cues about service workers including appearance

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and behavior to form an overall attitude of the service experience (Söderlund and Julander, 2009). Surprisingly little research examines the antecedents of rapport in relation to service providers' attributes (Kim and Baker, 2017b). It seems, however, that the elements of ethnic language and appearance that might increase perceptions of authenticity might come at the cost of decreased rapport. Given the call for more research to examine the importance of the relationships between ethnicity and language on perceptions of rapport (Azab and Clark, 2017) and authenticity, this research examines these two important variables which seek to build upon the theoretical gaps surrounding authenticity and rapport.

Finally, as perceptions of authenticity and rapport are not only formed by the physical elements, but also formed through the connection with people, it is also important to consider the social servicescape elements. The examination of the social servicescape would provide a rich extension to the service literature by exploring how the presence of other customers impacts evaluations (Azab and Clark, 2017). The two main elements of the social servicescape are the service providers and the other customers. Both can be used as cues to assess ethnic oriented services, yet to date, very little research investigates the social aspects of the servicescape (Wang and Mattila, 2013). There is a gap in the literature and more studies are needed to examine the social aspect of the service environment (Baker and Kim, 2016; Line et al., 2015). As such, this research conducts two experimental design studies, the first focusing on customer perception of the employee, and the second focuses on customer perceptions of the other customers.

Therefore, given the gaps in the current theoretical body of literature, the main purpose of this study is to contribute to the research by examining the impact of language spoken and body language on consumers' perceptions of authenticity versus rapport. In addition, this research seeks to extend the theory on social servicescapes by examining the influence of two elements: the service providers and the other customers. More specifically, this research conducts two studies; one that investigates customer perceptions of employee language spoken and employee body language (smile and appearance). The second study investigates customers' perceptions of the language spoken, smiling body language, and appearance of other customers in the social servicescape. The conceptual model is presented in Fig. 1. In addition to the theoretical and methodological contributions, this study provides important managerial implications to business marketers and practitioners regarding both language spoken and body language communication strategies in an increasingly diverse and multilingual economy.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceptions of authenticity

Authenticity is a critical attribute in appealing to target customers of ethnic establishments (Liu and Jang, 2009). Authenticity is typically defined as a reflection of credibility that comes from having the

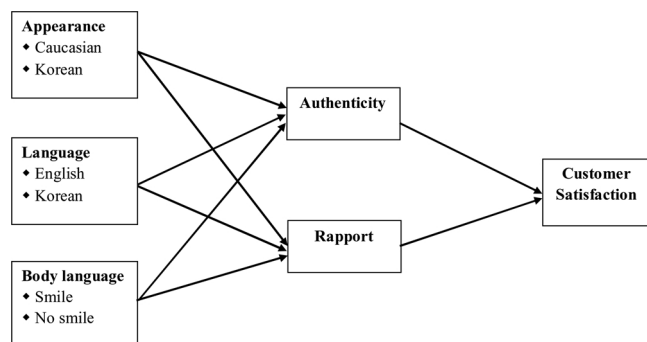


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

appropriate relationship to an original source (Rudinow, 1994) and that which is believed or accepted to be genuine or real. Authenticity can be viewed from both the objective and subjective standpoint. Objective authenticity implies that an object is genuine, thus authenticity can be judged by an expert (Trilling, 1972). Type authenticity is defined as a product or service offering that is true to its type, category, or genre (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009). On the other hand, subjective authenticity views authenticity as relative and dependent on the context rather than objectively determined (Jang et al., 2012). This suggests that customers expect symbolic authenticity which is derived from social constructions (Cohen, 1988). As such, perceived authenticity in an ethnic restaurant is considered as a customer's perceptions of the service outputs reflecting authenticity (Jang et al., 2012). Researchers utilize type authenticity as a restaurant should be considered genuine by its referent ethnicity and should reflect the cultural experiences of that ethnic group (Wang et al., 2015).

Authenticity is a critical attribute in appealing to target customers of ethnic establishments (Liu and Jang, 2009). As it is found that customers value authenticity (Gilmore and Pine, 2007), ethnic restaurants should emphasize their authenticity by emphasizing elements in the service environment (Ebster and Guist, 2004; Choi et al., 2017). In other words, service operators can enhance customer's perceived authenticity directly by optimizing tangible cues in the service environment (Kim and Baker, 2017a). In this study, this involves the examination of both authenticity related to language use and authenticity related to appearance of others in the social servicescape.

Only recently is language being examined as it relates to perceptions of authenticity with service experiences. However, in the branding literature, the strategy of spelling or pronouncing a brand name in a foreign language suggests that brands will serve as an important cue that triggers associations with specific origins (Ouellet, 2007). Furthermore, the service may be perceived as more authentic if the service employee's language use is congruent with the design of the customer experience (Sirianni et al., 2013). Recent research finds that the use of specific language, as it aligns with the focal customer's language, can positively or negatively affect the service experience (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). Similarly, a recent qualitative study finds the use of language can affect perceptions of authenticity (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). As such, an important yet under-researched area of authenticity involves how the language spoken affects authenticity perceptions.

Few studies examine the effects of the social servicescape in determining perceptions of authenticity, yet this is also a critical indicator worthy of further investigation. Hall (2007) finds that authenticity is formed through a connection with people. An important element related to race and ethnicity perceptions is examining consumer attitudes and behaviors towards goods and services (Ouellet, 2007). When the employee's identity aligns with the service brand, it results in greater perceptions of authenticity (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). In other words, it is important to have congruency between the service employees' behavior and the brand (Sirianni et al., 2013). It is therefore critical to examine how race (and other elements of appearance) affect customer's perceptions, especially in marketing contexts (Ouellet, 2007). As perceptions of authenticity are formed through the people in the social servicescape, future research should examine how the service providers and other customers affect perceptions of authenticity (Baker and Kim, 2018). As such, this research empirically investigates how the service provider and other customers may be an important source of perceived authenticity.

2.2. Employee-customer rapport

An employee is not simply a means to provide service and information to a customer, but more importantly, employees' rapport-building behaviors are crucial components in inducing positive behavioral intentions of customers such as customer satisfaction (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Rapport is defined as having pleasant interactions

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