Online Chameleons: the Effects of Stylistic Mimicry of Nonverbal Cues on Consumer-Brand Interactions Online

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We examine effects of online mimicry on consumer-brand relationships. Across three experiments, we find that consumers interacting with customer service employees report more positive attitudes towards the employee/brand when emoji-usage is mimicked, but more negative attitudes when punctuation is mimicked. Perceptions of rudeness (i.e., flaming) help explain when mimicry backfires.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Employee interactions with consumers influence consumer-brand relationships and assessments of service quality (Bitner 1990). Although many of these interactions still occur as face-to-face communications (FTFC), a substantial amount has shifted to online platforms, generally known as computer-mediated communications (CMC), such as live chats and social media. Yet a central issue in CMC is whether social meaning is affected by the absence of nonverbal cues resulting in an impersonal and cold medium of communication (e.g., Rice and Love 1987). Social information processing (SIP) theory suggests that although CMC lacks nonverbal cues, communicators adapt their language, style, and other cues to facilitate a stronger relationship development process (Walther et al. 2005). One such adaption is linguistic mimicry, defined as the “convergence on linguistic dimensions such as vocabulary or jargon as a way of signaling affinity toward their communication partner” (Scissors et al. 2008). We focus on nonverbal linguistic mimicry, specifically emoji and punctuation use, as it has been understudied in the marketing literature. The overarching goal of the research is to explore the potential ways in which consumers react to being mimicked by an employee during an online interaction and how this affects perceptions of consumer trust, satisfaction, and rapport, all of which are important building blocks in establishing consumer-brand relationships.

We base our hypotheses on the mimicry literature which states that mimicry can foster positive interpersonal relationships (Stel and Vonk 2010), increase feelings of rapport, liking, affiliation, and closeness (Lakin et al. 2003), and induce feelings of a much smoother and more enjoyable interaction (Lakin and Chartrand 2003). However, research also shows that mimicry can have negative outcomes when applied to the wrong person or situation (e.g., Liu et al. 2011). Specifically, research shows that mimicry does not increase liking when one mimics a non-affiliative expression, such as anger (van der Velde et al. 2010), or is reminded of money (Liu et al. 2011). Therefore, we expect that in positive service interactions, mimicry will result in higher perceptions of trust, satisfaction, and rapport (H1), while in negative service interactions, the effects of mimicry will be mitigated (H2).

We test our hypotheses across three between-subjects experiments. Our first two studies tested effects of mimicry using emoji mimicry (Study 1) and punctuation mimicry (Study 2). Study 1 (n = 116) used a 2 (service context: positive, negative) x 2 (mimicry: present, absent) between-subjects design. Participants were told that they were looking to purchase a laptop online (positive service context) or had a problem with a recent laptop purchase (negative service context) and had contacted the computer company for help. Participants were then shown a chat window containing their conversation with the company. The conversation included the use of an emoji by the consumer (participant) and this emoji use was either copied or not in the employee’s response. Our results revealed significant mimicry x context interaction effects on trust (F (1, 109) = 4.773, p<0.05), satisfaction (F (1, 109) = 4.061, p<0.05) and rapport (F (1, 109) = 3.868, p<0.06). In positive interactions, mimicry increased perceptions of employee trust, satisfaction, and rapport. These effects were mitigated in negative service interactions. These results support H1 and H2.

Study 2 (n= 106) adopted the same design as Study 1, but instead of using emoji, the customer added “!!!”; this punctuation use was either mimicked or not by the employee. We observed a marginally significant mimicry x context interaction for satisfaction (F (1, 99) = 3.145, p<0.08) and a significant interaction for rapport (F (1, 99) = 3.983, p<0.05), but there were no significant effects on trust. However, in contrast to H1, in the positive service context, mimicry reduced satisfaction and rapport. These effects were mitigated in the negative service context, consistent with H2.

We speculate that the difference in the effects of mimicry types are due to perceptions of rudeness (i.e., flaming). Research shows that the use of multiple punctuation marks in messages correlates with perceptions of flaming (Turnage 2007) between interactants online. In contrast, emoji can be used to mitigate perceptions of flaming (Thompson 1996) by expressing easily identifiable emotions. Therefore, we expect rudeness perceptions to mediate the effects of mimicry (H3).

To test H3, we ran a 2 (mimicry: present, absent) x 2 (mimicry type: emoji, punctuation) between-subjects experiments with a new, neutral service context (consumer had a question about his order number). Study 3 (n= 150; student population) results indicate a significant mimicry presence x type interaction on satisfaction (F (1,144) = 6.275, p<0.05), rapport (F (1,144) = 9.579, p<0.05), and rudeness perceptions (F (1,144) = 4.934, p<0.05). There was also a significant main effect of mimicry type (F (1, 144) = 6.001, p<0.05) on trust, but the interaction with mimicry presence was not significant. As expected, participants reported higher perceptions of trustworthiness, satisfaction, and rapport and lower perceptions of rudeness of employees who mimicked their emoji use than those who mimicked their punctuation use. However, there were no significant differences in perceptions in the no mimicry condition. To investigate the mediating role of rudeness perceptions, we ran 3 mediation tests using Hayes’s (2012) PROCESS macro. As Figure 1 shows, rudeness perceptions mediated the relationship between mimicry type and all three DVs, thus supporting H3.

Our research makes several theoretical contributions. First, we extend the literature on mimicry and marketing communications by showing the effects of mimicry of nonverbal cues on interactions online. We show that not all online mimicry results in positive outcomes, therefore, expanding the mimicry literature on the moderating effects of mimicry type. We also provide a possible explanation for understanding the negative effects of punctuation mimicry, namely rudeness perceptions. Second, we expand the literature on consumer-brand relationships by identifying a possible tool for building successful relationships online. We show that successful implementation of online mimicry can foster positive consumer-brand relationships online, helping compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues in CMC. Finally, we expand the literature on trust formation by examining an online behavior that can build or deplete trust.

**REFERENCES**


