Addressing The Customers: The Influence Of Status, Physical Contact, And Age On Customers' Level Of Irritation

NIK RAHIMAH NIK YACOB & MOHAMMAD NAIM AHMAD
Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia.

ABSTRAK

Bagaimanakah pengguna bertindakbalas apabila mereka dipanggil dengan nama mereka oleh seseorang pemberi perkhidmatan? Kertas kerja ini meninjau pengaruh status, sentuhan fizikal dan umur pemberi perkhidmatan terhadap rangsangan pengguna apabila dipanggil nama. Data untuk kajian ini telah dikutip melalui rekabentuk eksperimen di kalangan sebuah sampel pelajar ITM. Daripada tiga perulangan kajian tersebut, sokongan bercampur-campur telah diperolehi bagi pengaruh status dan sentuhan fizikal. Di samping itu, umur tidak menghasilkan pengaruh yang signifikan terhadap rangsangan pengguna. Beberapa pengaruh bersilang antara variabel bebas telah juga ditemui.

ABSTRACT

How do customers react when they are called by their first name in a service encounter? This paper explores the influence of a service provider's status, physical contact and age on customers' feelings of irritation when they are first-named by a service provider. Data for the study was a sample of ITM students. From three replications of the study, mixed support was obtained for the influence of status and physical contact, while age registered a non-significant influence on customers' level of irritation. Some interactions between the independent variables were also discovered.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increased recognition of the importance of person-to-person encounter between buyer and seller or client and provider in the overall success of the marketing effort (Gronroos 1982, Dunckel and Taylor 1988). Garfein (1987,1988) has emphasized the need to pay close attention to personal service to achieve a satisfactory exchange between a customer and a provider. Many service exchanges, especially those termed "pure services", are characterized by a high degree of person-to-person interaction. Medical, legal, and consulting services are some examples of services with a high degree of person-to-person interaction while services in places such as fast food restaurants and petrol stations reflect a lower degree of personal service.

In a service encounter, or a face-to-face interaction between a customer and a service provider, mutual understanding between the customer and the service provider becomes imperative in influencing customer satisfaction (Mohr and Bitner 1991). In the customer's mind, the manner in which the service is delivered becomes an integral part of the service itself and its evaluation (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Leonard, 1985). Besides the service outcome, a service provider's tone of voice, patience, attentiveness, receptivity, and how he or she addresses the customer would affect customer's feelings of irritation or satisfaction with the service.

This study seeks to discover the level of irritation experienced by customers when they are addressed by their first name by the service provider. Although the focus of this study is rather narrow, it will attempt to explain the circumstances in which using a customer's first name in a service encounter could be considered irritating by the customer. Explanatory variables for irritation that were examined in this study include provider's status, degree of

physical contact, and provider's age in relation to the customer.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Czepiel, Solomon, Surprenant and Gutman (1985), in their model of service encounters, have identified provider behaviour as an important influence on the quality of service experienced by customers. For example, when a service provider reacts rudely and aggressively towards a customer, the customer would experience anger and a loss of self esteem. On the other hand, if the service provider reacted with care and compassion, the customer would reciprocate with a better understanding of the service provider's position.

Further, Surprenant and Solomon (1987) suggest that personalization of services would result in a good service encounter because it leads to the individuation of the customer. According to Surprenant and Solomon, degree of personalization falls into three dimensions, ranging from option personalization to customized personalization, to programmed personalization. Option personalization is directed toward personalizing the outcome of the service. Customized personalization is directed toward assisting the customer in attaining the best possible form of the service offering for his or her needs. Programmed personalization is directed toward giving the impression of a personalized service by encouraging small talk or using the customer's name. This study deals only with programmed personalization because it tackles the issue of addressing customers by their first name.

Surprenant and Solomon have also suggested that the embellishment of routinized actions with personal referents (calling of an individual's name and having small talk) may succeed in making a person feel like an individual. However, the tactic may be disruptive if it forces the customer to expend more cognitive effort than is normally desired in a service experience. For example, a hairdresser who engages a client in impertinent conversation may deprive the customer of a few minutes of rest. As a result, the friendly chatter on the part of the service provider is perceived as a source of irritation rather than an effort at personalizing the service.

In this study, the question at hand is whether customers would appreciate a service provider's attempt to create a friendly relationship by addressing them by their first names. Would customers prefer to remain as strangers or would they prefer a friendlier relationship with the service provider? According to Goodwin and Frame (1989), preference for a friendly relationship depends on several factors. Based on the concept of social distance, Goodwin and Frame have posited that preference for close relationships would depend on customers' perception of provider status, requirement of physical touch, and provider's age, as shown in Figure 1.
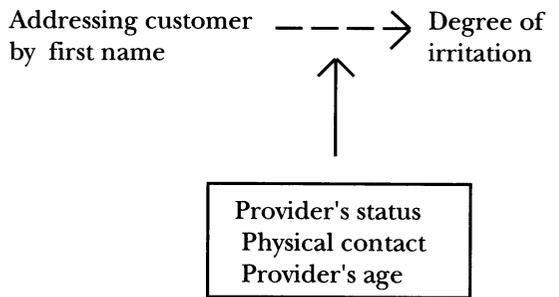

FIGURE 1
Relationship between provider's status, physical contact, and provider's age with degree of irritation

The concept of social distance states that in a dyadic relationship, humans would go through three levels of relatedness from zero contact (prior to interaction) to surface contact (first or following distant encounters) to mutual relationships (friendly and emotionally involved). Surface contact would typify most business transactions in which a standard service has been adopted for all customers. There is no attempt by the organization to get to know the customers better. With the increasing importance of relationship marketing, organizations have moved toward developing mutual relationships between the organizations and their customers (Dunckel and Taylor 1988). Some organizations maintain a catalogue not only of the customers' names but also that of family members, their

birthdates and their likes and dislikes in an attempt to get to know the customers better.

From Figure 1, a customer's degree of irritation towards being addressed by the first name would be moderated by provider's status, physical contact, and provider's age. The ensuing paragraphs will discuss each moderating relationship in detail.

Influence of Provider's Status on Irritation

Goodwin and Frame (1989) have stated that customer perception of provider's status would influence his or her preference for a friendly, as opposed to formal, relationship. Similarly, Brown (1965) has noted that status considerations influence form of address. For example, a lawyer would rather be called by the first name by another lawyer than by a hairdresser because of the large social distance between the legal and the hairdressing professions. However, even blue collar workers would not mind being called by the first name by their medical doctors or lawyers. A number of empirical studies (e.g., Brown and Ford 1961, Little and Gelles 1975, Rubin 1980) have suggested that higher status "others" may generate less discomfort from forced closeness created by first-name usage than lower status "others". Therefore, it is expected that :

H1 : Customers will display less irritation when they are called by their first name by higher status rather than lower status service providers.

Influence of Physical Contact on Irritation

As noted earlier, once contact has been established, a dyadic relationship could be characterized as a surface contact or a mutual relationship. In mutual or close relationships, such as in a family relationship or a group of friends, the individuals would react with spontaneity to each other as whole persons. These individuals are involved in non-role "transactions" which include an allocation of "giver" and "taker" roles between them. By contrast, people involved in surface contact would tend to respond with more routinised behaviours to role-related aspects of their partners.

In a service context, a customer's relationship with a waiter or a petrol station attendant, for example, may be constrained by certain prescribed roles. However, the relationship between a customer and a dentist or psychotherapist may be more spontaneous and responsive to changes in the role-occupant. Goodwin and Frame (1989) have explained differences in the relationship as due to the degree of intimacy between the individuals in a dyad. The more intimate or the higher the extent of physical touch or contact among the individuals, the closer is the relationship. Thus, services which encourage intimacy or physical contact may come to resemble close relationships in which customers would be more receptive towards the use of their first-name. Hence,

H2: Customers will display less irritation when they are called by their first name in services which require high physical contact between service providers and customers than in services which require low physical contact.

Influence of Age on Irritation

In many cultures and subcultures, age is treated with reverence. For example, among the Malays, children are brought up to respect their elders. Elder siblings are accorded special titles such as "Kak Long" and "Abang Ngah" to be used by younger siblings as a sign of respect. In Malay culture, even when addressing a stranger, the use of a proper title is highly encouraged so as to avoid offending the person. It is highly inappropriate, for example, for a teenager to address a mature client by his or her first name. The use of "Encik/Cik/Puan" would be more suitable in that situation rather than "Makcik" or "Pakcik".

In Western culture, Rubin (1980) found that students were less reluctant to first-name younger faculty members than older faculty members. In their empirical study, Goodwin and Frame (1989) also found that respondents were more willing to be addressed on a first name basis by service providers who were older than those who were younger. Thus, it is expected that,

H3: Customers will display less irritation when they are called by their first name by

older service providers than when they are first-named by younger service providers.

METHOD

To test the hypotheses, an experiment was carried out in which provider's status, degree of physical contact, and provider's age were manipulated. Services familiar to the respondents were selected to represent high and low status and high and low physical contact, as shown in Figure 2. Three services were selected per cell to serve as replications as well as to ascertain whether there were variations in the study findings when different services were utilized as experimental cues. Some variations in the study findings are expected across services for the same cell because of the presence of service characteristics dissimilar to the ones under investigation.

Age was manipulated by randomly assigning an older or a younger service provider relative to the respondents. A 2 * 2 * 2 factorial design resulted in 8 experimental conditions. Hence, eight different sets of questionnaires were designed in which each set differed in terms of status, physical contact and age of the service providers. An identical hypothetical scenario was utilized as background to all experimental conditions. In all eight sets, the respondent was asked to imagine that his or her name was "Zaini" and that he or she wore a name tag with the word "Zaini" on it. Respondents were also instructed to imagine that the encounter was the first time he or she was facing the service provider. The choice of the name "Zaini" was made because it was a common name for both sexes.

A total sample of 222 subjects was obtained from a pool of ITM students. Sample size per cell ranged from 25 to 30. Because of the nature of the sampling, this study was only confined to Bumiputera students in that particular institution. Any form of generalization should therefore be made with caution.

The dependent measure of irritation was operationalized in a Semantic Differential scale based on the measure by Goodwin and Frame (1989). Three items were utilized with descriptors such as "inappropriate/appropriate", "irritating/pleasing", and "offensive/inoffensive". These items were then measured on a five-point scale with a score of 1 representing high on the left descriptor or low on the right descriptor and vice versa for a score of 5. An individual's score on irritation constitutes the linear summation of the responses on the three items.

PHYSICAL CONTACT

		High	Low
STATUS	High	Medical doctor Dentist Surgeon	Lecturer Counsellor Architect
	Low	Barber Nurse Traditional masseur	Library clerk Restaurant waiter Auto mechanic

FIGURE 2
Allocation of sevices in the experimental cells

Data analyses were performed using the SPSSX package. To test the hypotheses, three runs of factorial analysis of variance was conducted to discover the main effects and interaction effects of provider's status, physical contact, and provider's age on irritation. In addition to the above analyses, a reliability analysis on the dependent measure was also performed.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 below describes some of the demographic characteristics of the sample. As evident from Table 1, 46% of the Bumiputera sample were male while the remaining were female. Over 99% of the sample were below the age of thirty. They came from various parts of Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak. A majority of them were in various stages of the diploma programme ranging from the first year of study to the third year. As seen from the sample description, the study finding is neither generalizable to the population of Bumiputeras nor to the population of Bumiputeras over thirty years of age. However, the finding is important in indicating the predicted relationship between variables in a homogeneous sample of Bumiputeras.

Reliability Analyses

Reliability analysis for irritation was computed based on the internal consistency approach using the Cronbach coefficient, alpha. The linear scale for irritation yields a reliability coefficient of 0.77, 0.78, and 0.73, respectively, for the three sets of replications. Generally, these values indicate that there is a high level of consistency in the responses given for the three items which make up the irritation scale. Reliability coefficients of 0.70 and above are considered more than acceptable for most behavioural science applications (Nunnally 1978).

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posits that customers would display less irritation when they are called by their first name by higher status than by lower status providers. The result of the empirical test of Hypothesis 1 is shown in Table 2 under the main effect of status. As shown in the table, the results of the factorial analysis of variance in part A indicate that the influence of status is significant at $p < 0.05$. The cell means on irritation for low status and high status providers are 8.93 and 9.55, respectively. It should be noted that a low score on the irritation scale indicates a high level of irritation and the reverse is true for a high score. This finding provides support for Hypothesis 1.

In part B of Table 2, a similar finding was obtained in which status was found to be significant at $p < 0.001$. The cell means of irritation for low status and high status providers are 8.54 and 9.58, respectively. This finding conforms to that of part A which supports Hypothesis 1. However, the replication in part C yields an insignificant influence of status on irritation, suggesting that Hypothesis 1 is not universally supported over the three replications. The third replication lacks support possibly because of the indistinctiveness of the status of the manipulation cues.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that customers will display less irritation when they are called by their first name for services which require high physical contact between service providers and customers than for services which require low physical contact.

From Table 2, the results for the first two replications indicate that the influence of contact on irritation was not significant. However, the third replication provides support that the degree of physical contact between a service provider and a customer would exert an influence on the level of irritation felt by customers when they are first-named. The cell means on irritation for low contact services and high contact services are 8.56 and 9.21, respectively. This finding provides support for the direction of the hypothesis.

The third and last hypothesis forwarded in this study posits that customers will display less irritation when they are called by their first name by older service providers than when they are first-named by younger service providers. Unlike the two previous hypotheses which resulted in mixed findings, this hypothesis yielded a similar finding over the three replications. As evident in Table 2, the main effect of age was not found to be significant in all three replications. This

TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics of sample

Sex:			Age:		
	Male	46.4%		20 years and below	47.3%
	Female	53.4%		21 to 30 years	52.3%
				31 years and above	0.5%
Origin:			Course:		
	North	31.1%		Certificate	0.5%
	Central	29.7%		Diploma	90.5%
	South	17.1%		Advanced diploma	9.0%
	East	18.0%			
	Sabah/Sarawak	4.1%			
Year of Study:					
	First	32.4%			
	Second	28.8%			
	Third	36.9%			
	Fourth	1.8%			

TABLE 2
Results of the factorial analysis of variance

A

Manipulation cues: Medical Doctor, Lecturer, Barber, Library Clerk

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig of F
Main effects					
Status	21.75	1	21.75	4.05	.05
Contact	17.73	1	17.73	3.30	.07
Age	13.39	1	13.39	2.49	.12
Interaction effects					
Status * Contact	0.65	1	0.65	0.12	.88
Status * Age	0.13	1	0.13	0.02	.73
Contact * Age	2.89	1	2.89	0.54	.46
Status * Contact * Age	12.44	1	12.44	2.32	.13
Residuals	1149.47	214	5.37		

B

Manipulation cues: Dentist, Counsellor, Nurse, Waiter

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig of F
Main effects					
Status	59.70	1	59.70	11.32	.001
Contact	11.64	1	11.64	2.21	.14
Age	11.03	1	11.03	2.09	.15
Interaction effects					
Status * Contact	67.28	1	67.28	12.76	.000
Status * Age	.60	1	.60	.11	.74
Contact * Age	48.87	1	48.87	9.27	.003
Status * Contact * Age	1.11	1	1.11	0.21	.65
Residuals	1128.85	214	5.28		

C

Manipulation cues: Surgeon, Architect, Masseur, Auto Mechanic

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig of F
Main effects					
Status	11.17	1	11.17	2.43	0.12
Contact	24.23	1	24.23	5.28	0.02
Age	2.68	1	2.68	.58	0.45
Interaction effects					
Status * Contact	4.46	1	4.46	.97	0.33
Status * Age	17.25	1	17.25	3.76	0.05
Contact * Age	3.27	1	3.27	.71	0.40
Status * Contact * Age	0.002	1	0.002	.00	0.99
Residuals	982.92	214	4.59		

finding suggests that age does not exert an influence on the level of irritation felt by customers when they are first-named. However, the lack of support for Hypothesis 3 could be due to the limitation in the sample. This study mainly focused on a homogeneous group of respondents between the age of twenty to thirty years old. Besides the lack of variability in age, this group could possibly typify a more tolerant attitude towards first-naming than an older group.

Interaction effects between status, contact and age have also been examined to better understand the influence of these variables on irritation. From Table 2, three interaction effects were found to be significant. Status by contact and contact by age interaction effects were found to be significant in part B while in part C there was a significant status by age effect. Figure 3 below depicts the nature of the interaction effects.

As shown in Figure 3A, low status-low contact service providers produced a higher level of irritation among customers than high status-low contact service providers (a high score on the irritation scale reflects a low level of irritation). However, when the first-naming was done by high contact service providers, the level of irritation was found to be insignificantly different, regardless of whether the service is of low or high status.

From Figure 3B, it can be observed that first-naming by high contact-young service providers resulted in a higher level of irritation when compared to high contact-older service providers. However, for low contact service providers, there was very little difference in the resulting level of irritation indicated regardless of whether the service providers were younger or older than the customers.

The status by age interaction (refer to Figure 3C) depicts a higher level of irritation when the first-naming was done by low status-older service providers than by high status-older service providers. When the first-naming was done by younger service providers, there was no significant difference in the level of irritation, irrespective of status.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the influence of service providers' status, physical contact and age on customers' level of irritation when being first-named by the service providers. From the experimental study, several interesting findings were obtained.

First and foremost, there were differences in the findings in the three replications when different types of services were utilised as manipulation cues for status and physical contact. However, differences among replications are useful in determining the extent of generalizability of the results.

Status was found to exert an influence on irritation in two out of the three replications. The manipulation cues utilised in the two replications consist of a medical doctor, a lecturer, a dentist and a counsellor for high status service providers while low status service providers include a barber, a nurse, a library clerk and a restaurant waiter. From the study findings, it was found that first-naming by high status service providers would result in a lower level of irritation among customers when compared to the first-naming by low status service providers. In other words, the customers would not mind being called by their first name by a medical doctor, a lecturer, a dentist or a counsellor but would express some level of irritation when a barber, a nurse, a library clerk, or a waiter addressed them in that manner.

The influence of status on irritation also manifested interactively with physical contact and age. High status-high contact services generated a higher level of irritation than high status-low contact services. However, low status-high contact services resulted in a lower level of irritation than low status-low contact services. When the service provider was relatively younger than the customer, the level of irritation was about the same irrespective of the status of the service. However when the service provider was relatively older than the customer, a higher level of irritation resulted when the service was of low status.

Physical contact appeared to exert an influence on irritation in one out of three replications. The manipulation cues utilised in this replication to represent high physical contact services include a surgeon and a traditional masseur, while an architect and an auto mechanic represented low physical contact services. Services which were high on physical contact tended to generate a lower level of irritation than services which were low on

FIGURE 3
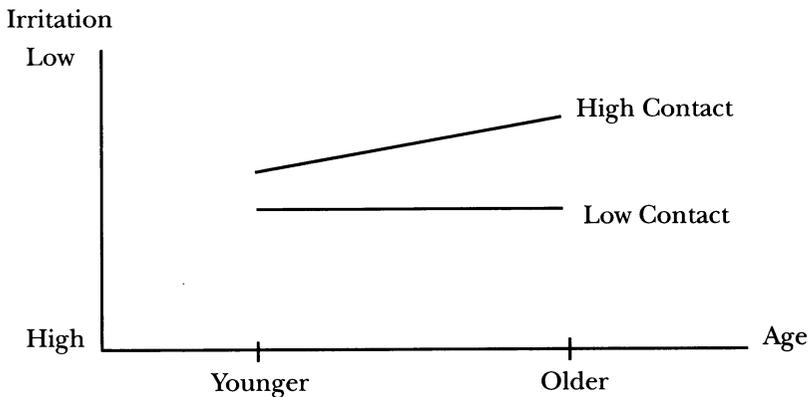## Nature of interactions between status , contact and age

A.   Status * Contact Interaction Effect
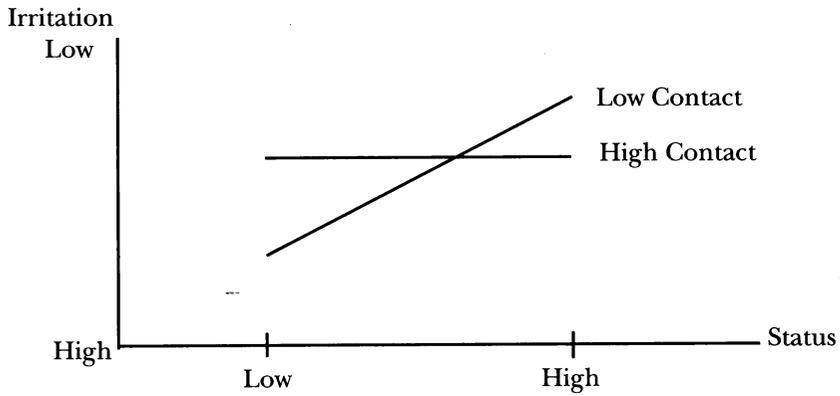
B.   Contact * Age Interaction Effect
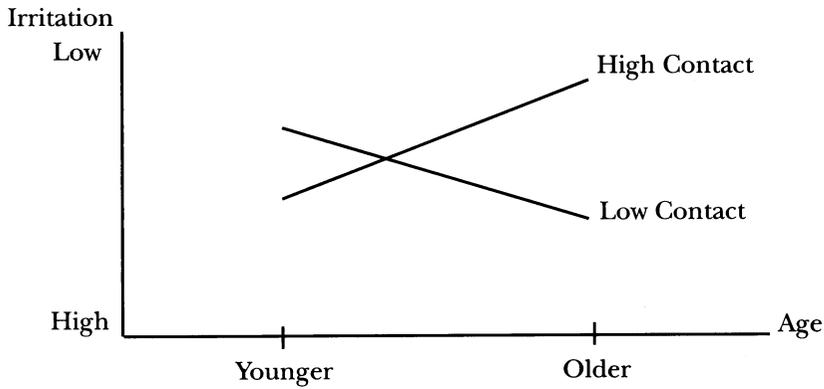
C.   Status * Age Interaction Effect

physical contact. In replication B of the study, the main effect of physical contact on irritation was cancelled out because of the interaction between physical contact and age. High contact-younger service providers tended to elicit a higher level of irritation than high contact-older service providers. In contrast, low contact-older service providers tended to elicit a higher level of irritation when compared to low contact-younger service providers.

Contrary to expectation, age did not exert a direct influence on irritation. In all three replications, the main effects of age were found to be non-significant. However, this factor was still important because of its interactive effects with other factors such as status and physical contact.

It should be cautioned that the findings of this study are not extendable to the Malaysian population as a whole because of its sampling limitations. The rather homogeneous Bumiputera student sample would not compare well with the multi-racial composition of Malaysia. As such, future research should attempt to replicate this study with a more representative sample. In addition, future research should also utilise a different set of manipulation cues to ensure generalizability of findings across service types.

REFERENCES

Brown, R. (1965). *Social Psychology*, New York: The Free Press.

Brown, R. & Ford. M. (1961). Address in American English, *Journal of Abnormal Social Psychology*, **62 (2)** : 375-385.

Czepiel, J. A., Solomon, M.R., Surprenant, C.F. & Gutman, E.G. (1985). Service Encounters : An Overview, in Czepiel, J. A., Solomon, M.R. & Surprenant, C.F., (ed.), *The Service Encounter : Managing Employee/Customer Interaction in Service Business*, Massachusetts: Lexington Books.

Dunckel, J. & Taylor, B. (1988). *The Business Guide to Profitable Customer Relations -*

Today's Technique for Success, Vancouver : International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.

Garfein, R. T. (1987). Evaluating the Impact of Customer Service Delivery Systems, *The Journal of Services Marketing*, **1 (2, Fall)** : 19 - 25.

Garfein, R. T. (1988). Guiding Principles for Improving Customer Service, *The Journal of Services Marketing*, **2 (2, Spring)** : 37 - 41.

Goodwin, C. & Frame, C. D. (1989). Social Distance Within the Service Encounter : Does the Consumer Want to be Your Friend ?, *Advances in Consumer Research*, **16** : 64- 71.

Gronroos, C. (1982). An Applied Service Marketing Theory, *European Journal of Marketing*, **16 (7)** : 30- 41.

Little, C.B. & Gelles, R.J. (1975). The Social Psychological Implications of Form of Address, *Sociometry*, **38 (4)** : 573 - 586.

Mohr, L. A. & Bitner, M.J. (1991). Mutual Understanding Between Customers and Employees in Service Encounters, *Advances in Consumer Research*, **18:** 611-623.

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric Theory*, Second Edition, New York : McGraw - Hill

Rubin, R. B. (1980). *Ideal Traits and Terms of Address for Male and Female College Professors*, paper presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New York City.

Surprenant, C. F. & Solomon, M. R. (1987). Predictability and Personalization in the Service Encounter, *Journal of Marketing*, **51 (April)**: 86- 96.

Zeithaml, V. A., Parasuraman, A. & Leonard, L. B.(1985). Problems and Strategies in Services Marketing, *Journal of Marketing*, **49 (Spring)**: 33- 46.