

Frontline employees' nonverbal cues in service encounters: a double-edged sword

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Abstract In this research, we look at the similarity between frontline service employees' nonverbal or expressive behavior and customers' receptivity of nonverbally expressed emotions (i.e., expressive similarity). Supported by evidence from four studies, we demonstrate that expressive similarity between customers and frontline service employees yields positive outcomes for both the employee and the organization under successful service delivery, but it can paradoxically backfire on the organization in service failures. In successful service encounters, higher expressive similarity between customers and employees enhances consumer satisfaction and promotes more direct compliments and positive word of mouth. In

contrast, higher expressive similarity increases customer dissatisfaction and intent to engage in negative word of mouth, but it reduces customers' inclination to lodge direct complaints following a service failure (Study 1). Studies 2 and 3, both field experiments, provide external validation of the key findings on customer satisfaction and voice intentions (Study 2) as well as actual voice behavior (Study 3). Building on these findings, Study 4 reveals that while customer-perceived rapport and trait impressions of the service employee mediate the observed effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction, only rapport significantly explains the effects of expressive similarity on voice intentions. Theoretical and managerial implications, along with suggestions for future research, conclude the paper.

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Introduction

Research suggests that frontline service employees are key determinants of service evaluations (e.g., Rust and Oliver 1994; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006). Especially in face-to-face interactions, customers often use frontline service employees' actions and behavior during service delivery to assess or predict the quality of service experiences (Bitner et al. 1990; Farrell et al. 2001). Berry et al. (2006) refer to such observations about the service employee as humanic clues (about the level of service) that “emerge from the behavior and appearance of service providers – choice of words, tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, body language, neatness, and appropriate dress” (p. 45). Although service organizations can and do standardize certain aspects of service delivery (e.g., service script) in order to manage service quality levels, the “softer”

parts of the customer–employee interactions (e.g., nonverbal behavior) are more dynamic, and hence harder to unify across service employees (Gabbott and Hogg 2000).

A growing body of research suggests that frontline service employees' display of appropriate specific emotions (e.g., showing empathy to angry customers) can help smoothen the service delivery process (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Hochschild 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Varca 2009). However, comparatively little research has focused on understanding the role of general expressiveness (i.e., the use of nonverbal behavior to express one's emotions) in a service context. Research suggests that people intuitively and accurately judge strangers based on their faces or brief observations of their behavior (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Ambady and Krabbenhoft 2006; Willis and Todorov 2006). Further, first impressions based on a person's gazes, mannerisms, and handshakes can serve as important evaluative cues for person judgments and subsequent relationship development (e.g., Forgas 2011; Naylor 2007). Frontline service employees' nonverbal behavior should hence play an important role for customers evaluating service encounters, since such service contexts frequently involve first-time and brief customer–employee interactions. By focusing on customer–employee interactions in service encounters, we seek to add to a better understanding of the role of frontline employees in service strategy research (e.g., Bitner et al. 1990; Pounders et al. 2015).

In this research, we look at the similarity between frontline service employees' nonverbal or expressive behavior and customers' receptivity of nonverbally expressed emotions—we call this “expressive similarity.” We hypothesize and show that in positive service encounters, a higher level of expressive similarity between customers and frontline service employees enhances customer satisfaction and elicits more positive feedback to the organization. Further, we demonstrate that these positive outcomes can be explained by heightened customer–employee rapport and better employee trait impressions as perceived by the customers who are experiencing higher expressive similarity. The expectation that customer–employee expressive similarity in successful service encounters will yield positive outcomes for the organization is consistent with the view that an organization stands to gain from relationships that employees have with their customers (e.g., DeWitt and Brady 2003; Gremler and Gwinner 2008). We push the boundaries of this view by identifying a common service situation—a service failure—in which the positive effects of expressive similarity apply to the employee but do not spill over to the organization. Specifically, we propose that the increased rapport and the more favorable employee trait impressions formed under high (vs. low) expressive similarity may actually cause customers to feel more dissatisfied and engage in more negative word of mouth when a service failure happens.

We contribute to the service literature by highlighting the consequential effects of expressive similarity on customer satisfaction and voice behavior. We also identify rapport development and impression formation—two integral processes in service interactions—as the mechanisms responsible for the expressive similarity effects. Collectively, this research offers managers and theorists new perspectives on the role of nonverbal behavior embedded in customer–employee interactions.

Theoretical background and conceptual framework

According to the person–environment fit paradigm (e.g., Cable and Edwards 2004; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; Pervin 1968), the level of match or alignment between the characteristics of a person (e.g., values, goals, demographics, personality) and those of the environment (e.g., organizational culture, work demands, co-workers) influences his/her attitudes and behavior. Much of the research on person–environment fit focuses on understanding how the fit between employees and the organization, job, or co-workers affects job satisfaction, performance, and turnover (e.g., Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001; O'Reilly et al. 1991; Yu 2013). Parallel to the person–environment fit paradigm, research in the marketing and services fields looks at consumers' perceived self-congruence as a predictor of consumption decisions and preferences. Consumers generally prefer products, brands, stores, service employees, and even fellow shoppers with an image that is congruent with how they view themselves (e.g., Jamal and Adelwore 2008; Jamal and Goode 2001; Leonard et al. 2004; Sirgy 1982).

Common across these two research streams (i.e., person–environment fit paradigm and consumer self-congruence theory) is a basic tenet that positive outcomes arise when there is a match or similarity between an individual's desire and what the (physical, organizational, social) environment has to offer. Such positive effects have been observed across multiple contexts, including social relationships (e.g., Gonzaga et al. 2007; Selfhout et al. 2009), subordinate–superior interactions (e.g., Ahearne et al. 2013; Turban and Jones 1988), and customer–employee interactions in sales/service situations (e.g., Jiang et al. 2010). We apply this premise to examine how similarity between frontline service employees' expressiveness and a customer's preference for nonverbal expressiveness influences customers' responses in the service context. Further, we go beyond the existing fit or congruence literature by uncovering the underlying mechanisms of the effects of expressive similarity. Table 1 provides an overview of selected literature to juxtapose the current research with existing work.

We define expressive similarity as the degree to which a target person's expressive style is perceived to match the evaluator's receptivity toward the use of nonverbal cues in

Table 1 Review of selected extant literature

Topic	Key findings	Representative papers	Relevance for current research
Customer–employee interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Frontline employees play a vital role in eliciting positive customer–employee interactions that in turn determine the quality of service experiences. ■ Appropriate emotions displayed by frontline employees help to improve the perceived quality of service experiences. 	Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Hochschild 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Pounders et al. 2015; Varca 2009	This research adds to work on customer–employee interactions to emphasize the importance of the frontline service employees in influencing service evaluations (such as customer satisfaction and voice).
Person–environment fit and congruence theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ According to the person–environment fit paradigm, the degree of match between a person (e.g., values, goals, demographics, personality) and the environment (e.g., organizational culture, work demands, co-workers influences his/her attitudes and behavior. ■ The congruence literature in the marketing and services fields show that consumers generally prefer products, brands, stores, service employees, and even fellow shoppers with an image that is congruent with how they view themselves. 	Cable and Edwards 2004; Jamal and Adelowore 2008; Jamal and Goode 2001; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; Sirgy 1982	Common across these two research streams (i.e., person–environment fit and congruence theory) is the basic tenet that positive outcomes arise when there is a match or similarity between an individual’s desire and the environment. Applying this basic premise, this research examines how similarity between frontline service employee’s expressiveness and a customer’s preference for nonverbal expressiveness influences customers’ responses in the service context.
First impressions and thin-slice judgments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ First impressions can be formed based on dynamic (from observations) or static (from photographs) information. ■ Information from static frames (e.g., photographs) provides valuable information, but this is less rich than dynamic information. Research suggests that people effortlessly make inferences about a person based on static information. ■ A thin-slice is essentially any excerpt of dynamic information of a person’s expressive behavior that lasts less than five minutes. Individuals make quick and spontaneous judgments about strangers based on observations about their expressive/nonverbal behavior. Such “thin-slice” judgments are highly accurate assessments about the actual performance of the observed target persons. 	Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Ambady and Krabbenhoft 2006; Wilis and Todorov 2006	Drawing from the literature on first impressions and thin-slice judgments, the present work examines the effects and processes explaining customer–employee expressive similarity in first-time and brief service interactions.
Interpersonal similarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Similarity can be established based on incidental cues such as shared birthdays, or more entrenched characteristics such as values and lifestyles. ■ People tend to evaluate similar others more zpositively than dissimilar others. 	Brown and Inouye 1978; Hendrick et al. 1971; Jiang et al. 2010; Padgett and Wolosin 1980	Our current research examines similarity between customers and frontline service employees in terms of their expressive/nonverbal behavioral styles, thus expanding the bases of similarity from verbal to nonverbal sources.

communication. Similarity can be established through a myriad of shared characteristics such as attitudes, values, lifestyles, life experiences, and demographics (e.g., Brown and Inouye 1978; Hendrick et al. 1971; Padgett and Wolosin 1980). While such shared characteristics are typically

communicated verbally, similarity judgments may also be based on nonverbal cues as humans spontaneously judge others by observing their nonverbal behavior (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1993). To this end, the nonverbal cues we examine include the smiles, voice intonations, and gestures that

are expressed by frontline service employees' when they interact with their customers.

Expressive similarity and satisfaction in positive and negative service encounters

Research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of fit or congruence (e.g., Jamal and Adelowore 2008; Jamal and Goode 2001; Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001; Leonard et al. 2004; O'Reilly et al. 1991; Sirgy 1982). Thus, in pleasant service encounters, we expect that higher levels of expressive similarity would enhance customer satisfaction. We extend the current fit and congruence literature by further positing that the increase in customer satisfaction from higher expressive similarity can be explained by heightened rapport and enhanced employee trait impressions.

Rapport Rapport is defined as harmonious interpersonal relations characterized by shared positive feeling, mutual attention, and enjoyable and connective interactions (Grewler and Gwinner 2008; Spencer-Oatey 2002; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). It works like a "social glue" that connects people (DeWitt and Brady 2003; DiMatteo et al. 1979), facilitating trust and cooperation between individuals (Drolet and Morris 2000; Ross and Weiland 1996), and lubricating future interpersonal exchanges (Bernieri et al. 1994; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990).

People have an innate need to belong and connect with others, not just in social settings, but also in commercial contexts (e.g., Jiang et al. 2010). Such social needs motivate individuals to make quick assessments based on others' nonverbal behavior so as to decide whether to form further affiliations with the person(s) being evaluated (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993). Further, nonverbal behavior has been found to be useful for the building and maintenance of rapport (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006; Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990).

While it is often assumed that rapport requires a reasonably long period of time to form (Grewler and Gwinner 2008), rapport can in fact develop rather quickly (Bernieri et al. 1996). Rapport that is formed in first-time and brief interactions, such as during the initial exchanges in service encounters, possibly sits within the lower boundaries of the rapport construct. We expect that when customers perceive service employees as being similar to themselves in terms of expressiveness, they bond more quickly and also enjoy the interactions more.

Trait impressions Nonverbal behavior plays a vital role in the formation of first impressions (Berry et al. 1994; Riggio and Friedman 1986). For instance, Riggio and Friedman (1986) found that individuals who appear

extroverted tend to be associated with more positive traits. Given that the interactions between customers and service employees are fundamentally social exchanges (Solomon et al. 1985), we expect that customers will intuitively form trait impressions of a service employee with whom s/he is interacting. Furthermore, since similarity breeds positive first impressions (Human and Biesanz 2011), we propose that customers' impressions of the service employees' traits (e.g., the level of competency and professionalism) will be more favorable when there is a higher level of expressive similarity.

To sum up, we expect that higher expressive similarity will accentuate both customer-perceived rapport and the extent of positive first impressions customers have about service employees. Such higher levels of rapport and favorability of trait impressions (from higher expressive similarity) raises customer expectations for a more satisfying experience (Boshoff 2012). How these heightened expectations impact customer satisfaction depends on whether the ensuing service delivery is positive or negative. When these expectations are met (as in the case of a positive service encounter), customer satisfaction will be enhanced (Parasuraman et al. 1985). But what happens when the higher expectations induced by expressive similarity are not met with a positive service delivery?

Even with the best efforts, service failures (e.g., unavailability of a product or service a customer desires) do still occur. The person–environment fit and congruence literature are less clear at explaining how expressive similarity affects consumer evaluations in such situations. The favorable assessments of a service employee (in terms of rapport and trait impressions) under higher expressive similarity create expectations that the service encounter will be positive. Subsequent service failure, however, breaks this expectation and therefore aggravates customers' negative evaluations of the service encounter (Parasuraman et al. 1985). As a result, customers who are more expressively similar to the employee will be less satisfied (or more dissatisfied) with a negative service experience. The aforementioned expectation–performance disconfirmation is relatively muted for customers who experience low expressive similarity, as they do not hold high expectations for a positive outcome in the first place. We therefore hypothesize that a negative service event will appear more dissatisfying to consumers in high (vs. low) expressive similarity conditions.

Summarizing the preceding discussions, we expect high (vs. low) expressive similarity conditions to raise expectations that amplify positive evaluations in positive service encounters as well as negative evaluations in service failures. Further, these effects are explained by the rapport and employee trait impressions perceived by customers.

- H1: Expressive similarity between the customer and the frontline service employee has a positive (negative) effect on customer satisfaction when the service experience is positive (negative).
- H2: The effects of expressive similarity x valence of service experience on customer satisfaction are mediated by (a) higher customer-perceived rapport and (b) more favorable trait impressions of the frontline service employee.

Expressive similarity and customer voice in positive and negative service encounters

Extant literature in marketing typically conceptualizes voice in service contexts as a post-consumption response about the service received (Karande et al. 2007; Laczniak et al. 2001; Maxham and Netemeyer 2002; Richins 1983; Singh 1988). We go beyond this passive view of customer voice as a mere outcome of service experience by adopting Hirschman's (1970) conceptualization of voice: that it can be actively used by consumers to bring problematic issues to the attention of organizations. When used in this way, customer voice is vital to both consumers and organizations: not only does it allow consumers to express their satisfaction or frustration after a service experience, it also provides service employees and service firms with important feedback and the opportunity for service recovery (Peters and Waterman 1982). We show that customers use voice intentionally to express social motives, such as to highlight employees' good work to organizations or shield them from potential harm or punishment.

We use the term "positive voice" to indicate favorable customer feedback in the form of compliments and/or positive word-of-mouth communication. "Negative voice," in contrast, refers to unfavorable customer feedback expressed through complaints and/or negative word of mouth. Broadly, we subscribe to the extant expectation that consumers will engage in (a) more positive voice directed outward (i.e., positive voice-to-public) after a satisfactory service encounter, and (b) more negative voice directed outward (i.e., negative voice-to-public) following a dissatisfying service encounter. However, as customers can use voice strategically to convey their opinions to organizations (Hirschman 1970; Ma et al. 2015; Singh 1990), we predict that they will use (positive and negative) voice directed inward to the organization (i.e., voice-to-organization) intentionally depending on how they feel about the service employee.

We propose that the use of voice-to-organization will depend on the extent of the rapport the customer feels s/he shares with the service employee. Once interpersonal rapport is formed, it can facilitate exchanges in the future and/or buffer the effect of negative interactions. In a service context, the

benefits of rapport can take the form of a greater tendency on the part of customers to promote or protect the wellbeing of the service employee. Hence, customers who perceive higher levels of expressive similarity with a service employee (and therefore experience more rapport with him/her) will be more likely to express positive voice to the organization following a positive service experience, as such feedback benefits the service employee directly by increasing his/her chances of receiving better performance appraisals. On the other hand, consistent with the notion that rapport forms a protective shield for the service employee, consumers experiencing high expressive similarity will be less willing to express their displeasure about a failed service to the organization as this can hurt the welfare of the service employee. Thus, customers who perceive higher levels of expressive similarity with the employees are less likely to lodge a direct complaint to the organization.

Summarizing the above discussions, we propose:

- H3: Expressive similarity results in a higher (lower) tendency to voice positively (negatively) inward when the service experience is positive (negative).
- H4: The effects of expressive similarity x valence of service experience on customer voice intentions are mediated by customer-perceived rapport with the service employee.

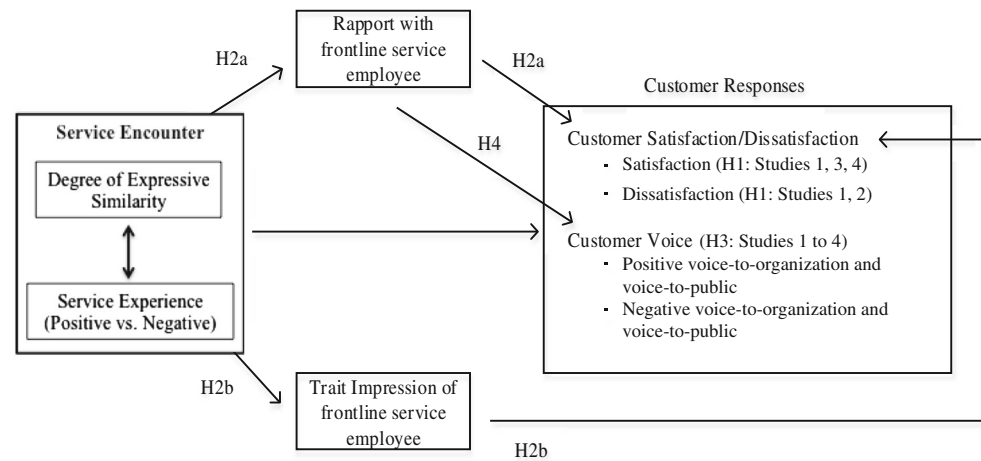
Figure 1 shows the conceptual model, along with the hypotheses (H1–H4) proposed.

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to test the intended operationalization of expressive similarity. To create low/high levels of expressive similarity,¹ we varied the degree of match between the service employee's expressiveness and consumers' receptivity for nonverbally expressed emotions (i.e., emotional receptivity; Lee and Lim 2010). We expect customers who are higher in emotional receptivity to experience higher levels of expressive similarity with a service employee who is more expressive (given the closer match between expressiveness and receptivity). Similarly, we expect expressive similarity to be heightened for customers with

¹ As the focus of this research is to understand the effects and mechanisms of low vs. high expressive similarity, we do not make a distinction for the specific expressiveness–receptivity configurations for each level of expressive similarity. Further, there is no *a priori* theoretical basis for expecting a difference in effects due to different configurations of low/high expressive similarity on the set of constructs being examined in this research (i.e., satisfaction, voice, rapport, and trait impressions). We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that we clarify the scope of our examinations of the expressiveness–receptivity combinations for low/high expressive similarity.

Fig. 1 Conceptual model



lower emotional receptivity when they encountered a less expressive service employee. In contrast, when service employee expressiveness is higher (lower), but customers have lower (higher) receptivity, perceived expressive similarity will be lower.

Design, participants, and procedure

Seventy-nine participants from a large university took part in this pilot study for partial course credit. Each participant attended two sessions held a week apart. In the first session, the participants completed a short questionnaire consisting of Lee and Lim's (2010) five-item emotional receptivity scale ("People should show a lot of facial expression when talking," "It is not necessary to show too much facial expression when interacting with people" [reverse-coded item], "I pay close attention to people's gestures when talking to them," "The use of hands and other body movements is very helpful in facilitating communication," and "When communicating, a person should use a lot of variation in his/her voice tone, pitch, and loudness"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Other filler inventories were included to curb demand effects.

In the second session, the participants viewed one of two video scenarios depicting an interaction between two customers (male and female) and a frontline service employee. The featured service employee was in fact an actor who was hired and trained to deliver the same service encounter script in a low or high expressiveness manner by varying the extent of smiling, voice intonation, and hand gestures. These nonverbal cues are prevalently used by employees in service contexts and are representative of the key types of nonverbal communication commonly examined in research (Gifford et al. 1985; Lee and Lim 2010).

After watching the video, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the employee in the video was similar

to them. An original inventory of three items was created for measuring expressive similarity ("This service employee is like me in terms of our communication style," "This service employee is similar to me in terms of how she uses body language to express herself," and "This service employee is like me when it comes to using nonverbal communication"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Results

A manipulation check confirmed that the service employee in the high (vs. low) expressiveness video scenario was indeed perceived to display higher levels of smiling ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.63$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.84$, $F(1, 78) = 35.86$, $p < .001$), more voice intonations ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.53$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.76$, $F(1, 78) = 31.26$, $p < .001$), and more gestures ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.46$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 2.92$, $F(1, 78) = 88.20$, $p < .001$; where 1 = not at all to 5 = very much for all three items).

An index for expressive similarity (average of the three expressive similarity items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$) was regressed on the emotional receptivity index (average of the five emotional receptivity items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$), the expressiveness level (a dummy variable coded as 1 for high expressiveness), and the expressiveness-receptivity interaction. The regression results revealed significant main effects of expressiveness ($\beta = -3.17$, $p < .001$) and receptivity ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .05$). More importantly, the analyses showed a significant interaction effect of expressiveness-receptivity ($\beta = 3.59$, $p < .001$). Further, simple slope analyses indicated that among participants who saw the high expressiveness video, those who were higher in emotional receptivity reported higher levels of similarity with the employee ($\beta = .55$, $p < .001$); for participants who viewed the low-expressiveness video, those who were lower in emotional receptivity felt they were more similar to the featured employee ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .05$). Given

these results, we adopted this nonverbal method (i.e., varying the expressiveness–receptivity alignment) to create varying expressive similarity levels in this research.

Overview of Studies 1–4

We conducted a series of four studies to test the hypotheses. Study 1 was a laboratory study designed to test all the predicted effects of expressive similarity (H1 and H3). Two field studies (Studies 2 and 3) were then conducted to provide external validation for the key predictions. Finally, Study 4 tested for the process mechanisms that underpin the effects demonstrated in Studies 1 and 2 (H2 and H4). It also explored the generalizability of our predictions across different attribution levels. All four studies used the hospitality context for two key reasons: first, service successes and failures are common phenomena in this industry; second, it is a high-touch environment in which face-to-face customer–employee interactions are prevalent. These characteristics of the hospitality industry collectively offer an appropriate context for testing our predictions.

Study 1

Design, participants, and procedure

Study 1 was designed to test the hypotheses relating to expressive similarity effects (i.e., H1 and H3). We used a 2 (service experience: positive vs. negative) \times 2 (receptivity: low vs. high) \times 2 (expressiveness: low vs. high) factorial design. One hundred and ninety-three undergraduates from a large university, who received partial course credit for their participation, were randomly assigned to the between-subjects conditions. Service experience was manipulated through either a successful service encounter (positive condition) or a service failure (negative condition). Given the supportive results of the pilot study, expressive similarity was manipulated via the degree of match between the service employee’s expressiveness and the participant’s emotional receptivity. Specifically, participants with low (high) emotional receptivity were categorized as having low (high) expressive similarity under the *high* service employee expressiveness condition. Participants with low (high) emotional receptivity were categorized as having high (low) expressive similarity under the *low* service employee expressiveness condition.

Each participant attended two sessions held a week apart. In the first session, the participants answered questions assessing their emotional receptivity (Lee and Lim 2010). In the second session, the participants watched a video scenario in which the service employee delivered identical service scripts using either low or high expressiveness. After showing

the initial exchange between the customers and employee, the video showed either a pleasant, error-free service encounter (for the positive condition), or a service failure in which the hotel’s record had the wrong room type reservation for the couple (for the negative condition). Thereafter, we captured the participants’ satisfaction and customer voice responses.

Measures

Satisfaction Levels of satisfaction were captured using three items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) (“I am satisfied with my overall experience with the resort,” “As a whole, I am happy with the resort,” and “Overall, I am pleased with the service experience at the resort so far”; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Customer voice Both positive and negative voice tendencies were solicited via items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). Specifically, we assessed participants’ proclivity to direct their compliments to the organization (“How likely are you to send your compliments to the resort manager?”) and spread positive word of mouth (“How likely are you to recommend this resort to your friends if they were looking for a vacation in the same area as ...?”), along with participants’ inclination to voice negatively via voice-to-organization (“How likely are you to complain to the resort manager?”) and voice-to-public (“How likely are you to discourage your friends from the resort if they were looking for a vacation in the same area as [name of resort]?”). All of the voice measures used seven-point scales (1 = not at all and 7 = very likely).

Results

Manipulation check The difference between the low and high expressiveness manipulations was significant. The participants in the high expressiveness condition perceived that the employee displayed higher levels of smiling ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.74$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 5.33$, $F(1, 189) = 21.68$, $p < .001$), more voice intonations ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.65$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 4.12$, $F(1, 189) = 35.3$, $p < .001$), and more gestures ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.40$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.44$, $F(1, 189) = 92.45$, $p < .001$; 1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

Satisfaction The participants’ satisfaction responses were averaged to create a satisfaction index for use in further analyses (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .96$). A full regression model with service experience, emotional receptivity, expressiveness, and their interactions revealed a three-way significant interaction between emotional receptivity and service experience ($\beta = -1.51$, $p < .001$; see Table 2, Part A). Simple slope analyses were performed to examine the effects of emotional receptivity on the satisfaction responses under each combinatory level of service experience and expressiveness Fig. 1.

Table 2 Summary of regression results of slope analyses

A. Study 1: effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice intentions															
	Satisfaction			Positive voice-to-organization			Positive voice-to-public			Negative voice-to-organization			Negative voice-to-public		
	B	t		B	t		B	t		B	t		B	t	
Emotional receptivity	-.29	-2.73 **		-.81	-5.92 **		-.24	-1.68		.01	.12		.01	.02	
Service experience	-5.91	-6.73 **		-7.78	-6.82 **		-5.19	-4.40 **		-.58	-.83		5.42	6.63 **	
Expressiveness	-3.74	-4.51 **		-6.41	-5.94 **		-3.39	-3.04 **		-.13	-.20		-.24	-.32	
Emotional receptivity*Service experience	.69	4.04 **		1.00	4.51 **		.53	2.28 *		.66	4.83 **		-.57	-3.58 **	
Emotional receptivity*Expressiveness	.80	4.93 **		1.33	6.34 **		.62	2.85 **		-.01	-.05		.02	.14	
Service experience*Expressiveness	7.55	6.21 **		7.94	5.02 **		3.83	2.34 *		4.80	4.93 **		-4.74	-4.18 **	
Emotional receptivity*Service experience*Expressiveness	-1.51	-6.4 **		-1.56	-5.06 **		-.69	-2.17 *		-1.07	-5.68 **		1.01	4.57 **	

B. Study 2: effects of expressive similarity on dissatisfaction and negative voice intentions											
	Dissatisfaction			Negative voice-to-organization			Negative voice-to-organization				
	B	t		B	t		B	t			
Emotional receptivity	-.33	-2.42 *		.22	2.57 *		-.34	-2.76 **			
Expressiveness	-.26	-3.16 **		2.82	5.45 **		-2.71	-3.61 **			
Emotional receptivity*Expressiveness	.57	3.33 **		-.6	-5.62 **		.57	3.69 **			

C. Study 4: effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice intentions															
	Satisfaction			Positive voice-to-organization			Positive voice-to-public			Negative voice-to-organization			Negative voice-to-public		
	B	t		B	t		B	t		B	t		B	t	
Emotional receptivity	-.24	-3.30 **		.09	1.15		.04	.65		-.34	-4.75 **		.23	3.92 **	
Service experience	-.33	-.63		.46	.81		1.32	2.86 **		-3.5	-6.91 **		-1.51	-3.61 **	
Emotional receptivity*Service experience	.65	6.19 **		.29	2.59 *		.30	3.23 **		.30	2.99 **		-.28	-3.36 **	

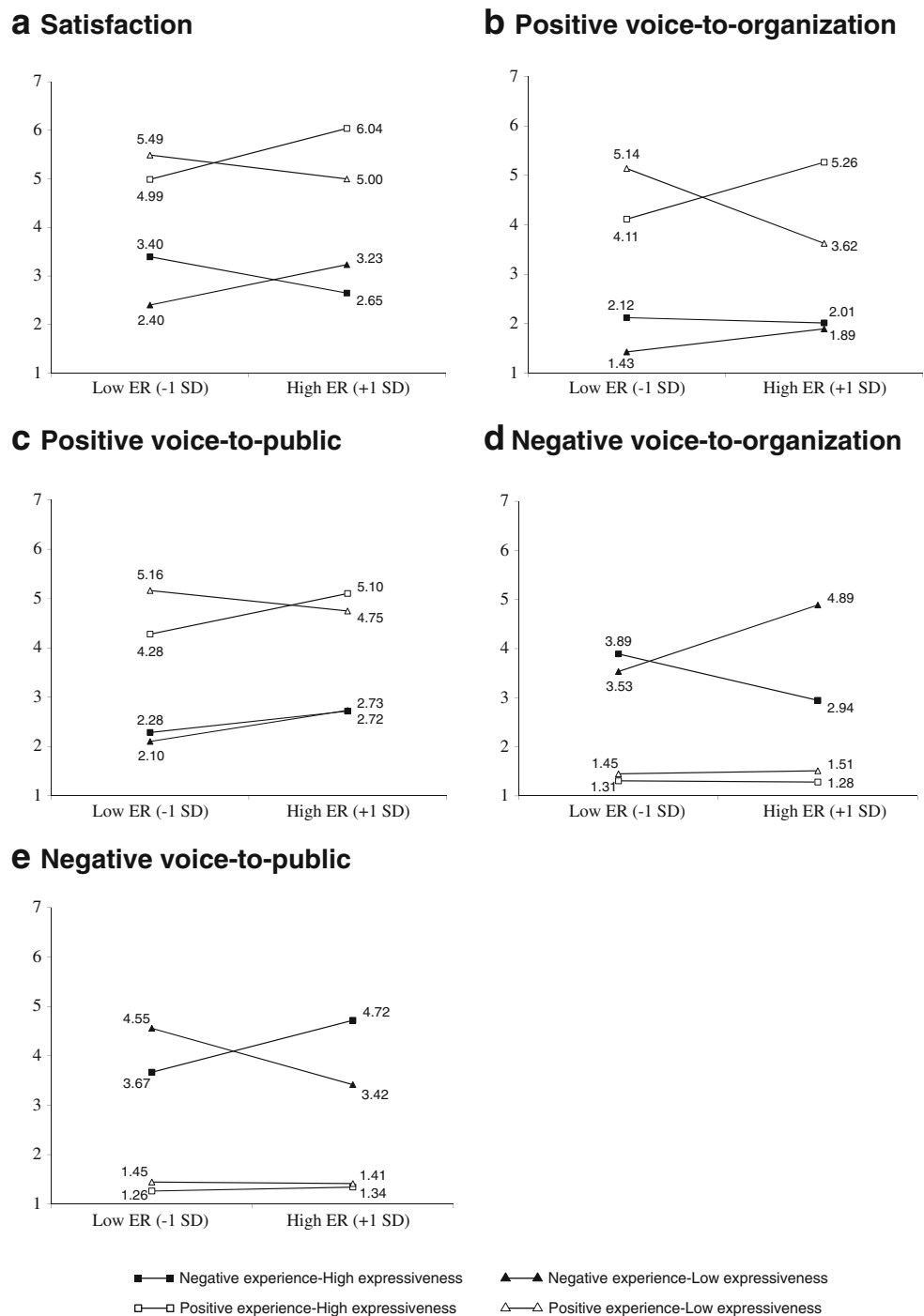
* indicates $p < .05$, ** indicates $p < .01$

In the positive service experience condition, a higher level of expressive similarity produced greater customer satisfaction. Specifically, under high expressiveness, the participants who were higher in emotional receptivity reported higher satisfaction ($\beta = .51, p < .001$; see Fig. 2, Part A); under low expressiveness, the participants who were lower in emotional receptivity reported being more satisfied ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$). In the negative service experience condition, higher expressive similarity produced lower satisfaction levels. In

particular, under the high expressiveness condition, the participants who were higher in emotional receptivity reported lower satisfaction ($\beta = -.31, p < .01$); under the low expressiveness condition, the participants who were lower in emotional receptivity reported being less satisfied ($\beta = .41, p < .01$). These results support H1.

Customer voice The participants' positive and negative voice responses toward the organization (i.e., sending compliments

Fig. 2 Study 1: effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice intentions



or complaints to the resort manager) and the public (i.e., recommend friends to go, or discourage friends from going, to the resort) were separately regressed on service experience, emotional receptivity, expressiveness, and their interactions. The results for voice intentions are presented in Table 2, Part A, and Fig. 2, Parts C-F.

For the positive voice responses, the three-way interaction terms were significant for voice-to-organization ($\beta = -1.56$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 2 part C) and voice-to-public ($\beta = -.69$, $p < .05$; see Fig. 2, Part D). Simple slope analyses revealed significant effects from expressive similarity under the positive, but not under the negative, service experience condition. For the positive service experience, voice-to-organization was higher when low expressiveness was matched with lower emotional receptivity (compliment: $\beta = -.81$, $p < .001$), and when high expressiveness was matched with higher emotional receptivity (compliment: $\beta = .53$, $p < .01$). These results offer support to the prediction of H3 with regards to positive service experience.

Further, voice-to-public was also higher for the high expressiveness-higher emotional receptivity (recommend: $\beta = .38$, $p < .05$) and marginally higher for the low expressiveness-lower emotional receptivity (recommend: $\beta = -.24$, $p < .1$) conditions.

For the negative voice responses, the three-way interaction terms were significant for voice-to-organization ($\beta = -1.07$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 2, Part E) and voice-to-public ($\beta = 1.01$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 2, Part F). Simple slope analyses revealed significant effects from expressive similarity under the negative service condition, but no significant result was found under the positive service condition. Under the negative service condition, voice-to-organization tendencies were lower when low expressiveness was matched with lower emotional receptivity (complain: $\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) and when high expressiveness was matched with higher emotional receptivity (complain: $\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$). These results support H3's prediction under negative service experience.

In contrast, voice-to-public tendencies were higher when low expressiveness was matched with lower emotional receptivity (discourage: $\beta = -.57$, $p < .001$) and when high expressiveness was matched with higher emotional receptivity (discourage: $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The expected expressive similarity effect, arising from a closer match between low expressiveness and lower emotional receptivity or between high expressiveness and higher emotional receptivity, received strong support from the service satisfaction measure. The voice-to-organization intentions also supported our predictions. Higher expressive similarity encourages customers to direct compliments to the organization when service delivery is successful, but it also discourages complaint behavior within the organization when a service

failure occurs. For the voice-to-public measure, increased expressive similarity encourages positive (negative) word of mouth under positive (negative) service experience. This is consistent with our theorizing that initial rapport based on expressive similarity promotes customers' concerns about the service employee's welfare for actions taken within but not outside of the organization.

Study 2

Study 2 was a field experiment designed to attain external validation of the effects demonstrated in the first study. Due to the limited availability of the field site, we focused on dissatisfying service events, given their potentially more costly consequences to organizations. As in Study 1, low and high levels of expressive similarity were manipulated using a 2 (emotional expressiveness: low vs. high) \times 2 (emotional receptivity: low vs. high) full-factorial design. While expressiveness was manipulated, emotional receptivity was a measured factor. One hundred and twenty-two participants took part in this study and were randomly assigned to the low- ($N = 61$) and high- ($N = 61$) expressiveness conditions.

We collected data over two occasions. The participants were students from a large university who believed they were taking part in an online survey in return for a \$20 dining voucher. In reality, this online survey, which included the emotional receptivity scale and other filler inventories, constituted the first part of Study 2. To facilitate the second part of the study, in which the participants would experience a service failure, the participants were told to personally collect the vouchers at a hotel located approximately 30 km away from the university. This hotel was in fact the field site for Study 2. An off-campus site far away from the university was chosen to ensure the participants would feel the effect of a service failure after travelling a long way to the hotel.

For the second part of this study, participants were told to arrive at the hotel at a specific time, so as to ensure that the confederate employee served only one participant at any one point in time. When a participant arrived at the hotel, a hired actor dressed in the hotel's uniform and posing as a trainee employee greeted and interacted with him/her (either using low or high levels of expressiveness).² Shortly after this, the

² For this field study, two female freelance actors were hired and trained to deliver the service interaction script. The actors took turns at the field site, and worked for only a short block of time. This was done to avoid burnout on the part of the actors, which could cause variability in their expressiveness. Before the study, the two actors tuned their expressiveness delivery to ensure that they displayed consistent and similar levels of nonverbally expressed emotions. Actor difference was not significant in any of the analyses.

actor would ask the participant to complete a service quality survey before excusing herself on the pretext of retrieving the dining voucher. A few minutes later, the actor would return to inform the participant apologetically that the dining voucher was not yet available for collection and that s/he would have to collect it on another day (i.e., a service failure). Following this, the participants were ushered to a second actor posing as an employee of the research company that supposedly commissioned the online survey. They were then asked to provide responses related to their dissatisfaction and voice intentions. Finally, the participant was given the dining vouchers and thoroughly debriefed.

Results

Expressiveness manipulation check Under the guise of a service quality evaluation exercise, the participants were asked to rate the extent to which the service employee smiled, varied her voice intonations, and used gestures when interacting with the participants (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). While the level of smiling was the same across both conditions of low and high expressiveness ($M_{low} = 5.69$ vs. $M_{high} = 5.86$, $F(1, 121) = 1.04$, *n.s.*), the actor was rated to be using more voice intonations ($M_{high} = 5.18$ vs. $M_{low} = 4.71$, $F(1, 121) = 12.26$, $p < .005$) and more gestures ($M_{high} = 4.95$ vs. $M_{low} = 4.38$, $F(1, 121) = 23.1$, $p < .001$) in the high- (vs. low-) expressiveness condition.³ Taken together, these results confirm that the low–high expressiveness manipulation worked as intended.

Dissatisfaction Three items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) were used to measure dissatisfaction (“I am dissatisfied with my overall experience with the resort so far,” “As a whole, I am not happy with the resort,” and “Overall, I am displeased with the service experience at the resort”; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$). Our analyses revealed that emotional receptivity moderated the effects of expressiveness on participants’ dissatisfaction ($\beta = .57$, $p < .01$; see Table 2, Part B, and Fig. 3, Part A). In the less expressive condition, the participants with lower emotional receptivity scores indicated higher levels of dissatisfaction with the service failure ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < .05$). In contrast, the participants with higher emotional receptivity were more dissatisfied in the high expressive employee condition ($\beta = .24$, $p < .05$). These results provide support for H1.

³ The field site was a 6-star hotel, and therefore it was appropriate that the level of smiling was moderately high, even in the low-expressiveness condition. If the level of smiling was very low, respondents might be suspicious as they expect courteous service from employees of luxury hotels.

Customer voice The items used for measuring customer voice were identical to those used in Study 1. Both internal and external negative voice were significantly affected by the receptivity and expressiveness interaction ($\beta = -.60$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .57$, $p < .001$ respectively; results presented in Table 2, Part B, and Fig. 3, Part B and Part C). In the low expressiveness condition, the participants with higher emotional receptivity scores indicated a higher amount of internal negative voice ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$), but a lower amount of external negative voice ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .01$). Conversely, in the high expressiveness condition, the participants with higher emotional receptivity scores showed lower internal negative voice ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$), but a higher amount of external negative voice ($\beta = .23$, $p < .05$). These results support H3.

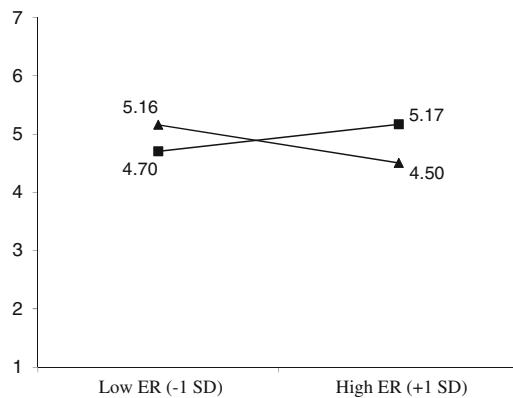
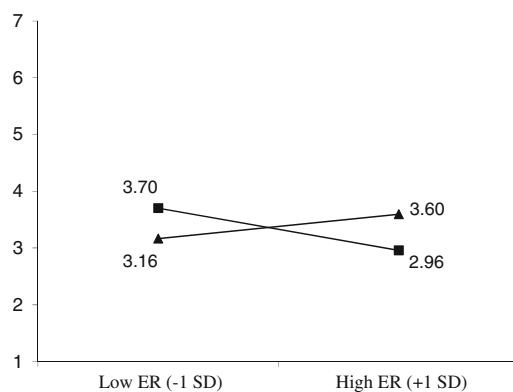
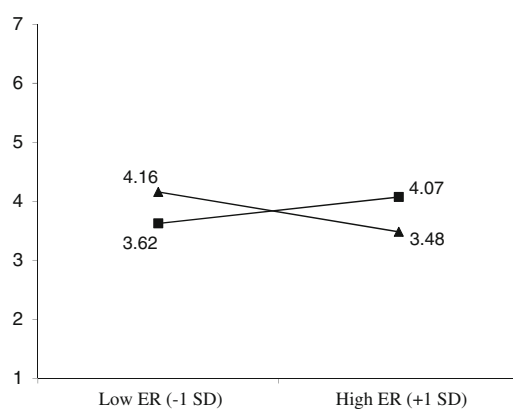
Discussion

In this field experiment, we observed that when customers and employees have higher expressive similarity, a service failure results in heightened levels of customer dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth tendencies, but a lower number of direct complaints to the organization. The results of Study 2 therefore provide external validation for the findings obtained in Study 1 relating to negative service experiences.

Study 3

We augmented Study 2 with a second field experiment (Study 3) tracking actual voice behavior. To do this, a 2 (service experience: positive vs. negative) \times 2 (emotional receptivity: low vs. high) design was used. Service experience was manipulated as either positive (i.e., customers received the flavor of ice cream they wanted) or negative (i.e., customers were told that the flavor of ice cream they wanted was out of stock), whereas emotional receptivity was a measured factor. Study 3 used only one level of expressiveness⁴ in its design. A high level of expressiveness was chosen, as it is the style commonly used by retailers. When paired with high expressiveness, low/high levels of emotional receptivity translated into low/high expressive similarity, respectively. A total of 101

⁴ Our results from Studies 1 and 2 suggest that there are no systematic differences between the exact configurations of low (low expressiveness–high receptivity vs. high expressiveness–low receptivity) or high (low expressiveness–low receptivity vs. high expressiveness–high receptivity) expressive fit. Given this, for time and cost effectiveness, only one level of expressiveness was used to create low/high levels of expressive fit. There were also practical considerations for using only one level of expressiveness. The field site was in a location with high foot traffic, so people passing the stall (who were potential customers) could witness the sales pitch delivered by the actor. Keeping to the same style for a long duration could thus raise suspicions or create unintended negative impressions (due to variability in perceived enthusiasm). Therefore, we decided to use only one level of (high) expressiveness for Study 3.

a Dissatisfaction**b Negative voice-to-organization****c Negative voice-to-public**

▲—▲ Low expressiveness ■—■ High expressiveness

Fig. 3 Study 2: effects of expressive similarity on dissatisfaction and negative voice intentions

undergraduates, randomly allocated to the positive ($n = 50$) or negative ($n = 51$) condition, took part in this study.

Data collection was completed in five days spread over a period of two weeks. An ice cream stall, which had already been in operation for a few months at a local university, was rented for use as the field site. The participants were therefore

actual customers at this ice cream stall. An actor was hired and trained to deliver a sales pitch to potential customers using high expressiveness, and to subsequently deliver either a positive (i.e., smooth transaction in which the customer was given the flavor that s/he wanted) or negative (i.e., informing the customer that the flavor s/he wanted was out of stock, because the employee had forgotten to replenish the stock) service experience.

As the participants walked away from the ice cream stall after completing the purchase, research assistants approached them to complete a survey. The cover story used by the research assistants was that they were students who were collecting reviews about campus food and snack operators to improve the overall quality of life at the university. Each research assistant had a tablet on which an app with an interface mimicking a community forum was run for the purpose of collecting participants' responses. The participants were invited to write (open-ended) reviews about their experience at the ice cream stall that would be seen (1) publicly by the student community (actual external voice), and (2) privately by the stall owner only (actual internal voice). After providing their responses, the participants were debriefed and told that they could withdraw their responses if they wished to do so. None of the participants chose the withdrawal option. Each participant received a payment of \$4 for taking part in the study.

Results

The participants rated the confederate actor as displaying high levels of smiles ($M = 4.55$), voice intonations ($M = 4.29$), and gestures ($M = 4.27$; 1 = not at all to 5 = very much). These judgments were similar across the positive and negative service conditions (all *n.s.*).

The participants' separate open-ended forum postings (i.e., external voice) and private postings to the stall owner only (i.e., internal voice) were coded by two independent raters to ascertain whether they were positive or negative. These raters' assessments agreed for 96% of the postings. Each posting was treated as one count of voice feedback. In total, 83 external voice (12 positive and 71 negative) and 107 internal voice (75 positive and 32 negative) comments were obtained. We then analyzed these four categories of voice separately under the positive and negative service experience categories to examine whether they were affected by participants' emotional receptivity.

A logistic regression suggested that under the positive experience condition, higher emotional receptivity (and hence expressive similarity) positively encouraged positive external voice ($\beta = 1.33$, Wald $\chi^2 = 6.41$, $p < .05$), but it had no effect on negative external voice (in fact, there were no postings here). For internal positive and negative voice, the effects of emotional receptivity were not significant as well (p 's $> .4$). Under the negative experience condition, emotional receptivity (and hence expressive similarity) did not affect either external or internal positive voice. In contrast, emotional receptivity had a

negative influence on internal negative voice ($\beta = -1.06$, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.78$, $p < .05$) and the positive effect of emotional receptivity on external negative voice also approached significance ($\beta = .88$, Wald $\chi^2 = 3.49$, $p = .06$).

Discussion

The actual voice behavior under the negative service experience condition observed in this study is consistent with the voice intention responses from Studies 1 and 2. Specifically, a closer expressive similarity encouraged a protective tendency toward the service employee whereby there was less negative voice directed inwards and marginally more negative voice directed outwards. For voice behavior under the positive experience condition, the current findings for external positive voice also corroborated the results of study 1 (study 2 involved negative experiences only). However, the results for internal positive voice were not replicated. This may be due to a ceiling effect, as 43 out of 50 participants made internal positive voice postings.

Study 4

Study 4 extends the previous studies in three important ways. First, it tests the hypothesis that the effects of customer-employee expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice tendencies can be explained by rapport and trait impressions. Second, it explores the effect of expressive similarity on service recovery efficacy. Previous research suggests that consumers are more likely to forgive brands with which they have closer relationships (e.g., Chung and Beverland 2006; Ganesan et al. 2010). Therefore, we similarly expect that richer preliminary relationships (in the form of rapport and more favorable trait impressions) between customers and service employees with high expressive similarity will facilitate recovery from service failures. Last, Study 4 further examines the generalizability of the customer-employee expressive similarity effects across service outcomes that are attributable to the employee versus the company.

Design, procedure, and measures

A 2 (service experience: positive vs. negative with recovery) x 2 (emotional receptivity: low vs. high) x 2 (attribution: employee vs. company) factorial design was used. Service experience was manipulated through either a successful service delivery (positive condition) or a service failure (negative with recovery condition). To manipulate attribution, scenarios that depicted either the employee or company as being primarily responsible for the service outcome were used. The participants' emotional receptivity was a measured variable.

One hundred and sixty-three undergraduates from a large university took part in this study. The experimental procedures were similar to those used in Study 1. In the first session, the participants completed the five-item emotional receptivity scale. In the second session, they first viewed a video scenario depicting the initial customer-employee exchange featuring a service employee delivering a service script using a high expressiveness style. After this, the first set of responses (i.e., impression traits, rapport/bonding responses) was collected.

The study subsequently continued with a written scenario that described either a positive (i.e., after a long flight, being able to go to the hotel room immediately) or negative (i.e., after a long flight, having to wait 30 min for the room to be ready) service experience. The scenario also places the burden of responsibility for the service outcome on either the employee (employee reminded colleagues to get a room ready in the positive condition; employee forgot to remind colleagues to get a room ready in the negative condition) or the company (booking system recently upgraded, thus facilitating seamless integration across departments in positive condition; booking system recently crashed, thus key department did not know of booking in negative condition). Thereafter, satisfaction levels and voice responses were solicited.

For the participants in the negative service experience, the scenario then resumed to describe the service recovery effort by the service employee (i.e., apology and offering a \$50 meal voucher as compensation), and they responded to the satisfaction measures again. For all of the participants, checks of the expressiveness manipulation and the attribution cause of the service success or failure were conducted in the last stage of the experiment.

Measures

Rapport The participants were asked to rate the level of rapport they had with the service employee using Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) six-item rapport scale.

Trait impressions The participants rated their impression of the service employee on 13 traits that may be associated with frontline service employees (competent, confident, courteous, enthusiastic, honest, hostile, likeable, professional, proud, supportive, trustworthy, warm, and unfriendly; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Satisfaction The levels of satisfaction were captured using five items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). The participants were asked to report the extent to which they agreed that (a) they were satisfied with the service provided by the employee they interacted with, (b) they were satisfied with the outcome of the service experience, (c) they were satisfied with their overall experience, (d) they were happy with the resort, and (e) they were pleased with the service experience

at the resort. All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Customer voice Both positive and negative voice tendencies were solicited via items adapted from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). The participants were asked for their voice-to-organization tendencies on four items (two each for positive and negative voice) that captured how likely they were to send compliments or complaints about the (a) employee and (b) resort to the resort manager (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely). Likewise, voice-to-public tendencies were assessed with six items (three each for positive and negative voice) in which participants were asked how likely there were to (a) spread positive or negative word of mouth about the resort, (b) recommend or not recommend the resort to their friends, or (c) encourage or discourage their friends to stay at the resort (1 = not at all, 7 = very likely).

Results

Manipulation checks The same measures used in the previous studies were used to check for perceived levels of facial smiles ($M=4.41$), voice intonation ($M=4.36$), and gestures ($M=4.28$) displayed by the service employee. The results showed that all three were similar across all conditions (all *n.s.*).

To check whether the attribution manipulation worked, the participants were asked how much they (dis)agreed that the outcome was caused by the service employee, the company, or neither of the two parties (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strong agree). The participants in the employee attribution condition reported stronger agreement that the employee was responsible for the outcome ($M_{\text{employee}}=4.97$ vs. $M_{\text{company}}=3.10$, $F(1159)=56.87$, $p<.001$), whereas those in the company attribution condition agreed more strongly that the company was responsible for the outcome ($M_{\text{employee}}=4.56$ vs. $M_{\text{company}}=5.37$, $F(1159)=23.52$, $p<.001$). Finally, the participants reported similar levels of disagreement that neither the employee nor the company was responsible for the outcome ($M_{\text{employee}}=2.44$ vs. $M_{\text{company}}=2.72$, $F(1159)=1.93$, *n.s.*). The results thus suggest that the attribution manipulation worked as intended.

Rapport and impression traits The participants' responses for the rapport items were averaged to form an index for further analysis (Gremier and Gwinner 2000; Cronbach's $\alpha=.87$). As expected, the participants who scored higher in emotional receptivity reported higher rapport with the high expressiveness service employee ($r=.4$, $p<.001$).

A factor analysis with varimax rotation (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin=0.8 and Bartlett's test of Sphericity<0.001) of the 13 impression traits revealed a three-factor solution (loadings>.4) that explained 56% of the total variance. The first factor centered on the perceived abilities of the service

employee (i.e., "competent," "confident," "enthusiastic," and "professional"), whereas the second factor related to the quality of the relationship with the service employee (i.e., "honest," "likeable," trustworthy," "warm," and "supportive"). The last factor included traits that are connected to the service attitude of the employee (i.e., "courteous," "hostile," "proud," and "unfriendly"). In line with our expectations, the participants who were higher in emotional receptivity (and therefore experiencing higher expressive similarity) had more favorable impressions of the service employee's abilities (ability trait factor: $r=.30$, $p<.001$), relational qualities (relational trait factor: $r=.23$, $p<.01$), and attitude toward service (service attitude factor: $r=-.17$, $p<.05$).

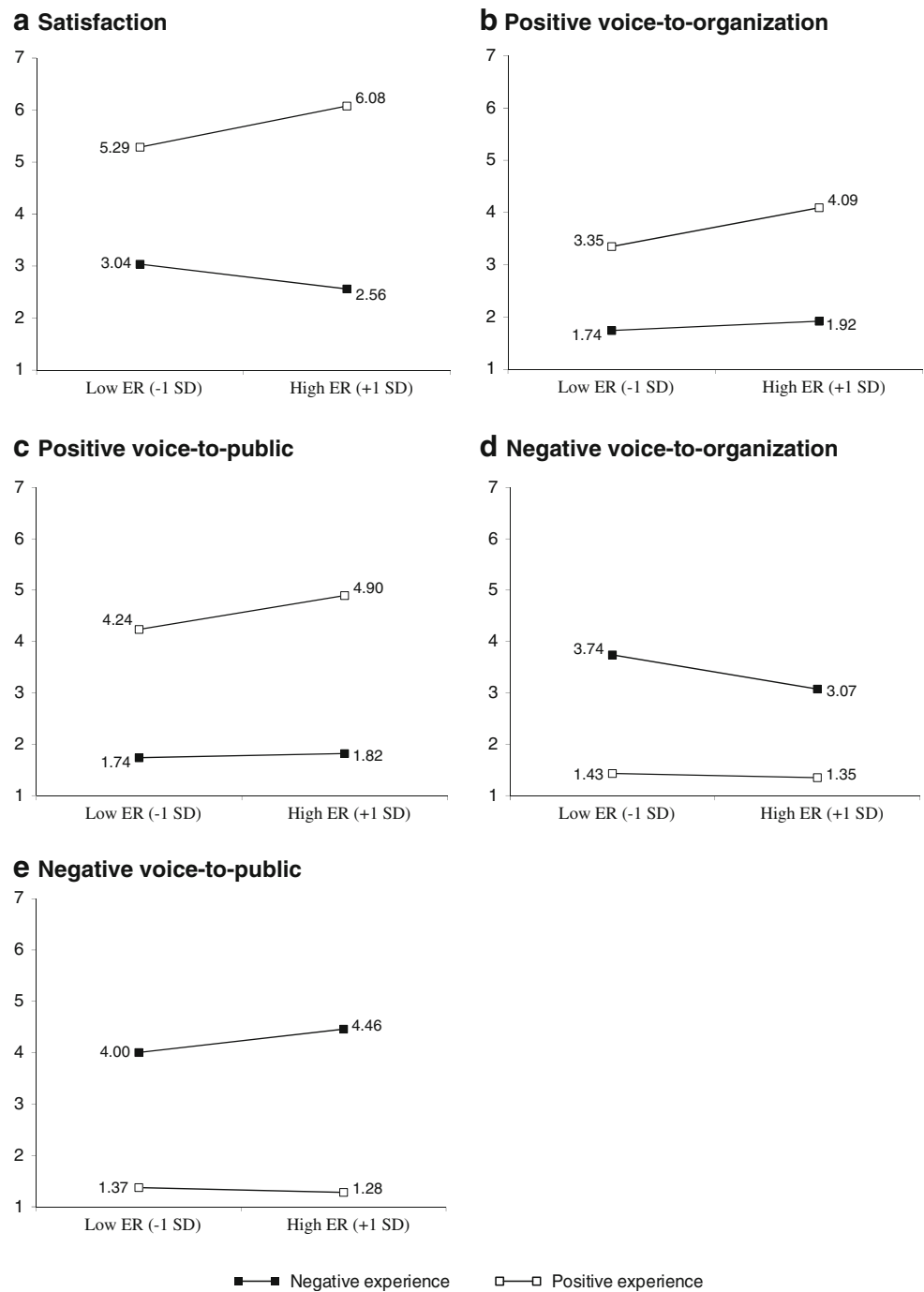
Satisfaction Participants' satisfaction responses were averaged to create a satisfaction index for use in further analyses (Cronbach's $\alpha=.94$). A full regression model with emotional receptivity, service experience, attribution, and their interactions revealed a two-way significant interaction between emotional receptivity and service experience. Simple slope analyses of the two-way interaction ($\beta=.65$, $p<.001$; refer to Table 2, Part C, and Fig. 4, Part A) revealed that the participants with higher emotional receptivity (i.e., higher expressive similarity) reported higher satisfaction levels ($\beta=.40$, $p<.001$) in the positive service condition. On the flipside, those with higher emotional receptivity scores reported lower satisfaction levels in the negative service condition ($\beta=-.24$, $p<.01$).

For the positive service experience condition, a bootstrap mediation analysis (Hayes 2013) using rapport and the three-factor trait impression solution as simultaneous multiple mediators showed significant indirect effects of emotional receptivity through rapport ($\beta=.14$; 95% CI [.05, .26]), the ability trait factor ($\beta=.06$; 95% CI [.02, .14]), and the relational trait factor ($\beta=.04$; 95% CI [.002, .1]). Similar mediation effects were also found in the negative service experience condition (rapport: $\beta=-.04$; 95% CI [-.1, -.01], ability trait factor: $\beta=-.09$; 95% CI [-.15, -.03]), and relational trait factor $\beta=-.04$; 95% CI [-.09, -.003]). These results provide evidence for the rapport- and impression-based processes proposed in H2.

Customer voice The participants' positive voice-to-organization (mean of two items; $r=.79$) and voice-to-public (mean of three items; $\alpha=.94$) scores and their negative voice-to-organization (mean of two-items; $r=.84$) and voice-to-public (mean of three items; $\alpha=.95$) scores were separately regressed on the independent factors and their interactions.

For positive voice, the interaction terms between emotional receptivity and service experience for voice-to-organization ($\beta=.29$, $p<.05$; see Table 2 part C and Fig. 4 part B) and voice-to-public ($\beta=.30$, $p<.05$; see Fig. 4 part C) were significant. Subsequent simple slope analyses revealed that

Fig. 4 Study 4: effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice intentions



emotional receptivity (and hence expressive similarity) had no bearing on positive voice tendencies in the negative service condition. However, in the positive service condition, participants with higher receptivity reported a higher level of both voice-to-organization ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) and voice-to-public ($\beta = .34, p < .001$) behavior. Subsequent mediation tests involving rapport and trait impressions as multiple mediators revealed that only the indirect effect through rapport was significant for both voice-to-organization ($\beta = .2$; 95% CI [.11, .34]) and voice-to-public ($\beta = .1$; 95% CI [.01, .21]).

For negative voice, the interaction terms between emotional receptivity and service experience for voice-to-organization ($\beta = .30, p < .01$) and voice-to-public ($\beta = -.28, p < .05$) were also significant. Simple slope analyses showed that the effect of emotional receptivity was not significant under the positive service condition. In contrast, under the negative service experience condition, participants with higher emotional receptivity indicated a lower level of voice-to-organization ($\beta = -.34, p < .001$) and a higher level of voice-to-public ($\beta = .23, p < .001$). These

results are depicted in Fig. 4, Parts D and E, for negative voice-to-organization and voice-to-public, respectively. Mediation tests showed only significant indirect effects through rapport for voice-to-organization ($\beta = -.09$; 95% CI $[-.16, -.05]$) and for voice-to-public ($\beta = -.09$; 95% CI $[-.03, .17]$). Collectively, these results about customer voice provide consistent support for the predictions made in H3 and H4.

Recovery from service failure For the negative service condition, there was a significant positive change in the satisfaction responses (satisfaction_{after recovery} minus satisfaction_{before recovery}; $M = 1.29$ vs. $M = 0$, $t(1, 79) = 11.7$, $p < .001$) after the service recovery effort. Further, emotional receptivity significantly explained the change in scores ($\beta = .26$, $p < .05$) and a mediation test showed that this relationship was simultaneously mediated by rapport ($\beta = .09$; 95% CI $[-.01, .22]$) and the ability trait factor ($\beta = .13$; 95% CI $[-.02, .33]$).

Attribution effect in satisfaction and voice Contrast tests revealed that regardless of emotional receptivity levels, a service failure attributed to an employee (vs. company) elicited (a) lower satisfaction ($M_{\text{employee}} = 2.62$ vs. $M_{\text{company}} = 3.01$, $F(1, 155) = 7.35$, $p < .01$), (b) lower negative voice-to-organization ($M_{\text{employee}} = 3.21$ vs. $M_{\text{company}} = 3.62$, $F(1, 155) = 8.96$, $p < .01$), and (c) higher negative voice-to-public ($M_{\text{employee}} = 4.41$ vs. $M_{\text{company}} = 4.05$, $F(1, 155) = 10.13$, $p < .01$). This may be a result of the contrastive processing induced by service failure, which in turn elicits a fuller and more calculated consideration of details in evaluative judgments. However, causal attribution had no effect on satisfaction and voice tendencies when the service experience was positive.

A further look at the manipulations of the cause attribution factor suggests that they could also have been interpreted as “person versus technology” attributions⁵ rather than the intended “employee versus firm” attributions. To address this possibility, we collected additional data using newly designed scenarios that related more directly to a company policy for a closer manipulation of the “attributed-to-company” factor. The original “booking system upgraded” and “booking system crashed” manipulations in the positive and negative experiences were replaced with “hiring of additional staff” (which led to manpower sufficiency) and “hiring freeze” (which led to manpower shortage), respectively.

One hundred undergraduates took part in this follow-up study. The manipulation checks confirmed that the participants were more likely to attribute the outcome to the company than to the employee ($M_{\text{company}} = 5.21$ vs. $M_{\text{employee}} = 3.90$, $F(1, 98) = 62.07$, $p < .001$). We then merged the responses from this new study with those for the “attributed-to-employee”

condition from study 4 to (re-)examine the effects of attribution on satisfaction and voice. Contrast tests revealed that the results were largely consistent with those of study 4. Regardless of emotional receptivity, a service failure that was attributed to an employee elicited a) lower satisfaction ($M_{\text{employee}} = 2.62$ vs. $M_{\text{company(hiring freeze)}} = 3.05$, $F(1, 173) = 7.89$, $p < .01$), b) lower negative voice-to-organization ($M_{\text{employee}} = 3.21$ vs. $M_{\text{company(hiring freeze)}} = 3.48$, $F(1, 173) = 3.61$, $p = .06$), and c) higher negative voice-to-public ($M_{\text{employee}} = 4.41$ vs. $M_{\text{company(hiring freeze)}} = 3.86$, $F(1, 173) = 9.84$, $p < .005$). Similarly, under the positive service experience condition, the attribution effect was not significant. It should be noted that these results were derived from responses from two separate data collections, and hence should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

The pattern of results for satisfaction and voice from this study replicated those of Studies 1 and 2. Further, mediation analyses showed that rapport and impressions about the service employee’s abilities and relational qualities explained the effects of emotional receptivity on satisfaction and negative voice-to-organization. The explanatory role of rapport in emotional receptivity’s effect on positive voice-to-organization and voice-to-public responses was also evident. In addition, the favorable rapport and ability trait impression from higher levels of expressive similarity helped to improve service recovery efforts. Our results also suggest that expressive similarity effects can be generalized across service outcomes that are attributed to either employees or organizations.

We note that although trait impression as it relates to service attitude (consisting of the items “unfriendly,” “hostile,” “proud,” and “courteous”) significantly correlates (negatively) with expressive similarity, it did not explain the effects of expressive similarity on satisfaction and voice. A potential explanation relates to the service context used for this research: throughout the scenario, the employee exhibited a general sense of friendliness and politeness. Therefore, negative trait impressions may feature less prominently in the satisfaction and voice responses.

General discussion

This series of four studies provides converging and robust evidence that perceived expressive similarity influences customer satisfaction and voice responses. In addition, we show that these effects can be explained by customer-perceived rapport and employee trait impressions. Our findings also suggest that rapport created by high expressive similarity appears to have far-reaching effects on satisfaction, voice intentions, and

⁵ We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this to us.

service recovery efficacy; however, the influence of trait impressions appears to be limited primarily to service evaluations (i.e., customer satisfaction) with little influence on behavioral intentions (i.e., customer voice). Further, our findings suggest that expressive similarity benefits service employees more than organizations. Although stronger rapport and more favorable trait impressions arising from higher expressive similarity lead customers to act consistently in favor of the employee, such positive outcomes can backfire on the organization in the form of heightened dissatisfaction and damaging negative word of mouth when service fails.

Theoretical implications

Drawing upon research on thin-slice judgments (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal 1993), first impressions (e.g., Forgas 2011), and nonverbal behavior (e.g., Mehrabian 1983), we introduce the notion of expressive similarity and provide convergent evidence to demonstrate its effects and mechanisms. Like other forms of similarity, expressive similarity leads to positive effects (e.g., protective shield over employee regardless of service success or failure). Our work suggests that such positive effects can be explained by the enhanced affiliation (as shown by higher rapport) and more favorable trait impressions invoked by higher expressive similarity. Past research suggests that interpersonal similarity can arise from different sources (e.g., gender, birthdays, values) that require different depth of relationship. In this sense, expressive similarity appears to be at the low-end of the relationship depth spectrum, as it can be quickly established even in the absence of existing relationships. Future research may examine whether expressive similarity differs from similarity achieved through other means in terms of the durability of its effects over time.

The dominant view of relationship researchers is that building strong commercial relationships is always beneficial (Gremler and Gwinner 2008; Palmatier et al. 2006; Worsfold et al. 2007). Consistent with this perspective, our results indicate that customer relations enhance customer positive experiences and increase the generation of favorable external word of mouth (Ganesan et al. 2010; Gutek et al. 2002; Tan et al. 2004; Tsai 2001). Of greater importance, our present work further suggests two important qualifications to the belief that rapport between customers and service employees is always beneficial. First, this view may be overly rosy and simplistic. Our observations suggest that stronger (but preliminary) rapport may actually make negative customer experiences appear worse. As our results were obtained from studying first-time service encounters, our conjecture is that rapport in first-time, brief service encounters differs from rapport established over repeated interactions in extended relationships; the former is more tentative and less stable. Depending on how subsequent interactions and events unfold, rapport from initial, brief interactions can be strengthened or weakened based on the related

evaluations. This line of thinking is consistent with research on the “love becomes hate” effect (see for instance, Gregoire and Fisher 2008), which highlights the potential downsides of positive customer interactions. Nonetheless, preliminary rapport possibly represents a critical first step towards long-term customer relationship building. Given so, future research may seek to develop a fuller understanding of the rapport construct (both preliminary and long-term). Second, our findings are consistent with extant research suggesting that employees’ relationship-building efforts tend to enhance relationships between the employee and customer, rather than between the company and customer (Palmatier et al. 2006). Indeed, our results suggest that the organization (vs. employees) may have relatively less to gain from rapport-building efforts. This research thus joins other studies in warning organizations about the potential pitfalls associated with empowering frontline employees to please customers (e.g., Brady et al. 2012; Palmatier et al. 2007).

Our research contributes to the voice literature by clarifying the distinction between positive and negative customer voice, and more importantly, the differences between customer voice directed inwards to an organization (voice-to-organization) versus voice expressed outwards to the public (voice-to-public). More specifically, our findings add to extant literature on the importance of managing customer voice. This literature has previously not considered how consumers choose their voice outlets (Hirschman 1970; Tax et al. 1998). Our work refocuses the spotlight on voice as a strategic tool used by consumers to influence organizational practices (e.g., by withholding negative voice to protect service employees, or by expressing positive voice to promote the interests of service employees), as originally intended by Hirschman (1970). Clearly, more work is needed to understand *why* and *when* consumers choose to voice inwards to the organization over voicing outwards to their social networks (and vice-versa). In today’s environment, where consumer-to-consumer reviews are taking center stage in a heavily networked world, understanding how consumers choose voice outlets can give marketers an edge over competitors in leveraging customer opinions.

Implications for managers

Our current work offers insights for service-oriented companies keen on managing customer touchpoints so as to ensure a positive customer experience. We find that the expressive similarity established at the start of a service encounter can potentially influence customer responses later in the customer experience (i.e., customer satisfaction, voice behavior, responses to service recovery efforts). Therefore, the initial customer–employee interaction is a key customer touch point that should be carefully managed. Future research may build on this research to further understand the effects of expressive

similarity at different stages of the consumer decision-making journey.

The results from this research provide robust evidence for the efficacy of expressive similarity as a rapport-building tool, thus expanding the existing pool of rapport-building strategies available to practitioners. Compared to the overt rapport-building strategies commonly used by practitioners (Gremler and Gwinner 2008), using nonverbal communication to build rapport is subtler and less obtrusive, and is therefore less prone to being tuned out or resisted. Given the potential advantages of expressive similarity, companies may consider taking a more active role in matching service employees to customers. In reality, companies already practice what is known as interaction routing to deploy employees to customers on the basis of their personalities and communication styles (van Dolen et al. 2002). For instance, the Predictive Behavioral Routing software by Mattersight pairs callers with the best available agent based on communication style (Forrestor Consulting 2015). We propose that companies can expand this to include routing based on customers' emotional receptivity.

Organizations generally prefer customers to share their pleasant experiences with other potential customers to activate the power of referrals (Buttle 1998) and encourage customers to voice dissatisfaction inwards to the organization so that service recovery efforts can be initiated (Evanschitzky et al. 2011). However, our results suggest that customers may sometimes do the exact opposite. Customers tend to direct positive voice inwards after a positive experience, and refrain from directing negative voice to the organization after a negative experience, if they have rapport with the service employee. In the current digital landscape, where consumers are increasingly taking to highly public social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) to voice their satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Nielsen 2012), this finding has important implications. Organizations must take additional measures to elicit or encourage feedback from customers especially in situations where service failures occur following service interactions where rapport is present. Overall, the benefits of customer–employee expressive similarity have to be considered against the potential drawbacks in the case of service failures.

Future research directions

We were primarily interested in understanding the effect of low vs. high expressive similarity. Hence, we pooled the low expressiveness–low receptivity and high expressiveness–high receptivity conditions together as “high expressive similarity” and the mismatched conditions (i.e., low expressiveness–high receptivity and high expressiveness–low receptivity) together as “low expressive similarity.” Future research may extend our work by probing deeper into the specific combinations of low and high expressive similarity. This line of further inquiry is theoretically interesting as there are probably

different mechanisms driving the specific combinations of expressiveness and receptivity that lead to low/high expressive similarity. For example, low expressiveness–low receptivity interactions may facilitate more emphasis on cognitive information, and therefore the knowledge of the employee may play a bigger role in influencing the service outcomes. In contrast, high expressiveness–high receptivity interactions may increase the salience of emotional connection or chemistry, i.e., whether the interaction feels right, and employees' efforts to please the customer may be additionally rewarded.

Future studies can also look at potential moderators for the observed effects of expressive similarity. Following Chan et al.'s (2009) differentiation between “social” failures (i.e., employee unfriendliness or inattentiveness) and “nonsocial” failures (i.e., product unavailability), the service failures used in our studies (i.e., the booking system crashed) can be classified as nonsocial (service) failures. Therefore, a more accurate interpretation of our findings may be that the higher rapport created by high expressive similarity serves to shield employees from the detrimental effect of nonsocial failures. More work is needed to determine if the same pattern holds for social failures. We do not expect this to be the case; in fact, it is unlikely that the same protective layer evident in high expressive similarity conditions will apply to situations in which service employees are deemed to commit social failures. Such employees may be punished more severely (vs. those in low expressive similarity pairs), as consumers expect more from them due to the enjoyable initial interaction, thus making social failures seem more grievous than reality would dictate.

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