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Customer responses to intercultural communication accommodation strategies in hospitality service encounters

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing pace of globalization, hospitality firms are serving more and more international customers from distinctively different cultural backgrounds. In order to enhance intercultural consumption experiences, some hospitality firms have implemented two types of communication accommodation strategies: (a) match the cultural background of the service provider and the customer and/or (b) use the customer's native language to facilitate communications. This study aims to examine how such intercultural communication accommodations influence customers' service encounter experiences. A 4 (communication accommodation: language congruence, ethnic congruence, language and ethnic congruence, and no accommodation) × 2 (focus of communication accommodation: intercultural vs. interpersonal) factorial between-subject experimental design was employed using videotaped hotel check-in scenarios as experimental stimuli. The findings suggest that consumers respond to communication accommodation strategies with increased felt pleasure, arousal, and dominance. Furthermore, accommodation strategies contributed to the perceived symbolic value of the service encounter, especially when employees expressed the intercultural focus of communication accommodation practices. The study results provide insights for hospitality practitioners in managing service encounters in today's highly global world.

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1. Introduction

International travel has experienced a time of rapid growth over the past few decades. According to the World Tourism Organization (2011)'s long term forecast, international tourist arrivals worldwide are expected to increase by 3.3% per year from 2010 to 2030 and reach 1.8 billion by 2030. Many hospitality organizations find it challenging to cater to global travelers with various cultural backgrounds. In particular, the cultural nuances in language, customs, and norms imply different rules and expectations related to customer–provider interactions (Chen et al., 2012; Heo et al., 2004; Stauss and Mang, 1999; Mattila, 2000). Such differences often result in discomfort felt by both parties in the dyadic interaction (Sharma et al., 2009, 2012). In an effort to better meet the needs of their global customers, some hospitality firms tailor their service offerings and communication approaches based on the customer's cultural background. For example, Hilton Hotels and Resorts launched the "Huan Ying" program (which means "welcome" in Mandarin) in 2011. The program enables Chinese customers to complete a hotel check-in using their native language, and enjoy in-room amenities and breakfast items that are commonly found at home.

Previous research shows that cultural congruence between a product and a consumer increases perceived productive familiarity and, thus, positive attitudes toward products (Grier et al., 2006). Heo et al's (2004) study also finds that hotels' product specific adaptations (e.g. menus, magazines and hotel directories) in the foreign guest's native language can make the difference in creating a satisfied traveler. However, the underlying mechanism for the positive influence of interpersonal communication accommodations (e.g., a culturally congruent service provider and/or the use of native language) in the hospitality context remains unclear. Communication between a consumer and a service personnel is at the core of the hospitality service encounter (Kang and Hyun, 2012; Nikolich and Sparks, 1995; Sparks, 1994; Sparks and Callan, 1992). Thus, understanding how customers react to communication accommodations during intercultural service encounters has important theoretical

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and managerial implications for hospitality researchers and practitioners.

The primary goal of this research is to examine how communication accommodation efforts influence customers' emotions and consumption values. The focus is on intercultural service encounters (ICSEs) in a foreign context (e.g., a customer engages in a service encounter when traveling abroad) rather than a domestic context (e.g., a customer engages in ICSEs in his or her country of residence). This context offers a more conservative testing of the positive effect (if any) of communication accommodations since it can be argued that tourists often seek to embrace cultural differences and the authenticity of the experience (e.g., Katriel, 1995; Weiermair, 2000). Drawing on literature from different domains, such as communications and social psychology, we investigate customer responses to communication accommodations, specifically regarding their felt pleasure, arousal, dominance, perceived relational value, and symbolic value. In addition, extant studies have not compared whether two common accommodation strategies—customer–provider cultural congruence and customer–provider language congruence—are equally effective as accommodating efforts. This study addresses this research gap by comparing the impact of these two communication accommodation strategies on consumer responses.

2. Background literature

2.1. Communication accommodations in intercultural service encounters

Communication accommodations reflect people's efforts to make themselves more similar to their counterparts in order to seek approval and improved communication (Holland and Gentry, 1999). The communication accommodation theory (CAT) taps into both interpersonal and intergroup communications (e.g., communication between different cultures/ethnicities, genders, and generations) (Coupland and Giles, 1988; Gallois and Giles, 1998) and it has been studied in various contexts, such as education, family, and organizations (cf. Soliz and Giles' (2014) review paper). CAT research has examined various types of accommodation efforts, accommodation motivations, the impact of different contexts, and consequences to the communicators involved (Soliz and Giles, 2014). Accommodation strategies are not limited to speech; nonverbal communication behaviors and communicative aspects of identity (such as appearance or dress styles) have also been studied (Coupland et al., 1988; Giles and Wadleigh, 2008). Overall, accommodation can create more favorable perceptions for the listener, who then tends to reciprocate the speaker's efforts (Aune and Kikuchi, 1993; Gallois et al., 1988; Giles et al., 1987).

CAT is also useful in the customer service context because interpersonal aspects of service encounters drive customer satisfaction (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1985; Sparks, 1994; Sparks and Callan, 1992). By applying CAT, service providers can alter their linguistic and non-verbal communications to match those of their customers. In intercultural contexts, customers often feel confused, anxious, and stressed due to differences in language and service norms (Barker and Hartel, 2004; Sharma et al., 2009; Sparks and Callan, 1992). Given that accommodations have been shown to be effective in intercultural communication research (Gallois et al., 1988, 2005), communication accommodations are also likely to be helpful in dealing with customers during intercultural service encounters.

Previous research shows that minority customers prefer service providers of their own ethnic background (Hopkins et al., 2005; Kulik and Holbrook, 2000; Montoya and Briggs, 2011). Moreover, studies also demonstrate that consumers prefer their native language during service encounters, even when they may be fluent in another language (Heo et al., 2004; Holmqvist, 2011; Puntoni et al., 2009). In this study, we evaluate customer responses to intercultural service encounters from affective (experienced emotions) and cognitive (perceived consumption values) perspectives.

2.2. Customers' emotional responses to communication accommodation

Customers' affective responses have gained considerable attention in service research (Mattila and Enz, 2002; Price et al., 1995). Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) PAD model, composed of arousal (high versus low), valence (positive and negative), and dominance, is one of the widely applied emotion frameworks in service research (e.g. Liu and Jang, 2009; Mazaheri et al., 2012; Michon and Chebat, 2004). Russell et al. (1989) demonstrated that pleasure and arousal are sufficient to capture the description of emotional experiences when only one person is involved. In an interpersonal context, however, the dominance dimension sometimes overshadows arousal (Argyle, 1988). In the following discussion, we rely on various streams of research to examine the link between communication accommodation and customer emotions.

According to Tiedens and Fragale (2003), similarity is a cornerstone of social psychology as people have a tendency toward and preference for it. Research on interpersonal relationships shows that people like similar others more than dissimilar others (Byrne, 1971; Byrne and Griffitt, 1969; Duck and Craig, 1978) and relationships with similar others are more satisfying (Antill, 1983; Eysenck and Wakefield, 1981). Hence, it is logical to hypothesize that communication accommodations increase pleasure derived from a service encounter. Intergroup communication theories, such as Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) and Integrated Threat Theory (ITT), assume that interacting with out-group members can stimulate arousal caused by anxiety (Gudykunst, 1988; Stephan and Stephan, 1985). Previous studies show that communication accommodation practices can reduce arousal. For example, a similar speech rate between the speaker and his/her listeners should reduce arousal (Buller and Aune, 1992). The similarity between a source's and a receiver's use of language intensity (i.e., the degree to which the speaker's attitude toward a concept deviates from neutrality) was found to be negatively related to the receiver's felt arousal (Aune and Kikuchi, 1993). We, therefore, hypothesize that communication accommodations can reduce arousal during intercultural service encounters. Russell and Mehrabian (1976) considered dominance to be closely associated with perceived control. In the context of service encounters, communication accommodations allow customers to use control strategies to establish their status and their role (Sparks and Callan, 1992). As a result, communication accommodations are hypothesized to increase feelings of dominance. Taken together, we put forth the following predictions:

H1. Communication accommodations during an intercultural service encounter will influence customers' emotional responses. Specifically, communication accommodations will (a) increase feelings of *pleasure*, (b) decrease feelings of *arousal*, and (c) increase feelings of *dominance*.

2.3. Customers' perceived consumption value of communication accommodation

Consumers derive different outcomes from their consumption, and those outcomes are subject to numerous interpretations (Oliver, 1996). Since the 1990s, marketing scholars have developed various frameworks to account for consumption values (e.g., Holbrook, 1994, 1999; Sheth et al., 1991; also see Boksberger and Melsen, 2011, for a review). Consumers buy products and services

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