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Research Paper

An investigation of the formation of rapport between players and dealers in the casino industry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the antecedents and consequences of rapport in the casino industry. More specifically, it was proposed that four types of perceived dealer attributes (i.e. expertise, likeability, customer orientation, and physical attractiveness) influence rapport. It was also hypothesized that rapport has positive effects on customer satisfaction and commitment, which in turn positively affects four types of customer citizenship behavior: feedback, advocacy, helping, and tolerance. The conceptual model of this study was tested based on responses from 224 casino table game players. Results indicated that all of the perceived dealer attributes except for physical attractiveness help to enhance rapport. In addition, rapport influences the formation of both customer satisfaction and commitment. Lastly, customer satisfaction has significant effects on feedback and advocacy while commitment significantly affects all types of customer citizenship behavior. In sum, four types of perceived dealer attributes have a positive influence on rapport, which in turn positively affects the outcome variables. Implications for both researchers and practitioners are discussed in the last part of the article.

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1. Introduction

Table games are representative games in a casino that have a major influence on casino profits. For instance, table games generate \$2105.03 per unit, per day in the state of Nevada (Review Journal, 2013). The report also showed that although the revenues generated from slot machine games were higher than the revenues generated from table games in 2007, the revenues of table games surpassed the revenues of slot machine games in 2013. Furthermore, about half of all casino visitors classed as young adults prefer to play table games (American Gaming Association, 2013). These statistics indicate the importance and popularity of table games in the casino industry.

Casino dealers have a key role in the table games. For example, one or more live dealers stand or sit behind a table depending on the game (e.g. blackjack, craps, roulette, baccarat) and they operate games where players participate in betting in games of chance (American Gaming Association, 2009; Jeon & Hyun, 2013). More importantly, casino dealers play a critical role as customer service professionals because table game players spend a lot of time with

casino dealers during the games. Therefore, having good personal relationships with table game players is the most important thing for casino dealers (Chron, 2014). Such a good personal relationship between the two parties is known as rapport. The concept of rapport has received attention as a critical part of the service industry because it significantly affects the overall service quality (Hwang, Kim, & Hyun, 2013). However, despite the importance of rapport between player and dealer, no previous study has yet investigated how this is formed and how it affects managerial outcomes in the casino industry.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the antecedents and consequences of rapport in the casino industry. More specifically, this study examined: (1) the perceived dealer attributes affecting rapport, and (2) the effects of rapport on managerial outcomes including customer satisfaction, commitment, and customer citizenship behavior. By developing a greater understanding of the importance of rapport in the casino industry, this paper highlights some practical implications relating to efficient customer relationship management. The following section provides a theoretical background related to the present study. The methodology and result sections containing measurement, data-collection procedures, and data-analysis processes follow. Finally, a discussion and implication section including the theoretical and practical implications of the study is presented.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Rapport

Rapport is defined as 'a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants' (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 92). That is, developing close personal connections and having enjoyable communication with customers are considered as important factors in the formation of rapport (Campbell, Davis, & Skinner, 2006). In the service-delivery process, rapport plays a leading role in the evaluation of the overall service quality which is crucial to the success of a service firm (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds & Lee, 1996; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Hwang et al., 2013). For this reason, service practitioners need to make a constant effort to identify how to create and enhance rapport with customers (DeWitt & Brady, 2003). Gremler and Gwinner (2000) suggested that rapport has two theoretical sub-dimensions: (1) personal connection, and (2) enjoyable interactions. Personal connection refers to 'a strong affiliation with the other person based on some tie' while enjoyable interaction is defined as 'an affect-laden, cognitive evaluation of one's exchange with a contact employee' (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 91).

Empirical studies have examined the importance of rapport in the service industry. For example, Macintosh (2009) investigated how rapport influences trust. They analyzed empirical data collected from 270 customers in the beauty salon business. The data analysis indicated that rapport is a critical determinant of trust. Delcourt, Gremler, van Riel, and van Birgelen (2013) also explored how rapport influences loyalty using empirical data collected from 323 customers in the service industry. They found that rapport positively affects loyalty. In addition, Hwang et al. (2013) analyzed data collected from 221 full-service restaurant customers in order to identify the effect of rapport on revisit intentions. They found that rapport is an important factor affecting revisit intentions.

2.2. Perceived dealer attributes (the antecedents of rapport)

Perceived employee attributes can be defined as an employee's ability and effort to enhance the relationship with customers (Darley, Luethge, & Thattec, 2008). It is widely accepted that perceived employee attributes play an important role in the formation of rapport (e.g. Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Kim & Ok, 2010; Macintosh, 2009). For instance, Macintosh (2009) analyzed data collected from 121 dental patients and found perceived employee attributes to be critical factors affecting rapport. Kim and Ok (2010) investigated the role of perceived employee attributes in the restaurant industry using empirical data collected from 299 full-service restaurant patrons. Based on a series of data analysis processes, they found that perceived employee attributes are important predictors of rapport.

Perceived employee attributes are also important parts of the casino industry. For example, Jeon, Magnini, Kim, and Hyun (2013) suggested that perceived dealer attributes are key factors influencing gamers' satisfaction. In addition, Prentice (2013) also showed that perceived dealer attributes positively affect casino customer loyalty. Many previous researchers have consistently stressed the following four theoretical sub-dimensions of perceived employee attributes either individually or collectively in the service industry: expertise, likeability, customer orientation, and physical attractiveness. (e.g. Chen, Shi, & Dong, 2008; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Hwang et al., 2013; Kim & Ok, 2010; Luoh & Tsaur, 2009; Saxe & Weitz, 1982). The next section of this research further provides theoretical discussion about the four dimensions.

2.2.1. Expertise

Expertise refers to an employee's knowledge, experience, and skill as they relate to his or her job (Lagace, Dahlstrom, & Gasenheimer, 1991). Employees with high levels of expertise can successfully complete their jobs without making mistakes (Williams & Spiro, 1985), so they typically provide high-quality customer service (Andaleeb & Anwar, 1996; Crosby et al., 1990). Hennig-Thurau (2004) also suggested that a service employee has to possess expertise in order to deliver a great service that satisfies customer's needs. More importantly, expertise helps eliminate customer's uncertainty, which thereby makes him or her have a pleasant time (Andaleeb & Anwar, 1996). Empirical studies also have shown the importance of expertise in the service industry. For example, in Huang and Chang (2008) analyzed the responses of 164 customers who had bought a package tour from a travel agency and suggested that expertise plays a critical role in predicting relationship quality (i.e. satisfaction, trust, and commitment). Rajaobelina and Bergeron (2009) also analyzed 772 clients in the finance industry and proved the effect of expertise on trust. More recently, Hwang et al. (2013) also examined the importance of expertise using empirical data collected from restaurant patrons. Based on a series of data analysis processes, they showed that expertise is a critical antecedent of mutual disclosure, which in turn positively affects revisit intentions.

Employees with high levels of expertise are more likely to enable customers to enjoy the core product, which enhances the relationship between customers and employees (Kim & Ok, 2010; Williams & Spiro, 1985). In addition, skilled employees tend to provide suitable advice to customers resulting in the development of a favorable relationship between customers and employees (Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Wincen, 2011; Kim, Jeon, & Hyun, 2011). Therefore, if casino table game dealers are skilled at their job, they are more likely to: (1) ensure the game proceeded smoothly, and (2) provide proper advice about the rules of the game to players. Consequently, table game players would feel high levels of rapport with the dealers. Following this logic, it was hypothesized that expertise is a key determinant of rapport:

Hypothesis 1. Expertise has a positive influence on rapport.

2.2.2. Likeability

Likeability refers to 'the buyer's assessment that people in the buying firm find the salesperson friendly, nice, and pleasant to be around' (Doney & Cannon, 1997, p. 40). Employees with likeability have an outgoing and gregarious personality, which leads to amicable communication processes, so they are more likely to develop favorable relationships with customers (Chen et al., 2008; Williams & Spiro, 1985). Hwang et al. (2013) also suggested that likeable employees leave a favorable impression on customers and thus such customers show positive behavioral intentions. Empirical studies also have shown the importance of likeability in the service industry. For instance, Shamdasani and Balakrishnan (2000) examined how likeability influences satisfaction and trust. They analyzed empirical data collected from 325 hair salon customers. The data analysis results indicated that likeability plays an important role in the formation of satisfaction and trust. In addition, Chen et al. (2008) analyzed data collected from 219 hospital patients and found that likeability is a critical factor affecting relationship quality (i.e. satisfaction and trust). Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramataris, and Vrechopoulos (2010) investigated the importance of likeability using empirical data collected from 163 supermarket customers. Data analysis results showed that likeability is a key predictor of customer-firm emotional attachment, which in turn positively affects loyalty.

This study hypothesized the effect of likeability on rapport based on the following theoretical background: likeable

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