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# The effect of frontline employees' personal self-disclosure on consumers' encounter experience

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how frontline employee self-disclosure influences consumers' reciprocal behavior. To investigate the effects of frontline employee self-disclosure, two experiments were conducted with a total sample of 475 participants. The results show that when frontline employees disclose personal information in one-time encounters, they are perceived as less competent and more superficial. The results also show that self-disclosure negatively affects reciprocal behavior, but that this is mediated through liking, competence, superficiality, and satisfaction. These findings suggest that it is not always beneficial for employees to use self-disclosure as a strategy for garnering a consumer's trust or satisfaction, which counters previous research that suggest that disclosure of personal information is a good way to positively influence consumers in the retail environment.

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## 1. Introduction

Relationship marketing is an important part of company strategy and consequently has been in focus of academic research (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). Some service research suggests that certain service encounters are liable to be more similar to a meeting between friends than to mere economic transactions (Butcher et al., 2002). Such relationships have been termed commercial friendships (Price and Arnould, 1999) and are often described as friend-like rather than conventional friendship. The idea that friendship leads to favorable returns for companies is becoming increasingly widespread. Cultivating friendship as a business strategy is not new to marketing (Grayson, 2007). For example, friendship may be used to increase feelings of an obligation to reciprocate. Research shows that the central property of friendship is self-disclosure, where friends are expected to share personal information with one another (Cozby, 1973; Grayson, 2007).

A common definition of self-disclosure is providing others with personal information about oneself, where the information can be either task-specific or/and relationship-oriented (Cozby, 1973, p. 73; Jacobs et al., 2001b, p. 49). Research supports the notion that individuals are more likely to comply with a request from someone

they perceive as their friend than from a stranger (Cialdini, 2001; Williamson and Clark, 1992); therefore, connecting friendship with business is believed to be beneficial for a firm in selling its products (Grayson, 2007). Burger et al. (2001) showed that a short conversation with a stranger where one party reveals something personal increases temporary feelings of liking that person, which affects consumers' social impression of the employee (Koerner et al., 2000; Lee and Dubinsky, 2003), satisfaction with the employee (Lee et al., 2011), and future reciprocal behavior (Macintosh, 2009a, 2009b). Most research regarding self-disclosure has sought to determine the role of self-disclosure in the development and maintenance of relationships – for example, among friends (Miller and Kenny, 1986); in the context of therapy (Knox et al., 1997); consumers who self-disclose to companies (White, 2004); and how self-disclosure promotes long-term relationships between salespeople and consumers (Jacobs et al., 2001b). Additionally, research on the effects of self-disclosure has covered several different contexts, primarily those concerning long-term relationships and other types of nonbusiness situations. As a result, there is a lack of knowledge about the effect of frontline employees' self-disclosure in short-term relationships (that is, where encounters may occur only once). An important motivation for this article is the increasing popularity in retail of friendly approaches in which frontline employees give self-disclosing information. Therefore, this paper will focus on exploring how consumers are affected by frontline employee self-disclosure in one-time encounters. To investigate this issue, two experiments were conducted. We hypothesize that frontline employee self-disclosure will affect consumer reciprocal behavior

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through two mediating variables: social impression and satisfaction.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, the theoretical framework with related hypotheses is presented. The methods, results, and discussions of the two studies are then presented, followed by a general discussion of the summarized results to conclude the article.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Social impression and self-disclosure

The service management literature (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 2006) recognizes frontline employees as an important element in the creation of favorable consumer perceptions of service performance. One important core dimension of impression formation is the degree of liking (displayed in the present study as friendliness and niceness). Research in social psychology has shown that self-disclosure increases liking for another person who submits the information (for a meta-analytic review, see Collins and Miller, 1994). Liking is defined as a global affective attachment that an individual has for another party (for the purposes of our study, an attachment that a consumer has for an employee). Liking is an emotional connection that one feels for another, and this feeling goes beyond the mere acceptance of a competent employee (Nicholson et al., 2001). Macintosh (2009a, 2009b) described the importance of enjoyable interactions, where liking for the other party plays an important role in the bonding process, similar to gift giving and social support in a commercial friendship. Burger et al. (2001) found that self-disclosure increases liking for the other party and also leads to automatic responses as requests from people with whom they share a commonality. These findings are consistent with research on compliance behavior, which emphasizes that people rely on heuristics to determine whether they should comply with a request (Cialdini, 2001). Sprecher et al. (2013) found that receiving personal information increased liking toward the discloser in initial interactions. Finally, disclosure of personal information to another person is viewed as being central to the development of close relationships (Collins and Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1973; Forgas, 2011).

Self-disclosure has been studied in terms of breadth (quantity), which refers to the amount of information disclosed; depth (quality), which refers to the intimacy of the information; and duration, or time spent describing the information (Cozby, 1973). A common method of operationalizing self-disclosure is to manipulate or measure its level of intimacy, where intimate topics (such as one's feelings about marriage) are considered to be higher levels of disclosure than less intimate topics (such as one's favorite musical group) (Collins and Miller 1994). A review of self-disclosure (Cozby 1973) suggested that liking increases when the topic disclosed is on a medium intimacy level. Ajzen (1977) propose that self-disclosure influences liking because the discloser of personal information is viewed by others as more friendly, warm, and trusting. Jacobs et al. (2001b) argued that it is not enough to only include breadth and depth in a self-disclosure construct, and expanded the construct with exchange-specific self-disclosure and social disclosure. Exchange-specific disclosure (in Jacobs et al., 2001a) is described as task-specific disclosure and facilitates interactions regarding a product or service that could affect the impression of the employee being competent and skilled. Competence has often been noted as an attribute of a frontline employee (Crosby et al., 1990). Price et al. (1995) suggested that the perception of a frontline employee being competent can contribute to positive feelings about the service encounter, and the absence of competent service can contribute to negative feelings about the service encounter. Social disclosure is personal information communicated beyond that required to complete the immediate task, which facilitates the psychological

bond between the consumer and the frontline employee. For example, frontline employees may disclose social information about their personal interests or experiences in an attempt to establish friendship and be seen as more likeable (Jacobs et al., 2001b). Gilliam and Zablah's (2013) findings suggest that disclosure regarding the product, compared to personal disclosure, is more efficient in enhancing consumers' purchase intentions in one-time encounters. In summary, these findings suggest that self-disclosure increases liking and promotes favorable attitudes and compliance behavior.

Although research has shown that self-disclosure increases liking for a person, other studies show a negative relationship between self-disclosure and liking (Collins and Miller, 1994). Jones and Gordon (1972) revealed that liking decreases when positive information is disclosed early in the relationship. In line with this finding, Archer and Burlison (1980) showed that negative disclosure has a negative effect on liking when it is disclosed late in the interaction. Violation of social norms could explain this negative effect of disclosure on social impression of the employee, where the employee may be perceived as unserious if he or she discloses personal information that violates the norm of how to behave in a service encounter (Collins and Miller, 1994). Further, Norton et al. (2007) showed with their "less is more" hypothesis that in a majority of initial interactions, obtaining more information about another person leads to perceptions of dissimilarity and decreases liking toward the disclosers. To summarize previous research regarding the relationship between self-disclosure and the social impression (that is, liking, competence and unseriousness) of the employee, it is difficult to predict whether the outcome will be positive or negative. Therefore, the present study hypothesizes that when a frontline employee discloses personal information, it influences the degree of social impression of that employee in either a positive or negative manner.

**Hypothesis 1a.** : Employee self-disclosure is positively associated with social impression.

**Hypothesis 1b.** : Employee self-disclosure is negatively associated with social impression.

### 2.2. Satisfaction

Satisfaction with a frontline employee represents a consumer's attitude about a service interaction he or she has just experienced (Jacobs et al., 2001b; Lee and Dubinsky, 2003; Oliver, 1993). Research shows that liking yields results such as satisfaction with the encounter. For example, Koerner (2005) studied service providers' (for example, doctors, hairdressers) personal connection with consumers and found a positive relationship with satisfaction. Research shows that satisfaction is partially determined by the consumer's emotional reactions (Price et al., 1995). Ganesh et al. (2000) suggested that if frontline employee contact with the consumer is positive, the consumer is likely to develop positive feelings that are directed toward both the employee and the company. These feelings then have an effect on encounter satisfaction. Based on the above, this study predicts that social impression derived from self-disclosure influences satisfaction with the encounter.

**Hypothesis 2.** Social impression is positively associated with encounter satisfaction.

### 2.3. Reciprocal behavior

Prior studies on consumer behavior have concluded that satisfaction has an effect on consumers' reciprocal behavior, such as word-of-mouth (WOM), intention (Sabiote and Román, 2009; Swan and Oliver, 1989), and repurchase behavior (Towler et al., 2011). Gremler et al. (2001) found that trust in the frontline employee has a positive influence on WOM. Brown et al. (2005)

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