

Customer agency in interactive service: Small talk and rapport at the café counter

Sylvaine Tunçer
Eric Laurier

Kings College London & The University of Edinburgh

Abstract

This paper draws on fine-grained analyses of video recordings of service interactions at the café counter to revisit the notion of rapport and conceptions of the customer in interactive service. We examine customers' agency in building rapport and how it reshapes interactions with staff. The paper contributes to three areas of research. For the sociology of work and employment, it sheds light on customers' agency and pro-active contribution to service through rapport. Secondly, for interactive service scholarship it shifts the perspective from rapport as solely the service employees' task, to a collaborative accomplishment, and one which customers establish as much as employees do. Lastly, the paper revisits service work in third places, emphasising the staff-customer encounter's role in the creation and maintenance of sociability. The paper thereby recasts the enjoyment of conviviality in service encounters against a utilitarian backdrop.

Keywords

Building rapport; Conversation Analysis; Ethnomethodology; Interactive service; The customer; Video analysis

Introduction

While the service economy was becoming predominant in the 1990s, customers became part of the subject matter of sociology of work and employment, opening the way to extensive research about their role. While critical approaches emphasised customers' power over service employees and their alienating force, others turned to the more positive and varying forms of influence customers can have on employees' experience and on service itself. Among the latter proponents, and in a move to reframe interactive service as not merely functional but made from human relationships, Bolton and Houlihan (2005) called for further acknowledgment of customers' agency, "their capacity to act as moral agents and resist and re-shape the very rules that confine them" (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 692). Yet, this promising perspective was not followed by much examination of customers' actions in situ.

In business and marketing research, the 'social view' (Czepiel et al., 1985; Czepiel, 1990) of service encounters as "first and foremost social encounters" (McCallum and Harrison, 1985: 25) is far from recent. It is reflected in, among others, a longstanding concern for rapport (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000; 2008) which is seen as an important element of service encounters, potentially improving customer satisfaction or creating relationships. Research typically focuses on employees' communicative practices in building rapport (e.g. Campbell et al., 2006; Lin and Lin, 2017) and on customers' post hoc perception of rapport. In other words, rapport is invariably considered as befalling on employees, as their sole responsibility and task. This tradition of research frames customers as puppets in the hands of employees and obscures their agency; thereby it fails to take seriously the fact that service encounters are inherently collaborative accomplishments.

Face-to-face service interactions are pervasive in the hospitality industry. This paper is concerned with a particular setting of interactive service in hospitality: cafés in the UK. Cafés, like diners or pubs, are known as ‘third places’ (Oldenburg, 1989), places that foster daily communal sociability, and core settings for civil society emerging with modernity (Laurier et al., 2001). Related research, in sociology, urban geography and economic sociology, has focused mainly on how interactions in third places contribute to civil society and communities. They highlight different forms of sociability between rural and urban areas, and how these forms evolve, as third places themselves and forms of conviviality change. However, this strand of research tends to obscure the interactive service work which structures encounters in third places, focusing instead on customers’ forms of inhabiting third places.

Our research takes a Workplace Studies approach (Suchman, 2007; Luff et al., 2000) to focus on interactions between members of staff and customers at the café counter. The findings derive mainly from systematic and detailed analyses of video recordings informed by ethnographic fieldwork. The analysis of video includes talk, embodied conduct, and orientation to, and use of, the material environment. We focus on a typical phase of service encounters: payment, jointly processed at the counter, at the end of service, by staff members and customers. We examine how customers use the time during payment to either initiate rapport-building themselves or in response to staff members’ standard questions. In identifying their methods, the paper sheds light on ‘the customer an equal and visible partner in the analysis of interactive service work’ (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh 2013: 6).

Customers in interactive service

Since the 1990s, with the rise of the service economy, the sociology of work and employment has made considerable advances to include customers (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Leidner, 1993), shifting the view of the employment relationship from a dialogic one to a ‘service triangle’ (Leidner, 1999; Korczynski, 2013). With the acknowledgment that customers have an impact on not just parts of, but the whole organisation of work, the latter was recast as a ‘customer-oriented bureaucracy’ (Korczynski, 2002). Within predominantly critical approaches seeking to expose power relationships (e.g. Bélanger and Edwards 2013; Deery et al., 2002), the figure of an omnipotent and tyrannical ‘sovereign customer’ (du Gay and Salaman, 1992) and the ‘consumer as king’ (Bolton, 2002) paradigm arose, emphasising the double pressure exerted on service workers by both employers and customers. A number of critical studies around this issue built on the notion of emotional work (Hochschild, 1983). Other scholars questioned the figure of the sovereign customer, some dismissing it as a ‘myth’ (Korczynski, 2008). The emerging interest in customers then took a new turn, sending the employment relationship to the background and bringing to the foreground the employee-customer dyad to reveal the more complex and multifaceted aspects of these relationships reframed as essentially human ones (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Korczynski, 2009). Part of this reframing involved developing more nuanced views of customers to explore different possible roles and representations, and to make way for, and better understand, customers’ agency.

Few studies have followed suite with a concern for customers’ actual contribution to interactive service. Those that did centred on customers’ perceptions or experience of service as a result of various features of provision, such as contact frequency (Dagger et al., 2009), or service employees’ behaviour, such as smiling (Barger and Grandey, 2006) or personalised service communication performance (Ford, 2003). Later studies investigated customers’ contribution from the employees’ perspective, for example, their affiliative behaviour as perceived by employees (Holman, 2016) or employees’ interpretative framework of customers

(Storer, 2023). Marketing research on value co-creation (e.g. Prahalad and Ramaswami, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Mustak et al., 2013) constitute a notable exception by acknowledging customers' contribution in value co-creation through communication. However, the focus largely remains on how employees can support customers' value creation. For example, Salomonson and co-authors (2012) find that sales representatives' communicative skills—attentiveness, perceptiveness, and responsiveness—involve customers as 'feelers', 'thinkers', and 'doers'; yet they do not explore how customers act in these roles.

It is only recently that research begun to reveal customers' contribution to service by coming to grips with interactional practices. Challenging the assumption that service employees are solely in charge of personalising service, Kevoe-Feldman (2015) identifies customers' methods to obtain personalised service in telephone calls with company representatives. Others use video data to include embodied practices. Llewellyn (2016) explores the practical work done by customers as they handle cash money at the gallery desk, sparing words, timing the payment process, or avoiding delicate rejections, while Llewellyn (2021) focuses on how customers display their knowledge of products and prices, and how employees rely on these public displays. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2013) tie more specifically customers' conduct and service work with the notion of inferential labour, how employees rely on subtle cues to infer what customers want and who they are sociologically, inferring for example from their acting as a social unit that they will pay together. Our study builds on this growing body of studies which provide insights on customers' work in service encounters and how they shape the emergent trajectory of the encounter and its outcome. In particular, we reconsider the customer's pursuit of sociability and conviviality as it is interactionally tied to the routine service inquiries of service staff.

Rapport finding and conviviality

The pursuit of sociability in studies of service-sector labour is gathered together under the idea of rapport-building. Rapport is used in describing the institutional and instrumental pursuit of positive relationships with clients, customers, patients and so on. Accordingly, it has been extensively studied in the social sciences in a variety of settings, such as sales encounters (Campbell et al., 2006; Kaski et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2003), police interviews (David et al., 2017), corner shops (Placencia, 2004), the apparel retailing industry (Lin and Lin, 2017), bars (Placencia and Rueda, 2011), and survey interviews (Lavin and Maynard, 2001). These studies remain cautious around what we should understand by rapport even as they reveal systematic and setting-specific mechanisms and outputs which encourage or damage it. In interactional studies, rapport is treated as having equivalences with social solidarity (Clark et al., 2003), affiliation and alliances (Lavin and Maynard 2001) and identity recognition. While the verb 'building' points to a cumulative, instrumental and teleological sense, we want to hold on to a more open sense of rapport through finding affinities and common interests and pursuing intimacy (Jefferson et al. 1987).

Small talk used to be considered as "minor, informal, unimportant and non-serious" (Coupland, 2000: 1); however, there is increasing evidence that small talk accomplishes a variety of institutional goals, such as diverting attention from delicate examinations in healthcare (e.g. Hudak and Maynard, 2011), or monitoring welfare while also implicitly providing recommendations for self-care in social work (Iversen et al., 2022). In other words, in organisations, talk that seemingly departs from the immediate task is nevertheless a resource in accomplishing institutional care-work and in creating relationships; it has, then, a dual function. In practice, small talk has long been valued because finding rapport starts with departing from the script (Lavin and Maynard, 2001), from the order of service (Chan and

Chandra-Sangaran, 2019; Crang, 1994), or from the task at hand, through “conversational activities that go beyond the service transaction and participants’ roles as service providers or customers” (Placencia and Rueda, 2011: 193).

Research on interactive service is predominantly concerned with rapport as output, defined as “a customer’s perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by [the customer’s perception of] a bond between the two parties in the dyad” (Gremler and Gwinner 2000: 91-92). Drawing on a review of business and marketing literature, Gremler and Gwinner explore a range of rapport-building behaviours, such as attentive or common grounding behaviour. The exclusive focus on customers’ perception, however, reflects and reproduces a one-sided perspective and the assumption that building rapport, for the customer to perceive, is the employees’ responsibility and task.

This assumption extends well beyond interactive service and business and marketing research. In the above studies, for example, Campbell et al. (2006) focus on salespersons’ sociolinguistic behaviours to overcome prospects’ objections and move beyond the exploration phase of the relationship; Placencia and Rueda (2011) on bartenders’ talk with customers; Clark et al. (2003) on sales representatives’ methods based on assessments and affiliation with prospects; or, David et al. (2017) on police officers in the early interrogation phase to create a sense of collaboration with suspects and use it later in adversarial questioning. Customers, or lay participants, are rarely considered as pro-active in building rapport (Placencia, 2004) and rapport itself emptied of authentic interest and enjoyment of one another’s company. It is almost always instrumental and never convivial.

Sociability and third places

Third places, a term coined by Oldenburg (1989), are between the intimacy of the home and the formality of the workplace, semi-public venues such as cafés, diners and pubs. They offer a unique opportunity for conviviality and the formation of relationships outside of work or home (e.g. Ferreira et al., 2021; Thurnell-Read, 2021). Accordingly, research in sociology, urban geography and economic sociology focuses on the role of third places for creating and sustaining communities (e.g. Cabras and Mount, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2021; Henriksen and Tjora, 2014; Thurnell-Read, 2023) and social support (e.g. Hickman, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2006). Recent scholarly discussions revolve around the diversification and evolution of third places over time, their changing functions and patrons’ experience (e.g. Ferreira, 2017; Lane, 2018). For cafés, a major change has been the widespread development of national and international chains since the 1990s (e.g. Ferreira et al., 2021; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Woldoff et al., 2013) and the emergence of the ‘café worker’ (e.g. Henriksen and Tjora, 2018; Mimoun and Gruen, 2021). A range of studies lament the decline of sociability in the face of these changes, and the threat to the building and sustaining of communities (e.g. Clark, 2007). Other studies bring to the fore new phenomena with positive effects on civil society, such as place attachment (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 2007; Sandiford and Divers, 2019) or urban multiculturalism (e.g. Jones et al., 2015). Even the infamous café worker, whose focus on their devices and unavailability for social interaction are predominantly frowned upon (e.g. Simon, 2010), seeks connection through a “brief interaction with staff and the possibility of observing people around them” (Ferreira et al., 2021: 26) and thereby contributes to sociability.

In longstanding research on different forms of pub sociability, Thurnell-Read notes that all forms “hinge on the involvement of pub staff to facilitate smooth social interactions” (Thurnell-Read, 2021: 74). In ‘occasional pub going’, customer-staff interactions are “mediated ... by a framework of customer service, with [pub goers] ... expecting friendly and efficient service” (73-74). Further, the established roles and institutional structures of service in hospitality

“allow strangers to interact in a way that transcends the barriers of social status” (Czepiel *et al.*, 1985: 14), and create an occasion for friendly, sociable conversation. It is in these customer-staff interactions that the convivial values of service encounters and the economic values of third places overlap and interplay in the everyday life of cafés, maintaining the “delicate balance between the moral economy and the exchange economy” (Thompson and Arsel, 2004: 639). Our paper connects research on third places and on interactive service through moving beyond the staff’s perspective and projects to examine customers’ organisation of their embodied actions in pursuing and finding rapport with staff members.

The study

Setting and data collection

This article builds on the second author’s research on cafés in the UK spanning two decades, drawing mainly on video recordings of naturally occurring interactions, informed by fieldwork. The data are from a 2016 collection assembled from three days of recording in an independently-owned, city-centre café.

The project’s methods were approved by the University of Edinburgh ethics committee. For data collection, two wide-angle cameras were placed, respectively, in front and behind the counter to provide complementary perspectives. Staff gave their informed consent, while customers’ consent was gained via posters and leaflets on each table with information on the project and instructions on how to proceed if they wished to withdraw from the research. The data are reproduced in transcripts on numbered lines including hearable features of speech, descriptions of relevant embodied conduct in grey font, and image captions located in the lines of talk with a # sign.

Approach

Our study sits within Workplace Studies (Suchman, 2007; Luff *et al.*, 2000), using systematic and fine-grained analysis of video data, drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks *et al.*, 1975). The analyses include talk, embodied conduct, and use of the material environment. The analyses aim at understanding staff members’ and customers’ practical problems and practical reasoning from their perspective, as they can infer from each other’s publicly available conduct (Hindmarsh and Llewellyn 2018). This approach has made significant contributions to understanding the practical accomplishment of service in various settings, from dentistry (Hindmarsh and Llewellyn 2018) to call centres (Whalen and Vinkhuyzen, 2000) through to hair salons (Oshima and Llewellyn, 2024).

Data analysis

Initially interested in payment, we extracted 55 payment instances from our video corpus. We systematically analysed them, looking for recurrent or otherwise interesting practices and phenomena. Our focus narrowed to 18 instances where staff members and customers engaged in small talk, as an empirical entry to conviviality.

We carried out detailed analyses looking for methods and systematicity across these 18 instances, returning across multiple data sessions to explore the trajectories in which small talk arose. Three sequential formats were selected for more detailed examination. In one, the customer or staff member resumes a previous conversation and builds on an existing relationship, and the customer sooner or later appears as a regular. In the second trajectory, one party initiates small talk with a question or comment drawing on an observation, for example “It’s quiet this morning” from a customer or “So graduations day?” from a staff member (3

staff-initiated, 2 customer-initiated). In the third trajectory, the staff member asks a standard question which leads to some small talk (11 instances).

Initiating small talk and building on staff questions

The findings focus on the latter two trajectories, one with one party initiating small talk with a question or comment, the other with the staff member asking a standard question. Two types of standard questions were examined: ‘next-activities questions’ (8 instances) such as “*What are you doing for the rest of the day?*”, and ‘service assessment questions’ (5 instances) such as “*How was everything for you?*” The first can be heard as initiating small talk, while the second is part of the routine order of service. The five videos analysed below include different categories of customers: one-time customers, potential repeat customers, and one regular customer. The analyses reveal strong similarities, across types of standard questions and customers’ category, in how customers, in first or second position as speakers, initiate small talk and through it search for and find rapport with staff members. What will become apparent is that the local problem is whether the customers do wish to not only begin small talk but to continue it in order to find or fail to find rapport. The customers, in other words, as with Llewellyn and Hindmarsh’s (2013) studies, guide the staff in their desire for sociability at the café counter.

Customers initiate small talk

In this first section we will examine how customers initiate small talk in the pursuit of rapport. In Excerpt 1, we join the payment interaction after the member of staff and the two customers¹ have agreed on splitting the bill and adding a tip, which the staff member concludes with “lovely stuff” (line 1). She then uses the credit card machine and one of the customers’ credit card (line 2).

Excerpt 1

```
01 STF      lovely stuff
02          (4.5) ((STF inserts card, types amount, waits for machine to
               request PIN code, hands machine over to Cus1))
03 CUS2     chicken and gin#ger broth (.) [that s-
               #Image 1.1
04 STF          [t's a good'un
05 CUS2     that sounds good (.) hmm mm
06          (3.0) ((Cus1 types PIN, hands machine over to STF))
07 STF     so graduation's today I take it
08 CUS1     ours was yeste[rday?
09 CUS2          [huh huh
10 STF     oh
11 CUS2     do we [stick out like] a# [sore thumb
               #Image 1.2
12 STF          [yesterday]
13 CUS1          [yours [is tomorrow.
14 STF          [no: it's just-
15 CUS2     yeah ours [is tomorrow huh huh]
16 STF          [that this week is the] week-
```

¹ In all the transcripts, CUS1 is on the left and CUS2 on the right-hand side.



Image 1.1



Image 1.2

Just as the staff member proffers the payment machine to the customer on the left (Image 1.1), the customer on the right reads aloud a menu item from the wall, with a singsong prosody: “chicken and ginger broth” (line 3). The member of staff responds in overlap with a positive assessment: “it’s a good ’un” (line 4), which, although interruptive, aligns with the customer’s assessment: “that sounds good (.) hmm mm” (line 5). Indeed, the interruption which anticipates correctly the positive agreement is itself a show of rapport (Goldberg 1990). What this assessment-agreement sequence is producing contrasts with the salespersons’ rapport-building method identified by Clark et al. (2003) in pursuing sales precisely because the sale is long since complete, it is, instead, initiating and inviting small talk.

By offering a new topic, through a matched action of a noticing about the customers (“so graduation’s today I take it”, line 7), the staff member accepts the wider invitation to small talk. However, the customer goes one step further with a breaching: “do we stick out like a sore thumb” (line 11). The breach produced with laughter, rebukes the staff member for making unwarranted inferences out of their appearances “initiating a move into intimate interaction from a status he perceives as non-intimate so far” (Jefferson et al. 1987: 160). He and the staff member then look at each other and bend forward in laughter (Image 1.2), shifting rapidly into a form of intimacy from their earlier participation framework for payment (Goodwin 2007).

Across both turns and as payment is being processed, the customer initiates small talk by identifying “common interest ... to make an initial connection and keep the conversation flowing” (Gremmler and Gwinner, 2008: 316), an activity previously identified in marketing research, albeit attributed to employees. Using a noticing from the café’s environment, the customers, through assessing and then teasing, lead the search for rapport. Of course, the staff member does also then need to be responsive to the customer’s pursuit of doing more than the instrumental work of payment and does so in returning a noticing about the customers and hearing the rebuke as an invitation to intimacy.

Customers build on next-activity questions

We join Excerpt 2 when the member of staff, looking for some change in the tip box to complete one of the customers’ payment, asks “*what are you doing for the rest of the day*” (line 1, Image 2.1). They are leaning toward one another because the staff member is looking into the tip box while retrieving change and the customer failed to hear the staff’s question first time around.

Excerpt 2

```

01  STF      what are you #doing for the rest of the day
                   #Image 2.1
02  CUS2     uh probably doing a walking tour
03  STF      nice,
04  CUS2     in the city if it doesn't rain,^
             cus2                                ^makes a face

```

05 CUS2 because they said it was go[ing to rain
 06 STF [it is meant to be heavy rain coming
 07 (1.1)
 08 CUS2 °hh so: we [will try
 09 STF [so maybe go now
 10 CUS2 yeah yeah we [go now [hhehhe
 11 CUS1 [yeah [hhehhe#

#Image 2.2

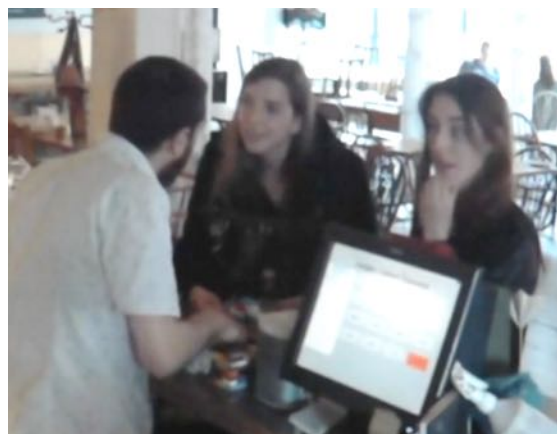


Image 2.1



Image 2.2

The customer on the left answers informatively: “*uh probably doing a walking tour*” (line 2), which the staff member acknowledges with: “*nice*” (line 3). Whereas the staff’s brief assessment is closing implicative, the customer on the right expands with “*in the city if it doesn’t rain,*” (line 7), and “*because they said it was going to rain*” (line 5). Weather is hearable as a small talk invitation. Between those two turns of talk, she makes a funny, worried face while looking at the staff member, visibly pursuing a response (Goodwin 1980). Meanwhile, the member of staff aligns to the customer’s willingness to engage in small talk by peering outside through the windows, with a pointing finger, showing that he is looking at the weather outside, and saying: “*it is meant to be heavy rain coming*” (line 6). He builds on her topic to offer his help with “so maybe go now” (line 9), not only as a staff member but also as a local resident encountering tourists, and the sequence ends on affiliation through laughter, mutual gazes and smiling (Image 2.2).

While the sequence enabled by the standard question could end after line 3, the customer’s expansion from line 4 onwards, accompanied by her pursuit through sustained gaze, is decisive in pursuing small talk and on a local knowledge topic which offers the staff member the turn for advice-giving which is markedly directive and treated as potentially a move toward intimacy via the customer’s hearing of it in their laughter. The fact that these customers pursue and provide resources for finding rapport even though they are tourists and unlikely to become regulars emphasises what is happening as non-utilitarian work around the payment task and their commitment to sociability, independent from the prospect of building customer relationships.

As we join Excerpt 3, after handing back her cash to the customer with “*there you are*”, the staff member offers a similar ‘next activities’ small-talk initiator: “*have you got a busy day ahead?*” (line 1).

Excerpt 3

01 STF there you are
 02 STF have you got a busy day ahead?

While customers in turn 2 may be merely answering the question, the expansion in 4 (a) provides additional material for small-talk, and (b) pursues affiliation: it is both leading the search for rapport and establishing the resources for it (e.g. weather as a topic, see Iversen et al. 2022). Besides, customers produce these expansions even when staff members work towards closing small talk or the encounter in 3, and even when it is established that the customer is most likely a one-time customer. What we have also shown in excerpts 1 and 3 is leaning toward one another while shifting to shared laughter in their talk as marking a shift in their participation, in particular, their affect which then displays their finding rapport with one another (Goodwin 2007).

Customers build on ‘service assessment’ questions

Commonplace at the end of service encounters, customer experience-checks are a closing component of the order of service (Oshima and Llewellyn, 2023). The customer’s assessment of their experience, even if negative, is considered important for businesses because “successful completion ... can bring satisfactory closure to the event, and may even help retain clients” (Oshima, 2014: 32). We consider here how assessment sequences are used by customers in seeking and finding rapport.

In Excerpt 4, while waiting for the customer’s bill to come out of the printer (Image 4.1), the staff member asks: “*and how is: was everything for you*” (line 1).

Excerpt 4

```

01 STF1      and #how is: was everything for you.
              #Image 4.1
02 CUS      ah w- lovely as always [of course
03 STF1      [ggr↑ea:t
04 CUS      u:hm which is why we keep coming ba:ck [and back and ba:ck]
05 STF1      *[\↑yea:h]=
06 STF1      =I'm gla:d
              Stf1 *takes cc holder
07 CUS      that you're *^on the gin as well I'm so pleased
              Stf2 *nods to Cus
              Cus ^nods to Stf2
08 STF2      yeah
09 STF1      ah ha ha ha ha
10 STF2      always.
11 CUS      >it's the way> you [hold the glass (.) #you hold
12 STF2      [the only way I get through the day
              #Image 4.2
13 CUS      the way you hold the glass
14 CUS      there's only one way to hold a glass
15 CUS      it's very Russian.
16 STF2      he he he

```

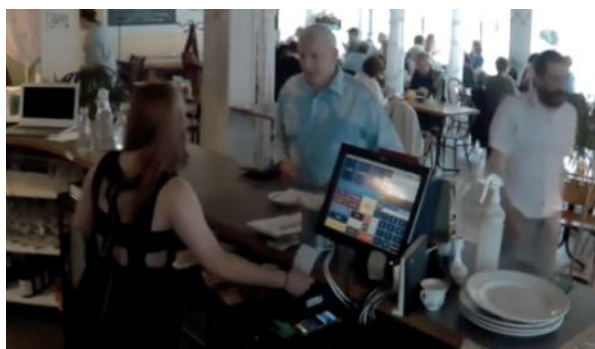


Image 4.1

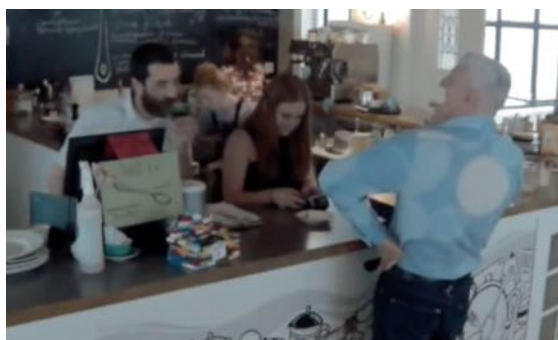


Image 4.2

With “*ah w- lovely as always of course*” (line 3), the customer provides a positive assessment which applies for his experience that day as well as for prior visits, categorising himself as a regular customer (Laurier, 2013; D’Antoni and De Stefani, 2022). His status as a regular is there for the staff member’s awareness even though she showed no earlier sign of recognition. She positively acknowledges solely his assessment with “*ggr↑ea:t*” (line 3)—in line with the pattern identified above. Then the customer repeats and expands on his regular status: “*u:hm which is why we keep coming ba:ck and back and ba:ck*” (line 4), which the staff member positively acknowledges again (“*↑yea:h I’m gla:d*”, lines 5 and 6), still displaying no signs of recognition. While at one level the customer is establishing their status as a regular, they are also offering resources to the staff for future rapport in providing much more than a minimal positive assessment. ‘Everything’ was ‘lovely’, they are devoted to the workplace and by implication its staff and on such a basis they display their existing rapport with the café as institution.

Meanwhile, a second staff member has arrived behind the counter and started drinking from a glass. Pursuing him, as the recipient for their talk, the customer sustains looking at him during his utterance on line 4, until the staff member returns his look. Why the customer does this becomes clear when the staff member nods to him in a sign of recognition. The customer then addresses him with a mildly improper mis-recognition: “*that you on the gin as well I’m so pleased*” (line 7), nodding back at the staff member and thereby showing their acquaintanceship. Moreover, he is now ratified by the second staff member as a regular customer. The staff member aligns with and adds to the invitation to intimacy, thus also affiliating with the tease and familiar tone: “*yeah*”, “*always*”, “*the only way I get through the day*” (lines 8, 10 and 12). In a series of overlaps, the customer reframes the potentially face-threatening joke (being called an alcoholic) into a compliment for acting with style (lines 11 to 15), theatrically underlying his compliment with an elegant posture (Image 4.2). In recognising the shift of her reciprocity to audience to the talk and accepting the rapport they have found, the original staff member laughs (line 9) (Goodwin 2007).

Although the service experience-check is hearable as part of the routine order of service, the customer uses it in the same way that the next-activities questions studied above are used, that is, to display his willingness to engage in small talk. His highly positive assessment at the outset prepares the ground for an expansion and thus is already geared towards building rapport with the first staff member. Then, he takes the lead in establishing his status from satisfied customer to regular, by bringing in the second staff member who knows him. In a swift shift of participation status, he displays his existing relationship with staff. The value and accountability of customers undertaking these affiliative practices are distinct from those of staff members, they are not compromised by their pursuit of instrumental rapport-building. We have a sense in this encounter of established rapport re-activated in the jump straight into teasing rather than through small talk.

Customers manifestly refuse to engage in small talk

We have been interested so far in customers' methods to pursue and find rapport, by offering a topic, in expansive answers to standard questions and around delicately indelicate proposals. Our data comprises a contrastive case which sheds additional light on customers' agency in rapport building. In Excerpt 5, two customers have approached the counter, and when they are about to speak with the staff member, they lower the volume of their ongoing, private conversation (lines 1 and 2). The staff member moves towards the till (line 1) and begins processing their payment with a tap on the till screen (Image 5.1).

Excerpt 5

```
01 CUS2      (          ) gave myself sore legs
02 CUS1      mmffhhh
03           (1.0)
04 STF       #was everything o[kay for] you guys=
              #Image 5.1
05 CUS1                      [>anyway.<]
06 CUS1      =yeah it was [great]
07 CUS2                      [↑yeah it] was ↓fine yeah,#
                                  #Image 5.2
              (1.5)
08 STF       all in all o[:r you pay separately]
09 CUS1                      [e:r just for the mo]cca for me [please
10 CUS2                      [yeah
```

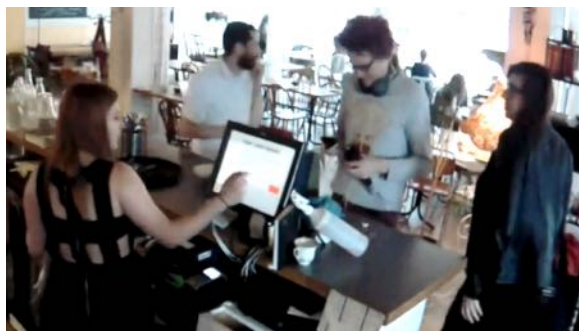


Image 5.1

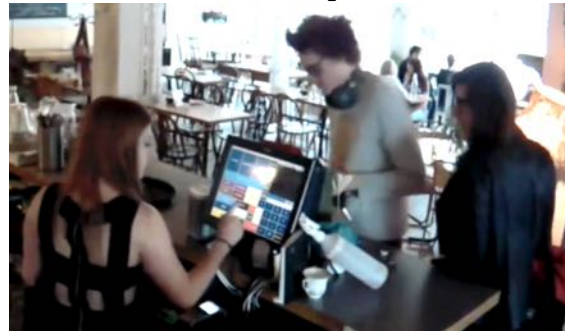


Image 5.2

While the staff member asks a typical service assessment question (*“Was everything okay for your guys?”*, line 4), one of the customers (on the left) puts their conversation on hold (*“anyway”* line 5) and answers the staff member, *“yeah it was great”* (line 6), a brief high-grade assessment serving as a no-problem report on the service. The other customer follows with her own assessment: *“yeah it was fine yeah,”* (line 7). Meanwhile she has also maintained her body orientation towards her partner (Image 5.2), only turning her head towards the staff member. In thereby forming a body torque rather than turning fully toward the staff member, she frames the suspended interaction with her partner as her main involvement and that with the staff member as a temporary, inserted one (Schegloff, 1998; Goodwin 2007). Shortly after, the staff member initiates payment with *“all in all o:r you pay separately”* (line 9), effectively accepting the absence of an invitation for small talk. Payment will remain the only topic until the customers leave.

The customers' assessments, by discarding any problems, satisfyingly answer the service assessment question; they are nonetheless non-expansive. Through her lack of uptake in third position, unlike the appreciative response in Excerpt 4, the staff member demonstrably orients to their suspended conversation; she solely and quickly deals with their payment. In other

words, the customers rely on the method identified and analysed so far, albeit in reverse, by showing no interest in small talk—that they are ‘only paying’—both through the design of their answer and their embodied conduct. They sustain the bare order of service and prioritise their customer-to-customer interaction. Conversely, the member of staff provides good service by recognising customers who do not want to engage in small talk.

The earlier analysis of Excerpts 3 to 5 brought to the fore the context-sensitive and contingent nature of service assessment (cf. Orlikowski and Scott, 2014). In Excerpt 5, the customers’ curt and general assessments seem to have more to do with their current project—avoiding engaging in small talk to prioritise their suspended conversation—as with their actual experience. On the contrary, in Extract 4 the customer’s praise is as much a device to re-establish their rapport with the staff as an actual assessment of service.

Discussion

Our study has shed new light on the customer-employee dyad (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005), showing how customers and staff actively produce the shape of the service encounter. In doing so, it further contributes to our ideas of rapport and third places by examining customers’ actions in initiating (or avoiding) small talk, pursuing intimacy and more generally producing the pleasures of sociability. We have shown that the service interaction between staff and customers is as much a setting for the pursuit of sociability as talk between customers. The order of service provides an institutional framework for customers, as they talk and answer to staff, to borrow and then display whether they welcome or reject the search for rapport.

In their analysis, Llewellyn and Hindmarsh (2013) brought to the fore customers’ subtle cues on which staff rely to do inferential work to process orders. We showed how, in the context of payment at the café counter, customers offer up more of who they are explicitly in ways that both show openness and provide the resources to find rapport. And the lurking risks of one party making an inference noted by Llewellyn and Hindmarsh can be used by customers as an invitation to intimacy as enjoyment (with ‘do we stick out as sore thumb?’). Rapport is bound up with intimacy, a paradoxical intimacy between strangers suddenly and intensely affiliating. In his classic work on third places, Oldenberg (1989) makes much of the casual affiliations and purposeless connections as that are often overlooked despite being abiding forms of civil life in society.

Furthermore, this article has situated seeking and potentially establishing rapport as part of customers’ concerns and interests as much as employees’, and shows that having an enjoyable interaction matters to customers notwithstanding business interests or the possibility of a service relationship. Whereas rapport has been hitherto tightly yoked to business and transactions, as an important lever to improve customer satisfaction or to make sales, this paper develops the concept of rapport by setting it against a utilitarian, instrumental backdrop. It recasts it in the realm of sociability, social connection and enjoyment, where affinity and bonds are more often than not integral to the service encounter and disconnected from the prospect of gains. As examples with one-time customers demonstrate, the ephemerality of the bond deters neither party from engaging in small talk. The enjoyable moment is worthy in and of itself for them, for us, as persons. Service encounters are bound up with the sheer fun of the human association.

Having focused on the customer, in concluding we can briefly re-consider the staff’s side: how staff members, by offering several slots for customers to either expand and engage in small talk, or move towards closings, have a mechanism for monitoring whether to engage in small talk or in a variety of ways to pursue or re-establish rapport with tourists, proud parents or regulars. In other words, we can re-examine the interaction examined earlier from rapport-building as *done by* employees to *enabled by* employees mindful of customers’ lead in seeking

a convivial conversation at the counter. Indeed, one way of avoiding the hint of institutional treason in the idea of rapport-building as a form of institutional accumulation, is in following the customer's lead, especially in the low status and lowly paid jobs of the hospitality frontline. Our study may have paradoxical implications for café workers in bringing to the fore not what staff's scripts should be or what best builds rapport but rather by advising them to consider carefully what the customer does before trying to seek rapport. Not that we are returning to the past ideas of customer as king but that rapport has to be found more than it is built and that staff might not know what they have in common nor whether they, as yet, understand one another well. It can easily mis-fire and requires being attentive to invitations found in the practices we summarised above. The staff's labour of doing so is in what customers reveal about their status, identity, plans, commitment, humour and more.

Conclusion

Drawing on fine-grained analyses of video recorded service interactions at the café counter, this paper revisits the notion of rapport and conceptions of customers in interactive service, examining their agency in finding and pursuing rapport. Drawing on systematic analyses of naturally occurring interactions of payment at the counter informed by ethnographic fieldwork, we identify an interactional pattern and practices through which staff members and customers can invite, engage in, or evade the emergence of small talk. We recast rapport as a non-utilitarian component of service interactions, bridging with research on third places and its concern for sociability and community building.

In the past decade, service and hospitality settings such as cafés and bars have been undergoing major technological transformations, a number of which remove customer-staff interactions at the counter in favour of ordering and paying at a screen. Further research on interactive service and in the sociology of work and employment is needed on how these recent developments have transformed the organisation of work and sociability in third places.

References

- Barger PB and Grandey AE (2006) Service with a smile and encounter satisfaction: Emotional contagion and appraisal mechanisms. *Academy of Management Journal* 49(6): 1229–1238.
- Bélanger, Jacques and Paul Edwards (2013). The nature of front-line service work: Distinctive features and continuity in the employment relationship. *Work, Employment and Society* 27(3): 433–450.
- Bolton SC (2002) Consumer as king in the NHS. *The International Journal of Public Management* 15(2): 129–139.
- Bolton SC and Houlihan M (2005) The (mis)representation of customer service. *Work, Employment & Society* 19(4): 685–703.
- Cabras I and Mount MP (2017) How third places foster and shape community cohesion, economic development and social capital: the case of pubs in rural Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies* 55: 71–82.
- Campbell KS, Davis L and Skinner L (2006) Rapport management during the exploration phase of the salesperson-customer relationship. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* 26(4): 359–370.
- Chan MY and Chandra-Sagaran U (2019) Scripted communication for service standardisation? What analysis of conversation can tell us about the fast-food service encounter. *Discourse & Communication* 13(1): 3–25.
- Clark T (2007). *Starbucked: A double tall tale of caffeine, commerce, and culture*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

- Clark C, Drew P and Pinch T (2003) Managing prospect affiliation and rapport in real-life sales encounters. *Discourse Studies* 5(1): 5-31.
- Crang P (1994). It's showtime: on the workplace geographies of display in a restaurant in southeast England. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12: 675-704.
- Coupland J (2000) *Small Talk*. London: Longman.
- Czepiel JA (1990) Service encounters and service relationships: Implications for research. *Journal of Business Research* 20(1): 13-21.
- Czepiel A, Solomon M, Surprenant S and Gutman E (1985) Service encounters: An overview. In Czepiel A, Solomon M and Surprenant S (Eds), *The Service Encounter: Managing employee/customer interaction in service businesses*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, pp. 3-15.
- D'Antoni F and De Stefani E (2022) On being known: Displays of familiarity in Italian café encounters. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 55(1): 79-100.
- Dagger TS, Danaher PJ and Gibbs BJ (2009) How often versus how long. The interplay of contact frequency and relationship duration in customer-reported service relationship strength. *Journal of Service Research* 11(4): 371-388.
- David GC, Rawls AW and Trainum J (2018) Playing the interrogation game: Rapport, coercion, and confessions in police interrogations. *Symbolic Interaction* 41(1): 3-24.
- Deery S, Iverson R and Walsh J (2002) Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal. *Journal of Management Studies* 39(4): 471-96.
- du Gay P and Salaman G (1992) The cult[ure] of the customer. *Journal of Management Studies* 29(5): 615-633.
- Ferreira J (2017) Café nation? Exploring the growth of the UK café industry. *Area* 49(1): 61-76.
- Ferreira J, Ferreira C and Bos E (2021) Spaces of consumption, connection, and community: Exploring the role of the coffee shop in urban lives. *Geoforum* 119: 21-29.
- Ford WZ (2003). Communication practices of professional service providers: Predicting customer satisfaction and loyalty. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 31: 189-211.
- Garfinkel H (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice-Hall.
- Goldberg JA (1990) Interrupting the discourse on interruptions: An analysis in terms of relationally neutral, power-and rapport-oriented acts. *Journal of pragmatics*, 14, 883-903.
- Goodwin, C (1980) Restarts, pauses, and the achievement of a state of mutual gaze at turn-beginning. *Sociological Inquiry*, 50, 272-302.
- Goodwin, C (2007) Participation, stance and affect in the organization of activities. *Discourse and Society*, 18, 53-73.
- Gremler DD and Gwinner KP (2000) Customer-employee rapport in service relationships. *Journal of Service Research* 3(1): 82-104.
- Gremler, Dwayne D. and Kevin P. Gwinner (2008) Rapport-building behaviors used by retail employees. *Journal of Retailing* 84(3), 308-324.
- Henriksen IA and Tjora A (2014) Interaction pretext: Experiences of community in the urban neighbourhood. *Urban Studies* 51(10): 2111-2124.
- Henriksen IA and Tjora A (2018) Situational domestication and the origin of the café worker. *Sociology* 52(2): 351-366.
- Hickman P (2013) 'Third places' and social interaction in deprived neighbourhoods in Great Britain. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 28(2): 221-236.
- Hindmarsh, J and Llewellyn, N (2018) Video in sociomaterial Investigations: A solution to the problem of relevance for organizational research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 21(2), 412-437.

- Hochschild AR (1983). *The Managed heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Holman D (2016) How does customer affiliative behaviour shape the outcomes of employee emotion regulation? A daily diary study of supermarket checkout operators. *Human Relations* 69(5): 1139-1162.
- Hudak PL and Maynard DW (2011) An interactional approach to conceptualising small talk in medical interactions. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 33(4): 634-653.
- Iversen C, Flinkfeldt M, Tuncer S and Laurier E (2022) The uses of small talk in social work: Weather as a resource for informally pursuing institutional tasks. *Qualitative Social Work* 21(6): 1043–1062.
- Jefferson, G, Sacks, H, & Schegloff, E (1987) Notes on laughter in the pursuit of intimacy. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and social organization* Multilingual Matters, pp. 152-205
- Jones H, Neal S, Mohan G, Connell K, Cochrane A and Bennett K (2015) Urban multicultural and everyday encounters in semi-public, franchised café spaces. *The Sociological Review* 63(3): 644-661.
- Kaski T, Niemi J and Pullins E (2018). Rapport building in authentic B2B sales interaction. *Industrial Marketing Management* 69: 235–252.
- Kevoe-Feldman H (2015) What can you do for me? Communication methods customers use to solicit personalization within the service encounter. *Communication Monographs* 82(4): 510-534.
- Korczynski M (2002) *Human Resource Management in Service Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Korczynski M (2009). The mystery customer: Continuing absences in the sociology of service work. *Sociology* 43(5): 952-967.
- Korczynski M (2013) The customer in the sociology of work: Different ways of going beyond the management-worker dyad. *Work, Employment & Society* 27(6): 1-7.
- Lane C (2018) *From taverns to gastropubs: Food, drink, and sociality in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Laurier E (2013) Encounters at the counter: The relationship between regulars and staff. In Tolmie P and Rouncefield M (eds) *Ethnomethodology at Play*. Ashgate, pp. 287-308.
- Laurier E, Whyte A and Buckner K (2001) An ethnography of a neighbourhood café: informality, table arrangements and background noise. *Journal of Mundane Behaviour* 2(2): 195-232.
- Lavin D and Maynard DW (2001). Standardization vs. rapport: Respondent laughter and interviewer reaction during telephone surveys. *American Sociological Review* 66(3): 453–79.
- Leidner R (1993) *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Leidner R (1999) Emotional labor in service work. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 561(1): 81-95.
- Lin CY and Lin JSC (2017) The influence of service employees' nonverbal communication on customer-employee rapport in the service encounter. *Journal of Service Management* 28(1): 107-132.
- Llewellyn N (2016) 'Money talks': Communicative and symbolic functions of cash money. *Sociology* 50(4): 796-812.
- Llewellyn N (2021) The embodiment of consumer knowledge. *Journal of Consumer Research* 48(2): 212-234.
- Llewellyn N and Hindmarsh J (2013) The order problem: Inference and interactive service work. *Human Relations* 66(11): 1410-1426.

- Luff P, Hindmarsh J and Heath CC (2000) *Workplace Studies. Recovering work practice and informing system design*. Cambridge: CUP.
- McCallum JR and Harrison W (1985) Interdependence in the service encounter. In Czepiel JA and Solomon MR (eds), *The Service Encounter: Managing employee/customer interaction in service businesses*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, pp. 35-48.
- Mimoun L and Gruen A (2021) Customer work practices and the productive third place. *Journal of Service Research* 24(4): 563-581.
- Oldenburg R (1989) *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Boston, MA: Paragon House.
- Orlikowski AJ and Scott SV (2014). What happens when evaluation goes online? Exploring apparatuses of valuation in the travel sector. *Organization Science* 25(3): 868-891.
- Oshima S and Llewellyn N (2024) Making the cut: The embodiment of experience in hair salons. *Marketing Theory* 24(4): 663-683.
- Placencia ME (2004) Rapport-building activities in corner shop interactions. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 8(2): 215-245.
- Placencia ME and Rueda AM (2011) Vaya, ¡que chungo! Rapport-building talk in service encounters: the case of bars in Seville at breakfast time. In Lorenzo-Dus (ed.), *Spanish at Work. Analysing Institutional Discourse Across the Spanish-Speaking World*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 192-207.
- Prahalad CK and Ramaswamy V (2004) Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value-creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 18(3): 5-14.
- Rosenbaum MS (2006). Exploring the social supportive role of third places in consumers' lives. *Journal of Service Research* 9(1): 59-72.
- Rosenbaum MS, Ward J, Walker BA, and Ostrom AL (2007) A cup of coffee with a dash of love. An investigation of commercial social support and third-place attachment. *Journal of Service Research* 10(1): 43-59.
- Sacks H, Schegloff EA and Jefferson G (1974) A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50(4): 696-735.
- Salomonson N, Åberg A and Allwood J (2012) Communicative skills that support value creation: A study of B2B interactions between customers and customer service representatives. *Industrial Marketing Management* 41(1): 145-155.
- Sandiford PJ and Divers P (2019) The pub as a habitual hub: Place attachment and the regular customer. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 83: 266-273.
- Schegloff E. A. (1998) Body torque. *Social Research* 65(3): 535-596.
- Simon B (2010) *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Suchman L (2007). *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Thompson CJ and Arsel Z (2004) The Starbucks brandscape and consumers' (anticorporate) experience of glocalization. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31(3): 631-642.
- Thurnell-Read T (2021) 'If they weren't in the pub, they probably wouldn't even know each other': Alcohol, sociability and pub-based leisure. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure* 4(1): 61-78.
- Thurnell-Read T (2023) 'It's a small little pub, but everybody knew everybody' : Pub culture, belonging and social change. *Sociology* 58(2): 420-436.
- Vargo SL and Lusch RF (2004) Evolving to a new dominant logic for Marketing. *Journal of Marketing* 68 (1): 1-17.
- Whalen J and Vinkhuyzen E (2000) Expert systems in (inter)action. In Luff *et al.* (op. cit.), 92-140.

Woldoff RA, Lozzi DM and Dilks LM (2013) The social transformation of coffee houses: The emergence of chain establishments and the private nature of usage. *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 1(2): 205-219.