

Authenticity, rapport and interactional justice in frontline service: the moderating role of need for uniqueness

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate how perceptions of employee authenticity and customer–employee rapport influence customers’ interactional justice assessments and related service evaluations, and how customers’ need for uniqueness impacts these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – A multi-method, three-study design is used to test the research model. Specifically, structural equation modeling provides tests of the main hypotheses, and two supplemental experimental studies tease out conditional effects providing insightful managerial contributions.

Findings – Results indicate that customers’ perceptions of employee authenticity affect customers’ interactional justice evaluations, particularly when customers identify high levels of customer–employee rapport. Additionally, the aforementioned relationships are contingent upon customers’ need for uniqueness, such that customers with higher levels of need for uniqueness experience lower levels of customer–employee rapport and, consequently, provide poorer interactional justice assessments. Finally, conditional effects are found given the type of provider and frequency of visit.

Originality/value – This research extends prior efforts to understand how customer–employee dynamics influence customers’ service encounter evaluations. In particular, it furthers understanding of authentic FLE–customer encounters, explores drivers of interactional justice and explicates how consumers’ varying levels of need for uniqueness have differential effects on service outcomes.

Keywords Need for uniqueness, Employee authenticity, Rapport, Interactional justice, Frontline service, Customer–employee interactions, Service encounter, Structural equation modeling, Quantitative research, Frontline service employees

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A keystone of services marketing has been, and remains, the provision of unique customer experiences via the understanding and management of relationships between frontline employees (FLEs) and customers (Furrer *et al.*, 2020). Work by Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggests customers are looking for something beyond simple service delivery, with more recent research suggesting customers will pay a premium for unique experiences (Bastos, 2019). This has prompted service providers to reconceptualize service delivery in terms of providing individualized experiences valued by customers. For example, London-based Engine, a service design firm that

focuses on helping firms enhance customer experiences, worked with Alpha Airports, a mid-sized UK airport operator, to redesign customer retail experiences (Engine Design, 2019). Part of the issue was taking into account the myriad demands customers had, which resulted in the need to identify unique experiences for each customer.

One of the first comprehensive presentations of need for uniqueness (NFU) as a construct can be found in Snyder and Fromkin (1977) who, noting the negative connotations associated with the term abnormal in the psychology literature, proposed uniqueness as “a positive striving for differentness relative to other people” (p. 518). This notion of an individual’s NFU suggests those high in NFU desire to be dissimilar to others and actively seek ways to fulfill their NFU. The importance of NFU has been recognized in understanding the marketing strategies of luxury brands

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Journal of Services Marketing
35/3 (2021) 367–380
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0887-6045]
[DOI 10.1108/JSM-11-2019-0434]

Received 5 November 2019
Revised 28 May 2020
2 October 2020
Accepted 4 October 2020

(Lunardo and Mouangue, 2019; Kauppinen-Räsänen *et al.*, 2018) and preferences for standardized vs customized service delivery (Ding and Keh, 2016), as well as in the likelihood of recommending products (Cheema and KaiKati, 2010), and of early adopters communicating about adopted innovations (Moldovan *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, practitioners have embraced consumers' NFU as with Axe's "Find your Magic" Initiative, which asks men to find and express their unique characteristics (Unilever, 2017).

While service firms may recognize customers have unique attributes (Mascio, 2010), it may not be sufficient to focus only on customers' NFU. Research has also noted the relationship between uniqueness and authenticity (Lehman *et al.*, 2019; Gershon and Smith, 2020), and more specifically has highlighted the importance of customers' perceptions regarding FLE authenticity (Lechner and Paul, 2019; Bucher *et al.*, 2018; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013). The broad importance of authenticity has been noted by Brown *et al.* (2003) who suggest, "the search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing" (p. 21). The importance of authenticity is further evidenced by its being labeled as one of the three most critical customer service skills for FLEs (Dragilev, 2019).

A primary goal of this research is to aid service managers in understanding how customers' NFU and their perceptions of FLE authenticity operate to impact evaluations of service interactions. Furthermore, this work also considers the mediating role of rapport, a critical aspect of service encounter management (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; DeWitt and Brady, 2003; Macintosh, 2009). Finally, given the present focus on explicating the interpersonal nature of complex service interactions, the primary dependent variable used is interactional justice, or the "perceived fairness of the service provider's response" (Kim, 2018, p. 729).

Consequently, this research makes several contributions to service theory and practice. First, the favorable impact of FLE authenticity on customer service outcomes is highlighted, the understanding of which is something Lechner and Mathmann (2020) advance as salient to service literature. Second, this research offers further explorations of interactional justice as a dependent variable, particularly in a service context (Kim, 2018). Third, the current

research provides insights to marketers regarding how consumers with varying levels of a NFU may differentially value efforts to provide unique experiences. Fourth, to further understand the moderating effects of NFU, two supplemental studies are conducted to investigate the frequency with which customers patronize a provider as well as the type of service provider itself to provide a better understanding of the impact of NFU along with more specific recommendations for service providers regarding the nuanced nature of NFU.

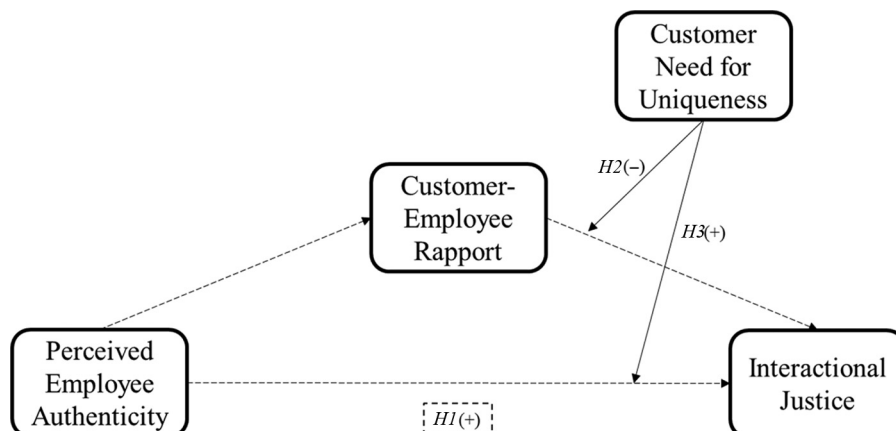
The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual research model is introduced (see Figure 1) and support for the hypothesized relationships is provided. Second, an overview of methodological procedures and analyses is presented. Finally, managerial implications, theoretical contributions, limitations and avenues for future research are offered.

Conceptual model development and hypotheses

The foundation for the model tested in this research is grounded in social exchange theory (SET), and supported by uniqueness theory (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). Interested readers are recommended to look at Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) or Lambe *et al.* (2001) for more in-depth reviews of SET as the presentation here will focus on the elements of SET most relevant to this research. At its most fundamental level, SET provides insights into how people engage in social exchanges, something Mills and Clark (1982) suggest characterizes any exchange in which parties give and receive benefits. As to the nature of what is exchanged, most agree with Molm (2003) who writes, "social exchange resources include not only tangible goods and services but also capacities to provide socially valued outcomes" (p. 2). In other words, SET can account for the exchange of both tangible and non-tangible resources. For example, in this context, customers may exchange positive evaluations for employees behaving authentically or responding positively to the customers' NFU.

Mutual, complementary, interdependent relationships are one of the defining characteristics of social exchanges (Molm *et al.*, 1994) and can take one of two forms: negotiated or reciprocal (Molm *et al.*, 2003). With negotiated exchanges,

Figure 1 Conceptual model



both parties know before the exchange occurs what the outcomes will be, whereas reciprocal exchanges suggest parties initiate exchanges without any expectations regarding the nature of the reciprocation, or if it will even occur. In other words, service employees who behave authentically have no way of knowing how the consumer might respond, if at all. However, SET proposes the initiating party provides the benefit in the hope that the receiving party will respond in kind. This expectation of reciprocal behavior is an important motivator with research suggesting the act of reciprocity is often valued over and above what is actually exchanged (Molm, 2003), something that may be particularly true with regard to authenticity and customers seeking uniqueness in service encounters. Germane to this research, Snyder and Fromkin (1977) indicate that individuals high in NFU will conform to social norms (e.g. adhering to the principles of reciprocal exchanges), but that they “do *not* value high degrees of similarity relative to others” (emphasis original, p. 519).

Authenticity

Researchers have called for increased attention to authenticity in service encounters (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013) as authenticity has been shown to be important with regard to the evaluation of frontline service employees (Baker et al., 2014; Sirianni et al., 2013). Authenticity generally refers to things that are genuine, real, true and sincere (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and cannot be evaluated by objective criteria, but rather only as it is perceived by the evaluator (Lehman et al., 2019). These positions are consistent with work within marketing that suggests authenticity is a “socially-constructed interpretation of the essence of what is observed rather than properties inherent in an object” (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010, p. 839).

Thus, authenticity is conceptualized in this research in terms of how the employee is perceived by the customer (i.e. perceived employee authenticity), and defined as customers’ perceptions that an employee genuinely embodies his or her values and positioning of his or her self-concept (adapted from Baker et al., 2014). It should be noted that employees may not always act authentically. It is possible that an employee may be required by “organizational display rules” (Grandey et al., 2015), to act in a manner inconsistent with their feelings, such that it appears forced or disingenuous. In this case, it would be up to the customer to decide regarding the extent to which the employee was acting authentically.

Rapport

Rapport has been associated with over 800 behaviors typically exhibited by service employees, including being attentive, empathetic, courteous and polite (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008). Furthermore, rapport has been conceptualized as being composed of two dimensions: enjoyable interaction and personal connection (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). This research focuses on the former because of the transient nature of many service encounters (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013). The enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport refers service employees’ attempt to create feelings of warmth with customers by, for example, discussing topics unrelated to the service encounter itself, warmly greeting customers, or perhaps complimenting customers on personal attributes or possessions (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008).

Thus, in this research, customer–employee rapport is defined as the “perceived quality of the relationship, dealing with the communication between the two parties and characterized by a connection or understanding among the participants” (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008, p. 309). Wang and Groth (2014) found that customers often attend to a variety of cues, which may include authenticity, to aid in service evaluations. This is because of the fact that, often in the service delivery process, there will have been little prior interaction with a particular service employee, even if customers have previous experience with the service provider (i.e. the brand or organization). Thus, customers are left with a narrower range of inputs to choose from in making determinations about service interactions. Given the importance of authenticity, customers’ perceptions of employee authenticity are likely to be used as one such input. More pertinently, employees perceived by customers as being more authentic – that is, genuine, real, true, sincere, innocent and original (Kennick, 1985) – are expected to be employees with whom customers would want to engage, or with whom they might have greater amounts of rapport.

Interactional justice

Interactional justice has been defined as “the quality of interpersonal treatment people received during the enactment of organizational procedures” (Bies and Moag, 1986, p. 44), such that perceptions of interactional justice assess the perceived fairness of services processes (i.e. the response of the FLEs; Kim, 2018). This is suggestive of interactional justice being more broadly applicable than within service failure/recovery contexts, an area where a great deal of marketing effort has been directed. While interactional justice is often introduced to the services literature in the context of conflict resolution (Blodgett et al., 1997; Maxham and Netemeyer, 2002), in line with Bies (2015), Kim (2018) and Folger and Skarlicki (2001), among others, this research subscribes to the notion that customers can and do evaluate justice perceptions “even without the existence of failures, customer complaints, and recovery efforts” (Martinez-Tur et al., 2006, p. 101). More specifically, evidence for this can be found in work by Martínez-Tur et al. (2006) who investigated interactional justice in the context of hotel and restaurant service delivery. Given its relationship-oriented nature, it does not appear to be a stretch that customers are looking for interactional justice, that is respect, across all service interactions, not only those related to service recovery.

Mediating role of customer–employee rapport

This research focuses on the mediational role of rapport in the relationship between authenticity and interactional justice. First, higher levels of perceived authenticity should be associated with higher levels of interactional justice. The reciprocity principle of SET posits that individuals should respond to positive and negative experiences by reciprocating in kind (Blau, 1964). For example, Beitelspacher et al. (2018) found that when salespeople took a more relational approach to engaging with retailers, those retailers reciprocated by returning less merchandise in the future. In the current context, authenticity, as noted above, is characterized, in part, by honesty and personal closeness (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013).

Research has found that interactional justice is influenced by trust, integrity and benevolence (Zapata *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, it is expected that when FLEs are perceived as behaving authentically, customers will reciprocate with greater perceptions of fairness and respect in interpersonal treatment.

It is suggested rapport acts as a mechanism explaining why authenticity is related to interactional justice. The enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport used in this research has to do, in part, with the extent to which FLEs develop feelings of warmth toward and create a connection with customers (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008). It follows that when interactions with FLEs are perceived as being authentic, customers are likely to be willing to engage in rapport-building. Although to date there has been relatively little research that has investigated customer responses to authenticity (Lechner and Mathmann, 2020), two studies provide some empirical support for a positive relationship between authenticity and rapport. The first, by Hening-Thurau *et al.* (2006), reports a direct positive relationship between authentic displays by FLEs and rapport. Second, Medler-Liraz (2016) found a tentative indication ($p < 0.10$) of a positive relationship between FLE deep acting, something equated with authenticity, and a negative relationship between surface acting (inauthenticity) and rapport.

The enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport, described by Gremler and Gwinner (2000) as an “affect-laden, cognitive evaluation of one’s exchange with a contact employee” (p. 91), hinges on this key element of “exchange.” In other words, rapport inherently has to do with the interaction between the customer and the FLE. Accordingly, one would expect that customers perceiving higher levels of rapport with FLEs will report higher levels of interactional justice, or perceived respect and fairness, in the service process. Thus, it is expected that when customers perceive employees as authentic, the rapport between the customer and employee will increase which, in turn, is expected to enhance interactional justice perceptions:

H1. Customer–employee rapport mediates the positive effect of perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice.

Moderating role of need for uniqueness

NFU concerns individuals’ emotional and behavioral reactions to information pertaining to their similarity with others (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Moreover, Maslach *et al.* (1985) found that NFU can be fulfilled via “reciprocal interchange between the individual and the social environment” (p. 736), something they referred to as individuation. In a service context, the individuation process can be characterized by the customer’s interaction with the service employee, thus rendering customer–employee service interactions vital components regarding customers’ NFU. Therefore, this research suggests that consumers’ NFU applies not only to product consumption through usage but also to the consumption of service through experience. As such, NFU is defined in this research as a customer trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization and disposition of consumer goods or services and marketplace interactions for the purposes

of developing and enhancing one’s self-image and social image (adapted from Tian *et al.*, 2001).

Uniqueness theory advances that when one’s need to feel different from others is aroused, people with high levels of NFU are likely to feel unpleasant about perceptions of similarity with others and consequently seek to differentiate themselves (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977). Tian *et al.* (2001) refer to this occurrence as similarity avoidance, which denotes the process whereby an individual loses interest in, or discontinues using, possessions or experiences perceived as commonplace as a means of separating oneself from the norm and reestablishing one’s differentness. When high NFU consumers avoid similarity with others (Snyder, 1992; Tian *et al.*, 2001), thereby failing to enhance their self-concept and achieve the needed level of uniqueness, it can actually increase their negative feelings and dissatisfaction (Abosag *et al.*, 2019).

On the other hand, service employees are encouraged to build customer–employee rapport by cultivating feelings of similarity with customers, personally complimenting customers, warmly greeting customers, having conversations with customers and matching behaviors or voice patterns of customers (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008; Umashankar *et al.*, 2017). However, for customers with high levels of NFU, this increased level of rapport may inhibit their ability to achieve the desired level of uniqueness. Furthermore, although FLEs may recognize that each customer has unique attributes (Mascio, 2010), they may ignore the qualities that make customers unique (Maslach *et al.*, 2001) because of focusing on activities designed to build rapport. For example, one way to build relationships with customers is to identify an incidental similarity, or a trivial point of comparison between two people such as a shared name or birthday, with the customer (Jiang *et al.*, 2010). While likely increasing rapport, this may have a more deleterious effect on those desiring a more unique experience. As such, customers’ NFU can be expected to weaken the extent to which customer–employee rapport mediates the effect of perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice. In other words, when a consumer has a high NFU, the actions a service employee might take to enhance rapport, and ultimately interactional justice, might be viewed negatively by those looking to fulfill their NFU, thus negatively impacting the relationship between rapport and interactional justice:

H2. Need for uniqueness negatively moderates the mediated effect of perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice via customer–employee rapport.

NFU is often expressed by owning and displaying novel products or services to reflect or enhance one’s self and social image (Kumar *et al.*, 2009; Tian *et al.*, 2001). According to uniqueness theory (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980), just as consumers driven by a NFU desire novel products and services as means of differentiation (Brock, 1968), they may also desire novel marketplace interactions. In other words, customers’ NFU can be fulfilled through experiencing interpersonal marketplace interactions perceived as scarce, new or authentic. Accordingly, it is suggested that customers are driven to seek authentic service experiences as a means of fulfilling their NFU (Lynn and Harris, 1997).

Services high in uniqueness and originality have been shown to draw the attention of those searching for authenticity (Hughes, 1995). Interpersonal behaviors considered normal outside of service encounters (e.g. disclosing personal information to customers, joking with customers, sharing customers' distress, etc.) may be viewed as unique during service encounters and consequentially correlate with a sense of authenticity within service contexts (Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013). Heidegger (1996) point out that authenticity carries with it the implication that those who seek conformity in their lives (i.e. individuals with a low NFU) are just the opposite (i.e. inauthentic). Similarly, those who seek counter-conformity in their lives (i.e. individuals with a high NFU) can be expected to be authentic or, at minimum, more perceptible to manifestations of authenticity. Therefore, customers' NFU is expected to influence how customers' perceptions of employee authenticity during service interactions influence customers' assessments of interactional justice. Specifically, during service interactions, customers' NFU is expected to enhance the extent to which their perceptions of employee authenticity enhance fairness perceptions of service employees:

H3. Need for uniqueness positively moderates the positive direct effect of perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice.

Method

Participants and procedures

A total of 470 undergraduate marketing students from a large university in the USA participated in the study (52.1% female). Participants were offered extra credit to be included in the study, which took place in the behavioral lab within the university's College of Business. Using Qualtrics, participants were asked to describe a recent, meaningful service encounter where they interacted with a service employee. This portion of the survey mirrors the critical incident technique (CIT) that has seen widespread use in services marketing, and more specifically, what Gremler (2004) refers to as using CIT for "creating a frame of reference for the respondent" (p. 70). Participants were asked to refer to that encounter to complete scales designed to assess perceptions of employee authenticity, customer–employee rapport, interactional justice and NFU, and then provide basic demographic information.

Measures

All measures were adopted from scales used in previous studies. Four items initially used by Baker et al. (2014) were adapted to assess perceived employee authenticity. Six items from Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) enjoyable interaction scale were used to assess customer–employee rapport. Interactional justice was measured using two items adapted from Blodgett et al. (1997). Finally, NFU was measured using four items from Lynn and Harris (1997). All items were measured using seven-point scales anchored by 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree). Means, standard deviations, construct reliabilities, average variance extracted estimates and correlations among all the constructs are provided in Table 1.

Analyses

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted via structural equation modeling using Mplus v.6.1 (Muthén and Muthén, 2010). Following suggestions by Hu and Bentler (1999), a number of fit indices were chosen to provide a broad assessment of model fit. Root mean square error (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) were used. Acceptable model fit was determined using a cut-off of <0.08 for RMSEA (Kline, 2015) and SRMR indices (Hu and Bentler, 1999), and a cut-off of ≥ 0.95 for CFI and TLI indices (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Finally, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS was used to test for the proposed mediation and moderated mediation hypotheses.

Results

The measurement model suggests the model provides an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 408.64$ (98), $p < 0.001$; RMSEA = 0.08; SRMR = 0.04; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94). All factor loadings were above 0.50 (the lowest is 0.70), providing evidence of convergent validity (see Table 1 Panel B). Discriminant validity was assessed via the process suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), whereby the square root of AVE of each latent variable is compared with the bivariate correlation between those constructs. All of the correlations were less than the square root of the AVE providing adequate evidence of discriminant validity (see Table 1 Panel A). Reliability was assessed using composite reliability, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2006). The Spearman–Brown coefficient was calculated to evaluate the reliability of the interactional justice scale ($r = 0.91$), because it has been identified as a better indicator of construct reliability for two-items scales (Eisinga et al., 2013). The smallest construct reliability obtained was 0.87, demonstrating good construct reliability (see Table 1 Panel A).

The extent to which customer–employee rapport mediated the relationship between perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice (*H1*) was assessed using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 4. Confidence intervals were estimated using 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. The 95% confidence intervals around the indirect effect did not include zero, indicating that customer–employee rapport significantly mediates the relationship between perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice, supporting *H1* ($\gamma_{indirect} = 0.66$, 95% CI [0.49, 0.84]). As can be seen in Table 2 Panel A, perceptions of FLE authenticity are positively related to rapport, which in turn is positively related to interactional justice. In addition, authenticity is positively related to interactional justice.

Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 15 was used to assess both the negative moderating effect of NFU on the mediated indirect effect of customer–employee rapport on the relationship between perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice (*H2*) and the positive moderating effect of NFU on the relationship between perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice (*H3*). First, as can be seen in Table 2 Panel B, the 95% confidence around the Index of Moderated Mediation (Hayes, 2018) does not contain zero (95% CI [−0.21, −0.01]), indicating significant

Table 1 Confirmatory factor analysis results

Panel A. Descriptive statistics and correlations								
Correlations	M	SD	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Perceived employee authenticity	5.49	1.11	0.87	0.62	0.79			
2. Rapport	5.16	1.66	0.96	0.80	0.78**	0.89		
3. Need for uniqueness	4.85	1.23	0.88	0.64	0.18**	0.11*	0.80	
4. Interactional justice	6.00	1.61	0.91	0.83	0.77**	0.84**	0.06	0.91
Panel B. Items, parameter estimates								
Items	Estimates							
<i>V1: Rapport</i> (adapted from Gremler and Gwinner, 2000)								
1. I enjoyed interacting with the employee	0.94**							
2. The employee created a feeling of "warmth" in our relationship	0.94**							
3. The employee related well to me	0.90**							
4. I had a harmonious relationship with the employee	0.87**							
5. The employee had a good sense of humor	0.82**							
6. I was comfortable interacting with the employee	0.88**							
<i>V2: Authenticity</i> (adapted from Baker et al., 2014)								
1. The employee genuinely embodied his/her own image	0.70**							
2. The employee had integrity	0.91**							
3. The employee was not fake or phony	0.73**							
4. The employee existed in accordance with his/her values and beliefs	0.79**							
<i>V3: Interactional Justice</i> (adapted from Blodgett et al., 1997)								
1. I was treated with courtesy and respect	0.97**							
2. I feel that I was treated rudely (RC)	0.86**							
<i>V4: Need for uniqueness</i> (adapted from Lynn and Harris, 1997)								
1. I prefer being different from other people	0.85**							
2. Being distinctive is important to me	0.85**							
3. I intentionally do things to make myself different from those around me	0.71**							
4. I have a need for uniqueness	0.77**							
Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$; M = Means; SD = Standard deviation; CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted. The square root of AVE is displayed on the diagonal in Panel A. All items were measured using seven-point scales anchored by 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree)								

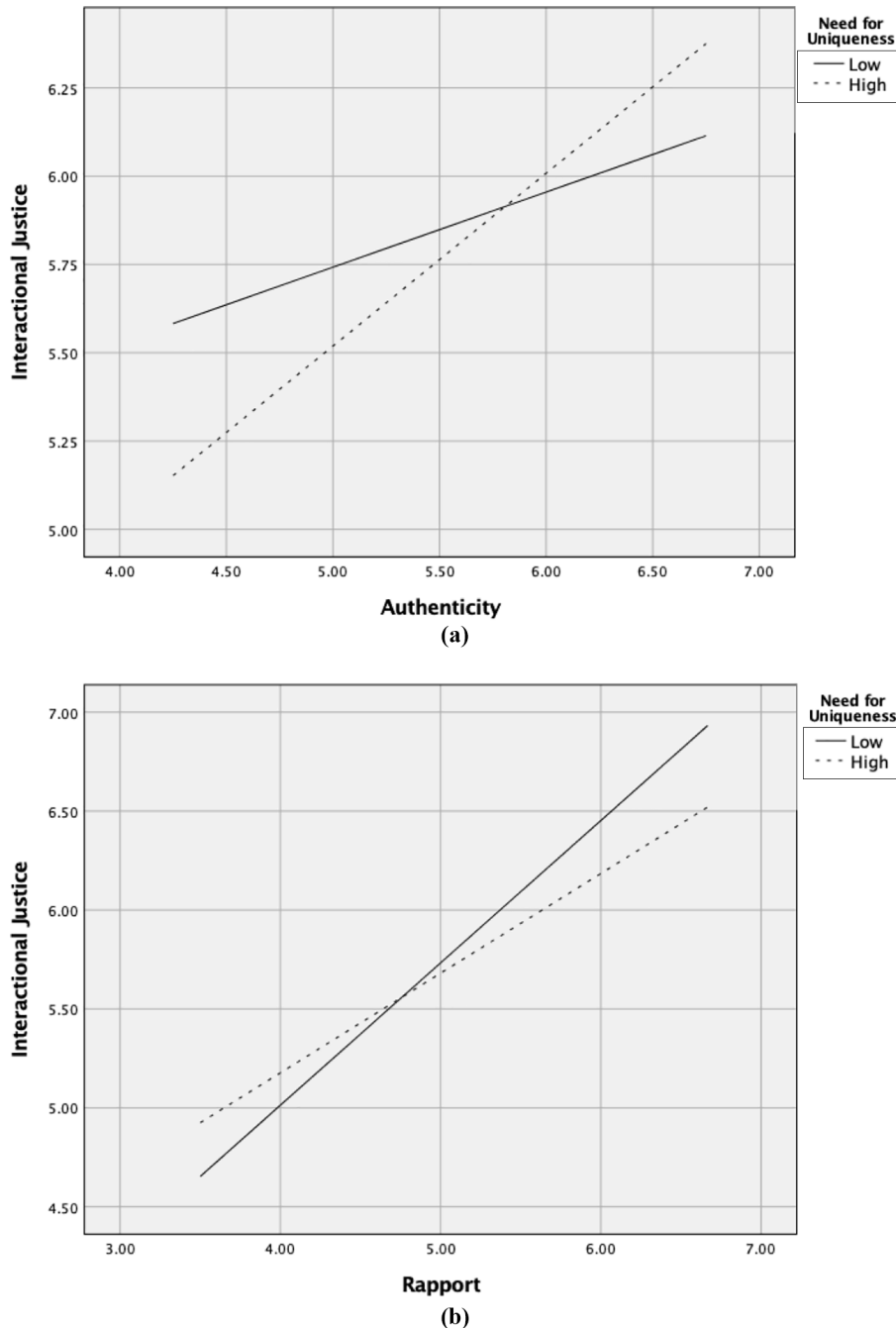
Table 2 Mediation and moderation analysis results

Path	b	SE	Y = Interactional justice			
			t	p	CI (Lower)	CI (Upper)
<i>Panel A. Mediation results</i>						
Perceived employee authenticity → Rapport	1.06	0.05	23.61	<0.001	0.98	1.15
Perceived employee authenticity → Interactional justice	0.47	0.07	6.88	<0.001	0.33	0.60
Rapport → Interactional justice	0.49	0.05	10.25	<0.001	0.39	0.58
Indirect mediated effect	0.66	0.08			0.49	0.84
R ²	0.74					
Model			F(2,460) = 656.17, $p < 0.001$			
<i>Panel B. Moderated mediation results</i>						
Perceived employee authenticity → Rapport	1.10	0.05	23.17	< 0.001	1.01	1.20
Perceived employee authenticity → Interactional justice	-0.33	0.25	-1.34	0.18	-0.83	0.16
Rapport → Interactional justice	1.12	0.16	7.04	<0.001	0.81	1.43
Need for uniqueness → Interactional justice	-0.28	0.18	-1.52	0.13	-0.64	0.08
Authenticity × NFU → Interactional justice	0.13	0.05	2.78	<0.05	0.04	0.23
Rapport × NFU → Interactional justice	-0.11	0.03	-3.38	<0.001	-0.17	-0.04
Index of moderated mediation	-0.12				-0.21	-0.01
R ²	0.64					
Model			F(5,454) = 163.62, $p < 0.001$			

moderating effects of NFU. More specifically, as expected, NFU negatively moderates the indirect effect of customer–employee rapport on the relationship between perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice and positively moderates the direct effect of perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice. Figure 2(a) and (b) provides the plots of the interactions. In Figure 2(a), the slope

of the line for low NFU is steeper than that for high NFU, indicating a stronger impact of NFU on the relationship between rapport and interactional justice when NFU is lower than when it is higher. Figure 2(b) shows, however, that the slope for the high NFU is steeper, suggesting that the relationship between authenticity and interactional justice becomes stronger for those with a higher level of NFU.

Figure 2 Moderation effect of NFU on the (a) authenticity and interactional justice and (b) rapport and interactional justice relationships



Notes: (a) Moderation of NFU in the authenticity–interactional justice relationship (Supplemental Study 1); (b) moderation of NFU in the rapport–interactional justice relationship (Supplemental Study 2)

Supplemental analyses

To provide additional insights regarding the effects of NFU, two supplemental experimental studies were conducted to identify more managerially actionable than explanatory factors. In other words, these studies focused less on internal, psychological processes that might provide a good theoretical justification and more on ones that might provide managerial insights. Consequently, the frequency with which customers visited a service provider as well as the type of service provider are investigated.

Frequency of visit

First, how the frequency with which the consumer visited a service provider might impact the positive moderating impact of NFU on the relationship between authenticity and IJ is investigated. Results from the main study suggested that when consumers have a high NFU, this strengthens the relationship between authenticity and IJ. Expectations were that as frequency of patronage increases, this would strengthen the impact of NFU on the relationship between authenticity and interactional justice.

Responses were collected from 189 students in a behavioral lab at a large, Southeastern university (USA). The study was a 2 (low, high authenticity) \times 2 (frequent, new customer) design. Respondents read a scenario in which they were asked to imagine having dinner with some friends and were going to a restaurant they had been several times previously (frequent) or had never visited (new customer). After reading that upon their arrival at the restaurant they were greeted by a server, respondents were asked to listen to a short (approximately 20 s) audio clip designed to manipulate high (enthusiastic and engaged) and low (uninterested and unengaged) authenticity.

Authenticity manipulations (Baker *et al.*, 2014) worked as expected as the mean for the high authenticity group was significantly higher than the mean for the low group ($F(1,187) = 29.01, p < 0.001; M_{high} = 5.44, M_{low} = 4.54$).

The data was analyzed using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 3. As shown in Table 3 Panel A, there is a significant three-way interaction, indicating the two-way interaction between NFU and authenticity on interactional justice is different between the two frequency groups. To gain a clearer understanding of this effect, the effect of the interaction between NFU and authenticity on interactional justice for the high- and low-frequency groups was plotted [see Figure 3(a)]. In the low-frequency condition, there is no interactive effect. However, in the high-frequency group, the slope of the line for the low NFU group is steeper than that for the high NFU group.

These results indicate that for consumers who frequent a service provider (vs new customers), higher levels of interactional justice occur when employees are perceived as being more authentic for customers with a low NFU compared to those with a high NFU. This may be, in part, because of a familiarity effect in which frequent customers build a stronger relationship with service employees and are therefore more likely to experience a broader range of interactions. For example, recent research has highlighted the "emotional labor" (Azab *et al.*, 2018; Seger-Guttmann and Medler-Liraz, 2020) that occurs in part when FLEs are asked to act in ways that are inconsistent with how they actually feel (e.g. follow organizational "display rules"). As a customer frequents a service provider more often, and engages with the FLEs, they are, by nature of their frequent interactions, more likely to see more authentic expressions by employees.

Table 3 Results for supplemental studies

Antecedent	<i>b</i>	SE	Y = Interactional justice			
			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	CI (lower)	CI (upper)
Panel A. Results for the impact of frequency on the interaction of authenticity and NFU						
Perceived employee authenticity (A_j)*	0.30	0.22	1.37	0.17	-0.13	0.74
Need for uniqueness (N_j)	-0.08	0.23	-0.33	0.74	-0.53	0.38
Frequency (F_j)**	-4.36	1.91	-2.28	0.02	-8.13	-0.58
$A_j \times N_j$	0.03	0.05	0.61	0.54	-0.06	0.12
$A_j \times F_j$	0.88	0.37	2.34	0.02	0.14	1.61
$N_j \times F_j$	0.78	0.41	1.92	0.06	-0.02	1.58
$A_j \times N_j \times F_j$	-0.16	0.08	-2.06	0.04	-0.31	-0.01
R^2	0.43					
Model			$F(7,177) = 18.80, p < 0.001$			
Panel B. Results for the impact of store type on the interaction of rapport and NFU						
Rapport (R_j)	1.00	0.27	3.71	0.00	0.47	1.53
Need for uniqueness (N_j)	0.84	0.31	2.67	0.01	0.22	1.45
Store type (S_j)***	3.28	1.03	3.19	0.00	1.26	5.30
$R_j \times N_j$	-0.13	0.06	-2.27	0.02	-0.25	-0.02
$R_j \times S_j$	-0.56	0.19	-2.93	0.00	-0.93	-0.18
$N_j \times S_j$	-0.73	0.22	-3.26	0.00	-1.17	-0.29
$R_j \times N_j \times S_j$	0.12	0.04	2.97	0.00	0.04	0.20
R^2	0.43					
Model			$F(7,304) = 31.79, p < 0.001$			

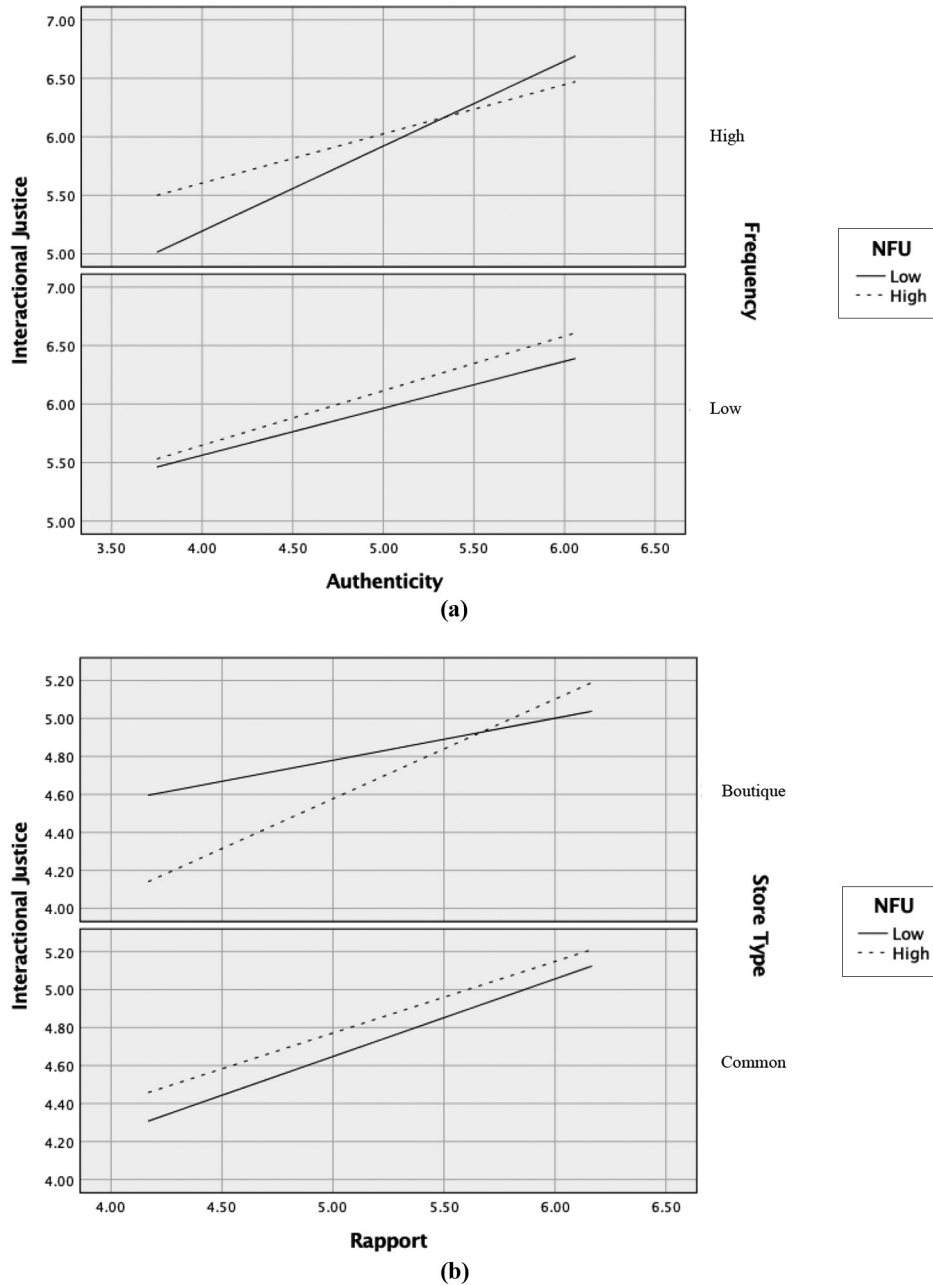
Notes: *Perceived employee authenticity (Low = 0, High = 1); **Frequency (Low = 0, High = 1); ***Store type (Normal = 0, Boutique = 1)

This may lead to the customer engaging with the FLE when having both “good” and “bad” days, something that should enhance the customer’s perceptions of FLE authenticity. Customers not frequenting a service provider would likely never experience that range of interactions because they would likely only experience the FLE engaging in interactions based on the organization’s “display rules.”

Type of service provider

As to the moderating effect of NFU on the relationship between rapport and interactional justice, this research investigated the type of service provider as a potential moderator, specifically the extent to which the provider is viewed as a “boutique” entity or a more “common” service provider. A boutique generally refers to a small, individually owned establishment that concentrates specialized or relatively

Figure 3 Interaction effects of (a) frequency × NFU × authenticity and (b) store type × NFU × rapport on interactional justice



Notes: (a) Interaction effect of frequency, NFU and authenticity on interactional justice (Supplemental Study 1); (b) interaction effect of store type, NFU and rapport on interactional justice (Supplemental Study 2)

unique offerings (Stone, 2010), whereas a common service provider might include well-known brands and a variety of offerings, such as with department stores or chain restaurants.

A total of 312 students, from a large Southeastern US university, provided usable responses. Each student was presented a scenario describing a situation in which they were going to eat with a group of friends. In the “boutique” condition, students are told they chose a new restaurant in an “up-and-coming neighborhood” with a “diverse, vibrant environment” and that the restaurant has a reputation for its “intimate atmosphere, funky style, and particular way of mixing flavors from around the world.” In the “common” condition, the restaurant is described as a “chain” restaurant that opened a couple of months previously “in an area close to the mall,” and known for its “casual atmosphere, contemporary style, and consistent menu.” The same measures of rapport, NFU and interactional justice described earlier were used in this study.

The data was analyzed using Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS Model 3. The results, which are presented in Table 3 Panel B, revealed a significant three-way interaction between rapport, NFU and type of store. The positive coefficient suggests the two-way interaction between rapport and NFU is significant in the boutique condition. Further evidence of this is provided by the fact that in the common store condition, the interaction between NFU and rapport is not significant ($p = 0.65$) but is in the boutique condition ($p < 0.001$). Interactions were plotted to improve understanding of the effects [see Figure 3(b)]. In the common store condition, the lines are more or less parallel, whereas in the boutique condition, there is an obvious interaction. Specifically, in this condition, it seems that as NFU increases, so too does the impact of rapport on interactional justice.

Results demonstrate that for service providers who are not seen as providing a more unique experience, there is little impact of NFU on the relationship between rapport and interactional justice. In other words, more common service providers do not need to be as concerned if customers have high or low levels of NFU. However, service providers who have positioned themselves as providing a more unique experience must be cognizant that consumers with high NFU will be more sensitive to rapport with FLEs. This makes sense as consumers who are higher in NFU are more likely to seek out service providers who are providing unique service experiences.

Discussion

Increasingly, customers are looking for unique experiences to fulfill their NFU. However, not all customers have this need. This study attempts to provide insights into how customers’ varying levels of NFU impact relationships between FLE authenticity, rapport and interactional justice. Results indicate customers’ perceptions of service employees’ authenticity are associated with higher levels of customer–employee rapport and interactional justice. Moreover, this research shows that customers’ NFU strengthens the positive impact of customers’ perceived employee authenticity on interactional justice, but reduces the mediated effect of customer–employee rapport on the relationship between customers’ perceived employee authenticity and interactional justice. Furthermore, two supplemental studies show how different contextual factors

(type of store, frequency of visit) impact the relationships explored in the primary research model.

Managerial implications

This research provides several managerial implications. First, the findings suggest opportunities may exist for service companies and employees to both recognize and take advantage of opportunities presented by customers’ NFU. First, because NFU is an individual difference factor, service providers will need to identify ways to determine those customers who have high levels of NFU. Part of this will be a function of the firm’s positioning strategy as those with high NFU will likely seek out providers that represent themselves as unique service providers. Beyond this, service providers should train FLEs to engage with customers in a way that will allow them to gather information regarding a customer’s NFU. FLEs are uniquely positioned to do this given their frequent interactions with customers.

Once approaches are put in place to identify customers higher in NFU, service managers can turn their attention to specific actions designed to more effectively engage those high in NFU. Results suggest service firms should encourage FLEs to present themselves as authentically as possible, particularly to those customers high in NFU. Here firms should be careful not to have FLEs hew too closely to organizational display rules that may result in FLEs acting inauthentically. In other words, to take advantage of those high in NFU, it may be that FLEs would be best served by allowing their “true” self to show in interactions with customers, even if on a particular day their true self is not consistent with prescribed organizational behaviors (Sirrianni et al., 2013). It is important to note that results from one supplemental study demonstrate that for customers who are frequent visitors, NFU has a somewhat dampening effect on the relationship between authenticity and interactional justice. This may be because of service firms too strongly enforcing display rules, leading to a “wear-out” effect for those who frequent a service provider. This is similar to research suggesting that repetition decreases authenticity perceptions (Gershon and Smith, 2020). Therefore, it seems even more important that for frequent customers, FLEs be allowed some flexibility regarding how closely they follow display rules to be able to provide a more authentic experience. Even with online-mediated service interactions, firms should be able to use “big data” approaches to gain a better understanding of how different customers approach their NFU. Relatedly, it is likely that even in online encounters, “scripted” or “canned” responses may negatively impact the perceptions of those high in NFU.

The results also suggest that NFU reduces the positive relationship between rapport and interactional justice, which may partially be because of the use of organizational display rules. In this case, those high in NFU may be more sensitive to FLEs using “canned” approaches to interacting with customers, something that would likely depress evaluations of rapport and, in turn, perceptions of interactional justice. Therefore, similar to suggestions above, service providers may need to allow more flexibility in how FLEs interact with customers to account for the relationship with NFU. The second supplemental study establishes that when a store is viewed as more of a boutique, the impact of NFU on the

rapport–interactional justice relationship is strengthened, so those service providers that try to differentiate themselves need to be even more cognizant of the need to provide flexibility for FLEs in their interactions. For example, Hard Rock Café is committed to allowing employees to have flexibility in terms of how they interact with customers, one of the many factors in their long-term success. The firm hires as much for those who are authentic in their love of music as they do their prior work history or skillset (Speakers.ca, 2013). Those service firms that want to provide unique and authentic experiences may need to reconsider hiring practices that do not allow flexibility in hiring those who may not meet “objective” qualifications but who are able to be authentic in how they interact with customers. For example, Azab *et al.* (2018) recommend screening employees for “who they are and how they think and feel” (p. 906).

One commonality that flows through the recommendations noted above is the need for customization and/or personalization, something that has been long noted as being important in developing customer relationships. The research reported in this paper suggests that those high in NFU are sensitive to the service firms’ attempts to leverage concepts such as authenticity in their attempts to gain interactional advantages. But, as noted above, service firms must be careful that these attempts to provide personalized service are viewed as being authentic, even if the FLEs actions go against display rules. For example, Wang and Groth (2014) suggest that if customers view FLEs as attempting to suppress negative emotions, this can have negative impacts on outcomes. In the context of this study, the notion that having FLEs stick to display rules could possibly be a negative is supported.

Theoretical contributions

The results from this research make clear theoretical contributions. First, SET suggests that individuals respond to positive (negative) experiences with positive (negative) reactions (Blau, 1964), and initiate positive reactions with others when they believe that others’ trust and respect are authentic (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Likewise, this research demonstrates that customers respond to displays of employee authenticity with more favorable interactional justice assessments and increased levels of customer–employee rapport. While FLEs may recognize customers’ unique attributes during rapport-building efforts (Mascio, 2010), oftentimes, these attempts may cultivate a sense of similarity with customers and, thus, for customers with a high NFU, undermine the benefits of establishing customer–employee rapport. Prior research indicates that “employee recognition of a customer’s uniqueness [...] generally has a positive impact on service encounter evaluations” (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008, p. 313), yet, this study finds that customers’ NFU decreases the extent to which customer–employee rapport accounts for the increases in interactional justice assessments because of customers’ perceptions of employee authenticity. As such, the increased interaction that service employees have with customers with whom they share rapport not only increases the extent to which these employees may ignore the qualities that make those customers unique, but also undermines customers’ self-perception of uniqueness and pursuit of differentness, inducing customers’ negative feelings (Abosag *et al.*, 2019).

Second, this study advances researchers’ understanding of the role of authenticity and interactional justice within the context of frontline service interactions. Specifically, this study empirically shows that customers’ perceptions of employee authenticity during service interactions positively influence the extent to which customers perceive having been treated fairly or equitably by those employees during such service interactions. Results indicate the more that customers perceive employees to be genuine and respectful, the greater the chance that customer–employee interactions will be perceived as equitable; and this is especially true for those interactions with FLEs perceived as enjoyable. This is particularly important as perceptions of fairness and respect are primary determinants of important service outcomes (Blodgett *et al.*, 1993).

Third, this research supports calls for research considering interactional justice as a dependent variable in service examinations. For example, Kim (2018) notes that “research that uses service justice as a dependent variable is hard to find,” but that “it is necessary to study the factors affecting service justice” (p. 730). Consequently, this research considers interactional justice outside of a conflict resolution context and as an important service-related outcome providing important insights into and expanding the scope of service justice research.

Limitations and directions for future research

While this research provides insightful managerial and theoretical implications, some limitations provide potential avenues for future research. First, this study uses self-reported, cross-sectional data. Future research could look at these relationships from a longitudinal perspective. For example, rather than manipulating frequency, to explore temporal differences and increase realism, researchers might compare shorter term interactions (e.g. single restaurant or retail encounter) with longer term or potentially recurring service interactions (e.g. banking services or hair appointments). In addition, future research may want to either control for different service contexts (e.g. restaurants vs banks) or explicitly incorporate context as an explanatory variable in the research design as it is possible context could differentially affect these results.

Second, this study focuses only on the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport because of the often brief nature of service encounters (Gremler and Gwinner, 2008; Yagil and Medler-Liraz, 2013), which allow only limited time for establishing customer–employee rapport. Future researchers may examine the potential effects of rapport in terms of the personal connection dimension, particularly under circumstances of greater frequency and/or duration of service interactions. Research might also consider whether allowing for and/or requesting self-disclosure of information, particularly of unique attributes, might strengthen these relationships.

Third, while this research focuses on customer–employee interactions, it does not consider how the interactive nature of value co-creation in service experiences (e.g. customer participation in service provision) may act as a means of creating unique and distinctive experiences for customers (Ranjan and Read, 2019). Researchers can explore how these co-created experiences fulfill customers’ NFU and increase value-in-use perceptions. Finally, this research advances

understanding regarding authenticity, rapport, interactional justice and NFU in a non-conflict-based service-provision context. While this research renders several implications for important customer-related service outcomes, future research might consider the differential effects of NFU in the service recovery process.

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