



# Speak my language or look like me? – Language and ethnicity in bilingual customer service recovery



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## ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of verbal (language) and non-verbal communication (ethnicity) of service providers on customers' perceptions of service recovery. Drawing insights from speech accommodation theory and inferiority complex, this study uses between subject experimental design to explore conditions under which language convergence and divergence are effective ways to build rapport. Results show that the influence of ethnicity and language cannot be interpreted without considering the ethnic composition of customers and service providers. Results also show that language can trigger stigma with positive country image that interact together to create a more favorable rapport.

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*Catalina and her daughter Isabella are Hispanic consumers living in the US. Each year they plan a fun beach trip as a mother-daughter bonding vacation. As regular hotel customers they were excited to start their trip this year. Unfortunately, when they reached the hotel, they were informed by the receptionist that their reservation had been lost and that the hotel was fully booked. Boiling with anger they called for the manager, thinking he/she was not going to get away with this. The manager came, greeted them in Spanish, expressed his sincere apologies and offered a one-week free stay at their royal suite as compensation for their inconvenience. Catalina walked away saying what a nice guy the manager was. Isabella blurted out "Oh, you were just charmed by his Spanish! What a way to try to fool us into not making big fuss! Look at what he did! He downgraded our ability to understand. He should have spoken to us in English like any other American customer!*

## 1. Introduction

Situations like the one above show how challenging it is for service providers to win customers back after a service failure. Such service encounters are "moments of truths" in which customers decide they will either continue doing business with the service providers or exit and deprive the service provider of all future revenues.

Given that employee/customer interactions are the "heart" of service provision (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012), surprisingly little is known about the role of language and ethnicity in service encounters

(Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Tombs & Rao Hill, 2014; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), especially when things go wrong. Service recovery research has made significant contributions in exploring factors leading to a transformation of customer perceptions of a failure to successful recovery. While the tangible aspects of such interactions after a service failure (what is communicated, what solution is offered, compensations etc.) have been studied extensively (e.g., Andreassen, 2000; Liao, 2007), the intangible verbal cues (language used, tenor) (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012) and nonverbal cues (displayed emotions and ethnicity) have not. In other words, would the service provider's ethnicity and language used in communication lead the customer to rate the service recovery differently? Would such assessment differ based on whether the customer is a minority or a majority? The current research attempts to answer these questions.

Managers must understand the impact of language and ethnicity on the service experience if they want to apply appropriate recovery strategies when customers are disappointed, angry, and frustrated at service failures. In the opening scenario, orchestrating the appropriate language, ethnicity of service provider, and displayed emotions in the encounter between customers and service providers could be the difference between Catalina and Isabella's reactions.

Responding to these gaps, the purpose of this research is to explore the role of language use (primary vs. secondary) and ethnicity (similar vs. dissimilar) on service rapport and rapport building between service providers and customers. We investigated this using a between subject video experimental design. This way we were able to manipulate language and bring greater realism and control to the study.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge in three ways. First, this study adds to the scant research on the role of language in

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services and extends it to service recovery. Second, this study gives insight as to how language and ethnicity interact together to affect service recovery. Third, this research sheds light on some of the moderators that play a role in the relationship between ethnicity and language and rapport between customers and service providers.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Service recovery outcomes

Mainstream marketing research is fairly unanimous in saying that it is harder and more costly to attract new customers than to retain customers (e.g., Reichheld, 1996). Because of this, service firms should make every effort to maintain relationships with existing customers in an era of cutthroat competition and choice among many service providers. Yet, delivering error-free services is almost impossible because humans, rather than machines, create and deliver services. Thus, service failures are an undesirable but inevitable part of business. Creating a sustainable competitive advantage, therefore, is challenging. What often distinguishes successful from unsuccessful service providers is how they interact with customers after a service failure and how they are able to build good rapport. Numerous studies have explored factors such as rapport in service delivery contexts (e.g., Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, 2008), but not as much in service recovery contexts (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

Rapport is one of the main components of interpersonal bonds (Gremler & Brown, 1998), and is an overall characterization of the experiential interaction between customers and employees. Rapport is used in common speech to mean chemistry, or relationship quality. While there has not been a clear academic consensus on what *rapport* means, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) show that rapport has two components: 1) an affect-laden cognitive evaluation, that looks at the level of enjoyment of an interaction; and 2) the bond established between the customer and the employee (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

The experience of such chemistry between service providers and customers does not necessarily require multiple encounters. Indeed, service employees and customers often enjoy good rapport after a single encounter (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). For example, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) found that nonverbal cues, such as the display of positive emotions and authenticity, significantly contribute to favorable rapport between service provider and customers. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) extend this research, identifying four antecedents of rapport: attentive behavior, imitative behavior, courteous behavior, and common grounding. Imitative behavior and common grounding are often triggered by the ethnicities and languages in service encounters (Macintosh, 2009). However, the literature has not explored how language and ethnicity impact rapport and customer outcomes in the service recovery encounter. Before examining the effect of language used in the service encounter, this study explores the context of ethnic minority and majority that could have great impact on the influence of language and ethnicity of service providers.

### 2.2. Minority and majority ethnic compositions

The concepts of *majority* and *minority* are useful when discussing cross-ethnic service encounters. The majority group is the dominant (usually homegrown) group, while the minority group is a smaller (often immigrant) group. Minority groups might use race, language, religion, customs, or their country-of-origin as ways to identify with their own culture. Clearly, use of the terms *majority* and *minority* can be somewhat malleable and arbitrary. For instance, Deshpandé and Stayman (1994) in their study of ethnic identity defined majority status based on whether respondents lived in Austin, Texas and minority status if they lived in San Antonio, Texas. However, in this study, we restrict ourselves to the simple case of a nation-wide ethnic majority, and an ethnic minority. Research has examined

the influence of ethnicity on customers' perceptions of product adoptions (Hirschman, 1981), behavioral intentions (Brumbaugh, 2002) and price evaluations (Saegert, Hoover, & Hilger, 1985). Ethnic minority research studies make up no >3% of top consumer research studies (Williams, Lee, & Henderson, 2008). Yet, this area of research can be essential to customizing marketing efforts/messages to minorities (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). Therefore, in the first two hypotheses we propose how targeting a minority/majority group by using their primary language or assigning a service provider who shares their ethnicity might lead them to feel that they established a connection between themselves and the service provider or have a favorable evaluation of rapport. In the third to the fifth hypotheses we show how ethnic status, country image and interaction effects might play a different role in the proposed relationship between ethnicity, language and rapport. In the sixth hypothesis, we propose how rapport can have other positive consequences like word of mouth and repatronage intentions.

### 2.3. Language—Trigger of rapport

While, language per se is clearly at the heart of communication, research in marketing has focused more on indirect communication (for example brands, ads) (Luna & Peracchio, 2005; Koslow, Shamdasani, & Touchstone, 1994). Table 1 summarizes the main studies conducted on language. From this summary it is apparent that the influence of majority/minority language in direct communication, such as service settings, has not received much research attention and is studied by very few researchers (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, Tombs & Rao Hill, 2014). In fact, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) call for research to examine the influence of language in service recovery.

Bilingual consumer research can be studied from either 1) a sociolinguistic approach, when exploring the effects of language as a signal of a shared group characteristic or 2) a psycholinguistic approach to study the results of language as a means for information processing (Puntoni et al., 2009). In this research, we adopt the first approach to show how language has an effect beyond its functional role in communication. Even when both parties are proficiently bilingual, language can trigger a vast array of emotional effects (Holmqvist, 2011). Because in this research, we examine the impact on the “chemistry” between service providers and customers of majority/minority languages used in the service encounter, these non-functional effects of language are of particular interest.

Research in this area is generally based on propositions of speech accommodation theory (e.g., Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Introduced by Giles, Taylor, and Bourhis (1973), speech accommodation theory proposes that a sender of communication accommodates their verbal (e.g., language, speech rate) and non-verbal behavior (eye contact, facial expression) in a way that they become more similar to the receiver. As a result, the receiver rates the interaction more favorably. Callahan (2006) explains that language accommodation occurs and solidarity emerges, when the speaker uses conversational language, and so converges to the other person in the exchange. However, when the speaker uses a language other than the interlocutor's primary language, divergence occurs in a way that creates a distance between the receiver and the sender (Holmqvist, Guest, & Grönroos, 2015). Language convergence becomes a particular concern in majority/minority service encounters.

Few studies have found support that language convergence results in favorable customer evaluations. For instance, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) found that language convergence is associated with a higher likelihood of tipping in restaurants. By contrast, language divergence is associated with higher negative word of mouth (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Indeed, customers value communication in their primary language especially when it pertains to high-involvement decisions (Holmqvist & Van Vaerenbergh, 2013). Language

**Table 1**  
Main marketing literature on language.

Author	Objective	Context	Interesting findings	Language	Study design
Fernandez et al. (2004)	Examine the influence of medical provider language ability effect on the concept of care	Medical care	Greater language ability influences customers' perception of medical provider's care	Spanish	Field study
Holmqvist (2011)	How bilingual customer in two countries perceive the importance of using first language in different service encounters	Low, medium and high involvement service contexts	The importance of first language use rises with the level involvement of services. Consistent findings were found across different countries.	English versus French Canadian, Finnish versus Swedish in Finland	Qualitative in-depth interviews, quantitative survey analysis
Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, and Grönroos (2014)	How second language communication willingness affect service outcomes	Eight different service setting	Perceived control is a strong antecedent to language use	Dutch speaking Finns and Swedish speaking Finns	Field study
Liu, Wen, Wei, and Zhao (2013)	How Mandarin accent versus Cantonese accent influences message persuasion in emotional versus rational ads for high versus low involvement goods	Advertising	Local accent interact with emotional appeal to influence brand attitudes and memory, while standard accent with rational appeal influences attitude and memory. Same differences between local and standard accents tend to occur with product involvement.	Mandarin versus Cantonese	Experimental design
Luna and Peracchio (2005)	Investigating how bilingual process words in ads corresponding to two languages	Advertising	Memorizing messages at L2 is less likely and less conceptual than memorizing at L1. Picture memory congruity might be a moderator to conceptual processing	English versus Spanish	Experimental design
Koslow et al. (1994)	The influence of code switching on ad persuasiveness	Advertising	Inferiority complex might be triggered with language	Spanish	Experimental design
Noriega and Blair (2008)	How language can impact self referent thoughts	Advertising language	Native language elicit self referent thoughts about family friends and homeland, which positive affect attitude towards the product and purchase intentions Consumption (native versus second language) context has a significant interaction effect on consumer related thoughts and attitude towards the brand.	English and Spanish	Proficiency was not accurately controlled Experimental pictorial design
Puntoni, De Langhe, and Van Osselaer (2009)	Explain how language influences perceived emotionality using episodic trace theory	Advertising	Slogans expressed in customer first language tends to be perceived more emotional and such an effect depends on the frequency with which the words are used	English, French, Dutch	Experimental pictorial design
Tombs and Rao Hill (2014)	Examine the influence of accent of service employees and competency affect service outcomes	Hotel Services	Accent only affect s repurchase intentions when considered with service provider competency	Australian and Indian	Audio experimental design
Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013)	Examine customer tipping behavior in responses to 1st versus 2nd language use	Restaurant	Language convergence result in greater likelihood to tip, irrespective of language proficiency. Language that trigger political views result in less tipping chances.	Dutch speaking Finns and Swedish speaking Finns	Experimental scenario design
Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014)	Explore how language divergence impact word of mouth intentions	Restaurant	Second language use are negatively related to positive word of mouth and also affect overall evaluation of service provider responsiveness	Finnish/Swedish, Belgian, Dutch, French	Experimental design

convergence indicates to minority consumers that marketers care about them individually (Noriega & Blair, 2008). Fernandez et al. (2004) found that physicians are perceived to be more caring and possess knowledge of the patient's culture when they communicate in their minority language. Therefore, language convergence after a service failure may lead customers to feel that they can bond with the service providers, because he/she cares enough to use their primary language.

**H1.** *Language used in communication significantly influences customer rapport after a service recovery, such that a) majority/b) minority customers will evaluate rapport between service providers and themselves more favorably when the communication is in their primary language than when it is in their secondary language.*

## 2.4. Ethnicity—Trigger of rapport

Similar to language, when the ethnicity of the service provider is similar to that of the customer, customers may identify more with the service providers. Kelman (1961) explains that during an interaction, customers compare the source to them and take a more favorable view when more similarities are found. Moreover, the similarity attraction paradigm postulates that the more similarities found between people, the more likely they are to be attracted to each other (Byrne, 1997). Accordingly, one aspect that could represent an attraction point that is salient and relevant to attractiveness is ethnicity. Most of ethnicity research has been focused on advertising (Torres & Briggs, 2007; Koslow et al., 1994). For instance, Whittler and Spira (2002) found that black

**Table 2**  
Main marketing literature on cross culture/ethnicity studies.

Authors (year)	Objective/Research Questions	Context	Design	Findings
Baker et al. (2008)	Determine the differences in service recovery perceptions between black and white customer Determine if racism attribution and ethnicity of other customers affects service recovery perceptions and efforts	Ethnicity (black or white in restaurant)	Experimental scenario design	Compared to the white respondents, blacks were found to suggest that a higher level of service recovery would be necessary to overcome the failure. Differences exist between black and white customers.
Deshpandé and Stayman (1994)	Determine how ethnicity of spokesperson affects the consumer's perception of their trustworthiness Include how minority and majority status influence consumer's perception of trustworthiness	Advertising, minority and majority Hispanics	Experimental design	Hispanics were more likely to mention their ethnicity when they lived in Austin (Hispanic minority) than when they lived in San Antonio (Hispanic majority). Hispanics were more likely to believe that a Hispanic spokesperson was trustworthy when they lived in Austin than in San Antonio
Chung-Herrera, Gonzalez, and Hoffman (2010)	Determine whether demographic differences between diverse customers and service providers impact service failure and recovery perceptions	Variety of hospitality businesses (restaurants, hotels, airlines, casinos, travel agencies)	Critical incidents	Study revealed no significant differences among people of different ages, gender, and ethnicities with regards to the types of service failures reported, the magnitude of the failure types, and failure. Caucasians were less likely to perceive ethnic difference as contributory, while Hispanics were more likely to view ethnic difference as contributory"
Donthu and Cherian (1995)	Determine how differences in strength of ethnic identification affect Hispanic shopping behavior	Hispanics	Field study	Strength of identification is an important moderator to consumer behavior
Montoya and Briggs (2013) Hoffman, Kelley, and Rotalsky (1995)	Examine how shared ethnicity influences service delivery Identify and classify failures in restaurant industry Assess customer perceptions regarding magnitude of failure Identify and classify recovery strategies Assess customer perceptions of the effectiveness of each recovery strategy Assess behaviors	Hispanic customers	Qualitative and quantitative experimental studies Critical Incident Technique (CIT)	Collective customers who are minorities are susceptible to shared ethnicity impact No demographic or cross culture differences were found in the type of failure
Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu (1986)	Identify how differences in intensity of ethnic identification relate to consumption behavior	Hispanic, attitude towards government organizations and business	Field study	Differences between Hispanics appear to be especially strong in terms of their attitudes towards institutions (business and government), use of Spanish-language media, brand loyalty, and preferences for prestige and ethnically advertised brands

consumers who identified strongly with a black spokesman in ads had better evaluation of those ads and products by applying a sort of favorable bias when they processed the message. Along the same lines, Baker, Meyer, and Johnson (2008) found that black customers make stronger discriminatory bias attribution of a service failure when the service provider is white and not when the service provider is black. Again, Montoya and Briggs (2013) found that customers evaluate the service encounter more favorably when ethnicity is shared. Interestingly, they also found that customers expect favoritism and preferential treatment when the service provider is of the same ethnicity. Table 2 summarizes the main contributions in service delivery and ethnicity research. Thus, this study proposes, when there is congruency between the service provider's ethnicity and customer's ethnicity, there will be a more favorable evaluation of rapport in the context of service recovery.

**H2.** *Ethnicity of service providers significantly affects customer rapport after a service recovery such that a) majority/b) minority customers will evaluate rapport between the service providers and themselves more favorably when the service provider is of the same ethnicity.*

### 2.5. Service recovery in different ethnic compositions

While H1 and H2 propose that language convergence and being of the same ethnicity have a positive and consistent effect on customer

rapport, we also find counter evidence from the literature that argues the influence might vary across subcultures or ethnicities (Zhang, Beatty, & Walsh, 2008). Hirschman (1981) presented one of the first looking at minority consumption by examining American Jews. She found that Jewish children are exposed to more information and grow as more innovative and information seekers. Similarly, Deshpandé and Stayman (1994) indicate that minority consumers react to advertisement in a different way than majority consumers. They tend to be more aware of their status and rate ad spokespersons as more trustworthy. Valencia (1989) results also support the distinction made between approaching Hispanics and White consumers. In the context of service failure and recovery, Baker et al. (2008) found that blacks compared to white customers tend to experience higher level of anger and have higher expectations of service recovery.

In light of the previous studies, minority and majority customers' characterization of the interaction between service providers and customers might diverge. Implicit in the similarity-attraction paradigm is that similarity is a desired characteristic. However, if similarity signals the fact that a customer is a minority, this could backfire (Platt & Weber, 1984). As noted above, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) argue that the influence of language be examined in the context of minority vs. majority. Koslow et al. (1994) expand this notion in their discussion of language/ethnic-related inferiority complexes among Hispanics in the US, who have

“...good reason to feel stigmatized by the use of Spanish. ...Although open, racially based discrimination may not be considered acceptable behavior, veiled, culturally directed discrimination is considered more acceptable (Essed, 1991). ...Although minority language usage may have a positive effect through the perceived cultural sensitivity of the advertiser, it may also have a direct negative effect on affect toward the advertisement due to language related inferiority complexes” (p. 577).

To support this further, Luna and Peracchio (2005) explain that when a majority group has negative attitudes towards a less prestigious and less powerful minority group, such attitudes might also be adopted by the minority group itself. A possible reasoning for this is that customers might want to disidentify, rather than identify, with their own culture (Josiassen, 2011).

This study, thus, proposes that customers of different ethnicities residing in the same country will also differ in the way they evaluate the influence of ethnic identification and country-of-origin value. Accordingly, the influence of language and ethnicity might depend on whether customers are minorities or a majority.

**H3.** *The influence of ethnic status will moderate the relationship between ethnicity and language on rapport.*

## 2.6. Language as a trigger of country image effects

The literature also suggests that the relationship between first language and customer recovery outcomes is not straightforward. There are other moderators that could affect the influence of language and customer outcomes like accent, code switching, and customer control (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011). For instance, research suggests that political considerations, language proficiency, customer perceived control might be moderating factors to consider when examining the willingness to use a second language (Holmqvist et al., 2014). Interestingly, Holmqvist, Van Vaerenbergh, and Dahlèn (2013) also found that when service providers try to accommodate customers by communicating in their first language, customers might feel that service providers are downgrading their communication abilities. In such cases, communication in their first language would backfire. These studies suggest that customers might have positive evaluations as well when the language of communication is their second language.

Tombs and Rao Hill (2014) show that cognitive schemas represented in certain stereotypes can be triggered by language, which guides the interpretation of certain behavior. For instance, English might be associated with education, wealth, and commerce (Luna & Peracchio, 2005). Country of origin and country image could be part of these cognitive schemas (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Hill and Tombs explain, “Just as consumers associate certain traits of a brand or a product with their country of origin, people attribute certain traits of service employees to certain types of accents” (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011 p.651). Borrowing from the country-of-origin literature, is the country image construct that is of particular interest in this case. Country image is a general stereotype or “halo” effect held by consumers that could be then extended or transferred to products (goods and services) (Han, 1989). Thus, positive or negative country images might affect consumers’ evaluations. Hence, the country image that consumers have can be transferred to the product image and quality perceptions (Gürhan-Canli & Maheswaran, 2000). While country image was not explored in the service literature before, this study proposes that language can trigger a country image that will affect customer evaluation of the service interaction. Close to this proposition, Holmqvist et al. (2014) found that political ideologies might affect the choice of language to communicate in, so that language becomes more than just a means of communicating information. Therefore, minority consumers may have more favorable evaluations of communication in the majority language because of the positive cognitive cues and normative cues associated with the country they came to reside in (Shimp & Sharma, 1987).

**H4.** *Country image perceptions will moderate the relationship between language and rapport, such that minority customers with positive country image perceptions will evaluate rapport between themselves and service providers more favorably when the service provider communicates in the primary language spoken in that country.*

In the above hypotheses (H1 and H2) we proposed how language convergence and shared ethnicity would have stronger effects on rapport. It might be interesting to explore what happens when both ethnicity and language come into play. What happens when either language or the service provider's ethnicity do not converge with that of the customer? Language convergence may have a stronger effect when the service provider does not share the same ethnicity than when the service provider shares the same ethnicity and does not use the customer's primary language. This idea is supported by speech accommodation theory. The accommodation efforts in ethnicity must be distinguished from those in language. Because there is no effort really exerted in how one's looks might imply ethnicity, ethnicity can be considered rather a static non-verbal cue. By contrast, choosing to speak in a language requires skill, mastery, and effort. Callahan (2006) explains that accommodation is a matter of degree. Thus, effort exerted in accommodating to the customer's language would lead to more favorable rapport than having the same ethnicity and speaking a different language, because the degree of accommodation would be higher.

**H5a.** *Majority customers will evaluate rapport more favorably when faced with a minority service provider and when communication takes place in their primary language than when faced with a majority service provider but speaks in their secondary language.*

**H5b.** *Minority customers will evaluate rapport more favorably when faced with majority service provider and when communication takes place in their primary language than when faced with a minority service provider but speaks in their secondary language.*

## 2.7. Nonverbal communication: Positive display of emotions and authenticity of emotions

Speech accommodation theory not only focuses on the verbal accommodation brought to the counter between the sender and the interlocker, but also includes the non-verbal accommodation. While ethnicity may represent a static non-verbal cue in a way that the sender cannot change it, emotions displayed during the interaction, like smiling and eye contact, represent manageable/dynamic nonverbal cues. Therefore, display of positive emotions is positively related to favorable perceptions of affective service delivery (Grandey, 2003), repatronage intentions and positive word of mouth (Tsai & Huang, 2002), service quality appraisal (Barger & Grandey, 2006), and customer satisfaction (Giardini & Frese, 2008). Positive emotions are used as cues for service provider friendliness, care, empathy, and sympathy (Pugh, 2001; Small & Verrochi, 2009; Tsai, 2001; Tsai & Huang, 2002). Being genuine in displaying positive emotions is even more important to the service encounter. In fact, customers view service employees as friendlier when they think their displayed emotions truly reflect how they feel (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). Customers will likely have a more favorable rating of rapport when they perceive that service providers display positive emotions and that these emotions are genuine. To understand how the larger proposed model fits into the known nomological net, positive emotions display and authenticity are included as covariates in this study.

## 2.8. Outcomes of rapport

Service firms should invest in building customer rapport, because it has many favorable customer outcomes. DeWitt and Brady (2003) found that rapport works as a buffer against service failure. In other

words, customers who enjoy a strong rapport with employees are more forgiving when it comes to service failure. As such, rapport would serve as a proactive strategy against negative impacts or customer reactions resulting from service failure. Studies have been consistent in terms of other outcomes related to rapport. The enjoyable interaction component of rapport positively influences word of mouth, satisfaction, and loyalty intentions (Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). Yet whether all these are parallel outcomes of rapport or whether satisfaction is a mediating factor is not consistent. For instance, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler (2002) and Macintosh (2009) propose that satisfaction is a mediating factor between rapport building behavior and word of mouth and customer loyalty. Whereas, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) propose that there is a direct effect between rapport and word of mouth and repurchase intentions. To control for the effect of satisfaction, it is included as a covariate. In all cases, based on the above review, this study proposes that when customers bond with service providers, they are more inclined to share that experience with others. Likewise, as customers perceive the interaction to be enjoyable, they are more likely to want to repeat that experience by repatronizing the service. The higher the levels of rapport, the more customers are likely to view the relationship between service providers and themselves as enjoyable and consider it as an opportunity to bond. They are, then, more likely they are to speak positively about the service providers to others and more likely to revisit in the future.

**H6.** *The more favorable the evaluation of the rapport between frontline employees and customers, the higher the a) repatronage intentions and b) positive word of mouth.*

### 3. Method

Fig. 1 summarizes the hypothesized relationships of the study. The study uses a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subject experimental design using scenario-based video manipulations of a restaurant service provider, where the service provider ethnicity and language spoken were manipulated for minority and majority population subjects. Using scenarios is a common experimental design in service failure research (Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003) and overcomes recall bias associated with

critical incidents techniques. In addition, using scenarios avoids placing customers in stressful situations associated with creating a real service failure and raising ethical concerns (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). Videotaped scenarios bring greater realism and capture respondents' attention. In this study, use of scenarios would be the only way to manipulate the language spoken and ethnicity of service providers (e.g., Bateson & Hui, 1992; Du, Fan, & Feng, 2011). To bring even greater realism, the scenario used a restaurant setting so that the service would be very common to respondents. Similar service restaurant contexts were used by Hess et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1999; and Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014. The scenario entailed customers receiving a mistake in billing. Four versions of the video were produced, reflecting the  $2 \times 2$  experimental conditions of frontline employee ethnicity (Minority/Majority) and language spoken (Primary/Secondary) (see Appendix I). The narration of the scenario was the same across the four videos. To ensure reliability, the Spanish/English back translation was used by two native speakers. The restaurant depicted in the video did not represent either Mexican or American dining. The restaurant filmed was a high end University restaurant that had more of a French style furniture/décor. A manipulation check was conducted using a pretest independent small sample ( $n = 30$ ) on mechanical turk (M-Turk) (Perdue & Summers, 1986). ANOVA indicated that a significant number of respondents were able to identify the difference in language ( $\chi^2(28) = 21.031 p < 0.05$ ) and ethnicity of service provider ( $\chi^2(28) = 14.632 p < 0.05$ ). In order to make sure that there were no confounding effects, we also examined accent ( $t(28) = -1.731 p > 0.05$ ) and service provider attractiveness ( $t(28) = 0.437 p > 0.05$ ) were also examined and were not found to be different across the scenarios depicted.

The scenario was filmed with narration. No image of the customer was shown, instead the camera was positioned in a way that would seem as if the customer is the one holding the camera. The narration goes as follows:

*Imagine you and your friend go to a restaurant you meet frequently at on a Thursday night. You are greeted by the waiter (Caucasian) "Welcome back to our restaurant. If you can please follow me to your seats..." The waiter gives you and your friend glasses of water and menus. When the waiter returns, you order your usual entrees off of the menu. You have your usual pleasurable dining experience until the bill arrives (picture of delicious entrée in the video). When the bill arrives you notice a problem.*

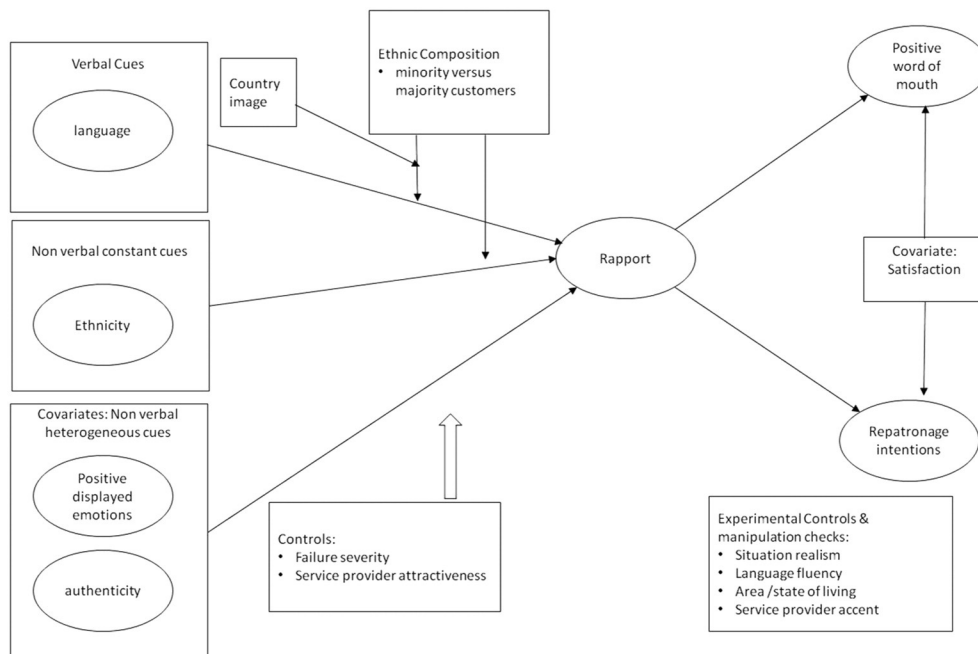


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

You ordered your usual entree, which costs 20 dollars (picture of an actual bill). But, you are shocked to learn that the bill shows that your entrée costs 10 dollars more than the entrée that you ordered. When the waiter returns (video shows waiter) you voice your concern. You think it is unreasonable to be expected to pay a higher price than the menu you have received advertises. The waiter says "I will bring your concern to my manager." The manager comes (Caucasian versus Hispanic) and says in (Spanish versus English): "Good evening. First, I would like to apologize for the prices listed on our menu. As you can see, we have made some changes around here that also include changes to our menu. The transition has gone pretty well, but it appears we have missed few things like updating all the prices in all our menus. I will fix the price on your bill so that you are only charged the price that was originally stated on your menu. Thank you very much for bringing this matter to our attention, as your satisfaction is very important to us. We hope you visit us as again soon."

### 3.1. Sample

Hispanic minority customers were chosen for several reasons. First, according to the 2010 US census (US Census, 2010), Hispanic customers represent 16% of the US population. Second, US Spanish-speakers exceed all other foreign language spoken. Third, Hispanic immigrants' spending has been on the rise (Fowler, Wesley, & Vazquez, 2007; Alvarez, Dickson, & Hunter, 2014).

A reputable research firm that has access to Hispanic and Caucasian respondents that are bilinguals provided the panel data. To ensure respondents were bilingual and fluent, eight control questions were put in English and Spanish, and respondents were opted out if they missed the answer. In addition to the screening questions, a couple of control questions addressing the video scenarios were asked. Six attention questions were included within the scale items. If respondents missed any of the control or attention questions, they were opted out of the survey. 14 respondents were opted out of the Hispanic sample and 26 out of the Caucasian sample.

A total of 313 surveys were completed by customers of Hispanic and Caucasian ethnicities. Of the 130 Hispanic respondents in the sample, 42.3% were males and 57.7% females. Of the 183 Caucasian respondents in the sample, 46.4% were males and 53.6% females. There were a variety of education levels, income levels, and age distribution across both samples. Furthermore, we controlled for the location, making sure that our data came from across >25 States, where there are no differences in ethnic distributions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Measures

Well-established seven-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree – 7 = strongly agree) were adapted for the restaurant service context. To examine scale reliabilities and validities, the measurement model was analyzed using smartpls. The standardized item loadings, ranging from 0.94 to 0.95 indicate convergent validity for all constructs because they are all positive and statistically significant. Similarly, all constructs had average variance extracted (AVE) >0.5 indicating high convergent validity. As an indicator of discriminant validity, the AVE exceeded the squared inter-construct correlations in all cases (Fornell & Larcker, 1981, Table 4). Table 3 provides the scale items and factor loading, with construct reliabilities and Cronbach's alphas >0.825. Table 4 provides the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of the study constructs for both constructs.

### 4.2. Hypotheses testing

To examine the overall model, Partial least squares-SEM was conducted. Unlike covariance based SEM, smartpls can test simultaneous paths with dichotomous variables (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006) and is

**Table 3**  
Scale items and factor loadings.

Constructs/statements	Loadings
<b>Rapport - (Rap) adapted from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006)</b> CR = 0.95, CA 0.93	
I would enjoy interacting with this manager.	0.93
I would look forward to seeing this manager when I visit this restaurant.	0.91
The manager relates well to me.	0.92
I am comfortable interacting with this manager.	0.88
<b>Country image (CI) (adapted from Maheswaran, 1994)</b> CR = 0.95 CA = 0.94	
Customer service is of high quality in the US	0.91
In the US, employees provide generally favorable customer service.	0.91
The US is known for superior service.	0.93
In comparison to other parts of the world, the US is advanced in the way services are delivered.	0.91
<b>Manager's authenticity (ATH) - adapted from Pugh, 2001</b> CR = 0.93 CA = 0.88	
The manager was not faking how he feels in this interaction.	0.93
The manager was not pretending or putting on an act in this situation.	0.89
The manager appears genuine.	0.87
<b>Display of emotions (DE) - adapted from Pugh, 2001</b> CR = 0.90 CA = 0.83	
The manager maintained good eye contact.	0.82
The manager talked with enthusiasm.	0.91
The manager was smiling.	0.84
<b>Word of mouth (WOM) adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, &amp; Parasuraman, 1996</b> CR = 0.97 CA = 0.96	
I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with this restaurant.	0.94
If my friends and relatives were looking for a restaurant, I would tell them about the restaurant.	0.95
When the topic of restaurant comes up in conversation, I would go out of my way to recommend this restaurant.	0.91
I will speak positively of this restaurant to others.	0.94
<b>Repatronage intentions (RPI) adapted from Zeithaml et al., 1996</b> CR = 0.97 CA = 0.95	
How likely are you to consider this restaurant as your first choice for dining?	0.95
How likely are you to do more business with this restaurant in the next few years?	0.95
How likely are you to do less business with this restaurant in the next few years?	0.95
<b>Satisfaction (SAT) adapted from Zeithaml et al., 1996</b> CR = 0.97 CA = 0.90	
Based on my experience with this restaurant, I am very satisfied with the service it provides.	0.9
I am satisfied with the decision to eat at this restaurant.	0.95
I think I did the right thing when I decided to use this restaurant for my dining needs.	0.96
My overall evaluation of the services provided by this restaurant is very good.	0.94

suitable for small sample size, is robust to violation of the normality assumptions, allows. The model was tested with a bootstrap of 1000 samples. Control variables included failure severity and service providers' attractiveness. For the majority sample, the model explains 54% of rapport, 46.2% of word of mouth, and 54.1% of repatronage intentions. For the minority sample, the predictive power of the model represents 53.9% of rapport, 72.6% of word of mouth, and 76.4% of repurchase intentions. Table 5 summarizes the PLS multigroup analysis findings.

**Table 4**  
Correlation matrix.

	CR	AVE*	1	2	4	5	6	7	8
ATH	0.93	0.81	0.90						
RAP	0.95	0.84	0.65	0.91					
RPI	0.97	0.91	0.60	0.73	0.95				
SAT	0.97	0.88	0.63	0.77	0.89	0.91			
CI	0.95	0.84	0.23	0.26	0.18	0.14	0.91		
WOM	0.97	0.89	0.59	0.74	0.86	0.86	0.18	0.92	
DE	0.90	0.74	0.56	0.59	0.60	0.56	0.24	0.57	0.86

\* Square root of AVE reported on the diagonal.

**Table 5**  
Partial least squares multi-group analysis.

	Majority sample			Minority sample			Group difference	Path
	Path coefficient	T statistic	P value	Path Coefficient	T statistic	P value		
Primary language (1 Spanish, 0 English) → rapport	0.149	2.929	0.0017	0.021	0.377	0.3531	2.137	0.0330
Service provider (1 Minority versus 0 majority) → rapport	0.021	0.38	0.3520	-0.179	2.942	0.0017	2.397	0.0170
Country image * language	0.075	1	0.1588	0.158	2.273	0.0116	0.737	0.4613
Satisfaction → word of mouth	0.645	9.158	0.0000	0.801	8.684	0.0000	1.288	0.1990
Satisfaction → repatronage intentions	0.83	15.736	0.0000	0.732	11.529	0.0000	1.217	0.2250
Rapport → word of mouth	0.291	3.987	0.0000	0.067	0.677	0.2493	1.803	0.0720
Rapport → repatronage intentions	0.096	1.625	0.0522	0.177	2.702	0.0035	0.923	0.3570
Covariates								
Display emotions → rapport	0.323	3.837	0.0001	0.199	1.885	0.0299	0.969	0.3610
Authenticity → rapport	0.373	5.146	0.0000	0.521	7.13	0.0000	1.448	0.1490
Controls								
Failure severity	-0.053	1.082	0.2795	-0.051	0.803	0.4222	0.059	0.9530
Attractiveness	0.004	0.058	0.9538	0.126	1.378	0.1685	1.102	0.2720

As can be seen, the main effect of language on rapport was significant for the majority sample ( $b = 0.149$ ,  $t = 2.929$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), but not for the minority sample ( $b = 0.021$ ,  $t = 0.377$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Thus **H1a** is supported while **H1b** is not. Service provider ethnicity main effect on rapport was not significant for the majority sample ( $b = 0.021$ ,  $t = 0.38$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), but significant for the minority sample ( $b = -0.179$ ,  $t = 3.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus **H2a** is not supported, while **H2b** is partially supported, because rapport was more favorable for the minority customers that were served by a majority service provider than by a minority service provider, possibly indicating an inferiority complex.

The results of the interaction effects multigroup analysis are presented in **Table 5**. The influence of language ( $t = 2.137$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and ethnicity ( $2.397$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) on rapport were different for both samples, indicating that ethnic status moderates the relationship between ethnicity, language and rapport. Therefore, **H3** is supported.

One of the other advantages of smartpls is that it allows for the calculation of moderating effect of continuous covariates and categorical independent. As seen from **Table 6**, **H4** is supported where the moderation effect between country image and language is significant ( $b = 0.158$ ,  $t = 2.604$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), indicating a moderated moderation, where minority

customers that have a positive country image and where served using the majority language experience a higher level of rapport.

Planned comparisons examined the interaction effects proposed in **H5**. The group that received a service provider of incongruent ethnicity to that of the customer was examined to determine whether language convergence in this situation has a stronger influence on rapport. For the majority sample,  $t = -1.945$ ,  $p < 0.05$  the effect is significant, whereas for the minority sample  $t = 0.0185$ ,  $p > 0.05$  the effect of language convergence it is not significant. Thus, **H5a** is supported and **H5b** is not.

Emotions display and authenticity were significant in their positive effect on rapport in both samples. Finally, rapport is found to positively influence word of mouth for the majority sample ( $b_{\text{Majority}} = 0.291$ ,  $t = 3.987$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) but not for the minority sample ( $b_{\text{Minority}} = 0.68$ ,  $t = 0.677$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Strong rapport also results in higher repatronage intentions for the majority sample but not for the minority sample ( $b_{\text{Majority}} = 0.096$ ,  $t = 1.625$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), ( $b_{\text{Minority}} = 0.177$ ,  $t = 2.702$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This impact is found to be significantly different between both samples. Satisfaction was found to significantly influence both word of mouth and repatronage intentions.

**Table 6**  
Mediation analysis.

Path	Majority Sample			Minority Sample			
	95% CI		Significance	95% CI		Significance	
	LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI		
Path from language to repatronage							
LANG → RAP → SAT → RPI	-0.2854	-0.197	sig	Path from language to repatronage			
LANG → RAP → RPI	-0.0859	0.0154	n.s.	Language			
LANG → RPI	-0.1205	0.2634	n.s.	n.s.			
Path from ethnicity to repatronage							
Ethnicity	n.s.			Path from ethnicity to repatronage			
				ETH → RAP → SAT → RPI	-0.6623	-0.021	sig
				ETH → RAP → RPI	-0.2923	0.0085	sig
				ETH → RPI	-0.1095	0.417	n.s.
Path from language to word of mouth							
LANG	-0.2176	-0.129	sig	Path from language to word of mouth			
→ RAP → SAT → WOM				Language			
LANG → RAP → WOM	-0.1928	-0.0137	sig	n.s.			
LANG → WOM	-0.3346	0.761	n.s.				
Path from ethnicity to word of mouth							
Ethnicity	n.s.			Path from ethnicity to word of mouth			
				ETH	-0.6669	-0.144	sig
				→ RAP → SAT → WOM			
				ETH → RAP → WOM	-0.1778	0.0728	n.s.
				ETH → WOM	-0.4552	0.0729	n.s.
Satisfaction as a mediator							
RAP → SAT → WOM	0.4423	0.7725	sig	Satisfaction as a mediator			
RAP → WOM	0.2261	0.4764	sig	RAP → SAT → WOM	0.55	0.9431	sig
RAP → SAT → RPI	0.642	0.9112	sig	RAP → WOM	-0.1024	0.2447	n.s.
RAP → RPI	0.004	0.2409	sig	RAP → SAT → RPI	0.58	0.9113	sig
				RAP → RPI	0.0582	0.4037	sig



### 4.3. Mediation tests

Control variables of failure severity and service provider attractiveness were found not significant across both samples. Since the literature is not consistent when it comes to the role of satisfaction in the relationship between rapport and positive word of mouth and repatronage intentions, we have conducted mediation analysis. Mediation was tested with bootstrapping as recommended by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) using the macro process (Hayes, 2009). This was chosen because of the following reasons: 1) consistency with partial least squares bootstrapping that is used in our main analysis 2) its robustness over the violation of the normality assumption 3) supports the notion that mediation can exist with a significant direct effect (for detailed explanation please see Zhao et al., 2010) 4) the macro allows for testing of multiple mediation, covariates, and categorical variables 5) decreased the possibility of omitted variables. The bootstrap creates a confidence interval at 95%, where the mediation (indirect effect) is regarded significant if the CI does not contain zero. Each path is tested with each independent variable and each dependent separately. Results are reported in Table 6. To show that satisfaction is different from rapport and to resolve some of the issues in the literature which looks at satisfaction as an antecedent for word of mouth and repurchase intention, it was important to include satisfaction as a covariate. Satisfaction was found to mediate the relationship between rapport and word of mouth and repatronage intention. Interestingly, for the majority sample, the language convergence effect on repatronage intentions only happens through the mediation of satisfaction. Similarly, for the majority sample, the language convergence effect on repatronage intentions is only significant through the mediation of satisfaction rapport affects repatronage intentions only through satisfaction. Similarly, for the minority sample, the effect of ethnicity on rapport is only significant through the mediation of satisfaction. Also interesting is that the direct effect of language and ethnicity on repatronage intentions and word of mouth is not significant. This gives higher rise to the importance of rapport and rapport building behavior.

## 5. General discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study is in response to the call from Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) for more research on the role of language in service failure/recovery. This research explores the role of language and ethnicity on customer rapport and service recovery outcomes in minority and majority contexts. Table 7 summarizes the main research findings and its contribution to the literature.

As noted by Gremler and Brown (1998), rapport (chemistry or relationship quality) is an affective bond, characterizing the interaction between customers and employees. The concept of rapport between service providers and customers is of preeminent importance in the evaluation and management of service encounters, failures, and recoveries. In a sense, it is the silver bullet. Its absence taints the entire service encounter experience, no matter how smoothly it goes; its presence makes all things possible, even in the face of catastrophic service failure. Thus, rapport emerges as a concept of major importance in the study of service dyadic encounters. Most of the research stream on rapport building has been done on service provider behaviors in a service delivery context (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Understanding the role of rapport in service recovery has significant impacts to successful long-term recoveries and future relationships with customers (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). When service providers invest in rapport building, customers can experience a major turnaround from being angry and unsatisfied to forgiving, satisfied and delighted. As such rapport becomes crucial if service firms want customers to return back to their business and speak positively about their experience.

**Table 7**

Summary of hypothesized relationships and contributions.

Hypotheses	Findings	Contribution
H1a and b	Language convergence is an effective strategy in majority population not minority.	Provides evidence for speech accommodation theory and extends it to the service recovery context. Also shows that in different context, like being a minority, language divergence might actually be effective.
H2a and b	Service provider ethnicity is not significant contributor to rapport in majority sample. In minority sample ethnicity has a significant role. However, the similarity attraction effect does not hold and the inferiority complex does.	Shows how language, ethnicity, and minority and majority populations interact together. Brings support to the inferiority complex. Suggests the relationship between ethnicity congruency and rapport is not straightforward.
H3	Customer ethnicity (minority versus majority) moderates the relationship between language and rapport.	Language convergence/divergence strategies must be interpreted within the context of ethnic distribution. Suggests a significantly overlooked moderator about the influence of ethnicity and language, namely whether language might signal minority or majority composition.
H4	Positive country image moderates the relationship between language and rapport.	Suggests why language divergence might be effective by looking at positive country image effects that transfer from the country perceptions to service provider. First study to test country image empirically in a service setting.
H5a and b	Language convergence with non-shared ethnicity has a stronger effect than sharing ethnicity and has language convergence.	Language convergence might range from different levels where a stronger convergence is perceived when the service provider is not of the same ethnicity of the language he/she communicates in than when the language is consistent with service provider ethnicity.
H6a and b	Rapport affects positive word of mouth and repatronage intentions.	Achieving a good rapport after a service failure can significantly influence positive word of mouth and repurchase intentions. Extends the literature by looking at the role of rapport after a service failure and recovery.

This study looked at rapport and rapport building in service recovery, across language and ethnic divides.

The findings contribute to the body of knowledge in several ways. First, beyond its utilitarian role in communication, the study highlights the singular significance of language used in service recovery. For majority customers, service providers can improve customer rapport using a language convergence strategy. In line with Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) and Tombs and Rao Hill (2014) language convergence can have favorable customer outcomes. Results also show that the language convergence influence offsets divergent ethnicities between customers and service providers. These findings are consistent with Rakić, Steffens, and Mummendey (2011), who found that accent/language could be a more meaningful cue for categorization than ethnicity.

Among minority bilinguals, the language effect may take a curious turn. Here, the effect relates to the majority language context the minority (but bilingual) speaker finds themselves in, when language-related stigmatization is present. In such situations, a bilingual paradox arises: although language comprehension increases when the majority language service employee uses the minority language, rapport is not

significantly affected, possibly provoking feelings of inferiority and embarrassment the customer associates with use of their own minority language *in that context*. This bilingual minority paradox may not be straight forward. In cases where pride (rather than stigma) is associated with the minority language, both comprehension and rapport may be increased when the minority language is used. Clearly, the bilingual minority paradox is a fertile area for future study.

Issues of bilinguality aside, the results suggest that language convergence per se is not a significant influencer for rapport among minority customers. However, the results do suggest that ethnicity has a significant influence on the development and evaluation of rapport in cases where rapport is more favorable between ethnic minority customers served by ethnic majority service providers. This finding challenges the conventional wisdom of *Byrne's (1997)* similarity paradigm, showing that rapport between individuals is not necessarily built on the fact that service providers and customers are alike. In this case, differences may attract; dissimilarity may be what makes them “click.” In a neurophysiological assessment, *Boshoff's (2012)* results also challenge the similarity paradigm, where higher negative emotions instead of positive emotions were associated with service recovery conducted by service employees of similar ethnicities.

The study also suggests two important moderators to the role of language and ethnicity in rapport building: country image and majority vs. minority ethnic composition. This contributes to the stream of research that considers different moderators in the role of language on customer outcomes. (*Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011; Holmqvist et al., 2013, 2014*). These moderators introduce an unexpected effect when the language diverted to signals positive country image effects. The effects on rapport and rapport building are not likely to be straight forward, since country image salience is relative to the point of reference. For example, the country image of US Native Americans is likely to be significantly different than the country image of Caucasian Americans. This opens up a number of possible avenues for future research exploring various language pair divergence possibilities and their effects on rapport and rapport building.

Using speech accommodation theory the study shows that language convergence can have stronger effects on rapport and rapport building than shared ethnicity with language divergence, because of the perceived efforts that language convergence implies. In other words, the service employee does not have to try to be of the same ethnicity as a customer, they either are, or are not. However, the effort to use the customer's language indicates time spent learning it and effort in producing the communication. This suggests one way in which ethnicity and language can interact.

In conclusion, the theoretical contributions of this study can be summed up as follows: 1) provided an extension of the research regarding the role of language convergence/divergence into the context of service recovery; 2) revealed the overlooked, yet important, construct of rapport or “chemistry” between service providers and customers; 3) challenged the similarity paradigm by introducing country image and racial composition as moderators that alter the relationship; 4) examined the possibility of inferiority complex as a reason minorities might value having a service provider of different ethnicities; 5) demonstrated that speech accommodation and language convergence strategies offer viable alternatives to monolithic shared ethnicity strategies and 6) suggested new variables like language and ethnicity to building rapport.

### 5.2. Managerial implications

In an age of global migration, where Saudi businessmen consult Egyptian doctors in Riyadh, where ethnic minority Chinese are served by ethnic majority Malays in Kuala Lumpur restaurants, or as in the opening scenario, where minority Hispanics interact with Caucasian majority service providers, the fact of language use and ethnicity has become increasingly prominent in service encounters (*Rizal, Jeng, & Chang, 2015; Sarpong & Maclean, 2015*).

What this means for virtually all services is an increasing overlay of language and ethnic complexities onto the service encounter. Understanding the influence of language and ethnicity on customer outcomes after a service failure has many direct implications for the design of recovery strategies. Since this research examines the role of service provider's ethnicity and language, managerial recommendations are made pertaining to 1) hiring and 2) language competency.

When dealing with customers of an ethnic majority, language convergence strategies should be employed to help win customers back after a service failure. Moreover, such an approach will improve chemistry perception and result in positive word-of-mouth and re-patronage intentions. The findings also suggest that managers should not worry so much about the ethnicity of service providers when most customers are from the majority. In other words, whether the service provider shares the same ethnicity with the customer is not a major factor in rapport building. What is important, however, is that ethnic minority service providers have excellent majority language competence.

Hiring minority service providers who are proficient in the majority language could prove to be a significant competitive advantage. Further, firms which employ providers with poor language competencies should provide regular training and even accent reduction courses. Failure to do so could affect the likelihood of winning customers back.

For minority customers, service provider ethnicity has a significant impact on customer rapport. However, the findings of this study indicate that when dealing with minority customers, contrary to the customary assumption, managers should hire service providers of majority ethnicities, because of the possible presence of an inferiority complex that might be associated with a minority service provider. To help identify this issue, service providers could engage customers in conversations about country image to discover whether minority customers have a positive or negative image of their country. Creating small conversation to understand customers' preferences is in line with *Holmqvist et al.'s (2013)* conversation. Where customers have a positive country image, language divergence to majority language might be an effective strategy for service providers to help customers trigger those positive country perceptions to the encounter perception of customer rapport. Overall the findings indicate that managers should customize strategies based on whether the customer's ethnic composition is of a majority or minority. Lastly, managers should train service providers to not only display positive emotions in the post-failure encounter, but also make sure that these emotions are authentic, resulting in more favorable rapport, word of mouth, and repatronage intentions.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

As with all cross-culture research, this study is limited to the ethnicity of the populations chosen (Hispanic versus Caucasian). While this study followed the approach of *Deshpande et al. (1986)*, who examined ethnic identification across different countries of origin, future research could potentially explore differences in customer evaluations among the ethnicities/language groups, subcultures (Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans and Anglos) relevant in the particular service setting. Clearly, future research is needed to better understand customers' ethnic disidentification (*Josiassen, 2011*) (negative image, lack of trust) with service recovery. Moreover, research could examine the nature of language in high context and low context cultures and its influence on recovery outcomes. In addition, the differences among first and second-generation immigrant perceptions and their identification with service provider ethnicity and language is an intriguing avenue for further research (*Fowler et al., 2007*). Moreover, the effects of language and ethnicity might be heightened in an ethnically-triggered study context (e.g., Hispanic ethnic food restaurant). Finally, the social context of the service setting would provide a rich extension of this study by exploring how the presence of other customers with shared and/or different ethnicities accompanying the main customers could impact their evaluations of service recovery.

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